



Review Paper

Being a 'Woman' and a 'Prostitute': The Dark Side of the Reality

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 3rd July 2016, revised 5th September 2016, accepted 10th September 2016

Abstract

Prostitution is considered as the oldest profession in the world and in India it has existed since centuries but its nature, concentration and issues regarding it has experienced a change. Prostitution was once socio-culturally sanctified now represented as an undignified profession that subjugates and marginalises women from all public spaces. The structured power relations and gendered practices instrumentalize the body of women that sexually exploits them and eventually repudiates them the basic human rights on the pretext of their 'shameful' profession of prostitution. Being a woman and a prostitute cause twofold exploitation first on the basis of their gender and secondly indulging in an act of prostitution. In many parts of India prostitution are carried out in the name of tradition and cultural practices like Devadasi (handmaiden of god) system in which unmarried young girls are dedicated to gods for sexual pleasure to priests and forced intergenerational prostitution for livelihood in Nat communities in Bihar. The paper seeks to examine the position of woman as a prostitute and attempts to analyse how their identity as a woman imposed on them the traditional practices of Devadasi system and inter-generational prostitution in Nat communities- the two case studies. It explores the reasons of persistence and impact of such cultural practices on women's lives. So, in this context and background, methodologically the paper would explore the struggle of twofold identities being a 'woman' and a 'prostitute' in the socially sanctioned enforced tradition of prostitution. The paper is an endeavour to address the question of 'identity' with reference to Devadasi and inter-generational prostitution in Nat communities. The study reveals that permutation of religious pressure, economic vulnerability, and sexual exploitation form the basis of the Devadasi institution and perpetuates its survival. The research also highlights some of the initiatives of the government and the problems, constrictions and challenges being faced in implementing the desired welfare oriented programmes.

Keywords: Woman, Prostitute, Identity, Tradition, Cultural Practices, Devadasi system, Nat Communities.

Introduction

The secondary position of women in societies is one of universal truth and it exists as a pan-cultural fact. Yet, the cultural conception and symbolisation of women is diverse across cultures and sometimes contradictory. Also, it is difficult to measure the status of women as high or low since in a society a woman may have high social standing but low religious status therefore the actual treatment of women and their relative power within the cultural tradition or in different cultures vary enormously. Nevertheless, one established fact of universal subordination of women cannot be repudiated hence many theories have been developed to understand the underlying structure and logic of cultural thinking that construct the ideology of women as inferior to men. The important question than bring forth that structure and the condition of existence in every culture that has led to devalued status of women. They are identified with symbols or something devaluing them and putting in the lower order of the society¹. In a country like India, in many cases the fate of girl is much decided before they are born through female foeticide or after their immediate birth in the form of female infanticide. Even if girl survives till the age

of their marriage their existence meet the fate through dowry deaths. How do we understand the dichotomy of second class status of women in which on one hand women are worshipped in the name of goddesses like Laxmi, Sarawati, kali, Durga etc. and on the other they are killed as unwanted. What is happening in being a 'woman' can be highly dreadful if woman is a 'prostitute'. The intertwined of two subjugated identities – 'woman' and 'prostitute' make the life full of gruelling challenges. Donning different identities throughout their lives-mother, wife, sister, friend, daughter-in-law, they fail to create an identity for themselves. In India where women make half of the population is still lagging far behind in many aspects of life including the basic necessities of life. Women are always powerless and be dependent on men in the male-female relationship as prostitution provides avenue for women to escape the relation of dependency on men thus empowered them rather reducing to being a victim². To the socialist feminists, the prostitute is a victim of the corruption of a society which accompanies class distinctions. Prostitution is highly discouraged by both the socialist and Marxist feminist and seeks the cause in the structure of the society which also has the solution. Radical feminism opposes prostitution since it believed

that it degrades further the position of women and enhance the hierarchical power relation and politics. Nevertheless feminist seek to be supportive of sex workers while censuring the work itself as essentially erroneous.

The main objective of my article is to examine the position of woman as a prostitute and attempts to analyse how their identity as a woman imposed on them the traditional practices of Devadasi system and inter-generational prostitution in Nat communities- the two case studies. It explores the reasons of persistence and impact of such cultural practices on women's lives. So, in this context and background, methodologically the paper would explore the struggle of twofold identities being a 'woman' and a 'prostitute' in the socially sanctioned enforced tradition of prostitution. The paper is an endeavour to address the question of 'identity' with reference to Devadasi and inter-generational prostitution in Nat communities. The paper uses secondary theoretical literature and electronic media information to augment its arguments and analysis. The article highlights some of the initiatives of the government in dealing with the problems and susceptibility of the sex-workers that are highly detrimental to their well-being.

Invisible Labor and Harsh Reality

Prostitution has been mentioned in the Rig-Veda the most ancient literary work of India. During those days women were paid in kind for its favours as prostitution as profession was not established during that period. There is no specified time in history when the prostitution in India arose as a recognisable profession arose or how much she was paid for the service rendered^{3(p33)}. The thought of wife as private property of her husband in the institution of marriage was concomitant with the emergence and the recognition of prostitution as a profession (ibid). Gradually, either because of early widowhood or could not find suitable husbands, unsatisfactory married life or if they had been forcibly abducted and enjoyed and had been given as gift in religious or secular events, there arose a section of women who was not given honourable status within the society therefore forced to take up prostitution as profession. Whether as an unmarried girl, a wife or a widow, she belonged to some man; so other men could not approach her without trespassing on the owner's property rights. Pleasure outside home, therefore, had to be paid for; hence prostitution had to be institutionalised so that there was an assurance of a steady supply for ready payment³. Women since ancient times only been treated as a property or commodity which was passed on to others as a gifts like the priests who was given women as fees on special occasions as well women were supplied to the royal palaces for kings who enjoyed them for some days and then were sent away in the slave markets or brothels. Prostitutes were recruited from four sources: either they were born as prostitute's daughters or they were purchased or captured in war or they were women who had been punished for adultery. Prostitution in ancient India existed both in a brothel or a separate establishment run by or for one or more prostitutes. Also

employer could keep women for the substitute for wife. Though prostitutes in ancient times enjoy a special status among the kings and the riches but nevertheless she had to comply certain extra chores like spying, entertainment, massaged, carried umbrella which they were not paid off³. The social status of prostitutes was no better as they were occasionally married and hardly fall in love. The chief courtesans were much better as compared to prostitutes for they get pensions after they retired or become old. They were treated as if their body belonged to other's persons property as such when they were raped or their daughter were raped, the assailant only had to pay few compensation and get away with that. On the other hand later religious texts and law books have nothing but contempt for courtesans and hold them solely responsible for the institution.

Religion is still being used as the means to exploit in some parts of India. For an example, the traditional religious custom like Devadasi system is largely prevalent in the southern part of India, particularly in the city of Mumbai⁴. The Devadasi system is an ancient cultural practice which essentially encourages young girls to engage in the sexual exploitation of their bodies⁴. The unfortunate life of these girls apart from the parents making a devotional gift of their daughters to the temple, there must have been the daughters of Devadasi or distress sales of girls to the temples in the name of sacrament to provide sexual entertainment to temple priests and to others whom god favoured⁵. With the span of time Devadasis provide sexual favours to the visitors in exchange of money and time and subsequently became ordinary prostitutions⁵. Prostitution is often socially condemned under the fabric of various social organisations whereas feminists argue that prostitution should be recognised under the gendered sexual relationship. Feminists have also worked for the transformation to replace the term prostitution with sex work⁶. From the behavioural point of view, prostitution can be defined as the act or practice in which a person male or female engages for some monetary reward or otherwise indulge in sexual relations with number of persons, who may be of the opposite or same sex⁵. Majority of women in prostitution are associated with it involuntary while some cases may be of voluntary choices and that too are determined by various factors. 'Sex work offers a significant supplementary income to other forms of labour'⁶. The sex markets are driven by male sexual urges and it is often wondered to what extent women initiate it in this patriarchal society. It is well enough argued about the relationship between the body, property and labor. Likewise in sex labor, the prostitutes are paid to smile, to dance, to dress up, whip to meet the client's desire and that does not mean the prostitution contract allows to the buy the prostitute rather it merely allows to buy the worker's alienable labor power by the employer⁷. Prostitution emerged to satisfy the sexual urges of people and people deprived of sexual urges do not suffer in the same way they do when other basic bodily needs are denied or medical attention is refused.

Sex is not merely a physical or bodily needs but it is grounded in the cognitive and emotional processes and in the market of

commodified sex, prostitute must assume herself as an object and just satisfy the erotic needs on demand. The sex work is continuing since ancient times because of various determining factors which persists due to patriarchal nature of Indian society where the hierarchy exists in terms of gender intertwined with caste, class etc. The women are subjugated and exploited in a most brutal way. Victims who are trafficked make and labelled them as invisible in society and reduced their access to health services, mainly those that focus on HIV/AIDS⁸. The main factors which lead to further establishment of prostitution are the poverty and culture. The sex worker in India can be classified into broad categories: i. brothel based female sex worker (FSWs) in red light areas and elsewhere; ii. FSWs of Devadasi origin; iii. Floating FSWs; iv. Call girls; v. Hijras; vi. Male Sex Workers (MSWs) (Nag, 2001). The poor family cannot think of anything else except of their basic needs and when those too are not fulfilled they are forced to send their daughters to brothels for easy money or sell them for little money to another person. The poverty is one of the main factor which land poverty stricken women into prostitution⁹. Sometimes women get lure to easy money or many times they are betrayed in the name of jobs and send to far off places like middle-east or other Asian countries. After getting into such profession they earn money half of which are taken by brothel keepers, some money by pimps and whatever remains are send to the family to run the houses. The society considers prostitution as demeaning and inappropriate contrary to which the feminist strive hard to make the 'invisible labor' of sex work as visible and dignified. Many in fact called such profession as social work since it terminates possibilities of rape, molestation and harassment of large number of women from the sexual urges of men.

Silent Victim: Being a Woman and a Prostitute

Women are always being treated as others and have an identity in relation to men only where men regarded them as incomplete, imperfect, lack of qualities. Thus humanity is male and men define women not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being². Women are always considered as second class citizen irrespective of any culture and their agencies are manipulated according to the conveniences and advantages of men. They have been subjugated, dominated, discriminated under the name of tradition, customs, biological imperfectness, weaker being for being the product of society as 'woman'. Whatever be the reason, it is largely seen that women across the globe occupy somewhat a lower position than men which of course depends on a variety of factors, including race, ethnicity class, social and religious ideologies among others¹⁰. With the women's movements and feminists struggle for gender equality and equal representation women had many achievements but still far from equality. They silently adhere to structured gendered practices without much resistance such as in domestic violence, unequal remuneration, female foeticide, child infanticide, trafficking, prostitution and hundreds of other oppression against them.

Considering women as other she is split into two personalities one which is visible to male as object-self while other as invisible sometimes even to oneself. Such is the psychic alienation created by the internalisation of otherness¹¹. They are the silent victims who do not have a voice or whose voices are being avoided for indulging in a particular profession like prostitution. Depiction of women as passive beings or as playing insignificant roles, an overemphasis on the management of their sexuality and on their roles as mothers and wives and an underestimation of their contribution as decision makers and as producers are all aspects of this distorted visibility¹². Prostitution is one such pit in which many women are forced to fall to survive in this world without any alternative. The girls are trafficked to different places such as Delhi, Mumbai and even to foreign places like Dubai, Malaysia, Thailand etc. from poverty stricken areas where the family sell their daughters for little money or in most cases girls are lured for jobs and other luxuries of life. Mumbai, Calcutta, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad and other cities are India's most bustling Red Light Areas.

More than 10 million prostitutes are in India and 1000 different Red Light Districts Operating in India and thousands of more brothels. Both Mumbai and Calcutta have over 100,000 prostitutes. In Mumbai, 90% of the prostitutes are 'indentured slaves'¹³. Women become involved in prostitutes due to several factors such as their economic vulnerability, homelessness, child sexual abuse, mental ill health, trauma, previous sexual violence, drug and alcohol misuse. The persistence of the trade reflects the profitable returns. The UN estimates that human traffickers earn around \$10 billion per year and that the average sale price for a slave is around\$ 12,500. Since operating costs (for transportation and false documents) are estimated to be approximately \$3,000 for each slave, slavers can earn nearly \$10,000 per victim¹⁴. The cause for the prostitution is not only that women are forced into such profession since also there is demand from the men to buy sex. If there are no demand and buyer the prostitution would long have been eliminated. Women become vulnerable to these situations where only option left for them is to sell their bodies in order to feed their bodies. All prostitutions are exploitative in nature whether the women are consented to prostitute or not. Thus it becomes important to ask how much it is difficult for being a woman and a prostitute. It's a double burden for women who are in the profession of prostitute and reside in the homes they called brothels as they are already subordinated as a woman. Hence the physical vulnerability is compounded with the gender vulnerability. Prostitutes are sexually harassed or verbally abused and they get repeatedly raped which are not addressed for being a prostitute. Even when they leave the profession and wanted to settle in a good profession they are not accepted and are rejected even by the family members let alone the society. There are several communities or villages in India which practise prostitution as a tradition apart from their source of livelihood. Devadasiis one such tradition practised in south India. For several communities in Uttar Pradesh, prostitutions have become a means of survival. One such community is Nat community of Natpurwa village in

Uttar Pradesh state of India where prostitution is practiced as a tradition since hundreds of years.

Prostitution as an Enforced Tradition

We have been hearing the existence of prostitution since ancient times and its presence in contemporary times in various forms such as devadasi. The Devadasi is a Sanskrit term denoting female servant of deity¹⁵. The word “Devadasi” is derived from two words, “deva” meaning God and “Dasi” meaning slave or servant-woman. Known by different names such as ‘Maharis’ in Kerala, ‘Natis’ in Assam, ‘Basavis’ in Karnataka etc. girls are dedicated to worship and service of a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. As early as 300 AD the giving of young girls to temples in the Devadasi system has been present which became established as institutions by the 700 AD⁵. Originally, in temple ceremonies Devadasi as celibate dancing girls entertained members of the ruling class which eventually turned into the practice of prostitution¹⁵. Devadasi system is largely prevalent in some regions of south India practised by few castes despite of legal measures such as Madhya Devadasis Prevention and Dedication Act of 1947 and Bombay Devadasis Prevention Act of 1954¹⁶. Women belonging to economic vulnerable households and lower castes suffer from the exploitation of prostitution, in the name of religion and, or culture inextricably linked to the poverty. For centuries, the culture of Devadasi was adopted, consumed and confined to the temples of the rich castes. Gradually, the practise was trickled down to lower strata of the poor castes that soon engulfed women of the lowest castes and a rigid type of village concubinage came into being.

The major disintegration of the Devadasi system during Islamic and British rule both the number and distribution of Devadasis are restricted. Nonetheless, according to the National Commission for Women (NCW), there are at least 44, 000 active Devadasi in India the number can be as high as 250,000¹⁷. ‘In its current form, the practice is not as much about temple worship or temple dancing; rather, it is almost singularly related to the sex trade, prostitution, and exploitation of the lower caste’¹⁸. The practise has gained a new meaning than what it was in the past. Due to various socio-economic and political vagaries the system has acquired new meanings and beliefs. Devadasi is not similar as a conventional system of sex workers. The forced entry of young girls as Devadasi due to a combination of religion and social beliefs is a notable difference. The tradition has survived due to culmination of religious beliefs, economic necessity and sexual exploitation¹⁸. The enforced tradition of Devadasi exemplifies the harsh reality of how individual as a woman has to succumb to the pressure of religious institutes, economic vulnerability and the social pressure.

Similar reinforcing tradition of sexual exploitation is found in Natpurwa village of Hardoi District in Uttar Pradesh. It is a 70km drive from the capital Lucknow where women are forced into prostitution for the source of income and livelihood. The

zamindars patronised the entire village of Nat community for sexual favours from women that still continues and has become a matter of tradition¹⁷. ‘The generic meaning of the word Nata comes from the root nrt and has different variations, like Natati, which means to dance and Natyati, to represent anything dramatically, act, perform, imitate’¹⁹. The long history of Nat women shows that they were performers some of them still carry on the tradition before prostitution became the custom. In 1871, the British passed the criminal Tribes Act classifying certain tribes as engaging in criminal activities and Nat community was one of them. Their rights were denied to pursue their profession as performers thus reduced them to the work of prostitution¹⁷. Women left with no choice and of ignorance to some extent enter into the profession since the early age of 12 years where it is instilled in their minds that prostitution is a tradition of their village and they have follow the tradition anyhow. Prostitution and sex slavery in this village have been there since the last 400 years and no one questions of its existence. Caste works as a principle determinant for forced prostitution in Nat communities who in the past were entertainers of the monarchy but with the colonial encounter and feudal disintegration lost their feudal patrons²⁰. ‘Women members of the Nat caste, for example, are selected to prostitute by men in their families; men of this caste are supposed to prostitute women to higher caste men’^{21(p278)}. Earlier in the village few people of rich class visit the women but now women are trafficked far off place like Mumbai or Dubai in order to earn more money. After certain age when they could not cater customers and are not able to earn their livelihood for the family, women are forced to live in poverty without any hope of aid from the family. Their helplessness and vulnerability are unaccounted since men are pimp for their own female kith and kin¹⁹. This harsh reality really makes one wonder to what extent one can keep a hope and faith on the family when fathers, brothers, husbands are involved in such heinous acts who are ready to sell their women for some money. Even the police and local administration, with the involvement of the Nat Panchayat (Council of the Elderly) ensure that prostitution and human trafficking continues and persists¹⁹. The life of women in Natpurwa village is bounded by a tainted tradition whose shadow stigmatised them for the rest of their life and push them into abject poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and exclusion. A major share of their earned money is spent on alcohol and gambling since the financial matters are in the hands of eldest male member resulting in the ‘masculinisation of wealth’ and ‘feminisation of poverty’ among the Nat¹⁹. This makes the life of women more horrible as when they get old there is no one to look after them or to take care of them. In Natpurwa today, more than 70% women are into sex work and not long ago the number was 100%¹⁷. Hence, the socially sanctioned occupation is critical in understanding the structural and cultural factors that perpetuate the triple jeopardy of caste, gender and prostitution. The fates of these women are predestined in the name of tradition where they cannot afford to come out and choose an alternative because no other options are provided and whatever NGO’s are helping on their level are really avoided by the men

of the village. Poverty and lack of education are the most determining factors for the forced inter-generational prostitution in Nat communities. The women of Nat community are classic example of what is happening in being a woman where prostitution as a tradition becomes a source of income while men rest in their nest waiting to feed their mouth²². Eventually, the loss of sexual attractiveness and prowess women are dragged into the poverty and loneliness, none to care, victimised and stigmatised for being a prostitute and then a spinster.

The silence is pervasiveness even the activity is considered legal or not but criminalising the 'outward manifestation of sex work' such as soliciting, brothel-keeping and trafficking^{6(p185)}. In the larger context, the overlapping of multiple identities like gender, caste and prostitution have produced norms of patriarchy, cultural hierarchy and gender essentialism that strongly influences their sense of self. Thus exploiting and subjugating women and creates multiple marginalisations that exploits women of low caste because of their vulnerability. The constructed ritual and sometimes through social force the lower caste girls are earmarked to join this profession²⁰. Hence in any case women suffer more which make their condition more deplorable and this is compounded by further two factors namely the spread of HIV/AIDS and clandestine nature of the activity. In India the problems are undeniable, 'HIV infections in commercial sex networks are estimated to increase from the 1999 level of approximately 2.49 million to about 3.93 million by 2005 in a favourable scenario and to 6.87 million in a worse scenario'²³. It is spreading at rampant pace as most of the women are illiterate or ignorant about the diseases related to the unsafe sex. The invisible labor of the sex worker and the stigma attached to their profession make them silent victims of the conditions which are not somehow visible to the society.

Legal Provision for Prostitutions

Perhaps the reality of regarding women as a sex commodity is hard to digest but the truth unveils itself in many forms of gender asymmetry and gendered practices. Feminist have tried hard to resist the suppression against them and provide the sex workers better conditions of work, more pay and dignity in their professions⁶. The Suppression of Immoral Traffic (SIT) Act, passed in 1956 and enforced in 1958, was not the outcome of an independent and sustained mass movement in the country, but rather the result of India being a signatory to the United Nations International Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons passed in 1950⁸. The SIT Act did not seek to abolish prostitutes or prostitution per se and hence the practice of prostitution individually, independently and voluntarily by a women did not constitute an offence. However, certain sections of the Act conceived of the prostitute as an offender and criminalised the prostitute²⁴. Many sex workers' union like Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee based in Kolkata expressed that legalisation results in excessive state control and ghettoization of sex work that forced the large sections of sex trade underground⁶. The need of the hour is to decriminalise

them so that they live without any fear at least from the police and could save whatever they earn. Hazards associated with prostitutes include sexual assault, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted disease, rape, abduction, murder and legalising prostitution would not stop this oppression against them. There should be proper rehabilitation measures where they could learn to live a dignified and respectable life. According to the '1934 Devadasi Security Act', this practice has been banned in India. This ban was reinforced again in the year of 1980, but this law continues to be broken every day throughout India¹⁵. 'Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) is a Government of India scheme in which hostel is provided for the girls for study and accommodation to empower vulnerable group like Nats. Apne Aap Women Worldwide (AAWW), which is an International NGO fighting to end sex trafficking, run KGBV and accommodate 50% of the students from Nat community to prevent next generation prostitution'²².

The government should also discourage the prostitution by providing alternative jobs to them which can sustain their life. The various schemes like Balika Samridhi Yojana, Swashakti, and Swayamsidha Projects have provided impetus for socio-economic empowerment of women and girls. Also the law should be strengthened against immoral trafficking, escort agencies and brothels which are breeding ground for prostitution. With stronger laws and provision for gender equality in the constitutions, Indian society is recalibrating its morality protecting young girls from age old tradition of prostitutions and sexual exploitation. Education, vocational training skills and marriage aid deposit scheme will allow them to move up and out of the vulnerable and them with knowledge of other choices and the means to make them. Social development and employment opportunities of the sex workers can be enhanced through making specific legal and administrative provisions.

Conclusion

Through this paper we have seen the interplay and overlap of multiple identities of woman being a prostitute belonging to a lower caste. The intimate relationship of caste, culture and prostitution exhibits a kind of structured and hierarchic power relations that became the primary force for woman to engage in this profession of prostitution. Sometimes the birth of women is resented as a burden but same society rejoices the birth for being it a source of income. Socially constructed connotation to the enforced tradition of prostitution deprives women of their own identity of self and reduces them to a victim controlling and regulating their body and sexuality. The politics of shame and exclusion is well played in Indian society since the profession of prostitution are considered to be shameful and stigmatized thereby marginalised and excluded who engage in it. Although the practices like Devadasi are outlawed by Indian government nonetheless they are prevalent on a greater degree under the different name and manifestations. Prostitution in Nat community has social and cultural sanctions and is practiced

without any effective obstruction or concrete interventions from the government. After more than six decades of independence and full protection from the Constitution very less difference has made to the Nat community and Devadasi system where systematically human rights are violated, and their women are subjugated as a matter of practice and tradition. As such hundreds of examples can be seen of women sacrificing her life and identity for the welfare of the family. Why only women are made to sacrifice and till when she will be deprived of right to life of dignity. Why despite of numerous laws and legislation for protection and equality for women in India they are still considered second class citizen? Girls at the tender age are trafficked, harassed, raped and push them into prostitution where there is meagre chance of getting out even when they free themselves they are shunned and stigmatised for their past life. Appallingly society exclude them from the right of dignified and respectful life however many feminists would draw their profession as social work since they believe if prostitution is completely banned then there would be more crime (rape, molestation, harassment) against women. The society needs a radical change which involves a comprehensive review of the problems of mores and social customs and provides better education, as well as socio-economic condition. Strengthening the established laws or passing new legislation that protects women's rights accompanied by strategy to combat educate, train, rehabilitate women will help them to become active and full members of the society.

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