

# The Creation of Difference

*Empire, Race, and the Discourse on Prostitution  
in Colonial Bengal, 1880-1940*

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*A Senior Thesis in Partial Completion of the Requirements for the:*

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April 18, 2012

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# INTRODUCTION

“Prostitution, as we have sought to show, has in India *as in every other civilized country* a distinct history of its own.”<sup>1</sup> This statement was written in a book tracing the history of prostitution in India to show that prostitution was not a problem unique to India. With this in mind, we begin an examination of how prostitution became a marker of a civilized society for Indian reformers. This ‘social evil’ has been voluminously written about and discussed throughout history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prostitution became a topic of debate in many regions, particularly in Europe and in their colonies. With the introduction of legislation to regulate prostitutes through the Contagious Diseases Acts in Britain, the issue took center stage in the late nineteenth century. The debate then ignited in India, one of Britain’s most important colonies, once the same Acts were implemented in the Empire.

The late nineteenth century in India was a period of reform, especially in Bengal, but also a period in which race relations in the Empire hardened. After the 1857 Rebellion, India came under direct control of the British government, and the East India Company’s reliance on natives lost prominence. Because of the fear awakened by the revolt, the British also began to study India more carefully. They perceived India as vastly different from Britain and sought to implement separation between Indians and Europeans. Not only were British citizens actively separated from Indians, but Victorian ideals of morality and immorality were also imposed onto Indian society. The Indian prostitute, who had previously been a heterogeneous category composed of many types of women, became a homogenous entity that stood for Indian women’s immorality. During this time, concern over the health of the British army in India led to

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<sup>1</sup> S.N Sinha and N.K. Basu, *History of Prostitution in India* (Calcutta: Bengal Social Hygiene Association, 1933), x. Emphasis mine.

regulation and medical examinations for prostitutes. The anxiety of inter-racial sex between the colonizer and the colonized exacerbated race relations. Once British feminists became involved in trying to save their Indian sisters, particularly prostitutes, the discourse on prostitution in India proliferated.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the international concern over trafficking of women raised philanthropic and political interest in saving the victims, specifically once it was acknowledged that there were ‘white’ women living as prostitutes in the colonies.<sup>2</sup> This heightened the racial fears of the West. The international furor over ‘white slavery’ shifted the focus on how to differentiate Indian prostitutes from European prostitutes. In India, concerns about prostitution spread in the interwar period, as Indians also sought to address international trepidations about trafficking. In the 1920s and 1930s, a series of laws were passed to regulate brothels and trafficking, which mostly served to demarcate separate spaces for the prostitutes from respectable society. The Bengal Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act was passed in 1933 with pressure from the All Bengal Women’s Union, and followed the Bombay Immoral Traffic Act of 1923 and the Calcutta Immoral Traffic Suppression Act of 1923.<sup>3</sup> The regulation of prostitution in Bengal was debated in the 1920s and 30s. This can be subsumed within the discourse of nationalism, as these two decades were the height of anti-colonial nationalism. During the interwar period, Indians actively criticized the British Empire for its authoritarian methods of rule, especially in light of the widespread idea of ‘self-determination’ that rose to

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<sup>2</sup> In my own prose I do not capitalize ‘white’ but some of the works that I utilize will do so.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Southard, “The All-Bengal Women’s Union and the Problem of Prostitution,” In *The Women’s Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal: The Quest for Political Rights, Education, and Social Reform Legislation, 1921-1936* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995), 220.

prominence after the First World War. The Indian agitation for independence grew until 1947, when it was finally granted.

Taking this historical period as the frame of analysis, this thesis examines the discourse on prostitution. The purpose is to identify trends in how the issue of prostitution was debated and what the specific discourse was saying about the relationship between India and the Empire. I investigate what the Victorian feminists who wanted to 'save' the Indian women, particularly the Indian prostitutes, were saying, as well as how other non-Indians characterized the problem of Indian prostitution before Indians responded. I am most interested in the rebuttal made by Indians themselves, and to what extent they criticized British and international discourses. My main interest lies in the discourse on Indian prostitutes: how were they characterized? Were they seen as victims or simply deemed as immoral women?

Accordingly, the questions that guide my examination are as follows: How were Indian prostitutes represented by Victorian feminists? Was the international League of Nations' view of Indian prostitution similar to the Victorian feminists' characterization or was it vastly different? Why was there an interest in prostitution and how did those involved view Indian women and society? Finally, and most importantly, what were the attitudes and opinions of Indians themselves? How was the discourse on prostitution affected by nationalist discourse, and to what extent was nationalism a force in the Indian response to prostitution? Undergirding these specific questions, the overarching focus is the range of voices and attitudes regarding prostitution that was current in the 1920s and 1930s. Sources for this investigation include British colonial and Victorian feminist writings, League of Nations documents, and books written about prostitution during the interwar period by Indians.

### *Secondary Literature Review*

Although there are numerous secondary sources that touch upon prostitution in India, here I outline the few that are most relevant. Indeed, important secondary sources mostly analyze how prostitution was changed under the British, the role of British women in getting the Contagious Diseases Act repealed in Britain and then in India, and the discourse on international trafficking in the early twentieth century. Many of the sources examine gender and racial identities and their confluence with colonial and nationalist discourse.

Sumanta Banerjee's *Under the Raj: Prostitution in Colonial Bengal* (1998) looks at how prostitution changed under colonial rule. He examines the shifting relationships between the British and the prostitutes, and the elite *bhadralok* and the prostitutes. He also considers the changing roles and positions of the prostitutes in Bengal throughout the nineteenth century. Banerjee argues that the modern prostitute was pushed into a space that was much narrower than the one occupied by earlier prostitutes, since in modern capitalist society, she was solely a specialist in sexual entertainment, rather than a woman with artistic skills and talents, like the earlier courtesan. The modern prostitute was deemed an outcast from society and set apart by strict moral boundaries that were previously loosely defined. While my thesis will not be looking at the change in prostitution as a profession over time, Banerjee sets up a background for the discourse that was created by people within and outside of the Empire.

It is also imperative that we consider the literature on race and race relations in the Empire as a way to understand how the Indian prostitute was constructed. The works of Antoinette Burton and Philippa Levine focus mostly on what Burton calls "imperial feminism" and the role that British feminists and missionary women occupied within the discourse of the Contagious Diseases Acts. In *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and*

*Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (1994), Burton argues that Indian women were the ideal ‘Other’ to Victorian feminists, while in *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Diseases in the British Empire* (2003), Levine argues that the regulation of the Contagious Diseases Acts shows the racial ideology of the Empire. While these two books examine the convergence of Victorian feminists and the problem of prostitution in the Empire, they mostly examine the late nineteenth century. I will be reviewing writings by Victorian feminists, particularly Josephine Butler, who was involved in the campaigns to repeal the Contagious Disease Acts, to corroborate the arguments pushed by Burton and Levine.

In a similar vein to Burton and Levine, the works of Ann Stoler and Harald Fischer-Tiné also touch upon race relations, particularly intimate relations between the colonizer and the colonized. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002), Stoler argues that the Empire was a place where the ‘management of sexuality’ was crucial, which led to the use of segregated spaces within the colony. In his *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and ‘White Subalternity’ in Colonial India* (2009), Fischer-Tiné examines the European ‘low-class’ subalterns in India, and the problems they posed. In his analysis of the ‘white’ prostitutes in India, Fischer-Tiné shows how European prostitutes were deemed a threat to the project of Empire and their ‘white’ racial superiority. His work also touches upon the ‘white slavery hysteria’ that affected the League of Nations’ stance against international trafficking. I will examine League of Nations documents to see where the focuses of their reports lie, as well as their specific views on prostitution in India. Changes made in the structure of prostitution under the British led to the creation of certain groups of prostitutes who were medically policed, and set apart from other prostitutes who were closed off to the Europeans. In *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (2009),

Ashwini Tambe argues that the colonial laws and regulations led to a spatial reordering of the city to create distinctions among native and European prostitutes.

Although these secondary sources cover a wide range of topics, none of them explore how the discourse on prostitution changed over time from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. While Levine and Burton touch upon the Victorian feminists and their involvement in trying to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in India, their studies do not consider the international discourse of the twentieth century or the Indian responses. Stoler and Fischer-Tiné offer a good framework for understanding the racial ideology of the Empire, but neither looks at the colonized striking back. This thesis aims to investigate how the discourse on Indian prostitution has changed over time, from the Victorian feminists to the international sphere to what the Indians were saying. As far as I know, there has been no secondary source published that has closely examined the writings by Indians during the interwar period on the social issue of prostitution. Mrinalini Sinha's *Specters of Mother India* (2006) examines how Indian nationalists responded to the criticism levied against them by Katherine Mayo in *Mother India* (1927). She argues that nationalists reversed Mayo's argument to argue that India's social problems did not justify colonial domination, but on the contrary, proved the need for independence so that India could fix its social problems.<sup>4</sup> My argument aligns itself with Sinha's to a certain extent. Like Sinha, I will argue that India's social problems do not justify colonial domination, but I take this further to show that Indians worked very hard to show that prostitution was a social problem, and not a symptom of 'cultural backwardness,' as the colonizers believed. For the Indian reformers, whose writings I will examine, prostitution was a

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<sup>4</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). Sinha is one of the only scholars to look at social reforms during the interwar period, while most scholars tend to focus exclusively on the political changes and agitations of this time.



marker of modernity, since it was also a problem the British had back in the metropole. Most studies on the interwar period in India are heavily centered on political history, but this paper will try to carve out a space in the social and cultural history during that period. My intervention opens up an opportunity to think about how the social issue of prostitution fits into the narrative of political nationalism in the years leading up to independence. My argument comes down to a basic trend: the colonizers attack Indians as being backward, but the native Indians strike back and argue against this trope, insisting that their problems are similar to the problems that even the colonizers have to deal with on their home fronts, while simultaneously attacking the legitimacy of colonial rule.

### *Structure and Breakdown of Sections*

This thesis is arranged mostly chronologically and is broken down into three major sections. The first section focuses on the Victorian feminists of the late nineteenth century, and the reasons for which they felt compelled to intervene on behalf of their Indian sisters against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Victorian feminists viewed Indian women as a site to prove their own moral and cultural superiority. Consistent with the views of colonial officers, Victorian feminists saw prostitution in India as endemic to Indian culture and religions. The second section moves to the early twentieth century and specifically to the international discourse regarding trafficking. I will argue that the League of Nations was more concerned with getting European prostitutes deported from the colonies than they were in fixing the problems of prostitution, partly due to the hardening of racial categories by this time. The first two sections also examine how the Indian elite worked to distinguish their women from prostitutes, and how their views converged with the views of the colonial state. The third section focuses on the Indian response to the problem of

prostitution through the examination of three books written on this topic during the early 1930s. This is where I deviate from my secondary sources and instead focus on primary materials, by scrutinizing how Indians understood the problem of prostitution. Indian reformers emphasized prostitution as a social problem that plagued many nations and not as something that was entrenched in Indian traditions. Education became one of the most common methods suggested by these reformers as a way to eradicate prostitution.

I will conclude by looking at how the concepts of modernity and nationalism fit into the discourse on prostitution, particularly in the writings of the Indian reformers. I then explore the relevance of my study to the wide-ranging questions of nationalism and its association with social reforms and modernity. I will also consider the representation and lack of women's voices in discourses about women. This study claims a space within the broader realms of studies on the British Empire, Indian women, and Indian nationalism.

**SECTION I:  
THE QUEEN'S DAUGHTERS:  
VICTORIAN FEMINISTS IN INDIA,  
1880-1900**

## The Problem of Prostitution in Britain

Prostitution came under great scrutiny in the nineteenth century, and nowhere was the debate as forceful as in England. In order to curtail this 'social evil' the government turned to regulation. In England, the Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in 1864, 1866, and 1869 to protect men from venereal diseases.<sup>5</sup> These Acts set up a system of registration for prostitutes, providing for compulsory medical examinations and hospital confinement of those found to have venereal diseases. They regulated prostitution only in certain English ports and garrison towns, so the Acts were not widespread. However, many people saw these tactics as degrading and sought to repeal them. Participants in the campaign to repeal the Acts included moral reformers, feminists, and defenders of personal rights. From the early 1870s until these Acts were repealed in 1886, such activists waged an active struggle in and out of Parliament.

The repealers' campaigns were directed against what they saw as unfair and immoral actions against poor women, without taking into account male complicity in prostitution. The Social Purity campaigns were also interlinked with these debates.<sup>6</sup> Many middle-class women challenged the Acts as immoral and unconstitutional. The Ladies' National Association (LNA), under Josephine Butler (1828-1906), was an important actor on the stage to repeal the Acts. The manifesto of the LNA said that the Acts sanctioned male vices, while attacking female vices.<sup>7</sup> LNA members did not like that male clients were shielded from the intrusion and examinations forced upon the women. As moralists, they wanted male sexuality to be curtailed. While Butler is the most prominent of the feminists associated with the Contagious Diseases Acts campaigns, male social reformers were also involved. Henry Wilson and James Stansfeld worked alongside

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<sup>5</sup> See Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> The Social Purity Campaigns, or the Social Purity movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, sought to abolish prostitution and other sexual activities, such as masturbation, that were deemed immoral. They targeted both men and women.

<sup>7</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 2.

Butler and the LNA to direct the political strategy of the campaign at certain stages.<sup>8</sup> Henry Wilson, a Radical repealer and an industrialist, was a self-made man who was involved in the Social Purity movement and was a speaker on male chastity and self help. Men needed to be involved in order for changes to happen, since they needed to show that not all men were supportive of prostitution since it benefitted men. Having men involved in the campaigns gave credibility to the fight against immoral sexuality in general, rather than attacking only one sex. Repealers believed that regulating prostitutes authorized men unlimited freedom to seek out available women, who were already tested for venereal diseases. It was important for the people involved to emphasize male complicity in necessitating prostitution, so that female prostitutes would not be blamed as immoral, but as victims of society and men.

While repealers fought in the name of helping the prostitutes, historian Judith Walkowitz argued that the attack on prostitution was actually an attack on the poor as well as a way for moralists to gain prominence in the English political arena.<sup>9</sup> It was also the perfect platform for women to be recognized as the ‘moral conscience’ of the nation, and therefore those best fit to speak for women’s freedom. Thus, a group of elite middle-class women saw themselves as necessary to save the lower class women in England and later to speak for their sisters in the British Empire. India, the ‘Crown Jewel,’ became a site that attracted numerous Victorian feminists, such as Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929), Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), Annette Ackroyd Beveridge (1842-1929) and Mary Carpenter (1807-1877). It also attracted Josephine Butler. The Empire became a space that gave Victorian feminists an opportunity to assert both their solidarity of sisterhood and also their racial

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid 6.

<sup>9</sup>See Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, for more about this argument and details about the campaigns in England, as well as Victorian fears of prostitution.

superiority. What the British feminists learned from their campaigns in England was then shifted, as the focus turned to India in the late nineteenth century.

## **Imperial Feminism and Indian Prostitution**

Colonial India became a site where British women were able to flaunt their superiority in comparison to their Indian sisters and engage in the colonial enterprise of taking part in what Gayatri Spivak has called “saving Brown women from Brown men.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than seeing the oppression of Indian women as similar to their own oppression in British society, these women saw the Indian women as needing to be saved from their culture and society, which they thought to be inferior in every way to European society. Many feminists considered the “emancipation of Indian women” as an extension of their own domestic campaigns to uplift women.<sup>11</sup> These women were involved in what Antoinette Burton calls “imperial feminism,” which she sees as guiding Josephine Butler’s crusade against the Contagious Diseases Acts in India.<sup>12</sup> The Victorian feminists mentioned here will all be considered imperial feminists. According to Burton, ‘imperial feminism’ combined Victorian feminism with imperialism. Imperial feminists were women from Britain and America who did not oppose the project of Empire, but believed that they had a purpose to speak on behalf of their oppressed sisters. Many women who advocated on behalf of Indian women never set foot in the subcontinent. Harriet Martineau wrote the influential books *The History of British Rule in India* (1857) and *Suggestions Towards the*

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<sup>10</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds (London: Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Penelope Tuscon, ed. *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology of Victorian Feminist Writings on India, 1857-1900* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). This term is actually borrowed by Burton from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century feminists Pratibha Parmar and Valerie Amos, who used it in reaction to the rhetoric of white women during the second-wave feminist movement.

*Future Government of India* (1858), without ever visiting India.<sup>13</sup> Even Butler, for all the fame she gained for getting the Contagious Diseases Acts eventually repealed in India, never traveled to India.

Victorian imperial feminists often received their information from Indian men who were abroad or from men who had been to India. In 1870, Keshub Chunder Sen, the charismatic leader of the Brahma Samaj,<sup>14</sup> spoke in England appealing to British women to help Indian women, calling “upon [them] to do all in [their] power to effect the elevation of the Hindu women.”<sup>15</sup> Women like Mary Carpenter and Annette A. Beveridge were linked to India through their exclusive ties to Indian male reformers, most of them Bengali, Hindu, and upper caste.<sup>16</sup> While this bodes well for a study on Bengal, it was problematic for Victorian feminist intervention into Indian women’s lives, since they did not take into account the diversity among the different regions, ethnic groups and more. These feminists superimposed Victorian ideals and the borrowed Brahma Hindu ideals onto Indian womanhood in general. It is interesting to note male involvement in trying to change the condition of women. Social reforms were the domain of men, and even when Victorian feminists advocated on behalf of Indian women, they turned to Indian men for guidance, rather than Indian women. At the same time, these feminists also blamed Indian men for Indian women’s subjugation. While questioning the authority of Indian men over Indian women, these women did not question their own authority over Indian women. Their views were firmly located in “certainties of cultural supremacy and imperial domination.”<sup>17</sup> It

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<sup>13</sup> Tuscon, *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> The Brahma Samaj was a religious movement, founded in Bengal in 1828, that advocated for religious, social, and educational advancement of the Hindu community. See David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979) for more information.

<sup>15</sup> Keshub Chunder Sen’s ‘Speech to the Victorian Discussion Society,’ quoted in Tuscon, *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology*, 55. Sen worked alongside the British to bring social reforms in India.

<sup>16</sup> Tuscon, *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 58.

was in this mindset that imperial feminists involved themselves in helping Indian women, particularly Indian prostitutes.

*The Contagious Diseases Acts in India*

“Imperial feminism” gave British and American feminists and missionary women a space to occupy within the discourse of the Contagious Diseases Acts that were passed in India in 1868. These Acts were an attempt by the British government to license prostitutes and to control venereal diseases, and they were the same as those that were passed in England, except that these were aimed to protect solely the British officers, not the native Indian men. Within Britain, the Contagious Diseases Acts were confined to port and garrison towns and only applied to prostitutes in those areas. In India, by contrast, they applied to all public prostitutes who were frequented by Europeans, which included much of the indigenous prostitution population, particularly in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras.<sup>18</sup> Different groups of Victorian feminists united for the repeal of the Acts, since feminists were opposed to the provisions of the Acts that forced examinations on prostitutes. As in England, they were mostly appalled at the double standard of “unrestrained male activity while defining women as the purveyors of disease.”<sup>19</sup> They attacked men’s complicity in Indian prostitution. In both India and England, the problem of disease spreading was directed at prostitutes rather than the clients. As in England, Josephine Butler became a central figure in the campaign to end regulations. She entreated people to “promote a strong expression of public opinion in this matter.”<sup>20</sup> After much agitation, in 1888, the British government repealed the Contagious Diseases Acts in India, but they were still in place under a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid 124.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 9.

<sup>20</sup> Josephine Butler, “A Call to Battle” in *Dawn* (April 1890). Reprinted in Jane Jordan and Ingrid Sharp, eds. *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politics* (Routledge: New York, 2003), 166.



new name, without mention of words such as “prostitute,” “venereal,” and “lock hospital.”<sup>21</sup>

Butler urged the British to realize that the Government of India had acted as a ‘fraud,’ since they restored “a system of vice-regulation.”<sup>22</sup> While Butler never visited India, she was instrumental in sending two American feminists, Elizabeth Andrew and Katherine Bushnell, women who were also members of the World’s Women’s Christian Temperance Union, to investigate what was happening in the late 1890s.<sup>23</sup> These women found systematic provisions in place for prostitutes who were for the exclusive use of British soldiers, even in 1899. By the twentieth century, feminist efforts to be rid of regulations were nullified.

While advocating on behalf of Indian women, Victorian feminists utilized the rhetoric of Empire and religion, and this asserted their superiority over Indian women. According to Burton, ‘white women’ used Indian women in order to further their own claims to emancipation. Rather than creating changes for the betterment of Indian women, imperial feminists tended to highlight the superiority of the European women over the Indian women (and men). If they could be moral enough to speak out against what they saw as injustices against their Indian sisters, they certainly embodied the Victorian ideal of women as the moral beings in society. Elizabeth Andrew and Katherine Bushnell, the American missionary women who wrote the book *The Queen’s Daughters in India* (1899), attacked the Acts as they were applied in India, defining them as ineffective and as an outrage to women. These women did not attack the idea of Empire; rather, they argued that British colonial administrators were not living up to the Christian ideology that should frame their interaction with the colonized. They wrote that Indian women were simple “in

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<sup>21</sup> Tuscon, *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology*, 126.

<sup>22</sup> Jordan and Sharp, *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Tuscon, *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology*, 10.

their faith and lack of practical knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Consistent with the trope of the West representing the colonized, Andrew and Bushnell insisted that Indian women “depend upon us to voice their sorrows and plead their cause, by solemn compact with them and God.”<sup>25</sup> Not only did they represent the colonial Indian women, but they also created the very discourse that led to a binary division between the ‘free’ Anglo women and the ‘unfree’ and inferior Indian women. By appealing to the religious zeal of their audience, the British government, they sought to show that a goal of Empire should be for Christian women to ‘help’ their heathen sisters. This same moral and religious argument was extended by British men. In *The History of A Sanitary Failure* (1990), Henry Wilson argued that the Regulation System could not be defended on moral grounds.<sup>26</sup> Josephine Butler was aware that the cause was a religious one; her own crusade was fueled by a desire to save the victims of prostitution from the other sex and from immorality within their own society.<sup>27</sup> She wrote that she imagined a “long procession of angels, clad in white, descending the mountain,” as a group who would defeat those who were standing in the way of repealing the Acts.<sup>28</sup> Imperial feminists saw themselves as angelic figures that would bring salvation to their oppressed ‘sisters’ in India.

Imperial feminists considered Indian prostitutes as victims of their culture and religions. Many feminists viewed issues affecting Indian women as extensions of their own, but they also

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<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Andrew and Katherine Bushnell, *The Queen’s Daughters in India* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1899), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Henry Wilson, *The History of A Sanitary Failure: The Results of 90 Years Experiments in the Hygienic Regulation of Prostitution in India* (London: The British, Continental, and General Federation for The Abolition of State Regulation of Vice, 1900). This was written to show that the history of Regulation in India is a history of failures and therefore, Regulation should end. Also, since the Contagious Diseases Acts failed to protect the British troops, it was futile trying to keep these regulations in place.

<sup>27</sup> Josephine Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (London: Horace, Marshall, and Son, 1911)

<sup>28</sup> Josephine Butler, “The Abolitionist Cause in India, 1893,” In *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology of Victorian Feminist Writings on India, 1857-1900*, edited by Penelope Tuscon (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1995), 174.

targeted certain additional forms of oppression “as relating to cultural backwardness.”<sup>29</sup> Imperial feminists often aligned with missionary groups and believed that they could save these women, as evidenced by Butler writing about the “assumed helplessness” of the Indian women. Butler believed Indian women deserved more pity than the women in England who suffered under the Acts since Indian women were oppressed by men and by their culture. She wrote that “Indian women were oppressed by native religions, which made them less able to resist oppression.”<sup>30</sup> For Butler, India was equivalent to the condition of its women, which is why she never addressed the cases of European prostitutes even though they were affected by the Acts as well. Butler stated that she “cannot feel it possible to work for repeal in India without grappling more or less with the whole condition of Indian women. Our own responsibility as Christian women presses heavily on my mind.”<sup>31</sup> For imperial feminists, colonial women were victims of their culture and required imperial intervention.

Indian prostitutes were posited as being the lowest class in comparison not only to the British women, but also to respectable Indian women. If the Indian woman was subaltern to the subaltern colonial man, the Indian prostitute was subaltern to the respectable Indian woman.<sup>32</sup> Indian prostitutes were described as being both immoral and shameless, unlike the prostitutes in England. In their book, Andrew and Bushnell quote from a British Commission Report that slanders the Indian prostitutes by saying that “this life is not a life of shame in the sense in which this is true in England. Most of these women are prostitutes by caste and can feel no desire to give it up.”<sup>33</sup> British officers viewed Indian prostitution as a product of Indian culture,

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<sup>29</sup> Tuscon, *The Queen's Daughters: An Anthology*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Burton, *Burdens of History*, 146. The quotes are from Butler's writings utilized by Burton.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* 144.

<sup>32</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?.” Spivak argues that the Indian woman is a double subaltern, once to the British and then to the Indian men. The prostitute is that and more, since she is subaltern to the Indian woman as well.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Andrew and Bushnell, *The Queen's Daughters*, 54.

particularly of the caste system. They seemed to believe that British prostitutes were ashamed and took to prostitution as a last resort, while Indian prostitutes willingly chose this lifestyle and did not want to leave it. In his report Wilson quotes a British soldier who said, “there is a certain class in India who are prostitutes by profession.”<sup>34</sup> This informant believed that prostitution was endemic to Indian culture, particularly to its class system. In colonial writings of the late nineteenth century, Indian prostitutes were said to be shameless, which was something the Indians would later challenge, particularly in the Indian discourse on prostitution in the early twentieth century.

Imperial feminists promoted the cause of Empire. As Butler herself said, “women must always continue to be at the heart and in the forefront of the work in order to ensure success.”<sup>35</sup> They were navigating a space that propelled the idea of the civilizing mission. Antoinette Burton convincingly argues that, “feminists cultivated the civilizing responsibility and its attendant imperial identity as their own modern womanly and secular burden.”<sup>36</sup> She claims that the ‘white woman’s burden’ was to improve the lives of colonial peoples so that the Empire could survive. Imperial feminists served a national moral function: they were to be the moral voice of the nation. Therefore, it was their national and religious duty to redeem colonial people so the Empire could survive. Indian women were hence the objects of feminist salvation.<sup>37</sup>

Burton has already argued that for Victorian feminists, Indian women were the ideal ‘Other’ that allowed them to assert their superiority in colonial discourse. Similarly, Philippa Levine suggested how the very regulation of the Contagious Diseases Acts shows the racial

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson, *The History of A Sanitary Failure*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, “The Abolitionist Cause in India, 1893.” In *The Queen’s Daughters: An Anthology*, 173.

<sup>36</sup> Burton, *Burdens of History*, 13

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* 60.

ideology of the Empire and colonial rule.<sup>38</sup> The Contagious Diseases Acts were themselves a way to control the sexuality of the colonized peoples, especially inter-racial sexual contact. In order to control and police the sexuality of European men, Indian prostitutes had to be regulated. That could only be done by arguing that the women who were dangerous to the European men were different than other Indian women. Many moral purity campaigners and feminists objected to Indian prostitutes being regulated because they saw this as “government approved access for large number of working-class men to the seductive sexual attractions of the Orient.”<sup>39</sup> Imperial feminists were also afraid of non-European women having access to European men. Their fear of ‘Oriental’ women being sexually available also motivated much of the campaigns in India. The prostitute had to be constituted an ‘Other’ so that she could no longer pose a threat to British racial supremacy. This was also actively taken up by Indian society, since they needed to prove that the prostitute was separate from respectable Indian women.

### **The Indian Prostitute and Indian Society in the Nineteenth Century**

In sum, concern over the health of the British army in India led to regulation and medical examinations for prostitutes in the late nineteenth century. This led to the differentiation of prostitutes as the ‘Other’ to almost everyone in society. It was another way for the government to police sex and keep the different groups separated. One way of understanding theoretically what we have seen in this section is to make use of the work of Michel Foucault, who defined the policing of sex as “the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003)

<sup>39</sup> Tuscon, *The Queen's Daughters: An Anthology*, 127.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Vintage Books, 1990), 25. This chapter's argument on creating a colonial and native discourse on prostitution is taken from the Foucauldian concept of discourse acting as a way to produce knowledge about sexuality.

According to changes made in the structure of prostitution in Bengal under the British, certain medically policed groups were created to cater to the needs of the British soldiers, and these were set apart from other prostitutes who were closed off to the Europeans. Sex, then, became a material good that could be bought and sold. The British created a market for prostitutes as they sought to provide for the sexual needs of their soldiers. This did not bode well for the Indian prostitute who lost much of her previous status. Sumanta Banerjee argues that the modern prostitute was pushed into a space that was much narrower than the one occupied by her previous sisters in the form of temple dancers, courtesans, and more, since in modern capitalist society, she was only a sexual entertainer. The modern prostitute “represents the ultimate alienation in a capitalist society” since unlike her previous sisters, she is deemed an outcast from society and set apart by strict moral boundaries that were previously loosely defined.<sup>41</sup> Affected by Victorian conceptions of morality which characterized sex as shameful, Indian prostitutes were further alienated from society.

During the late nineteenth century, as the relationship between the British and the Indian prostitutes changed, so too did the relationship between the elite *bhadralok* (the Bengali ‘gentlefolk’ class) and the Indian prostitutes. The imperial state and colonial elite’s discourses converged. The prostitute became the ‘Other’ to both groups; she was never the dominant figure in either British or Indian discourses. Especially in regard to the ‘respectable’ Bengali woman, the *bhadramahila*, the prostitute was seen as an example of what to avoid, and a reason for why women needed to remain secluded in the house. The Bengali *bhadralok*, like the colonial officials, never sought to penalize the men who patronized prostitutes, but rather perpetuated the image of the prostitutes as “immoral” and unacceptable members of Indian society. Prostitutes needed to be seen as separate from respectable Indian women in all aspects, whether it be in

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<sup>41</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Under the Raj: Prostitution in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Seagull Books, 1998), 20.

spatial areas or in the public discourse. It was useful to set the prostitutes as detached from regular Indian society. Prostitutes were “pushed to the peripheries while prostitution was not done away with,” which is consistent with Foucault’s analysis that power works to produce a multiplicity of female sexualities which works to maintain the social order.<sup>42</sup> Incidentally, the prostitutes never lost a place within public society, in that they were constantly under scrutiny, especially in discourse regarding women’s respectability.<sup>43</sup> While the imperial feminists were speaking on behalf of the Indian prostitutes, Bengali reformers were not quite so vocal, although they did seek to differentiate prostitutes from respectable society.

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<sup>42</sup> Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 121. See also Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Banerjee says the discourse on prostitution was always there in the public space. The concept of respectability in Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was important in creating the *bhadramahila*, who was seen to be representative of Indian society, since these women were both modern and traditional, i.e. educated but also important in the home and lived by Bengali values.

**SECTION II:  
THE INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE ON  
TRAFFICKING AND PROSTITUTION,  
1900-1940**



## **‘White Slavery’ and the Politics of Sexual Management**

In India, public attention to prostitution heightened in the twentieth century as international pressure focused on how to stop trafficking of women and girls, particularly with regard to European prostitutes. Keeping with Foucault’s account of sexuality, prostitution was not only talked about, but also highly regulated as a social problem. The discourse on prostitution was complicit in the creation of the colonial ‘Other’ in colonial Bengal, and this was exacerbated once ‘white’ prostitutes were introduced into the discourse. The bodies of the prostitutes were the site through which colonial debates over trafficking, prostitution and race were waged. The international concern over trafficking of women raised people’s interest in saving the victims, especially once ‘white slavery’ was emphasized, as European prostitutes entered the debate. Unlike the focus on Indian prostitutes in the nineteenth century, European prostitutes held British and international attention in the early twentieth century.

The idiom of ‘white slave traffic’ became prominent in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The ‘White Slave Traffic’ phrase, coined in 1830s, alluded to the rhetoric of early nineteenth century abolitionism, but was here used to refer to the traffic in (‘white’) women.<sup>44</sup> The anti-White Slavery campaigns began in Britain, but by the twentieth century they became transnational, and were then taken over by the League of Nations after World War I. The focus shifted from a European oriented problem to a global one. Harald Fischer-Tiné argues that the ‘White Slavery’ hysteria bore the signs of a “cultural paranoia” since the reports and news were all exaggerated with sensationalist stories of young innocent girls being taken to foreign places, mainly the uncivilized colonies.<sup>45</sup> Stephanie Limoncelli argues that the international anti-

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<sup>44</sup> Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and ‘White Subalternity’ in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 190.

<sup>45</sup> Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*, 196. See also Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*: (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

trafficking movement shifted toward a nationalist framework, and served more to cater to the interests of the European nations than solving the problem of trafficking itself.<sup>46</sup> This was intricately linked to the problem of prostitution in the colonies, and the distinction between the European prostitutes and the indigenous Indian prostitutes. The panic over the 'white slave trade' "posited a profound divide between hapless and properly passive white women sold into sexual slavery and non-white women for whom such a loss of status was of little consequence, a divide resting squarely on a racially marked binary of passive/active."<sup>47</sup> The 'white' prostitutes were seen to be victims who were forced into prostitution, and therefore, needed to be saved. In the international discourse, prostitution for non-white women was not deemed to be as great an issue as the problem of getting white women out of prostitution.

In the League of Nations reports from the 1920s and 1930s, the focus was on foreign prostitutes. The League of Nations was formed after World War I in order to stabilize the international community and ensure that war did not break out again. It was the precursor to the United Nations, an organization that was founded in 1945, and similarly, the League also wanted to be a space to negotiate issues that connected nation states. The League took on trafficking as a part of its mandate in 1920 and set up a permanent committee to collect information, study methods of prevention, and advise the Council of the League.<sup>48</sup> In the resolutions and reports written by the League of Nations regarding trafficking, the focus was on the expulsion of foreign [white] prostitutes from the colonies. The League wanted to compile a list of organizations within every country that would help "foreign prostitutes who are to be expelled."<sup>49</sup> There was

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<sup>46</sup> Stephanie Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking: The First International Movement to Combat the Sexual Exploitation of Women* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>47</sup> Philippa Levine, "Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities," *Feminist Review* 65 (2000): 11.

<sup>48</sup> Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconducts: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>49</sup> League of Nations Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People Report (1926): 5.

an overwhelming emphasis on foreign prostitutes, despite the small numbers. In colonial discourse, Indian women's prostitution was seen a result of their ignorance, and "symptomatic of a degraded society where husbands ruled tyrannically and without due respect for feminine sensibilities."<sup>50</sup> The foreign European prostitutes, by contrast, were deemed victims. Racial ideology motivated the creation of a distinction between European/foreign prostitutes and Indian prostitutes.

The laws regarding prostitution and trafficking led to the spatial reordering of the city based on the race of the prostitute. In British India, after the Rebellion of 1857, colonial officers and politicians "stipulated new codes of conduct that emphasized respectability, domesticity, and a more carefully segregated use of space," and these measures were concerned with European women.<sup>51</sup> This was even more important in Bombay, where most of the foreign prostitutes lived.<sup>52</sup> The number of European brothel workers in India was not high, yet there was a significant enough number, which was used to argue about notions of gender and was extremely useful in managing interracial sex in the colony. In Calcutta, which had as few as only 41 'white' prostitutes compared to over seven thousand Indian prostitutes, the 'white' women were constantly under surveillance.<sup>53</sup> The colonizers feared miscegenation, so the British closely monitored 'white' prostitutes to guarantee that only European men visited them. They wanted to ensure that native Indian men did not have access to European prostitutes, for that would mean

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<sup>50</sup> Levine, "Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities," 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 77.

<sup>52</sup> See Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, for a fascinating study of prostitution in Bombay and how laws created separate spatial areas of occupation for the different peoples, even among prostitutes. See also her article "The Elusive Ingénue: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of European Prostitution in Colonial Bombay" in *Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism: Sex Work*, edited Prabha Kotiswaran, 3-26 (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011) for the European prostitute in Bombay. Bombay was the main center of European prostitutes since it was a port city, and the first European prostitutes came there after the 1860s, and then eventually went to the other cities in India. The British regulated and supported these brothels because they were necessary to cater to the large number of European men. It was a necessary evil to prevent European men from having relationships with Indian women.

<sup>53</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India* (Calcutta: Das Gupta & Co., 1934). These numbers are mentioned in Mukherji's book, and is taken from the 1921 Census.

Indians were free to have access to ‘white’ women. The British did not want British women to be prostitutes because it diminished their racial prestige, so they deported British prostitutes and only allowed continental European women to remain as prostitutes in India.<sup>54</sup> In terms of European races, as long as the British could claim they were superior, other ‘white’ prostitutes were allowed to remain, although this was something the League of Nations pushed to get rid of. One of the committees wanted to focus on examining the “problem of the expulsion of prostitutes in all its aspects,” the prostitutes being the foreign European women, not other foreign Asian prostitutes in India.<sup>55</sup> The international anti-trafficking campaigns of the 1920s were a challenge to the brothels since they were strongly against European women being trafficked to the colonies. This led to the racialization of the city’s prostitutes by dividing European prostitutes from Indian prostitutes into brothels in different areas. Brothels were officially banned in Britain in 1885, but remained legal in India. European prostitutes were mostly prominent in the colonies until World War I, after which international efforts led to a decrease in their numbers and acceptance.<sup>56</sup> Yet, while the white prostitutes were in India, they were segregated in separate spaces within the city, so no men who associated with ‘white’ prostitutes would associate with Indian prostitutes.

As Ann Stoler argues, the management of sexuality structured race and nationality, and this “sexual management” was internal to the structure of British rule in India.<sup>57</sup> The British saw India as a sexual melting pot and wanted to get rid of inter-racial sexual connections. They knew ‘white’ prostitutes served a purpose, yet they had to “establish a clear barrier between their

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<sup>54</sup> Ashwini Tambe, “The Elusive Ingénue: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of European Prostitution in Colonial Bombay” in *Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism: Sex Work*, edited Prabha Kotiswaran, (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011), 8.

<sup>55</sup> League of Nations Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People Report (1926): 3.

<sup>56</sup> Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 45.

‘whiteness’ and the ‘whiteness’ of the imperial elite.”<sup>58</sup> In order to gain the respect of indigenous Indians, the British had to show that whites were superior and sexually unavailable to Indians. European prostitutes were inferior to the officials, but still superior to the Indians. The ‘white’ prostitutes all worked in brothels run by European mistresses; but, they were never completely isolated from their Indian environment, which was a concern for the British who wanted to maintain racial separation.<sup>59</sup> Race and gender, or rather “blood and sex,” were regarded as markers of difference between the colonial rulers and subjects.<sup>60</sup> It was important to not let native Indian men have access to European prostitutes, since that would be problematic for the project of Empire. The foreign prostitutes were listed, registered and more closely policed, while the native prostitutes were not as closely regulated. Prostitution was deemed more acceptable for Indian women than for foreign women. While the number of European prostitutes in all of South Asia was probably never more than three hundred to four hundred women at any one time, they received much of the British and international (read: League of Nations) attention.<sup>61</sup> There was a hierarchy even among the prostitutes, with the European ones always higher. It was a “racial demarcation of prostitution.”<sup>62</sup> Under imperialism, prostitution became a gendered and a racial activity, enumerated by the colonial state.

### **Differentiating Indian Prostitutes from Others in India**

Once the Indian prostitutes were segregated from and constituted as inferior to foreign European prostitutes, they had to be differentiated from Indian women who felt threatened by the prostitutes’ presence in public. The 1923 and 1932 anti-trafficking debates in the Bengal

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<sup>58</sup> Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid* 208.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid* 187.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid* 207.

<sup>62</sup> Levine, “Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities,” 8.

Legislative council were “part of a movement to sequester and segregate reputable and disreputable women.”<sup>63</sup> Rather than creating laws to help the prostitutes, the anti-trafficking laws placed the difference between the *bhadramahila* (respectable women) and the *beshya* (prostitute) into law.<sup>64</sup> The gradual increase of Indian women in the public sphere created a necessity for prostitutes to disappear from the public or be differentiated, so ‘respectable’ women would not be confused with prostitutes. Heather Dell argues that that is why legislators in the Bengal Legislative Council actively wanted anti-prostitution laws in Calcutta. Contact with prostitutes was seen as the reason for “a decline in the virtues of respectable, homely women.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, it was necessary to separate respectable society from the ‘evil’ of prostitution. Indian nationalists wanted to differentiate their women from prostitutes to counter British accusations of “cultural barbarism.”<sup>66</sup> They became involved in making laws and legislating so they could prove India’s modernity as a nation that could also combat the problem of prostitution.

Within India, concerns about prostitution were rampant in the interwar period, 1920-1940, as Indians also sought to follow international concerns about trafficking. The League of Nations’ report on the East found that trafficking and prostitution were indeed issues in India, but that India was also working to ameliorate the effects of this ‘immoral’ problem on society.<sup>67</sup> By the 1920s, India had agreed to the Convention of 1910, which meant that member countries agreed that anyone who procured, enticed, or led away, even with her consent, a woman or girl under age for immoral purposes, would be punished, notwithstanding that the various acts constituting the offense might have been committed in different countries. They had also signed and ratified

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<sup>63</sup> Heather Dell, “Hierarchies of Femininity: Sex Workers, Feminists and the Nation.” (PhD Diss., Duke University, 1999): 96.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid 268.

<sup>65</sup> Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*, 116.

<sup>66</sup> Dell, “Hierarchies of Femininity,” 56.

<sup>67</sup> League of Nations: Commission of Enquiry into Traffic In Women and Children in the East Report (1932).

the Convention of 1921, known as the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, with the reservation that the age be 16 instead of 18 for girls who needed to be rescued. In a League of Nations document, it was reported that the “general policy of India toward prostitution is one of abolition, there being no licensed houses or prostitutes and no compulsory medical supervision of prostitutes in the country.”<sup>68</sup> India made it difficult for foreign prostitutes to enter British India, which can be seen as the main reason why the League of Nations started investigating trafficking in the East. Race was very much an element in the sorts of things reported to the League. Even in reports regarding prostitution in non-European nations, the spotlight seems to have been on foreign prostitutes. The overarching goal was to make sure no Western woman was making a living as a prostitute in the East.

Prostitution was so widespread that the imperial government and home government actively legislated it into the twentieth century and even Indian women became involved in this project. In 1923, the Prostitution Act, applicable to all of India, criminalized prostitution. The Calcutta Immoral Traffic Suppression Act of 1923 was passed in order to fight against prostitution in the Calcutta presidency. This was followed by the Bengal Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act in 1933, which passed with pressure from the All Bengal Women’s Union, an organization of Bengali women formed to end “commercialised vice, and the exploitation and contamination of young women.”<sup>69</sup> The regulation of prostitution in India was debated in the 1920s and 30s, and led to many Indian women becoming involved in the effort to ‘save’ and rehabilitate prostitutes. In part influenced by the works of Victorian feminists, Indian organizations were founded and expanded to fight against the ‘evil’ of prostitution. It was never

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<sup>68</sup>League of Nations: Commission of Enquiry into Traffic In Women and Children in the East (1932), 330. Recall from the previous section that the Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed in 1888 in theory.

<sup>69</sup> Southard, “The All-Bengal Women’s Union and the Problem of Prostitution,” In *The Women’s Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal*, 227.

that prostitution was hidden from society. Even international magazines and journals reported on efforts made by Indian women to get involved. It was reported in international press when women of Bengal organized the All Bengal Women's Union in 1933 to fight for the Bengal Suppression for Immoral Traffic Act.<sup>70</sup> *International Women's News* mentioned when there was a petition by Indian women in support of laws regarding prostitution.<sup>71</sup> It was a time of great mobilization within India to regulate and create a public discourse about prostitution.

In the 1920s and 1930s, laws were passed to regulate brothels and trafficking, which served to demarcate separate spaces for the prostitutes from respectable society. Nationalists passed laws so that brothels were deemed as "disorderly houses," whereas the home of the Indian family was a place of order.<sup>72</sup> A case that went to Calcutta High Court had to show that houses (supposedly used as brothels) were neither disorderly nor causing annoyance to be free from accusations.<sup>73</sup> In order to confine Indian prostitutes to certain spaces, the meaning of the term 'brothel' changed. In the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1923, a brothel was defined as "any house, room, or place habitually used by more than one person for the purposes of prostitution."<sup>74</sup> Brothel keeping was not an offence unless it disturbed neighbors. The Act also stated that, "girls up to age 16 may be removed from brothels and detained in safety until further measures can be taken under the Children Act."<sup>75</sup> These girls could be placed in certified schools, homes or under custody of reliable persons. In theory, as long as prostitutes were regulated, they would not bring shame upon the nation. Most laws and regulations worked to exclude prostitutes from respectable society, and from being mistaken for typical Indian women.

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<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, "Feminist Notes: Bengal Women Organize," *Equal Rights* 19, no.10 (1933): 79.

<sup>71</sup> Anonymous, "Indian Women Petition Against Prostitution," *International Women's News* 15, no.7 (1921): 109.

<sup>72</sup> Dell, "Hierarchies of Femininity," 92

<sup>73</sup> Calcutta High Court: Ram Pada Chatterjee and Ors. Vs Basanta Baishnabi And Ors., April 7, 1925

<sup>74</sup> League of Nations: Commission of Enquiry into Traffic In Women and Children in the East Report (1932), 332.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



## The Attitude of the League of Nations

The League of Nations characterized prostitution in India as intertwined with Indian culture and society. They reiterated what had been said in the colonial discourse. The League of Nations' report on the East mentioned that in recruiting prostitutes in Calcutta, the women drawn into it were often "connected with old traditions, customs, and caste institutions among the native population."<sup>76</sup> It justified that Indian prostitutes were not victims in the same sense as European prostitutes, since Indian traditions apparently condoned prostitution. This emphasis on these women's culture was not unusual in colonial discourses, but it was crucial in understanding that the international (Western) bodies saw prostitution as something to be expected in Eastern cultures. The League also mentioned that in Calcutta, there was a certain caste among which all women were prostitutes and all men were pimps.<sup>77</sup> The document enumerated specific information about the prostitutes, especially concerning their religion. In many cases, the women were labeled prostitutes if they were unmarried but living with a single man as a family, because of caste restrictions.<sup>78</sup> Culture was used by the League of Nations in determining how data should be collected. Another important note was that in Calcutta, practically all prostitutes had pimps or procurers. This observation highlighted the perilous condition of prostitutes, who often had to depend on others for their very survival. Despite the overwhelming evidence that Indian women were victims of social and economic conditions, most of the international focus was on making the foreign prostitutes appear to be victims of society, while their Indian counterparts were interpreted as symptoms of a backward indigenous culture.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid 334.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid 333.

**SECTION III:  
THE INDIAN (MALE) RESPONSE TO  
PROSTITUTION**

In this section, we turn to what Indians themselves wrote about the problem of prostitution in Bengal specifically, and in India broadly. This chapter will look carefully at three books that were published in the early 1930s about prostitution and prostitutes in India, with all three mostly focusing on Bengal.<sup>79</sup> Satyendra Nath Mukherjee's *Murder of Prostitutes for Gain* (1930), S.N. Sinha and N.K. Basu's *History of Prostitution in India* (1933) and Santosh Kumar Mukherji's *Prostitution in India* (1934) were all written during the heyday of Indian nationalism, but none of the books explicitly mentioned independence or nationalist agitations. Rather, all four authors focused on highlighting a problem that they believed had plagued India for a long time. We will take note of how these authors understood the history of prostitution within India, as well as how they believed the institution of prostitution could be abolished and/or reformed. This section is divided into four parts: how the authors showed the Indian prostitutes to be societal victims, the reforms and changes that Indians believed were needed to change the condition of prostitution in India, and a look at education as one such reform. The fourth part will encapsulate the Indian responses and arguments regarding prostitution.

First and foremost, prostitution was always seen as a morality issue, so the responses were always tied to proving a nation's moral superiority. Those who were involved with prostitution were deemed immoral, and even the two important trafficking laws passed in Bengal were titled "Immoral Traffic Suppression Act." In her infamous book, *Mother India* (1927), Katherine Mayo found that the "general subject of prostitution in India need not enter the field of [the] book" since it was automatically assumed to be a reason for the Indians' backwardness.<sup>80</sup> It

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<sup>79</sup> It is remarkable that the few books written about prostitution are so heavily biased towards Bengal, despite the fact that Bombay had more prostitutes and red light districts. Bengal was an important political center of British India, but by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the 1905 Partition of Bengal, the British capital shifted from Calcutta to Delhi, so it would make sense to focus on Bombay prostitutes for the sheer number.

<sup>80</sup> Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (London: Florin Books, 1927), 44. Mayo claims that India is too backward to be able to rule itself and therefore, colonial rule is necessary. Mayo insists that India's backwardness is tied to the social conditions of Indian women.

is interesting, though, that in her arsenal of attacks against India, she did not take up the one topic that Indians themselves were afraid indicated the immoral contamination of their society. Some Indians did condemn prostitution, since “public condemnation of prostitutes ensured respectability” for those who spoke out.<sup>81</sup> Unlike British and international authors who claimed that Indian prostitutes were a symbol of Indian cultures, traditions and religions, the Indian writings that will be examined from the interwar period characterized Indian prostitutes as victims of society. Rather than accepting the colonial discourse, these Indian reformers wanted to change the situation through the regulation of brothels and prostitution in public spaces, as well as through educating the public.

### **Indian Women As Victims of Society**

While the League of Nations debated prostitution and trafficking, Indians in South Asia also engaged in the conversation. The international arena was concerned with protecting European prostitutes from being contaminated by Indians, and focusing on how to get rid of Anglo-European prostitutes from the East, and especially from the colonies. Indians were in the midst of the anti-colonial nationalist movement, and set on proving that they were capable of maintaining control over their own population. They were actively engaged in refuting the idea of Indian prostitutes as victims of a culture that sanctioned prostitution by emphasizing prostitutes’ status as societal victims who were coerced into that lifestyle. Many writers also stressed the immorality of these women, supporting the gendered stereotype of women as morally loose. S.K. Mukherji, in the preface of his book *Prostitution in India* (1934),

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<sup>81</sup> Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*, 122.

acknowledged the prevalence of prostitution in all societies, not just in India.<sup>82</sup> He stated that “the evil is old and deeply rooted still in all the World’s civilizations –West and East.”<sup>83</sup>

Prostitution was viewed as a general societal ill that was not unique to the Indian colony, but rather a social issue that most modern nations grappled with, including the colonizers. From this vantage, prostitution was a sign of modernity, not cultural backwardness.

In order to shift the blame away from Indian culture and traditions as a cause for prostitution, Indian men attacked the female gender. Indians were well aware that there were many causes for a woman’s fall, ranging from the voluntary to the accidental. Nevertheless, women’s sexuality was often faulted as the reason for their entry into prostitution. If social ills could be connected to gender, then they could be seen as distinct from cultural backwardness. Like many others at this time, Mukherji felt that “excessive sexual passion is an indirect cause of drifting of a woman to a life of shame.”<sup>84</sup> Since women’s sexuality was not supposed to be available to the public eye, the Indians argued that prostitutes in general were unable to control themselves, and therefore only a small portion of Indian society had taken the wrong path. Other faults that Mukherji cited as reasons for women’s drift into this profession included licentiousness of disposition, seduction, temptation, constant association of men and women, ill-assorted marriages, and ill-treatment of girls at work.<sup>85</sup> It is not surprising that within his criticism of prostitution, Mukherji blamed the women, yet also targeted social institutions such as marriage. If prostitution was to be blamed on the female gender, it could equally be seen as men’s fault for perpetuating prostitution.

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<sup>82</sup> Santosh Kumar Mukherji, *Prostitution in India* (Calcutta: Das Gupta & Co., 1934)

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, i.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid* 156.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid* 154-56.

For many Indian authors, Indian prostitutes *were* seen as victims of men. S.N Sinha and N.K. Basu's book, *The History of Prostitution in India* (1933), began with the premise that male complicity was crucial in prolonging prostitution, but they were optimistic about changes since they were living at a time when an attempt was being made for the first time to "control, regulate, and if possible, eradicate" prostitution.<sup>86</sup> The Bengal Social Hygiene Association, an organization that was associated with the Moral and Social Hygiene Associations that branched out in many parts of the Empire from England, commissioned the writers to produce a history of prostitution to better understand the situation, to show that prostitution in India had a long history.<sup>87</sup> Yet, in the preface, the authors make it clear that "prostitution is the creation of a set of men born with a super abundance of sexual passion and a society dominated by males."<sup>88</sup> These Indian men's goal was to not mention women's sexuality, but rather to pinpoint the problem as men's sexuality. Not women, but rather society and especially men, were to blame. Sinha and Basu argued that in ancient India, "prostitution is described as mainly a man's question" and in the law of ancient India, "we find an attempt to put more check on the male advances than on the female surrender."<sup>89</sup> The prostitutes were merely victims caught in an unfortunate institution. This argument could have been misconstrued by the colonizers to show that Indian men were incapable of controlling their own passions, so how could they expect to be rational beings who could lead a nation? Indians could simply point to the problems that British men themselves encountered during the late nineteenth century and how they perpetuated the institution of prostitution in India because of their need for concubines and available women. One writer

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<sup>86</sup> S.N Sinha and N.K. Basu, *History of Prostitution in India* (Calcutta: Bengal Social Hygiene Association, 1933). The quoted phrases are written in the preface to the book.

<sup>87</sup> Josephine Butler was crucial in setting up numerous Social and Moral Hygiene Associations to look into the problem of prostitution within the Empire.

<sup>88</sup> Sinha and Basu, *History of Prostitution in India*, Preface.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid* xii.

insisted that the state of prostitution in India was due to the Europeans, since when they came to India, they took concubines and perpetuated the institution.<sup>90</sup> It is worth noting that Indian men were making the same argument Victorian feminists did about men's complicity in prostitution. In this manner, prostitution became a common problem for both the metropole and the colony. Women had been portrayed as being at fault for this problem, but when Indians admitted how men contributed to the issue, it became a social problem that affected all within a society. An issue must have relevance to men for it to be appropriated as a social problem; otherwise, if it only afflicts women, it is relegated to the private space and is not up for debate in the public sphere.

Indian prostitutes were deemed unfortunate victims and never constituted any agency. Just as European prostitutes in India were characterized as societal victims, Indian prostitutes were also portrayed as helpless victims of society by Indian writers. A prostitute was outside of the fringes of society and not recognized in open society. S.N. Mukherjee, another Indian who wrote about prostitutes, mentioned that they were outcasts and that their life was "not so happy as it looks from outside."<sup>91</sup> S.K. Mukherji expressed the same sentiment when he wrote that "the life of a prostitute is not so happy as it appears from outside."<sup>92</sup> This attitude, as expressed by two different authors, directly attacked the idea that prostitutes were shameless and chose their lifestyle, as had been argued by colonial officials in the nineteenth century. The career of a public woman was short and Indian prostitutes were limited in many ways. It was difficult for them to get anywhere after their prime, since they were ostracized by society. Indians agreed that marriage was seen as the sole important goal for most Indian women; however, it was not an

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<sup>90</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 74. In a way, not only should the British not be condemning Indian society for prostitution, they should realize they are responsible for much of it.

<sup>91</sup> Satyendra Nath Mukherjee, *Murder of Prostitutes for Gain*, (Calcutta: Jnan Printing Works, 1930), 1.

<sup>92</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 269.

option for Indian prostitutes. Sometimes, rarely, prostitutes did marry Muslim men, but never Hindu men because “no Hindu would ever think of marriage with a harlot.”<sup>93</sup> While it cannot be gauged how accurate the divisions were along religious lines, marriage among prostitutes was extremely rare and was not conducive to the women leaving the profession. Once a woman was marked as having sold her body, she could not claim to belong to one male only, and thus marriage was never considered proper for her. The prostitutes were victimized by society to the extent that they often had no other option but to continue with their profession, which made their exploitation easy.

According to Indian reformers, most of the prostitutes were victims who had been forced into the trade because of society’s restrictions. In the brothel areas, the prostitutes lived away from other residents, except other fallen women. Calcutta was one of the largest cities in India and had many brothels. Usually, women were recruited into brothel life through trickery and force. Mukherji claimed that abduction of girls by force was common under the British rule in Bengal, especially in the eastern province.<sup>94</sup> By tracing the problem to the British, Indians highlighted the issue as not being native and unique to India, but rather as something that was aggravated because of the colonizers. Nevertheless, problems with marriage also contributed to the victimization of young women. Mukherji wrote that marriage “is one of the methods by which girls are recruited for the brothels by *dalals* (agents).”<sup>95</sup> This was much more common in procuring Muslim girls than Hindu girls because of marriage restrictions within clans/castes.<sup>96</sup> While Indian prostitutes were on the fringes of society, they were nevertheless living by caste and religious rules in terms of how they interacted with others. Mukherji also mentioned that

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid 271.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid 215.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid 195.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



prostitutes worshipped God, visited temples and even went on pilgrimages. A prostitute was “an outcaste; but it is rather curious that some of these women observe caste distinction in the matter of inter-dining amongst themselves.”<sup>97</sup> To Mukherji, these women’s actions appeared to be “curious.” He was surprised that prostitutes continued to follow their religions, despite the fact that their religions did not condone their profession, but this could be seen as the women holding on to their own sense of identity, even as society continued to disregard them as acceptable members of their communities.<sup>98</sup> Prostitution also continued in India as a result of bogus widows’ homes, supposedly constructed to serve the “unfortunate victims of abduction or rape, but apparently for sale of these girls.”<sup>99</sup> It is not surprising that a large number of widows were turned into prostitutes as society failed to find a place and role for widows.<sup>100</sup> There were many ways that girls were forced into the trade, mostly because young girls were easily exploited by men and society.

Our Indian authors wanted to show that women were not taking part in prostitution by their own will, but were driven into it. In *Murder of Prostitutes for Gain* (1930), S. N. Mukherjee examined how prostitutes were entrapped by criminals and murdered, since murder of prostitutes for gain was not uncommon in India. He argued that the main motivation for the murder of prostitutes was the wealth that they amassed, which was mostly converted into “gold ornaments.”<sup>101</sup> S.K. Mukherji also mentions crime in brothels, with women being murdered for their jewelry.<sup>102</sup> Whereas Mukherjee does not condemn the women for utilizing their money for personal beautification, he does condemn them for being in league with the very criminals who

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid 261.

<sup>98</sup> What’s also important to keep in mind is how many prostitutes chose clients based on religion. Many Hindu prostitutes refused to have Muslim men as clients, while many Hindu men refused to go to Muslim prostitutes. This was not always easy to do, since many women would change their names once they went into prostitution.

<sup>99</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 203.

<sup>100</sup> Widows were discouraged from remarrying and thus, there were large groups of young widows in India.

<sup>101</sup> S.N. Mukherjee, *Murder of Prostitutes*, 5.

<sup>102</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 248.

murdered them. Once again, Indian prostitutes were never seen to take part in prostitution by choice, but rather as being coerced into it by men, and then losing their lives to these very men. Men were the agents who created prostitution and were implicated as the cause for prostitution's existence. Mukherjee argued that prostitutes were killed after being drugged.<sup>103</sup> This drugging was done through alcohol and poisons since the murderers could make the women appear intoxicated. It was almost seen as a justification for why the women were murdered; since they were unable to stay away from alcohol, which respectable women do not drink, their punishment was to be expected. Therefore, the issue of prostitution was tied to the social purity movement, just as it has been linked in England in the nineteenth century. These Indian reformers viewed prostitution as a 'social evil' that allowed many other evils to be propagated. For Indians, it became essential that efforts be made to reform and change the situation of prostitution in India.

## Preventive Methods and Reforms

The Association for Social and Moral Hygiene had been in effect in India since the 1870s, when Josephine Butler first became involved with the Contagious Diseases Acts in India, but Keshub Chunder Sen was the first Indian member of its Central Council in 1875.<sup>104</sup> Keshub Sen was a Bengali social reformer known for his involvement in numerous social issues during the late nineteenth century.<sup>105</sup> By the time of the interwar period, Indians were making suggestions on how to become involved in trying to eradicate the 'social evil' from society. S.K. Mukherji's book on prostitution has one of the most comprehensive sections on how prostitution in India should be controlled. Thus, it is worth looking at the potential reforms he suggested in detail.

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<sup>103</sup> S.N. Mukherjee, *Murder of Prostitutes*, 11.

<sup>104</sup> The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in India, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *A Plea for the Provision of Instruction in the Duties of Civic and Family Life (including Sex Hygiene) in Schools and Colleges in India* (Delhi: The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in India, 1938), 5.

<sup>105</sup> Recall that Keshub Sen appealed to Victorian feminists to help their sisters in the Empire. See page 16.

S.K. Mukherji advocated many social reforms, such as changing how society viewed the women in prostitution. He made a plea for taking abducted and seduced girls into society, and wrote that girls/women should be forgiven if they repent.<sup>106</sup> Just why they had to repent for something that they were ‘forced’ into is a question that is not answered by Mukherji. Like many previous reformers, he also wanted *devadasis*, otherwise known as ‘temple dancers,’ to be “suppressed,” which is consistent with the language of trafficking and prostitution during this time.<sup>107</sup> He supported the public’s attacks against prostitution since it acted as “a very effective bulwark of public morals.”<sup>108</sup> But, at the same time, that disdain acted as a barrier for women to go back into society. While these suggestions were quite contradictory, they also showed the difficulty of trying to implement meaningful reforms. Mukherji also suggested other preventive measures, such as improving the living conditions of the poor. He wanted to improve slums, since in Calcutta, while the Improvement Trust built barracks for laborers, they were still too few for the number of people who needed accommodations.<sup>109</sup> He understood that in order to stamp out prostitution, it was essential to make social conditions better and to focus on social reforms.

Most reformers were aware that in order to create changes in prostitution, they needed to bring about reforms regarding issues affecting all women. While marriage was sometimes suggested as being a solution to combating prostitution, Mukherji actually viewed marriage as being a part of the problem of prostitution in India and wanted marriage reforms. Girls who became widows became social problems, especially if they had no sons, since many of them ended up in brothels. Mukherji argued that society should prevent marriage of young girls with

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<sup>106</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 317.

<sup>107</sup> *Devadasis* were young girls who given to temples as temple priestesses. Over time, they became associated as temple dancers and were sexualized as readily available women rather than religious figures. One of the reasons the British saw prostitution as sanctioned by Indian religion was because of the prevalence of *devadasis*, although they were mostly in South India.

<sup>108</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 315.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid* 355.

old men to avoid the prevalence of young widows. Along the same line, he denounced polygamy, which was not limited to Muslims anymore, since many Hindu princes practiced it, as they too had harems. Another important aspect of preventing child marriage was enforcement. Since the Child Marriage Restraint Act, also known as the Sarda Act, came into effect in India in 1930, it had raised the marriage age to 14 for girls and 18 for boys, yet marriages under 14 were still common.<sup>110</sup> It could be argued that since Mukherji was writing only a few years after the Sarda Act was passed, its effects still had to be seen. Similar to this, when the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was passed, its effects were not immediate. However, the census report of Bengal for 1931 showed an increase in widow remarriage.<sup>111</sup>

The social purity movement also influenced the reforms that Indians called for.<sup>112</sup> Other reforms often suggested were tied to alcohol and obscenity. The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in India was especially active in campaigns against obscenity. They regulated representations of sexuality and sex, and censored sexually explicit books, pamphlets and magazines.<sup>113</sup> As in Europe, Indian reformers also sought to fight the ‘social evil’ by speaking out against alcohol and linking it to the temperance movement and availability of obscene materials. Mukherji wrote that wine should not be sold and there should be a control of indecent publications. According to Mukherji, indecent publications “stimulate sexual impulses of men and women.”<sup>114</sup> This was seen to increase the necessity for prostitution. It should come as no surprise that the Indian view of the West as degenerate is strongly depicted in regard to how sexuality and indecency portrayed in American pictures depict semi-naked women that Indian

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<sup>110</sup> The Sarda Act, passed in 1929, raised the marriage age for girls to 14, and for boys to 18. See Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India* (2006) for more information about how it came about as a result of the social reform movement, and as a response to Katherine Mayo’s scathing book, *Mother India* (1927).

<sup>111</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 326.

<sup>112</sup> Recall from section one how the rhetoric of the Victorian feminists against the Contagious Diseases Acts in England was saturated with moralist ideals. They condemned all immoral sexuality, be it male or female.

<sup>113</sup> Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*, 57.

<sup>114</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 359.

films do not, which “may be proper to Western eyes but are barbarous to the people of Eastern countries.”<sup>115</sup> Like many nationalists, Mukherjee was attacking the West as being spiritually degenerate, since Westerners seemed to have no concept of shame. While only advocating social reforms, he simultaneously attacked the idea of the modern West as being superior to the East. Alcohol and obscenity were two separate issues that found most opponents in social purists who believed society was becoming corrupt and too Westernized.

In terms of stopping prostitution, vigilance associations were seen as potential groups that could abolish prostitution. Mukherji believed there should be women officers to talk to women offenders, especially since the police had power to enter and search brothels under the Immoral Suppression Acts. There should be women magistrates for trying cases.<sup>116</sup> If women were more involved in trying to help prostitutes, they would not be as exploited by male officers. Mukherji also considered homes for rescued girls as important provisions for those who were in brothels. He believed these homes should be non-sectarian.<sup>117</sup> He cited the Gobinada Kumar Home, Society for the Protection of Children in India, Salvation Army Women’s Industrial Home for Girls, Calcutta Protestant Home, and other homes in Calcutta as good places, but not always welcoming for those from different backgrounds. Already, reformers were aware that India needed to accommodate all its citizens in order to be a better place, something that would not be lost on the British as the nationalist movement was surging at that time.<sup>118</sup> Mukherji believed it was the duty of the state, particularly the Indian government, to protect children from traffickers. He was making the argument that only Indians were best equipped to reform India. By giving

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. This common thread of Indians claiming moral superiority over the West was made by numerous people, with Gandhi being the most prominent person to do so during the interwar period.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid 372.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid 387.

<sup>118</sup> The 1920s and 1930s were a period of the zeal of anti-colonial nationalism which was unifying various groups to seek independence from British rule.

responsibility to the native government, he claimed that Indians were completely capable of bringing about positive changes for its people. He wanted to instruct prostitutes and society about venereal diseases since the examinations in the nineteenth century were a failure. Mukherji argued that there should be a facility for free treatment of venereal diseases since it was a matter of public health and necessary for the well being of the people and the nation.

Similarly, S. N. Mukherjee argued for better regulation of brothels and prostitutes as a way to decrease crimes against prostitutes. Like most other social reformers, Mukherjee also had a list of preventive methods to decrease crime, with the most important being surveillance of prostitutes.<sup>119</sup> He suggested that the police regulate brothels and prostitutes more carefully. He wanted the police to start enquiring at once to trace the girl if a prostitute disappeared with a stranger, watching over movements of all prostitutes, and patrolling the brothel areas at night.<sup>120</sup> While that is important in trying to decrease crimes against prostitutes, the main motivation was regulation of these women, rather than trying to combat a crime that was mostly related to urban issues. This could be traced back to the surveillance of sexuality in the modern state.

Many Indians focused on the need to abolish brothels by engaging former prostitutes in other work. There has been a history of attempts at abolition of brothels with Bengal. In looking at Calcutta, the keeping of a disorderly house was not a legal offence. The Calcutta Immoral Suppression Act of 1923 made it illegal for a male person to keep a brothel, but it did not prevent a woman. The Immoral Traffic Act of 1933 did not abolish brothels per se. Anyways, the “mere abolition of brothels by an Act cannot be expected to stamp out prostitution.”<sup>121</sup> S.K. Mukherji did not see the licensing of brothels as an effective method. He mentioned many disadvantages of the licensing system, such as encouraging young men to visit brothels, giving a false sense of

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<sup>119</sup> S.N. Mukherjee, *Murder of Prostitutes*, 22-23.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 482.

security against venereal diseases, and, perhaps the most important in terms of morality, making vice “a source of revenue.”<sup>122</sup> Also, as the British and Indians found, not all prostitutes would register themselves since it was not required for all to do so. According to Mukherji, “the only remedy is the total abolition of all houses of prostitution and provision to enable the women to earn their livelihood by honest work.”<sup>123</sup> It is significant to note that already it was becoming necessary that women become part of the working class and be taught skills. He wrote that girls be trained for livelihood after they are weaned from the “life of shame.” They should be taught lucrative arts and crafts that could be carried on at home, such as tailoring, embroidery, lace making, knitting, preparation of chutneys, jellies, and so on. Nursing and teaching were also viable options that should be open to these women.

While many of these methods are interesting, it should be noticed that most of these cannot bring about changes unless people in India accepted that social status and the urbanization of cities continued to lead to the exploitation of young girls. Mukherji’s call for providing provisions for rescued girls can be further expanded to include the idea of creating an educated public that is aware of how issues of prostitution are not straight-forward. As we are aware, they are meshed in a long history of male-female relations, as well as changing times. Even if Indians were grappling with these issues at a time of intense nationalism, they needed to realize that no matter how many reforms were suggested, not all could be put into effect. Instead, they should have focused on one reform at a time, so that they could highlight their progressive ideals and prove their ability to bring about constructive changes into society.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid 457. Recall that Victorian feminist made the same argument when they said that regulation of prostitutes by the British sanctioned (male) vice. See pages 13 and 17.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid 460.

## Education as a Way to Fight the ‘Social Evil’

While many different methods had been suggested to combat the problem of prostitution in society, education was one that was prevalent in many of the writings from that time period. In a document published by the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in India, teaching children about sex hygiene was at the core of the argument made for how to work around the problem of prostitution in India.<sup>124</sup> The Educational Commissioner J.E. Parkinson wrote the foreword of the pamphlet on sex education in India in 1938, in which he wrote that there was a need for providing instruction in civic duties and family life (including sex-hygiene) in the schools and colleges in India.<sup>125</sup> He suggested “preliminary meetings with medical and social workers, as well as with educationists, and parents” as a “fitting approach to the subject.”<sup>126</sup> He also highlighted that other countries were doing research and undertaking investigation regarding such teachings in schools and colleges, with the United States being a case in point. Once again, the emphasis is obvious, that this is something that India should adopt because it is something that other nations, particularly Western nations, were adopting. At the same time, he stressed that “the object of this pamphlet is not necessarily to plead for the introduction of a particular subject in schools and colleges, but rather to stress the need for careful examination and discussion, and to render available a somewhat limited amount of information.”<sup>127</sup> He heartily recommended it to “those interested in the welfare of young people in India.”<sup>128</sup> The concern, then, became tied with the youth to show that India could be progressive and modern if they exposed their youth to modern education.

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<sup>124</sup> The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in India, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *A Plea for the Provision of Instruction in the Duties of Civic and Family Life (including Sex Hygiene) in Schools and Colleges in India* (Delhi: The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in India, 1938).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid



The Association acknowledged the history of the problem of prostitution and how previous efforts had yielded little result. According to the Association, governments in various parts of the world had attempted to solve the problem of disease by providing registered and medically inspected women who would live in segregated areas, but as we know, it was a failure during the late nineteenth century. This Regulation System perpetuated the “double standard of morals” because it allowed “women to be regarded as articles of commerce” and it “condemns in women acts which are condoned in men.”<sup>129</sup> These views pointed out the inequality of the institution of prostitution. The Association believed that teachers and professors should realize that the Regulation System was futile and “should uphold the equal responsibility of men and women in sexual relationships and teach the responsibilities of liberty.”<sup>130</sup> The report also showed that the challenge against the traffic in women was “not merely concerned with the punishment of procurers and traffickers, the closing of brothels, and the rescue of those who have been victimized” but also with educating the young about sexual matters.<sup>131</sup> As indicated by the title, *A Plea for Education*, the authors saw education as the most effective means to combat the problem of prostitution in India, rather than the oppressive methods that were mostly imposed upon female bodies.

Concerning the education system in India in the 1930s, the books that were being used tended to “omit all references to the reproductive system” so the report suggested that school books include information on the reproductive system.<sup>132</sup> Teachers should be given training on sexual matters so that they could teach correct information. In an attempt to establish credibility, the report states that “it is important to remember that sexual morality is a part of general

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid 5.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid 6.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

morality, and its isolation from the general curriculum” is not “desirable.”<sup>133</sup> In order for India’s morality to be strong, sexual education had to be taught so that young people understood what was appropriate and what was not. The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) argued that students should be taught about the body before physical temptation strikes. They also asked that schools teach about things such as menstruation and masturbation to boys and girls.<sup>134</sup> S.K. Mukherji who was writing around the same time believed that a proper education for girls was needed, but not coed education.<sup>135</sup> He did not see co-education as proper for girls aged ten to sixteen because of puberty, but it was “less objectionable” for college-aged women.<sup>136</sup> Like the AMSH, Mukherji also agreed that girls should be educated about sexual matters from lady teachers or their mothers, and not from married girls, ignorant maids or others. He wrote that “what is required is a special book on the subject for their girls and they should be disclosed delicately.”<sup>137</sup> It was acknowledged that in India, the proportion of girls’ schools to boys’ schools was low and that should be changed, because education is tied to the “future family life of India.”<sup>138</sup> Once again, sexual morality was tied to the family, which was the structure that shaped political relationships. It was also suggested that schools open up research opportunities to learn more about these subjects, since the purpose of education is to prepare for all life, not just married life. After all, “purity is knowledge, rightly used.”<sup>139</sup> In Bengal, the subject of social hygiene was not being taught in schools and colleges. Nor was it taught in most other places in India. The report suggested using films and books as instruction materials. The document also included a syllabus of what sort of books and materials to utilize. The Association

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid 6.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid 31-32.

<sup>135</sup> S.K. Mukherji, *Prostitution in India*, 336.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid 341.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid 351.

<sup>138</sup> Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in India, *A Plea for the Provision of Instruction*, 7.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid 9.

made a strong case for why education was the most effective and best method of combating the ‘social evil’ especially since it would allow India to target the youngest population. The AMSH document is informative, argumentative and offers suggestions on how to go about changing the curriculum in Indian schools.

## The Argument of Indians

The Indian response to prostitution was in dialogue with the international discourse regarding necessary changes, but also tied to an understanding of Indian society as a whole. As two Indian authors have stated, “prostitution, has in India *as in every other civilized country*, a distinct history of its own.”<sup>140</sup> Prostitution in India had a long history, but that does not disqualify India as a civilized nation. While our Indian reformers might not have explicitly engaged with nationalist discourse, or even mentioned the political situation in India, their writings are implicated in the time periods they were written in. It is quite remarkable that they do not mention anything about the concept of modernity or nationalism, but that should not stop us from seeing how Indian writings on prostitution in the interwar period were linked to the greater political agitations for independence. Since the period under study was limited to the interwar, which was also the zenith of Indian nationalism, most of the Indian responses can be seen as trying to prove India’s ability to lead the nation. In colonial discourse, women were the index of social backwardness, so social reform legislation was directed toward modernizing the condition of women.<sup>141</sup> Nationalism and social reform went side by side, in that a nation needed to be socially progressive in order to be recognized as politically capable. Instead of agreeing that prostitution was tied to Indian culture and backwardness, Indian (male) writers stressed the need

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<sup>140</sup> Sinha and Basu, *History of Prostitution in India*, x. Emphasis mine.

<sup>141</sup> Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 43.

to recognize it as a social issue that was apparent in modern nations around the globe. Changes regarding women were the key to “all other social reforms and to real national progress.”<sup>142</sup>

Therefore, many of the suggested reforms were aimed at changing social structures such as marriage, understanding women’s status as victims in horrific institutions such as prostitution, and creating education reforms in schools.

In their attacks against prostitution as a social evil, the reformers often blamed the British as much as they did native male complicity. Some of the writers criticized the corrupting Western influence, which they saw as promoting obscenity and alcohol in Indian society. Rather than accepting the colonial trope of the West as the civilizer, Indians characterized the West as a corruptive and harmful force that had exacerbated problems such as prostitution. Throughout, a conscious effort was made by Indian authors and reformers to highlight their society as undergoing stages of modernity, such as rapid industrialization and a need for education reforms. If the Indian nation could be seen as a modern nation struggling with social problems that plagued even the colonizers, they could claim equality with the British in terms of deserving the right to control their population. Indians could prove that they were capable of facilitating much needed changes within Indian society, without the colonial state.

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<sup>142</sup> Sita Ram Singh, *Nationalism and Social Reform in India* (Delhi: Ranjit Printers & Publishers, 1968), 124.

## CONCLUSION

Looking back at the trajectory of the discourse on prostitution in late colonial India, it is easy to see how it follows a familiar trend. During the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the discourse evolved from a critique of the colonized by the Empire to that of the Empire by the colonized. During the late nineteenth century, Victorian imperial feminists who were involved in the prostitution debates in England began to see the regulation of prostitutes as immoral and degrading to women. These imperial feminists then turned to India and believed it was their duty to 'help' their 'oppressed sisters' who were imagined as victims of Indian men and Indian culture and traditions. Victorian feminists came in as saviors who saw themselves as superior to Indian women and felt it was the duty of the Empire to help the oppressed Indian women. They were motivated to intervene on behalf of Indian women as a way to fulfill their roles as the 'moral conscience' of the Empire. Indian prostitutes were not granted the same status as social victims that British prostitutes in England were; rather, the Indian prostitutes were seen as victims of their culture and religions. For British colonial officers and Victorian imperial feminists, Indian prostitution was a sign of Indian cultural backwardness. By the early twentieth century, prostitution was debated on the international stage, as the League of Nations passed numerous resolutions and created committees to investigate the problem of prostitution and trafficking. In these discourses, the League's documents were highly focused on deporting European prostitutes from the colonies rather than trying to combat all prostitution everywhere, as race became a signifier of which women should engage in prostitution where. The League of Nations was relatively unconcerned about the native prostitutes in India, as their attention centered on getting rid of 'white' prostitutes. The international discourse also characterized Indian prostitution as a symptom of Indian cultures.

In response to this international discourse, Indians themselves began passing laws and speaking out against prostitution within their society. A few Indian male writers lent their voices to the debate by arguing that prostitution in India was a societal problem as it was everywhere else, and that it was not unique to Indian culture and traditions. Similar to what the imperial feminists had done in England, these Indian reformers also stressed men's complicity in perpetuating prostitution in all societies. They pinpointed prostitutes as victims of male violence and desire, as well as society in general. Indians emphasized a need for reforming social problems through various means, with better education for the public as one of the most important suggestions.

Indian reformers implicitly positioned the problem of prostitution within the discourse of nationalism. Their argument made the case for prostitution as a symptom and marker of modernity, rather than cultural backwardness. Since the writings of Indians looked at were from the 1930s, a time of strong nationalist sentiment in India, any talk of reforms and changes would take into account the nationalist discourse. Mrinalini Sinha has argued in her *Specters of Mother India* (2006) that criticisms of social issues in India led to the argument that independence was necessary to bring about changes.<sup>143</sup> For Indian reformers, emphasizing the problem of prostitution as widespread in modern nations, namely, Britain, placed them on equal footing with the colonizing nation. The Indian response to the arguments made by the British contradicted the premises justifying colonial rule. If the international and British discourse argued for the necessity of colonial rule to bring progress and modernity to India and a way to implement social reforms, the Indians could respond using that same language. Indians would certainly agree that prostitution needed to be abolished, and social reforms were vital to bringing positive changes into Indian society. But they could counteract the colonial discourse of prostitution as an issue

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<sup>143</sup> Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

that existed in India because of Indian culture and religions by pointing to prostitution as a symptom of modernity. Furthermore, even the British and other western nations had prostitution. If industrialization and cities were seen as markers of progress and modernity, so too was prostitution which flourished mostly in urban areas. Since India was a burgeoning modern nation like Britain, it needed to be run by people who best understood its social problems (of which prostitution was one). By touting prostitution as an emblem of modernity, the Indian reformers were aligned with the nationalist discourse that pushed for Indians to be the sole arbitrators of problems related to India, particularly those related to Indian women. As inhabitants in a modern nation, Indians were more than qualified to run their own country and seek reform to redress grievances of their own people. This would of course be limited to Indian men, not women, who would be recognized as heirs best fit to rule India.

Indian men had to claim a space of modernity within a masculinized nationalism in order to be recognized as political figures. As Joane Nagel argues, “the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity go hand in hand with the culture and ideology of hegemonic nationalism.”<sup>144</sup> If the discussions on prostitution are to be placed within the discourse on nationalism, we must consider how male reformers were masculinized nationalists. Men took upon women’s issues, such as prostitution, since nationalists were concerned with women’s sexuality, as women were bearers of masculine honor.<sup>145</sup> As we have seen, Indian prostitutes did not have a voice in the discourse produced about them. They were symbolically important as a group that was wronged by the British, since women occupied “a distinct, symbolic role in nationalist culture.”<sup>146</sup> The prostitutes were told by the colonizers and elite Indians that they were

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<sup>144</sup> Joane Nagel, “Masculinity and Nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21, no.2 (1998): 249.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid* 256.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid* 252

symbols of shame for the community and the nation.<sup>147</sup> This was then taken up by reformers who tried to change the symbolic meanings of prostitutes by emphasizing their victimization by men and society. In her argument against Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, Sinha argues that the Mayo controversy gave away to a new political nationalism, which challenged the relationship between the state and society.<sup>148</sup> This then led to the recognition of women as political subjects and brought about debates about women's franchise, political representation, and more. Mayo meant to show that "the social backwardness of India disqualified Indians from any further political advancement toward future self-government."<sup>149</sup> Just as the discourse on prostitution encouraged Indian reformers to retaliate and suggest reforms, so too did Indian nationalists take up women's issues as they felt attacked by imperialist views that painted them as backward. In a way, the "cultural-nationalist defenses of Indian society proceeded by inverting the values attributed to it in colonial discourse."<sup>150</sup> Nationalism gave Indian reformers a space to contest the colonial characterization of their society and political ability to rule.

The debate on prostitution could be placed within the discourse of nationalism and colonial modernity during the interwar period. Sinha challenges Mayo's contention that India's backwardness is due to its 'social' conditions and not related to the 'political' context of colonial rule.<sup>151</sup> According to Sinha, critics contemporary with Mayo stated that 'social' backwardness was the result of 'political' condition of colonial rule, thereby implicating the colonial state in India's supposed backwardness.<sup>152</sup> The colonial state was shown up for its inability to modernize India and bring about social reforms. Sinha's argument could be imposed onto the social issue of

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<sup>147</sup> Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*, 116.

<sup>148</sup> Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 9

<sup>149</sup> Ibid 5.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid 3

<sup>152</sup> Ibid 6



prostitution. The British acknowledged prostitution as a social problem, yet they were unable to abolish or reform it. If the Indians were to be denied political independence as a result of their inability to modernize, the British should also be denied control of India for their failure to modernize India. Social problems are resolved through political means, and the British had been in power for a while. This recognition led to the “reconsideration of the role of the British as an agent of modernity in India.”<sup>153</sup> There were significant shifts in how modernity was understood during this time as compared to the nineteenth century, when the British were seen as harbingers of social reforms. By implicating the British in India’s ‘backwardness,’ Indians legitimized their call for total independence while delegitimizing British colonialism. The problem of prostitution fits into the paradigm of exposing the limits of the colonial state as an agent of modernity for the reform of social conditions in India.

The scope of this thesis is limited by the accessibility of materials, but it should be noted that the debate on prostitution in India was much more complex, with many additional actors. I would have liked to know what Indian women were writing about prostitution in women’s magazines and other publications. The voices of Indian women are effectively silenced in this paper due to the lack of access to those documents, most of which are located in Indian archives. This study is limited solely to the voice of ‘white’ Victorian feminists, to League of Nations documents, and to a few Bengali Hindu men. We do not know how the Indian Muslim men viewed the problem of prostitution in Bengal, although we do know that most prostitutes identified as Hindu, so perhaps Muslim men did not see this as a social issue they needed to address at a time of nationalism. We do not hear from women who were involved with prostitution, either directly or indirectly, and we certainly do not hear from pimps or others

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid 73

involved intimately with the prostitutes. Very few prostitutes were literate and even if they left written records, those records were not preserved.

The very problem of not having access to women's voices is one of the issues raised by the debate on prostitution: why do we never hear from the women themselves about whom the discourse is being created? The prostitutes are not subjects, but always objects on behalf of whom others are speaking. The question of representation is important: who is representing whom? This is a problem with historiography, since the voices recovered through archives are usually those of the elite (men). This thesis also does not look at Indian women reformers in general, and the very fact that there is little information on women reformers is symbolic of the deprivation of female voices from history. This is both due to the lack of written records by women and non-elite people, and also because of my own lack of access to materials in India.<sup>154</sup> Further study on the general reform movement against prostitution in the interwar period in Bengal will broaden our understanding, particularly if the efforts of Indian women are added to the discussion.

Despite the paucity of available sources, there are enough primary materials discussed from this important historical period to enable us to see the connection between prostitution and nationalism, as well as continuity with the discourse on prostitution today in Bengal. The discourse on prostitution allows us to look at nationalism through a different lens. Social issues, such as those connected to prostitution, are best resolved by having a powerful government that is free to make its own reforms without being dependent on a foreign nation. Today's prostitutes re-claim their voices and seek recognition as sex workers, thus highlighting their roles as

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<sup>154</sup> Indian women were involved in organizations such as the All Bengal Women's Union, an organization of women who wanted to reform and help women involved with prostitution and trafficking during the 1930s. Although this organization still exists in modern day West Bengal, their archives are not published and are only accessible within the organization's office.

productive members of a labor force within their societies. They are no longer passive subjects in the discourse on prostitution, even as others attempt to speak on their behalf. While it has not been easy, many sex workers are centrally involved in these debates. Elite men are no longer the sole voices speaking for women, as more and more sex workers are joining organizations such as Sex Workers' Network and Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) in Bengal.<sup>155</sup> The most effective calls for reforms in prostitution today come from sex workers themselves, not only from foreign feminists and Indian men.<sup>156</sup>

This thesis opens up a space for us to look at Indian nationalism differently, as something that was affected by social reforms and issues, rather than solely by political events. Since the interwar period is usually characterized as political history, this paper adds to the larger history of interwar India to show the importance of societal issues to the nationalist discourse. The Empire's inability to implement substantial social reforms was very much a part of the Indian critique of the political legitimacy of colonial rule. By focusing on society and criticisms of social issues in India, I question the dominant political framework of the interwar period that has garnered the most interest by scholars. This project contributes to the larger discourse on women in Indian history, nationalist studies, and the social history of India during the early twentieth century. I have tried to show how the colonial discourse on prostitution, coming from British officers, Victorian feminists and the League of Nations, was inverted by Indians, who re-appropriated the problem as an incentive for why Indians deserved independence from the British Empire.

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<sup>155</sup> The DMSC in Calcutta has been an effective voice against the criminalization of sex work, while the Sex Workers Network is one of the only organizations to have successfully mobilized sex workers in Bangladesh today. See Prabha Kotiswaran, ed. *Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism: Sex Work* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011) for manifestos and writings about and by sex workers in India today.

<sup>156</sup> See Nalini Jameela, "Autobiography of a Sex Worker" in *Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism: Sex Work*, ed. Prabha Kotiswaran, 225-241 (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011). Also see *Sex Workers' Manifest: First National Conference of Sex Workers in India, Kolkata*, 268-278, in the same edition.

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