

***Barbonita to Sex Workers:***  
**The “Dirty” history of commercial sex life in Kolkata**

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**Abstract**

Prostitution was one of the earliest businesses in any city of the world and so it is not surprising that it was serious business in cities of the global south such as the city of Kolkata. Brothels are a necessary aspect of every city in every civilization, and they are present in the cities eco systems. Yet brothels or the spaces that the sex workers inhabit are always neglected in a city’s imagination. The urban futures treat brothels as dirty secrets that need to be driven under the proverbial carpet. What makes brothels particularly significant as a southern question is that brothels of the global south are always “dirty” in the urban imagination. They are crime infested and the bodies of the sex-workers are emblematic of this southern filth. The contagious disease act of 1868 is one of the first laws that was demonstrative of that dirt/filth. Brothels and prostitutes who inhabit them underwent multiple manifestations in Kolkata’s history. In this paper we will explore the evolution of brothels and prostitutes therein, into sex workers in the imagination of a southern city or Kolkata. We will discuss the evolution from the British period to the present times in a city’s imagination its brothels and its sex workers and reflect on the real contests fought by these sex workers for the right to belong in and to this southern city.

According to Sumanta Banerjee, the idea of prostitution “underwent a dramatic change in Bengal soon after the British take-over”.<sup>1</sup> Brothels were considered as harbingers of everything negative in the Victorian period under the British rule. Starting from affecting the “moral character of the youth”, brothels were also considered as one of the possible threats to the increase of crime in the city. There were several criminal cases registered in the areas known for having brothels or prostitute quarters each year in the central and northern parts of the city. Apart fear of crime, there was another greater fear and that was of venereal diseases, especially among British soldiers and officers, and that propelled the government to legislate for controlling prostitutes, their bodies and their spaces under the Contagious Diseases Act, 1868. (Act No. XIV of 1868, popularly known as *Chouddo Ayine*). That Act portrayed the control that was considered necessary to regulate prostitution in the city of Kolkata. What is significant is that the government tried to impose restrictions on the prostitutes, their bodies and also on their spaces and movements. The ethico-political structure of colonial state considered sex-work as ‘immoral’ but never banned it or declared it illegal.<sup>2</sup> The tensions over colonial prostitution and the cities was reflected also in the Cantonment Act of 1864 and subsequently in 1895. In this paper we will explore these Acts and the debates that they generated.

With independence and incipient decolonization new tensions and new contests arose over prostitution. Just after nine years of Indian independence prostitution created a major contest

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<sup>1</sup> Sumanta Banerjee. *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 1998), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Though at that time it was called prostitution, I consciously use the term sex work

over citizenship and became a subject of offence as borders were created and migration in large numbers continued. Women emerged as subject of state formation thereby subjects of control. This created massive problems in urban imagination and influx of partition women was equated with uncontrolled sexuality of foot loose women. Control was imperative as in the postcolonial era prostitution began to be regarded as one of the immoral business-based relationships between men-women that was driven by female sexuality and male desire. Yet in the city it was ever expanding as there was increasing markets and footloose women who could be supplied in these centers. To regulate refugees and displaced people due to partition and the emerging border the state banned sex work and criminalized it. Yet prostitutes remained. With the criminalization of prostitution procuring of women became even more nefarious. Trafficking of women and girls in different forms was present in the colonial period as well. Large groups of women and men were trafficked to be sent to plantations and other centres of the Empire, both for labour and pleasure. Now the brothels became centres where girls and women were brought in as commodities for pleasure. Progressively trafficking became a nefarious activity much aligned to filth and crime.

Prostitutes or brothel workers were ever present in colonial and post-colonial literature, commodified and objectified but always present, sometimes as the main protagonist, such as Umrao Jaan, and other times as the antagonist. However, in the twentieth century their relationship with crime, criminality and security became increasingly complex. With the city's evolution and consciousness of rights, prostitutes became sex workers through dramatic shifts and turns. They tried to take their destinies in their own hands and the present day co-operative of the sex workers is a case in point. This paper is not about the victories or victimhood of these women but about their evolution as a necessary subject of the southern city. The paper will explore laws, political debates, health issues and consciousness of rights in the evolution of sex work and its influence of making Kolkata an emblematic southern city. Our paper is about biopolitics from below and the southern question.