OF CONTAGIOUS DISEASE AND EMIGRATED PROSTITUTES: 'GULZAR' CHANDERNAGORE IN SELECT 19TH CENTURY BENGALI CHAP BOOKS

Antara Mukherjee

In 1864 British rule in India necessitated the application of The Cantonment Act on prostitutes imprisoned within the cantonments in late nineteenth century Calcutta. The act was directed to protect the health of British soldiers who were visiting prostitute quarters and contracting venereal diseases from them. By this Act it was decided that separate brothel would be constructed for the British soldiers within the cantonments. This measure which was apparently taken for the safety of the British soldiers was actually directed to control the prostitutes through surveillance by the colonial masters. Hence a section of the prostitutes was imprisoned in the cantonments. Prostitutes employed for the soldiers would be registered and special care would be taken for their regular medical check up. For this purpose young, healthy and beautiful girls were brought from nearby suburbs and villages. Lest they want to return to their relatives, they were entrapped in the Lock Hospitals which were built for their treatments within the cantonments. This was a significant moment of transition of the profession of prostitution from being a sinful trade in the pre-colonial past to a criminal act in the colonial present. Colonial rule, as Sumanta Banerjee notes in *Dangerous Outcast: Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (2000), converted the so called sinners into criminals, and altered the profession from its 'socio-religious interpretation' (*Dangerous Outcast* 143) to a 'colonial socio-legal codification' (143). Actually, whoring in pre-colonial societies, Sumanta Banerjee has aptly pointed out, was a 'sin' where the prostitutes, though branded as sinners, were grudgingly accepted as a part of society. But to the colonial rulers, the profession of prostitution was considered as a crime, and so must be controlled. In other words, prostitutes were dangerous since they threatened the Empire by making inroads into it through its soldiers. In this sense, the 'docile' bodies of the colonised 'other' had the capacities to exert an uncontrollable threat to the imperial operations. So controlling those bodies by disciplining them medically was the only way by which they could be transformed and used. Elleke Boehmer, in "Transfiguring : Colonial body into postcolonial narrative (1993)", opines that colonised subject's body has been the object of the coloniser's fascination and repulsion and in effect possession: "the sublimated fascinations with the strange" justifies the domination of the

other as untamed and raw, and "open to mastery, available for use" (269). Hence, to use the bodies of the colonised subject, it became essential to tame them medically to negate any possibility of exerting an unpredictable threat to a systematic mode of social system, neutralizing thereby the threat to the prevailing social system and legitimising colonial rule.

Yet the Cantonment Act was failing in its aims, for the soldiers were moving out of their cantonments and consorting with other prostitutes and were getting inflicted. So the authorities decided to extend their operation beyond the cantonments and impose control over all those prostitutes who were plying their trade outside the cantonments. Thus they implemented a new law called the Indian Contagious Diseases Act on 1st April 1868. This brought the entire profession under strict state supervision and surveillance. By this act, it became compulsory for all prostitutes to undergo medical examinations in Lock Hospitals along with registration. Only a fit certificate from the authorities would permit them to ply their trade. This dreaded act was known as 'Choddo Ain', 'Choddo' or fourteen, derived from the number of the Legislation Act XIV. The act was the brain child of Dr. C. Fabre-Tonnerre, Health Officer in Calcutta. In his article "Stick Bodmaesh Jobdo", *Bangalir Bottola* [*Bottola of the Bengalis*] (2013), Surajit Sen describes the method of operation of the Act:

> Ei Ain e bola chilo je sorkari doctor beshyaparai camp korbe, beshyara thanay registry koraben ebong sei registration number onujayi tader deke porikkha kora hobe. Jander shorire siphyilis er lokkhon pawa jabe tanderke sorkari haspatale rekhe chikitsa korano hobe ebong sustho hole tader chere dewa hobe. Ei jonyo british sorkar kolkatay joruri bhittite kotoguli hanspatal khulechilo, Dr. Locke onushorone jegulor nam chilo Lock Hanspatal. Proshongoto Dr. Lock e ei ain tir prostab rakhen sorkarer kache.
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> [It was mandated in this law that the Government doctors would camp in the land of the harlots, the prostitutes would register their names in the police station and they would be called for examination. Those persons whose bodies betray symptoms of Siphylis would be admitted to the hospital and their treatments would begin right there. Gradually as they restore to health, they would be allowed to leave. For this reason the British Government opened up a handful of hospitals on emergency errand, after the name of Dr.

> Lock which were known as Locke Hospitals. Incidentally it was Dr. Lock who took the initiation of proposing the establishment of this law to the government]. (377)

The police left no stone unturned to torture, threaten and abuse the prostitutes under the garb of this law. Sumanta Banerjee in *Ashruto Kanthoswar* [*The Unheard Voice*] (2002) opines: "Jor kore dhore niye jawa, daktari porikkhar name doihik obomanona o utpiron, rehai pabar jonyo utkoch prodan – ityadi nana hoirani sojhyo korte hoi dehopojibinider ["The prostitutes were forcibly dragged against their will, molested and abused in the name of medical scrutiny; in their desperate attempts to escape the undesirable captivity the prostitutes often bribed the police yet the prostitutes had to bear with several other humiliating harassment"] (122)". Thus the docile bodies were subjected to torture; they were used and transformed. Confinement at Lock Hospital meant loss of income for a long period, which by extension, meant lack of food and essentials for dependants at home. Out of the hospital, many of them became unemployed, for they are now replaced by new prostitutes who had come in their place during their prolonged absence from the trade. Resultantly some of them, as Adrish Biswas, in his 'Introduction' to volume 2 of *Battalar Boi: Unish Shotoker Dushprapyo Kuriti Boi* [*Books of Bottola : Twenty Rare Books of Nineteenth Century*] (2011) points out, some fell sick, some committed suicide and some ran away to French-ruled Chandernagore : "police theke purush daktar sokolei emon nirmom o nisthur achoron korten je porikkha koranor jontronar bhoye bohu beshya Kolkata sohor chere paliye gyalo. Oneke gyalo forasi swashonadhin Chondonnogorer penetite sekhane british ain chole na ["The prostitutes were subjected to such inhuman and unbearable torture both by police and by male doctors that in fear of medical examination many ran away from Calcutta to French-ruled Chandernagore where British measures were not applicable…"] (18)". In fact, in order to save themselves from oppression and unemployment, many fled from British-ruled Calcutta to nearby districts like Hooghly and Burdwan as well as to distant lands like Kashi, Vrindavan, Gaya, Mathura. In an interview to Adrish Biswas and Mou Bhattacharya, Pradeep Basu has interpreted this phenomenon as an instance of 'typical colonial biopolitics' (*Bangalir Bottola* 32). 'Colonial biopolitics' refers to a shrewd mechanism of power that attempted to consolidate the imperial authority by utilising political power to regulate and control the bodily autonomy of the oppressed colonized subject. However, the very fact that they could escape from British-ruled Calcutta to either distant lands or to non-British territory deserves critical re-exploration of the phenomenon which Dr Basu calls 'typical colonial biopolitics'.

It must be noted that colonial Calcutta became a dreadful place for the 'obhodro' or disgraced 'other' not only for the Act, but also for lack of sympathetic support from the genteel society. Deep seated prejudice against the prostitutes could not be overpowered by western education and so the 'bhadra samaj' failed to recognize prostitution "as any other professional community working within a commercial set up... and so deserves support when threatened by legal measures" (*Dangerous Outcast 152*). Rather, some amongst the 'bhadralok' voiced against the eradication of the prostitutes from respectable localities or 'bhadra pallis' and appealed for dumping them to the peripheral part of the city; in this regard one may recall Sri Kaliprassana Sinha's, who led 'Vidyotsahini Sabha', appeal to the colonial administration, published in the newspaper 'Sangbad Prabhakar' on 19/11/1856, to issue orders to move the prostitutes from the city centre in to some marginalised, ghettoized locale of the city; the 'bhadra mahilas', accustomed to traditional norms of female submission to male dictates in social behavior, failed to recognize the male responsibility in it. The situation became complicated, for many bhadralok who had links with the prostitutes, on a regular basis, either directly, as customers, or indirectly, as their doctors, house owners, lawyers, pundits etc, now came under the scanner, for it became compulsory for them to get registered. The act became a double edged sword – 'babus' could not decide what to do. If they get registered, they would risk their family pride and prestige, for they could no longer keep their dark deeds a secret, and, if they do not do so, they could no longer enjoy hedonistic pleasures. While some really came under the legal dagger, economically privileged 'babus' either rented or constructed a second home, outside Calcutta to keep their mistresses. Quite interestingly, this arrangement opened up a new avenue for the prostitutes and gave them courage to thwart their physical and psychological confinements. In her article "Inscriptions and body maps", published in *Feminine/Masculine Representations* (1991), Elizabeth Grosz argues that "if the body is the strategic target of systems of codification" (64), there is also a possibility of "a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways (64)". Thus the confined bodies of the colonised contests their stereotyping and insists on self-representations. Self-representation was the only alternative left for them because, as 'obhodro' or 'disgraced women', they were turned down both by the 'bhadralok' and by 'bhadra mahilas' of the time

It is interesting to note that a large number of prostitutes immigrated to colonial Chandernagore, not only because it was a favourite weekend gateway of the 'babus' and Europeans, outside Calcutta, but it also provided them a much needed space within the

mainstream of a colonised society, something that colonial Clacutta could not allow. Incidentally, long stretches of this tiny colonial town in the north of River Ganges of this waterfront town – from Sorshepara to Laxmiganj area – specifically speaking, were known for its brothels. With the implementation of the Indian Contagious Disease Act in 1868, and its resultant emigration of a large number of prostitutes from Calcutta, Chandernagore witnessed a mushrooming of prostitute quarters, in another part of the town, towards the south, in Hatkhola, Beshohata and Gondalpara. Known for multiple garden houses of Zamindars (for instance, Khans of Mankundu and Gopal Mukherjee of Gondolpara), this part of the town also had residences of native elites like the Srimanis and the Rakshits. Unlike Calcutta, affluent localities did not object to their settlements; rather they provided a fertile ground for the mushrooming of their trade. This area was also close to the waterfront, on the eastern part, where European settlements grew, and where all the pleasure habitats - pubs, hotels and brothels - were located since the eighteenth century. Incidentally, as a part of the French colonial project, colonial Chandernagore was fragmented into *la ville blanche* or the white town and *la ville noire* or the black town. White town, as Kanchana Mukhopadhay notes, had abundant European structures - "*Topiwala Mahal'* with many *Pakka Bari* or brick built houses near the *ghats* and the neighbouring area" (Original emphasis; 62). In fact beautification of the areas in *la ville blanche* was prioritized over *la ville noire* and, resultantly, *la ville blanche* had an urban, elitist character in contrast to *la ville noire* which continued to retain its rural, mass character. In *Chandannagorer Sonkhipto Itihas* [*A Short History of Chandannagar*] (2007) Biswanath Bandyopadhaya notes: "Sada onchole chilo prachurjo o paka barir somaroho. Dock O bondorer kormobyasto jogot. Gacher shari ola somantoral rastar bahar. Poyopronali, nacher adda o shunrikhana aar kaloonchole chilo anka banka rasta, jongol, doba, nana fanka rasta, khorer ghor, ja dekhe gram bole mone hoto… ["While ville blanche was noted for its beautiful buildings, shipping dock, port, good drainage system, boulevard, brothels and pubs, the condition of the ville noire was deplorable with improper roads, jungles, deserted streets, thatched cottages and ditches"] (32)". Adrian Carton in *Mixed-Race and Modernity in Colonial India*: *Changing concepts of hybridity across empires* (2012) echoes the same: "These colour-coded classifications seem self-evident enough where the spatial politics of imperial power were grafted into the urban landscape resulting in the construction of two divergent worlds (63)". Even though this crude Manichean division between white and black town signified a racialized demarcation based on colour, this division, in the context of cultural difference in eighteenth – nineteenth century India, acquired a symbolic meaning of power. Small wonder that in *la ville blanche* elites, who had

access and entitlements to the privileges of whiteness by dint of their wealth and class position, resided along with the Europeans. Naturally therefore, the wealthy class frequented the newly developed hotels and pubs where exclusive variety of French wines like cognac, champagne and claret were readily available. Moreover, it is this economic power that gave access to neo elites from Calcutta to enjoy the swanky night life at *la ville blanche*. Revolutionary Sachindranath Sanyal, hiding at Chandernagore, recollects in his memoir *Bandi Jivan* [*A Life of Captivity*] (1922) about the availability of high quality French wine in hotels: "Oi hotelete shonibar-robibar Kolkata theke soukhin o dhoni lokeder podarpon hoi. Ekhane khub sohoje o sarombore suradebir aradhona kora hoi. Kenona Kolkatar chaite ekhane dokkhina onek kom ["On Saturdays and Sundays neo-elites from Calcutta step in that hotel. In this place the Goddess of Wine is worshipped easefully with grandeur. Because compared to Calcutta the expense is less here"] (qtd. in *Chandernagore:Bibidha Prasanga* 23-24)". Imported yet low-priced French wine attracted the 'babus' from Calcutta, excited to spend their weekends at Chandernagore. Fascination for French wine was well complemented with famed brothels at colonial Chandrenagore. Thus white town of Chandernagore emerged as a pleasurable weekend destination both for the Europeans as well as for the native elites, particularly the 'babus' from Calcutta since the colonial times. Thus the prostitutes settled quite comfortably in the white town and continued to ply their trade unhindered by any social or cultural obstacles.

Interestingly enough, the swanky night life of Chandernagore along with the whole episode of the torture, plight, escape and re-homing of the prostitutes find significant mention in contemporary chapbooks, cheap Bengali books, brought out by Calcutta's small printing presses of 'Bot-tola', and written by neo-literate people of humble origins, these books, known as 'Bot-tola Sahitya', voiced the unheard voices of the prostitutes, chronicled the entire episode of 'Choddo Ain' and its historical impact, apart from shedding light to many such neglected and marginalised topics. Incidentally speaking, 'Bot-tola', as Sukumar Sen has noted in "Bottalar Basati", *Bottalar Chapa O Chabi* [*The Writings and Paintings of Bot-tola*] (2014) was the area adjacent to Sovabazar Balakhana, where upon a cemented pavement around the trunk of a sprawling banyan ('bot') tree, an old market for local books thrived:

> ...Shovabazar Balkhala onchole ekta boro bonospoti chilo. Sei botgacher shan bandhano tolay tokhon kar purobasider onek kaj cholto. Bose bisram newa hoto. Adda deoa hoto. Ganbajna hoto. Boier poshra o bosto.

> Onuman hoi ei boi chilo Biswanath Deb er chapa. Inie bottola onchole ebong sekaler uttor Kolkatay prothom chapa khana khulechilo.
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> [There was a large Bot/Banyan tree in the vicinity of Shovabazaar Balkhala in Kolkata. Townsfolk used to sit on the cemented platform surrounding the huge tree and busied themselves in multiple worldly chores. They would rest there. They would idle away hours in gossips. There was music and performance. Even this became a place for the bazaar of books. It is likely that these books were published by Biswanath Deb. He was the man who started a printing press in the neighbourhood locale of the Banyan tree and eventually in North Kolkata"]". (53)

Sumanta Banerjee, in *Unish Shotoker Kolkata O Saraswatir Itor Sontan* [*Nineteenth Century Calcutta and the uncultured wards of Saraswati*] (2013) notes that 'Bot-tola Sahitya' and 'Sonagaji' or 'Sonagachi', Kolkata's red light area ("Sonagaji O Bot-tola: Dui Jomojer Kahini"/ "Sonagaji and Bottola : A tale of Twins") could be called as twins for they share the same habitat, Chitpur. Infact, 'Sonagachi' is derived from 'Sonagazi', a Muslim religious preacher, Sona Gazi or Gazi Sonaullah Shah Chisti Rahmatutulla who came from Iran and settled down in North Calcutta. The literatures of 'Bot-tola', aptly pointed out by Hardik Brata Biswas in "The obscene modern and the pornographic family: adventures in Bangla pornography (2013)", published in *The Sexual History of the Global South : Sexual Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, edited by Sasrika Wieranga & Horacio Savori, were of varied themes and genres– 'naksha' (satirical prose), 'prahashan' (farce), 'keccha' (scandals), 'guptokotha' (mysteries), popular sex periodicals, and erotica apart from other topics like murder, mystery, natural science, etc. He also opines that these genres irked the taste buds of the Bengali bhadralok, whose sensibility was cast in Victorian morality and tradition in opposition to the babu**.** Notorious for their lurid presentation of sexuality, 'Bot-tola' books annoyed the refined sensibility of the genteel society. But these books challenged the elitist bias of mainstream 19th century literature, subverted the upper class culture and registered the socio historical winds of change that were blowing in British ruled Bengal. Naturally enough, the implementation and effect of 'Choddo Ain' provided a ready material for the 'Bot-tola' authors who documented how the disgraced other undermined 'typical colonial biopolitics' and registered their protest against the same. In doing so, they nevertheless refused to excuse their

elite brethren whose prejudiced, deaf ears could not hear the plight of the disgraced women.

In *Beshya Bibaran Natak* [*A Play about the Annals of the Prostitute*] (1868) Bot-tola author Tarinicharan Das takes a 'babu', Sumati's husband, Gyan, not a prostitute, to task for his illicit ways. However, Sumati, the programmed wife, is not spared either for camouflaging her husband's venereal disease: "Jogodisher kripay gunomoyee daktar mashi hoite gopone jatona nibaron hoilo prokash hoile grinate obhimane amar pran bidirno hoito.. ["By the blessings of Lord Jagadish I could secretly procure medicines from the lady doctor to cure you of your venereal disease…had it been brought out in the open, I would have died of shame…."] (Das 175)".The otherwise subdued, faithful wife who is unable to detect the vulnerability of her nurtured home, ironically, scorns at the prostitutes as 'kolonkkini' or tainted women. These lines express the poignant condition of Bengali 'bhadra mohilas' who were capable enough to find means of curing infected husbands but were incapacitated to deter them from visiting brothels. This text speaks volume of the massive extent to which 'Bhadra mahilas' have internalised the ambivalence of their 'Bhadra lok'. Written by Prankrishna Dutta in 1869, *Bodmaesh Jobdo* [*The Taming of the Profligate*], which begins the night before the implementation of 'Choddo Ain' and continues after its implementation so that the author can present the mental anxiety of and necessary measures taken by its sufferers, takes the issue a step further and focuses on the politics of representation. 'Bodmaesh' is an implied snobbish, upper class tag given to describe someone's wicked nature, and in this text it seems to be applied to prostitutes as home-wreckers and to the ignominy attached with their trade. When such a trade is controlled by the British administration through 'Choddo Ain', they are evidently tamed or 'jobdo'. With the progression of the text, however, Dutta's satirical vein finds its best outlet as one slowly but steadily tracks down the actual 'bodmaesh'. Clearly Dutta's sympathies are with the helpless victims of colonial policies and, therefore, he gnaws at the fixed customers or 'babus' of the prostitutes who illegally satisfy their lust in the darkness of the night, the real 'bodmaesh'. Like Tarinicharan Das, Prankrishna Dutta also mocks the Bengali neo-elites by calling them 'bodmaesh' who are now tamed by the Act or "Bodmaesh Jobdo Ain"/ "Law for the Profligate" (186), for it became mandatory to register their names along with the prostitutes. They are cut to size as fear of exposure looms large over. Prankrishna Dutta brilliantly expresses the nervous rankings of the inner soul of the 'Bhradralok' caught in between the Act and illegal desires: "Buk fete jay hai mukh tola bhar/Registery korilei hooibe amar/ Na korile bondho hobe beshyaloye jawa /Bish somo bodh hobe boshonter hawa / Bot-tola hoibek nimtola somo/ Nimtola bhalo

ebe bodh hoi momo["My heart bursts open, my face unable to rise /Registry seems ineluctable/ Unless the brothel-door remains padlocked forever/ Vernal breeze would then sting like venom /Bottola would become synonymous with Neemtola/Even Nimtola would appear as a better place than Bottola…"] (Dutta 185)". Oscillating between pleasure and problem, they cannot decide their *modus oporendi* and so wait anxiously with worried foreheads. These lines beautifully express the Hamletian dilemma of the frequenters of the brothels who were served with such a sermon that they can neither ignore nor can digest.

If their affluent status gave the babus an opportunity to make separate arrangement at nearby Chandernagore, it also opened an alternative employment possibility for the prostitutes in a French-ruled colony. Thus one notes in these 'Bot-tola' texts, a plethora of reference to 'Farash danga' or the land / 'dongi' of the French/'farash', popular nomenclature for colonial Chandernagore. Colonial Chandernagore, incidentally speaking, was easily accessible from Calcutta through both railways and waterways. Thus Aghor Chandra Ghosh's Narrative poem, *Panchali Kamolkoli: Choddo Ain* [*A Poem about a Lotus Bud: Act XIV*], 1871, particularly mentions how both 'babus', from Calcutta, fearing registration, and public women came to settle down at colonial Chandernagore. Ghosh writes about the carefree and comfortable set up of the babus: "Abar kono kono dhoni, or moddhye jinni dhoni,/ Bhalobashay songe loye jay/ Bole cholo Fareshdangay, hase hal thakbo mojay,/ E behale teka holo day ["…And some amongst the rich/took their keeps with supposed love/saying let us go to Fareshdanga, to live in utmost pleasure/ since living here has become problematic"] (82)". He also mentions the public women who did not lag behind to accompany them: "Keu ba chore koler gadi, foreshdangay kocche bari, / Keu ba giye khali bari khunjiche/ Keu ba chore noukay, nukiye fareshdangay jaai,/bhalobashay bhorsa diye koto/ bole ki korbere dhon, upai to aar nai ekhon, / Upai hocche Fareshdangay joto ["While some searched for empty houses/Some came by boat secretly/Holding on to the promises of love/Believing that there is little luck left for them there/All prospect of physical intimacy lay in Fareshdanga solely"] (81)". The anonymous author of another 'Bot-tola' text, *Bahoba Choddo Ain* [*Kudos to ActXIV*], 1869, dealing with this historical shift confirm this: "Kahar kahar upapati mahadoy grostho hoiya kormo porityag purbok uppatni digoge loiya forasdangay keho ba Hooghly Srirampore, keho ba Bordhoman rakhiya asiyachen. Ebong pronoy pashe eirup boddho hoiyachen je tahadiger tattabodhaner jonyo keho keho proti soptahe, keho keho dui tin dibos pore, keho ba protidin louho marge gomon koriya thaken ["Overwhelmed by love, some of the honourable keepers abandoned their regular duties for maintaining their keeps at Farashdanga or

Hooghly Serampore, or to Burdwan. Babus became so obsessed with the upkeep of their mistresses that some of them visited their keeps every week, some went to see them at regular intervals of two or three days, some even boarded trains everyday to visit them"] (qtd in *Ashruto Konthoswor* 125)". The desire for Farashdanga as a prospective trading zone is stressed in *Beshya Bibaran Natak* where a prostitute suggests her colleagues to flee from coercive colonial biopolitics of colonial administration that is denting their business prospects: "Anubhabe bojhah gyalo, premer / bajar mochke galo, khatbenako chhal/ chaturi. soilo soi sabey miley, chal jai/polaiye, Faesh dangaye bash kori ["It seems like the time for the fete of flames has come to an end/the film of pretence and guile fades past/Oh my bossom-mates let us flee/ to Farash danga and nestled there"] (173)". Tied down by the 'Repressive State Apparatuses', the speaker-prostitute gives a clarion call to her colleagues for self-assertion. So the Narrator in *Panchali Kamolkoli* decides to abandon a claustrophobic Calcutta and declares: "E rajjye te bash ar hobe na ["It is impossible to stay in this state any longer"] (77)".

As Sumanta Banerjee has rightly pointed out that French administration at Chandernagore did not impose any such Act, Chandernagore witnessed massive immigration of prostitutes from Calcutta in 1868-1869. In this connection, one must also note that despite being away from the winds of enlightened Western education, uneducated marginals of Calcutta were perceptive enough to have a 'knowledge' of a place outside the purview of British laws. Thus settling down in colonial Chandernagore was a decisive step to outsmart the 'typical colonial biopolitics' directed to medically discipline the body of the colonised. However, critiquing the 'Bot-tola' texts further would bring to light how the emigrated prostitutes contested 'typical colonial biopolitics' in Chandernagore by counter-strategic self-representation. Representation of the self was possible in the permissive French ambience, free from Hindu religious coercion. Surajit Sen in his article "Stick Bodmaish Jobdo" observes that "Chandannagore er adi sanskriti rokkhonshil chilo emon bola jaayna, karon ekhane brahmonyo onushashon chilona ["Traditionally Chandannagore didn't adhere to strict Brahminical practises and so it's cultural ambience was quite lenient"](388)". This absence of orthodox Brahmical order was complemented with the presence of a large number of Vaishnavites in Chandernagore. Majority of Bengali working class of Chandernagore came from the labouring agricultural and artisan class like 'kaibarta' (fishermen and peasants), 'tanti' (weavers), 'dhopa' (washermen), 'goala' (milkmen), and 'chutor' (carpenters). These communities were inclined towards Vaishnavism which allowed a more permissive and liberal lifestyle than the strict Brahminical order that ruled Calcutta Bengali

society. As the 'Bot-tola' text affirms, the prostitutes sometimes took shelter under the garb of another religion, as disguised Vaishnavis, and explicitly expressed their preference for Lord Krishna over Goddess Kali. In *Beshya Bibaran Natak,* a widow-turned prostitute claims: "Tagiya kalir naam krishno ke bojibo/ krishnopreme premi hoye soda sukhe robo/ hoibo shomon joyi krishno naam gune/ Krishno bole par hobo e bhobo toofane/ ghore ghore mege khabo bole krishno hore/ kar saddhyo ke amare dhorite na pare ["Disowning the Goddess kali I would take on venerating Lord Krishna /Turning into a devotee of the Lord of Love I would reside in the realm of bliss /The power of chanting the name of the Lord Krishna would leave the Master of Death bemused/ 'Krishna' be the barque to sail through the turmoiled sea of life/In the name of 'Hare-Krishna' I would knock for alms door to door/This was life would be beyond the grasp of trouble, trial and time"] (Das 177)". This intense urge to adopt Vaishnavism is not only an expression of protest against the rigidity of Hinduism but is also a pointer to their suppressed desire to lead a free life, away from Hindu orthodoxy. *Beshya Bibaran Natok* ends with a prayer of a Hindu prostitute to return to earthly form as a non-Hindu – "Hindu kule monushyo nahik ekjon/ hindu dhormo miche matro bujhinu ekhon ["Now I realize the religion of Hinduism /is nothing but a sham, a make-believe"] (Das 179)". The rigid caste and class divisions of Hindu religion are taken to task by this hapless victim as she further criticises the hypocrisy of the Hindus: "Gopone sokoli kore thake hindugono / gopone koriya karjo sadhu hoye rono ["In the clandestine way the Hindus do every possible thing/ their life of an ascetic takes sinuous rills through the covert caves"] (Das 180)". Their disguise is a subversion of the hierarchical snobbery of the Hindu religion as well as a protest against socio-religious orthodoxies which are no less obnoxious than administrative intervention in the practice of their trade.

Resistance to 'typical colonial biopolitics' and their counter-strategic self-representation in Chandernagore are best expressed in their destabilisation of the colonial binaries of white town and black town. Chandernagore's white town with its distinctly European characteristics erased the indigenous life styles, replaced them by that of the settler's, establishing thereby, the prerogatives of the settler nation. Apart from assimilating the indigenous elites into commercial activities, French colonizers, as already mentioned, encouraged tax-free French wine in pubs, hotels and full-fleged brothels to function. French colonial masters thus amalgamated indigenous elites into a hedonistic, relaxed, submissive socio-cultural life-style and therefore attempted to curb ideologically any possibility of violent uprising. This was a well thought off French colonial project of maintaining spatial binary in colonial Chandernagore.

However, the abundant mushrooming of brothels along the southern part of the Ganges in the white town brought significant changes to the colonial project. The 'dangerous outcast' of Calcutta begin to co-exist with respectable localities in the white town, and became a part of the main stream of French-ruled society. As Ghosh's poem records, the immigrant prostitutes catered to the pleasure quotient of a large cross section of the society, irrespective of the spatial binary: "Anache kanache ranr, ranrmoye sob/ Fareshdangay joto chonrader barilo utsob/Alhade atkhana joto ki buro ki chonra/kankurfata hoye uthlo chilo joto gonra ["Prostitutes invaded every nook and corner/of Fareshdanga, youth were ecstatic/ aged feasted on similar pleasures/so did the rigid populace…"] (83)". Unlike Calcutta, there was no need to oust them from 'bhadra pallis' of Chandernagore. As new prostitute quarters sprang up near Hatkhola and Gondolpara, in south Chandernagore, night life of the colonial town got a boost. In *Bodmaesh Jobdo* the author indicates how the economy of the town improved, for rent of a house in Chandernagore rocketed from ten rupees to fifty rupees per month. Thus 'Choddo Ain' converted Chandernagore from a sleepy little town into a grand epicenter of whoring: "Chandannagore guljar hoiya uthilo ["Chandannagar became 'gulzar'"] (189)". According to *Feroz-Ul-Lughat (Jame)* by Maulvi Ferozuddin, Persian word 'zar' in 'gulzar' refers to a 'place' (745) of 'gul' or flower (1106). As beautiful and appealing roses, their relocation made the colonial town no less than a garden of flower or 'gulzar'. In this sense, they were redeemed from being 'dangerous outcasts' of Calcutta to the most coveted and sought-after heartthrob of the colonial town. Colonial Chandernagore, therefore, provided them a much needed social space, a place in the mainstream society, something that they could never dream of in Calcutta. Moreover, the world 'zar' also refers to a King or 'Badshah' or a towering personality. In this sense, the emigrated prostitutes vicariously tasted a legal privilege, for their babus in Chandernagore had the free reign to enjoy the privileges of the white by dint of their class position. Whatever could be the interpretation, one could gauge the role reversal of the emigrant prostitutes in Chandernagore under 'Choddo Ain'.

Moreover, varied customers, with diff class, colour and cultural backgrounds, converted the brothels into 'contact zone' of socio-cultural exchange. In "Arts of the Contact Zone" (1991), Mary Louis Pratt explains 'contact zone' in *Imperial Eyes* as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination - like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across globe today (4)". Contact zones are thus "spaces of colonial encounters", or rather colonial frontiers, where people, "geographically and historically

separated come into contact and establish on going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict(6)". Bottola text *Panchali Komalkoli* brilliantly highlight how brothels as contact zones attracted men from diverse class and cultural background: "Gouranga shoron kore shikoye tule jhuli /ranrer bari unkijhunki macchee kulikuli/Ekhonete nobyo babu achen tatha jara,/Dibyo kore chul firaye bahar diye tara,/ Pokete phele panch paisha, churut gunje mukhe,/ Ranrey'r bari eyarkiti macchee mano sukhe ["The neo-rich 'babus' living there, curling up their locks in a swanky style, /with five paisas in their pockets and cigars stuck in their mouths, /are carousing at will in the houses of these whores…"] (*Beshyaprar Panchti Durlobh Songroho* 83)". Not mere the neo-rich but these quarters were also frequented by the labouring class like potters, weavers, carpenters: "Aat paishar mojur jara khajur chataye thakey,/Khat palonke khasha bichanaye succhey lakhey lakhey ["Labourers who earn eight paisa and sleep on coarse mats made of palm-leaves,/are now in hordes moving over for a chance of sleeping/comfortably on bedsteads and couches, in the house of the prostitutes"] (83)". Devoid of class and cultural biases, the prostitutes had no caste prejudices. They welcomed Muslim boatsmen to their quarters. These boatsmen, carrying passengers or goods across Hugli river from East Bengal, often stopped at Chandernagore and disguised themselves as Hindus to have a good time. Aghor Chandra Ghosh pertinently includes them in his poem and says that Muslim boatsmen, disguised as Hindus are spending nights at Fareshdanga. These encounters are, indeed, fraught with racial and cultural conflicts as their disguised identities as Vaishnavites or as housewives bear out the point. However, the different clientele of the brothels is symbolic of the fact that when it comes to whoring, colonial binary at Chandernagore was quite relaxed towards the later part of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the immigrant prostitutes became instrumental in disrupting and displacing the hegemonic divide of the colonial culture in the white town. The hybrid nature of the customers undermines the formation of any essentialist cultural identity at the brothels. On the contrary, the varied customers at the brothels and garden houses create a 'contact zone' of interaction in colonial Chandernagore, where cultural homogeneity is overshadowed by continuous cultural negotiations, a negotiated in-betweenness, despite power imbalance. In this sense, brothels become an intercultural contact zone, a 'gulzar', a hybridist garden of prostitute and their varied customers. This poem thus becomes a valuable document which registers the destabilisation of colour-coded classification of the colonial town.

What differentiates the 'Bot-tola' farces from the 'Bot-tola' narrative poem is the absence of the voice of the prostitute in the latter. This is probably because unlike the underlying note of sadness in the farces, the narrative poem ends with an optimistic, mythical vision of the return of prostitutes to Calcutta after the abolition of 'Choddo Ain'. Almost like *dues ex machina*, the poet brings down the Hindu God of love, Madan Deb, from Heaven to Calcutta maidan. After touring Calcutta, when Madan Deb finally comes to 'Sonagachi' he is aggrieved to find the empty corridors: "Shunitechi Choddo Ain asiyache bole/ bas chari porobase jacche sob chole ["Deserting home for Choddo Ain/ Everyone has flocked to a distant land"] (100)". Resultantly, he decides to bring back his followers to their 'original homelands' and appoints 'basantoraj'/Cuckoo bird to carry out his mission: "Cholo sobe Fareshdanga Kashi Brindabon/ Prayag Mathura Gaya Dwaraka bhuban/ Bardhaman Tribeni Hooghly Srirampore/ cholo giya dekhi keba geche kotodur ["Let us go and track the prostitutes/who have emigrated from Calcutta to different places /like Serampore, Hooghly, Burdwan Chandernagore…"] (100)". Stuck by the arrows of Cupid, prostitutes return to 'Sonagachi' and the poet concludes "guti guti sobe elo, sohor gulzar holo, ... ["….the prostitutes came back to Calcutta/ and the city became 'gulzar'…"] (101)". The emigration of prostitutes, as the 'Bot-tola' poet envisions it, had made Calcutta a barren land devoid of its appealing flowers. The empty streets of 'Sonagachi' speak volume of its aridity. He, therefore, hopes that Calcutta can only get its hue back by their homecoming. After making Chandernagore 'gulzar', the prostitutes return to Calcutta to make the city 'gulzar'. This 'Bot-tola' text thus relocates the prostitutes from the peripheral Chandernagore to central Calcutta, from where they had been decentred both by the British administration and by the Bengali elites. To dismiss this vision simply as mythic would be to undermine its epiphanic nature. 'Chodda Ain' was finally withdrawn by the British government in 1888 after the intervention by British feminist Josephine Butler who led Ladies' National Association and also by the efforts taken by Christian Missionaries and few sympathetic Brahmo reformers like Shibnath Shastri (*Atmacharit,* pp 122-23 & 134-36) and Nilmani Chakravarty (*Atmajeebansmriti*, pp 17-18). Due to all these interventions Calcutta was gradually converted from a dreaded land to a 'gulzar'. Thus the ending of the poem is epiphanic in nature.

It must be pointed out that no attempts were taken to integrate the prostitutes into respectable / 'bhadra' society of Calcutta. The measures, rather, ignored their individual capacities to exercise a rational control over their own lives. Contrastively, in Chandernagore, as the 'Bot-tola' texts affirm, they created a counter-discourse of self–

representation and therefore could assert their choice. Their capacities to construct another, better grand centre helped them to lead a life free from the strict Brahminical order at Calcutta. Most astonishingly, their rehabilitated 'contact zones' challenged the colonial policy of spatial fragmentation of Chandernagore. However, the most unique thing that could be deduced from these 'Bot-tola' Literatures is their refusal to be a passive receptor of a "typical colonial biopolitics", by using a coercive administrative measure of one colonial settlement to challenge colonial policies of social fragmentation of another colonial settlement. The historical emigration of prostitutes thus was a conscious unsettling of the master's house with the master's tool.

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