

Prostitutes and Politics: the Tolerated Brothels Debate in Colonial India

This paper sought to examine the geographies of prostitution regulation in India following the repeal of the Indian Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1886 but under the continuing influence of the Cantonment Regulations. The geographical emphasis sought to explore the importance of spatial setting to social processes of prostitution. These geographies included: differences across the presidencies of British India; differences between rural and urban areas; the importance of residency port towns and the impact of their transient populations on the risk of prostitution, in terms of social decency and biological disease; and the toleration of segregated parts of the city ("red light districts") and of brothels as places which could make prostitutes visible and thus, presumably safe; and the notion of trafficking as a spatial phenomenon the emphasised the movement over space, rather than congregation in specific places.

The policies of 20th century colonial India have one of their many origins in the reactions to the inadequacies of the Cantonment Regulations. These laws allowed for the ejection of prostitutes from military settlements that refused to be treated for a "contagious" (ie. venereal) disease. However, these women often settled just outside the cantonment boundaries and thus posed an ongoing threat to the health of the military, and thus their political utility to the state. Suggestions of banishing the women to a 10 mile radius from the cantonments were accepted in rural areas but denied in urban areas due to the unacceptability of military authorities wielding influence over municipal populations.

The solution was found in a series of "suggestions" that municipalities be "actively encouraged" to segregate women in one part of the city that could be outlawed to the soldiers. This suggestion was taken up in the amended Rangoon Police Act and the amended Bombay Police Act, both of 1902, that created segregated areas for brothels and prostitutes. These were taken up as templates by the Government of India and had an influence on similar policies that were put in place in the first decade of the 20th century.

These areas led to a series of scandals, however. A 1914 petition forced the closure of the red light district in Rangoon due to its demoralising influence on the city and its alleged contribution to the *increase* of the problems associated with prostitution. A more violent scandal erupted in Bombay when a girl held captive in a brothel was beaten to death in 1917, as punishment for an attempted escape. The furore that followed these scandals led to the Army publically denouncing segregation in 1919.

The next solution to the problem of prostitution was devised in the 1920s. The Burma Suppression of Brothels Act of 1921 formed the template for the Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act of 1923. The latter targetted soliciting, pimping, procuration, importation of women or children, detention of prostitutes and brothel letting; that is, the activities surrounding the act of prostitution itself. These clauses were taken up in the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Acts (the SITAs) which spread throughout British India between 1923-1940. These powers allowed urban areas to be "cleansed" of prostitutes and attempted to prevent

women and girls being brought into the trade, but provided little protection or rehabilitation for women already operating as prostitutes.

The terminology of the SITAs hints at the international networks, discourses and voluntary bodies that worked alongside local campaigners for their uptake. The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) campaigned from the 1920s-40s for the spread of the SITAs and brought with it an emphasis on the assumed *immorality* of prostitution. The League of Nations produced reports and enquiries into the *traffic* in women and children, both of which had an effect on the form and content of the SITAs.

The AMSH and the League of Nations' successor body, the UN, continued to impact upon the policy with regards to prostitution in the post-independence era. This embedded what D'Cunha has referred to as a "social purity" model in postcolonial legislation that continued to condemn and prostitution and treat it as an offensive profession in need of reformation rather than regulation or protection.



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