

# **The Social World of Prostitutes and *Devadasis*: A Study of the Social Structure and Its Politics in Early Modern India**

By Karuna Sharma<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

This research paper discusses two groups of professional women who had a distinct place in the sexual economy of the period under review. By analyzing the actions and situations of prostitutes and the *devadasis* (literally meaning servants of God) in terms of a broader context of relationships, I consider the sexual-services and the entertainment provided by them as a meaningful labor, which got integrated at both the social and cultural levels. I have looked at how and to whom the prostitutes and the *devadasis* sold their labor, and how they related to other women, to men, and to various social systems. The study of these professionals shows different strands of Indian culture and one could state that the world of entertainment, to which these professions belonged, itself is a cultural reproduction of society. Specifically, it is my view that the prostitutes were sought after for their physical attraction, but elegance and élan were to an extent constitutive elements of their profession. In the case of *devadasis* who were the custodians of the arts of singing and dancing and whose dedicated status made them a symbol of social prestige, I would say that while the economic/professional benefits were considerable, they did not lack social honor either. The essay shows that the women who were part of this set-up, a set-up which thrived on the commercialization of women's reproductive labor, had those skills and expertise which eventually get appropriated by politico-economic structures. This gives a better insight into the politics of human relations.

*Keywords:* sexual economy, entertainment-labor, socio-cultural norms, human relations, gender disparity, femininity, political power

## **Introduction**

From the political movements to the academic discourses, the issues related to sexuality, especially women's sexuality have caught the attention of scholars.<sup>2</sup> My paper makes an effort to look into the world of prostitutes and devadasis (also called temple-women) and their labor, which I hypothesize, had an important role to play in the socio-political structure of the day.<sup>3</sup> The presence of such women, particularly in

---

<sup>1</sup> This research was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Global Conference- Sex and Sexuality: Exploring Critical Issues*, Krakow, Poland, December 2006. With a usual disclaimer, I thank the anonymous referees and the editor, Diana Fox, for their comments and suggestions to which the essay owes its present form. I specialize in medieval Indian history, particularly aspects of labor, sexuality and culture and am currently a post-doctoral research fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands. Address for correspondence [karunahis96@hotmail.com](mailto:karunahis96@hotmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> To cite few, Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi De Alwis, *Embodied Violence Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia* (London: Zed Books, 1996); Meenakshi Thapan ed, *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Mary E John and Janaki Nair ed., *A Question of Silence? The sexual economies of modern India* (New Delhi: Kali, 1998); V Geetha, 'Gender and the Logic of Brahminism: Periyar and the Politics of the Female Body', in KK Sangari and Uma Chakravarti ed., *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998), 198-233. Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani eds., *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Some essays by Suparna Bhaskaran, Scott Kugle, Indrani Chatterjee have been used in this paper for their insights into the working of socio-political structures. These essays are in Ruth Vanita ed., *Queering India: Same-sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

an order which considered conjugality as the basis of all human relations,<sup>4</sup> evokes the politics of the relations entered with them. I state that even though outside the heterosexual order, the women in question nearly reinforced the socio-political order of the day. These women could have been able to articulate their sexual desires, or alternatively their bodies could have been sites of resistance.<sup>5</sup> However, as I argue in this paper, these women's experiences show that they could not have escaped the diktats of the erstwhile socio-political order, which was doubly reinforced when these women came into (sexual) contact with their patrons/men. This also portrays the human body being central to articulation of prevailing social and economic asymmetries. In our case, women's sexuality and its particular commercialization brings to fore the role of gender in organizing social relations. Such an exercise imparts a constitutive role to women and explains how their (bodily) labor<sup>6</sup> added to the larger socio-political discourses.

In this essay, I have chosen historical period of 16th and 17th centuries, which coincides with the rule of Mughal dynasty in North India. The research data comes from the contemporary court chronicles, foreign travelogues, paintings and I try look at the sexual economy of this period. I will elaborate upon the prostitution of sexuality to show how this profession was reflective of the erstwhile culture and gendered norms. I also draw upon the labor of temple-women in South Indian temples and have combined my reading of contemporary data with modern scholarly works to look for parallel socio-political order in South as well. As I build my case in this essay, more than looking for certain propositions like victim vs. agency, I would rather problematise the sexual aspects of these professions and see how and why a caste-ridden social structure accepted/or allowed such professionals to be part of their society, even though at fringes. What might be of interest is the typicality of these professionals in providing the social input and yet have quiet a distinctive impact on the masculine societal order.

The royal births and marriages and the day-to-day entertainment made the Mughal court the biggest consumer of music and dance. Many singers, musicians and dancers were attached to the royal household and the men as well as the women possessed such entertainers. Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty, was very happy when he sent dancing girls, of Ibrahim Lodi's haram, to the women of his household in Kabul.<sup>7</sup> The *Ain-i Akbari*, the premier book detailing the structure of the Mughal state and practices of its people, also refers to a group of entertainers, known as *kanjari*, where men play *pakhawaj*, the *rabab* and *tala* while women sing and dance. The Mughal king, Akbar (1556-1605) named the women of this group as *kanchanis*.<sup>8</sup> Further, different bands of

---

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars like Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai do question such 'misnomers' and provide evidences of same-sex relations, often within the religious traditions. See Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai eds. *Sam-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Veena Talwar Oldenburg, 'Life Style as Resistance- The Courtesans of Lucknow', in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (ed.), *Contesting Power: Essays and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 23-61; Michael H. Fisher, 'Women and the Feminine in the Court and High Culture of Awadh 1722- 1856', in Gavin Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World* (New York St. Martin's Press, 1998), 489-513.

<sup>6</sup> These women's sexual activities have been looked at from the perspective of meaningful labour, which earned them material rewards and the prestige to an extent, in the case of temple-women. These women were sought after for their accomplishments in various arts.

<sup>7</sup> Gulbadan Begum, *The Humayun Nama of Gulbadan Begam*, tr. AS. Beveridge (MS of British Museum; Royal Asiatic Society of London, 1902), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Abul Faz'l, *Ain-i Akbari* III, tr. H.S. Jarrett (New Delhi: Oriental Books, 1978), 271- 2. Francois Bernier too mentions these *kenchens* during Shah Jahan's period (1628-56). See Francois Bernier, *Travels in Mogul Empire*, tr. Archibald Constable (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1994), 273-4.

singers, dancers, and musicians displayed their arts and skills during the celebrations for royal births and marriages. The contemporary literary accounts as well as the paintings are reflective of these revelries. Francisco Pelsaert, a Dutch traveler, informs about some women-musicians attached to the royal households who were necessary at the royal marriages. They were known by names such as *lullenees*, *domenees* and *hentsinins*.<sup>9</sup> For the Mughal women and men, music and dance parties provided a pleasant means of recreation, and they organized such assemblies on the terrace during nights,<sup>10</sup> which were at times attended by men too. These entertainers were trying hard to be the favorite of their patrons, as we find Princess Jahanara, King Shah Jahan's favorite daughter, saying 'my best dancing girl my sweet Gulru-Bae from Gwalior, had invented a new dance with which to gladden my eyes.'<sup>11</sup> The candor expression for the dancing girl's expertise draws attention toward the professionalism expected from and required in the domain of music and dance.

In my view, these entertainers had a place in society and a role to perform, and the success of their professions was embedded in the skills acquired in the fields of music, singing, and dancing. *Ain-i Akbari* gives a list of singers who performed in *Akhara*, an entertainment held at night by the nobles. They have been termed as *natwas*, who exhibited some graceful dancing, and introduced various styles to which they sang and played on various instruments. They were sometimes retained in service to teach the young slave girls to perform; and occasionally they instructed their own girls, took them to nobles, and profited largely by commerce.<sup>12</sup> We could say that the profession of singing and dancing and displaying one's skills does signify, largely, the use of women's bodies or reproductive labor for various services, and the entertainment being one of those. Informed by the fact that 'entertainment' was a conscious activity being done for earning a living, I would look at the prostitutes and courtesans who were also professional entertainers, the ones who used their bodies in a different way than the rest. Thus I would concentrate on how far the carnal services were socially acceptable, given the fact that there were strict rules for respectable womanhood and territorial mobility. This will give an overview as to how far these professions symbolically reproduced contemporary social configurations, especially the gendered ones.<sup>13</sup>

### Prostitutes/Courtesans

Irfan Habib writes "the line of demarcation between the dancers and the world's oldest profession (which is of sexual service to men: *emphasis added*) was by no means clear".<sup>14</sup> As we do not know which of the two, the aesthetic and sexual, parts of this profession was more important, it can be argued that the prostitute

<sup>9</sup> Francisco Pelsaert, 'Remonstrantie c.1626', (tr.) W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl as *Jahangir's India* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1925), 83. Various Mughal miniature paintings would testify to such gatherings where different performers exhibited their respective arts Geeti Sen, *Paintings from Akbarnama* (Varanasi: Lustre Press, 1984), pls 56-7; 67- 8; M.S. Randhawa, *Indian Miniature Painting* (New Delhi: Roli Books International, 1981), Pl. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Randhawa, *Indian Miniature Painting*, Pl. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Butenschon, *The Life of a Mogul Princess Jahanara Begam* (London: Routledge, 1931), 33.

<sup>12</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari* III, 273.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Sumanata Banerjee explores this profession in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal and records change and complexity of the trade, the reaction of the British and the Bengali males to prostitutes and latter's responses to their milieu. See Idem, *Under the Raj: Prostitution in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Irfan Habib, "Non-Agricultural Production," in Irfan Habib and Tapan Raychaudhuri ed., *Cambridge Economic History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), vol. I, 302- 3.

encompassed all winsome qualities and combined professional skills of singing and dancing with providing sexual services to men. This profession has repeatedly received state support, as it was a source of revenue, though some efforts to check this profession are also noticed. This is evident from the state injunction, issued by Sultan Alauddin Khalji (1309-16), which prohibited and ordered removal of wine. Because of its propensity to incite political squabbles, its accompaniments, as the order read, like this *abominable profession* was also to be stopped.<sup>15</sup> But the state itself benefited from continuance of this profession, particularly as we find that the Mughal state too had arrangements for plying of this profession. It guaranteed its continued existence by assigning a separate quarter of town, *shaitanpura* (devilsville). A *darogha* (superintendent) and a clerk were appointed for it who registered the name of visitors to prostitutes.<sup>16</sup> These women were referred to as *rupajivas*, literally meaning those earning a living by means of their beauty and were typified as *samanya* that is who is property of none and is concerned only in moneymaking.<sup>17</sup> Before proceeding ahead, I like to draw attention to the historical roots in order to emphasize the longevity of this profession. Under the Maurya dynasty (in 3 BCE), the state was regulating activities of *ganikas*, the accomplished courtesans and the reference to these women is seen in the major historical record of this dynasty, Kautliya's *Arthasastra*, which laid a set of arrangements for plying of this profession. A profession that filled state coffers was regulated by special officers known as *ganika-adhyaksha* who were to regulate the visitors coming to such women. There was a strict code of conduct which controlled the relations between the prostitutes and their visitors.<sup>18</sup> D.D. Kosambi opines on the use of the word *ganika* for these women. According to him, it is derived from group-wives and relates the origin of prostitution to the abolition of group marriage.<sup>19</sup>

Besides such-state sponsored pronouncements, the foreign travelogues too are replete with references to this profession. I cite here from reports of foreign travelers, Thomas Bowrey and J.B. Tavernier, which give an impression that the quarters inhabited by these professionals were set apart from those of any married-folk houses. Further, the number of these women had been registered with local authorities, who in turn were responsible to the central political authority. Whereas Bowrey shows them paying "some amount to the Governor of that part of country and every Thursday night pay visit to the house of governor and *kotwal* (justice of peace), before whom they do and must dance and sing and make *salams* (salaams, obeisance). Then the handsomest stays back at night to suppress the lechery of him

<sup>15</sup> Amir Khusrau, *Khazain'ul Futuh*, tr. Mohammad Habib as 'The Campaigns of Alauddin Khalji' (Madras: Diocese Press, 1931), 10-11. In the footnote 2 in this book, the translator specifies likelihood of the closure of those brothels that were along with taverns and gambling dens. See Ziauddin Barani, *Tarikh-i Firushahi*, ed. Syed Ahmed Khan (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1862), 284. This might not be true for all brothels as such.

<sup>16</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain iAkbari* vol. I, tr. H. Blochmann (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprints, 1977), 201-2. 'That this profession could be lucrative anywhere is witnessed from account of labour in medieval Islamic world. Maya Shatzmiller cites evidences from 11<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad and 14<sup>th</sup> century Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt that any one who registered and paid tax could practice prostitution as trade. Maya Shatzmiller, *Labour in the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 356.

<sup>17</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, vol. III, 256.

<sup>18</sup> Kautilya, *Arthasastra*, tr. R.P. Kangle (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1972), 164. For details also see Suvira Jaiswal, 'Female Images in Arthasastra of Kautilya', *Social Scientist* 29/3-4 (April 2001).

<sup>19</sup> D.D. Kosambi, 'Urvasi and Pururavas', Kum Kum Roy ed., *Women in Early Indian Societies* (Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 274.

and his Punes i.e. waiting men".<sup>20</sup> Tavernier on the other hand says "they do not pay any tribute to the king but a certain number of them were obliged to go every Friday to present their dance. Further many of them were engaged in selling taxi/toddy (a local intoxicating drink) from which government drew high revenue and thus allowed these women to carry on their industry".<sup>21</sup> In this situation these women did not replete the state treasury directly but through the sale of intoxicants. A two-way relationship between prostitution and sale of intoxicants seems to be working here (refer to Alauddin Khalji's reform note 14). Another description of these professionals comes from a rather retrospect account of Gujarat, which says that there was a great thrust to remove these women from bazaars of Ahmadabad City.<sup>22</sup> Though not evocative of sensual/sexual activities, Fray Sebastian Manrique, a foreign traveler in the seventeenth century, does refer to the professionals performing as singers and dancers for the recreation of Mahometan barbarity.<sup>23</sup> But in Manrique's account of the *caravanserais* (way-stations) for the passengers and merchants there are no speculations because he clearly mentions that these places were a site for this gainful profession and further that the women paid taxes to the state for allowing them to continue with their business.<sup>24</sup>

### **Matters of Autonomy**

These rupajivas commercialized their aesthetic-skills and the body thus proficiency in several arts in order to attract customers was expected of them. They were to have a good disposition and beauty and other appealing qualities. Such women framed relationship with appropriate men after full consideration in order to obtain riches. For men these women carried an élan that consisted of both intimate companionship and sexual intimacy. These women inhabited separate quarters and an exchange took place between them and their customers. Consequently, these women could be ascribed a collective identity, as V.T. Oldenburg so vehemently put. Using narratives of courtesans (of Lucknow in the nineteenth century), Oldenburg has located an altogether different world of such women, which was complex and hierarchical as the society, of which it was part.<sup>25</sup> Similarly Michael Fisher underlines that some women were born or forced into this profession but some seem to have entered voluntarily. For the latter ones, the profession offered a different and deviant lifestyle that is "compared to an unhappy or abused life with a husband or in-laws or ostracism as a widow, some women found a career that could offer fame, wealth and supportive companionship of other women".<sup>26</sup> To this rhetoric of alternative female subjectivity a tinge of female companionship has been added by Ruth Vanita.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed the separate setting of this profession, in physical and metaphoric sense, completes its detachment from rest of the society. Being important to the

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal 1669 to 1679*, ed. R.C. Temple (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1905), 206-7.

<sup>21</sup> J.B. Tavernier *Travels in India*, tr. V. Ball and ed. W. Crooke (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 127-8.

<sup>22</sup> Ali Mohammad Khan, *Mirat-i Abmadi*, tr. M.F. Lokhandwala (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1926), 234: the *muhatsib* (guardian of public morals) was supposed to stop prostitution by expelling them from the city or to repress it in public places.

<sup>23</sup> Fray Sebastian Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique* (Oxford; Hakluyt Society, 1927), 161.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 242.

<sup>25</sup> Oldenburg, 'Life Style as Resistance'.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, 'Women and the Feminine', 507- 8.

<sup>27</sup> Vanita, 'Married among their Companions Female Homoerotic relations in Nineteenth Century Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India', *Journal of Women's History* vol. 16, no. 1, 2004.

erstwhile market nexus, in which the political state had its stake, the separate quarters thronged by these women and visited by men, in my view manifest social and political order. Although the human relations in such settings were business-like but I have reservations whether these quarters would reflect a varied order, as Oldenburg or Fisher have shown. For an understanding of these quarters, where people engaged in sexual, erotic and aesthetic relations, I would draw an analogy between these quarters and typical *mehfil*, a gathering, of elite male patrons and musicians for musical performance. Katherine Brown has characterized these gatherings as a unique liminal space in which Mughal conceptions of masculinity were both performed and contested.<sup>28</sup> In the light of my ongoing research, I am of the opinion that as the socio-political norms aligned with the conception of power and its public display, the separate quarters was exactly the place where certain distinctions could be successfully reinforced. Digressing a bit, a look at the ascription of role in erotic relationships, particularly, shows that the men of (higher status: *emphasis added*) had quite an active role. If we look at the manuscript *Laddhat ul- Nisa*, its accompanying pictorial characterization of human sexuality is very engaging. In terms of clothes and other outer appearances, it is easily identifiable that the men belonged to upper class to whom different and multiple sex partners were available.<sup>29</sup> If the erotic relations are to be described in terms of active/passive actors,<sup>30</sup> the pictorial representation is again reflective of triumph of male sexuality. Instead of an issue of female subjectivity in the commercial/erotic relations, I find an order in which masculinity was beyond the straight jacketing of hetero/homo-sexual divides, an order which demanded an active role on the part of males in all socio-sexual relationships. Like in the *mehfils*, the performance of erotic-commercial relations and the physical sites associated with them readily made available those *female-humans* on whose bodies gender as well as social/political relations were performed.<sup>31</sup>

I would like to tackle with the issue of female companionship in these quarters by taking up clue from Carla Petievich's study in which she has attempted to discuss deliberate 'prudish aversion' to lesbian expression in Urdu poetry.<sup>32</sup> Petievich takes to task the description of erotic relations among women in terms of active/passive sexual partner. While conceding to the possibility of particular emotions of women,<sup>33</sup> Petievich underlines how the explicitness of the feminine, in the sexual encounters: *emphases added*, in the literary genre was tantamount to weaken Indo-Muslim culture.<sup>34</sup> On this premise, I would argue that it is difficult to

<sup>28</sup> She describes such places as liminal space in which the patriarchal/hierarchical norms of Mughal elite were deliberately turned on their head in pursuit of emotional satisfaction; a space that needed to be carefully constructed and controlled to prevent any transgression of social-political order. Katherine Butler Brown, 'If Music be the food of love: masculinity and eroticism in the Mughal mehfils', in Francesca Orsini ed., *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61-83.

<sup>29</sup> *Laddhat ul Nisa: A Persian Manuscript from Kashmir* (University Library Leiden).

<sup>30</sup> For a critical analysis of active/passive actors, see Brown 'If Music be the food of love'; and Rosalind O Hanlon, 'Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India', *Journal of Economic and Social History of Orient* 41/1 (1999), 47-93.

<sup>31</sup> A parallel study devoted to social and natal isolates (in slaves) shows that the asymmetrical penetrator/penetrated sexual gesture is repertoire of enactment of socio-political hierarchies. The sexual act itself represented status differentials. See Indrani Chatterjee, 'Alienation, Intimacy, and Gender: Problems for a History of Love in South Asia', in Vanita, *Queering India*, 61-76.

<sup>32</sup> Carla Petievich, 'Doganas and Zanakhis: The Invention and Subsequent Erasure of Urdu Poetry's Lesbian Voice' in Vanita, *Queering India*, 47-60.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 56.

account whether erotic relations between women were part of women's life in all-female quarters or how far the relations between women cordial. Instead such quarters reproduced dynamics of household relations, one rife with tensions. A study of *Muraqqa-i Dehli*, a late-18<sup>th</sup> century account, shows that the professional-women were well-versed in the art of elegant conversation, their selective usage of the words and the conversation could be easily differentiated from the coquetry of many other women.<sup>35</sup> This is suggestive of competitive environment to a large extent. There is yet another perspective which I like to add, that of putting such quarters adjacent to the royal Mughal household. Both households/quarters comprised many women, thus the tensions between various members would distinctly occupy everyday relations.<sup>36</sup> This is again indicative of relations brooding in rivalry and conflict among the women abounding in these households. In the case of prostitutes, the cause of such jealous behavior must be the business-like setting of those places. It is the business-character of such relations that portrays women less as subversive agent and more as social agents whose bodies were a site for establishing socio-political relations. This brings me to another group of women, whose institutionalized (sexual) services enacted the social-political order in a unique way, whereby one can examine multiple links between cultural ideologies and social practices. Let us have a look at *devadasis*, literally meanings servants of God (also referred to as temple woman) who were a ritual specialist associated with deities in Hindu temples.

### *Devadasis*

I summarize from Amrit Srinivasan's study "the young *devadasi* underwent a ceremony of dedication to deity of local temple, which resembled in its ritual structure the upper caste, Tamil marriage ceremony. She was set apart from her non-dedicated sisters in that she was not permitted to marry and her celibate or her unmarried status was legal in customary terms".<sup>37</sup> Even if she could not marry mortal man, many of them maintained sexual relationships with upper-caste Hindu patrons. Thus, we could say that these women occupied a liminal position where they were *nityasumangali* (ever married) but still unmarried.<sup>38</sup> Some of the questions that perplex us are who these women were and what were they doing in the temples? The socio-religious act of dedicating girls to temples was part of the overall ideology of *bhakti*, thus needs to be viewed in conjunction with general socio-religious and economic/historical developments of the times. The *bhakti* movement represents a religio-social movement which tried to make the religion more accessible, at the same creating an alternate space. We can suppose that the mass following would be the marginalized groups but Uma Chakravarti cautions us of "a noticeable degree of Brahman participation which was to check the intrusion of Sanskrit penetration of religious forms".<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Dargah Quli Khan, *Muraqqa-i Dehli: The Mughal State in Munhammad Shah's time*, tr. Chandra Shekhar and S.M. Chenoy (Delhi: Deputy Publication, 1989), 75-7, 109. (Delhi incorporates Shahjahanabad or the walled city as well as old cities of Dehli like Purana Qila and Mehrauli and their suburbs.

<sup>36</sup> These aspects have been dealt with in my unpublished PhD thesis 'Women and Division of Labour in Medieval India', in the chapter *Harem and Women* (History Department, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> Amrit Srinivasan, 'Reform or Conformity- Temple Prostitutes and the Community in Madras Presidency', in Bina Aggarwal ed., *Structures of Patriarchy- State, Community and Household* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 175-98.

<sup>38</sup> This description of these women is a simplification, owing to considerable regional variations among the practices of temple dancing girls.

<sup>39</sup> Uma Chakravarti, 'The World of Bhaktin in South Indian Traditions', in Idem, *Everyday Lives, Everyday*

*Bhakti* has various and complex strands; while some socio-gender transgressions were possible as in the experiences of female *bhakti* saints,<sup>40</sup> I would argue that ideology of *bhakti* brings solace to the subaltern classes, entrenches their servitude by letting their autonomous agency be compromised. This serves those in power.<sup>41</sup> A religious phenomenon can have an existence of its own but the economic setting too plays an important role. In case of *bhakti* tradition, the process of sub-infeudation, proliferation of temple activities and popularity of sectarian cults through the *bhakti* movement, especially from eight-century onward were happening simultaneously. And these were important factors for the increased temple dedication.<sup>42</sup> Here comes the role of large number of girls meant to perform religious/ritual duties in the temples, who used dance and music to explain main elements of religious ideology. What was the general attitude of the society towards these girls? In the contemporary sources, these women have been characterized as *vesyas* whose meaning comes closer to a prostitute. An Arab traveler, Zeid al Masan (867 A.D.) talks about them and says "she prostitutes at certain rates and delivers her gains into the hands of Idol's priests to be used by him for the upkeep and support of the temple".<sup>43</sup> James Forbes locates the Brahmanical mysteries in this institution as "these damsels are not only dedicated to the principal idols but to the pleasure of the priests".<sup>44</sup> But I will argue that these women occupied a position in the cultural sphere, enjoyed a respect within the social space. It was not mere prostitution. Further, these girls were not prevented from leading a normal life involving economic activity and child bearing and these women "have a privilege above all others.... where they enjoy earthly pleasures enough without any scandal to themselves or relations. They are wholly to their own choice...."<sup>45</sup> They also enjoyed the privilege of having a family outside the conventional domestic place, and they commanded an independent source of income and a great deal of religious honor. This makes the study of intra-household relations interesting.

### **Intra-household matrices**

A strong economic motivation lay behind such temple servitude because a girl's dedication to the temple ascribed a status to the household, through which it acquired rights to perform temple ceremonies. This also brings in an element of competition where the households vied for such a position. These temple-girls enjoyed land benefits of the given temple<sup>46</sup> and the joint and inalienable nature of

---

*Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of 'Ancient' India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006), 275-92, here 289.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Rekha Pande, *Religious Movements in India* (New Delhi; Gyan Publication, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> On the working of religious movements see an important book, David N. Lorenzen ed., *Religious Movements in South Asia 600-1800: Debates in Indian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> See Aloka Parasher and Usha Naik, 'Temple Girls of Medieval Karnataka', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* vol. 23 (1986), 63-78.

<sup>43</sup> B.P. Mazumdar, *Socio-Religious History of Northern India 1030-1194* (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1960), 392- 403.

<sup>44</sup> James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs* (London: White Cochrane and company, 1813), vol. I, 81-2.

<sup>45</sup> Bowrey, *Geographical Account*, 13-14.

<sup>46</sup> They received grants made either to them or to the temple; they were paid by being assigned a share in land, in the revenue from specified taxes or *kani* i.e. landholding rights in temple land. Kanaklatha Mukund has cited many epigraphical evidences from thirteenth century to property owned, sold, and bought by the *teveratiyal*, which indicate that they had property independent of the temple; so much was that even their rights were not questioned. Kanaklatha Mukund, 'Turmeric Land: Women's Property Rights', in Roy, *Women in Early*, 129-33. Sometimes upper

privilege of land use was the reason to keep the member actively employed in the temple. Because a woman was the main economic backbone of household, and the transmission of property was from mother to her daughter it could be argued that the *devadasi* households presented an alternate structure. That is, a structure with the matrilineal kinship matrices in which the men could not be patriarch, as they happen to be in a patrilineal patri-virilocal system.<sup>47</sup> This is also indicative of less control on sexual and reproductive lives of the women in these settings.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, it is possible to examine the transactions rendered on the bodies of *devadasis* and for this I draw upon the researches of Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson which stress that even matrifocal societies could not reinforce female control over external affairs.<sup>49</sup> In this case, even though a *devadasi* possessed greater functional specificity and technical excellence of dance tradition, the (male) guru exercised control over the dance tradition as well as over them. They denied these women of a professional career and rejected circle of marriage exchange.<sup>50</sup> For the social regulations governing the relations of *devadasis* with the rest of society, Bina Aggarwal adjudicates “sexually inaccessible to all but a chosen patron- an upper caste, upper class married Hindu male”.<sup>51</sup> I would say that their area of activity remained within a patriarchal and caste structure. They were like slaves with no clear definition of their rights and duties,<sup>52</sup> who in addition served to advertise in a perfectly open and public manner their availability for sexual liaisons with a proper patron and protector.<sup>53</sup> Despite being atypical ritual specialist, their profession failed to empower them in any effective, pragmatic sense. Instead they provided a terrain where the distinction between purity and pollution,<sup>54</sup> typical of cultural ideology determining social relationships in Hindu

---

class women also made such grants. See Cynthia Talbot, ‘Temples, Donors, Gifts: Patterns of patronage in 13<sup>th</sup> Century South India’, *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 50/no. 2 (1991).

<sup>47</sup> For working of matrilineal system, see Leda Dube, ‘Who Gains from Matriliney? Men, Women and Change on an Indian Island’, in Rajni Palriwala and Carla Risseuw ed., *Shifting Circles of Support Contextualizing Kinship and Gender in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa* (New Delhi: Sage, 1996), 157-89.

<sup>48</sup> *Bhakti* tradition does make such transgressions in the social relations of being female possible, as has been shown by Chakravarti through the lives of some females saints who were able to transcend socially defined feminine roles (marriage) and also female sexuality. See Chakravarti, ‘Bhaktin in South Indian Tradition’, 290.

<sup>49</sup> They discuss property forms, political power and female labor in the origins of class and state societies and opine that the domestic authority in the matrifocal societies did not produce the mirror image of men in patrilineal societies. And also those women had less incentive to make demands of husbands than males did to make demand of wives Stephanie Coontz and Peta Handerson eds., *Women's Work, Men's Property* (London: Verso, 1986), 132.

<sup>50</sup> A study, though of later period, has overviewed complexities of feudal economy and feudal relations and how *devadasis* and their patrons were caught up within it: see K. Srilata edited and translated, *The Other Half of Coconut: Women Writing Self Respect History, An anthology of self respect literature 1928-36* (New Delhi: Kali, 2003), 153. Also, Pamela G. Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 65-70.

<sup>51</sup> Aggarwal, *Structures of Patriarchy*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> For alienation of slaves, see gender sensitive study by Chatterjee, ‘Alienation, Intimacy, and Gender’.

<sup>53</sup> Priyadarshini Vijaisri's study suggests the powerlessness of these women which lay in their vulnerability to aggressive sexual identity of the caste Hindu male. Priyadarshini Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Kaniskha Publishers, 2004), esp.306.

<sup>54</sup> The concepts of pollution and purity help organize a formal hierarchy, an encomium that expresses society's awareness of its own configuration and necessities. Elsewhere I have discussed the relation between (female) pollution and the economic matrixes of the socio-political order. Tools and Taboos. Agricultural Production and Gender Inequality in Mughal North India, 16<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> centuries’ Paper presented in the panel ‘Technology, Gender and Division of Labour’ at the XIV

society, coalesced to buttress cultural hegemony of Hindu caste-structure.

### **Remarks on their labor and the social set-up**

Some recent researches have tried to underscore elements of resistance and agency in the field of human-sexuality, thereby delving into an unexplored topic of sexuality, particularly female.<sup>55</sup> Within a particular historical timeframe, my study has attempted to raise an issue related to commercialization of female sexuality which took place both in religious and secular spheres. It is their distinctive activities which have critically analyzed to address politics of gender and culture. The narrative of the sexual economy, that I presented here, does neither reveal any sexual desire on the part of females nor reflect any transgression of the socio-political order. Instead, the sexual orientation of these full-fledged professions, in my opinion, played a significant role in constructing boundaries or circumscribing spaces for women, including the sexual laborers themselves. I will also stress that there were some specific socio-cultural and gendered contours attached to the experiences of these women, as the social and sexual are interrelated phenomenon. Definitely music and dancing were great pastimes and developed into important professions and the women devoted time in learning the use of letters. The women committed to this profession extensively deployed their skills and labor. Princess Jahanara's sentiments for her dancing girl reflect upon the competitive atmosphere in which such entertainers exhibited higher excellence in their art and scintillating performance and tried retaining their position as the favorite ones. Their striking presence in the routine Mughal court life can be judged from their consistent presence in various Mughal paintings. They were not just sought after for public social and cultural events and entertainment, they also joined the army. Their contribution in cultural synthesis, especially the Turki dancers, reiterates their activities' political contours in a pleasurable context. These professional women formed part of the royal or wealthy household, which shows that the outsiders could be incorporated every now and then. Hence, it can be argued that the services of such women, who provided labor in the world of entertainment, were standard for all functions and festivities in both the private/domestic and public places. Whereas their labor was deeply integrated with other forms of entertainment in medieval society, the socio-political matrices supporting these professions were of no less importance.

The social set-up of the period under review was made up of men as well as (respectable) women, irrespective of class and caste divisions. The cultural ideologies such as honor, shame, segregation, and purity/pollution play an important role in circumscribing women's activities and the social spaces they can legitimately occupy.<sup>56</sup> As the women were markers of social status and boundaries between castes and classes, their sexuality was something to be protected, which was best achieved by secluding them. The *carnal professionals* tend to stand outside the bounds of respectability expected of the family-women. The matter gets complicated when the patrilineal system of inheritance rendered women vulnerable to the patriarchal norms.

---

*International Economic History Conference, Helsinki, August 2006.*

<sup>55</sup> To cite a few, Vanita, *Queering India*; Brinda Bose ed., *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India* (New Delhi: Katha, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> For some interesting details, see David G. Mandelbaum, *Women's Seclusion and Men's Honour: Sex Roles in North India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 80-82, 96-97. Hanna Papanek, 'Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter', in Idem and Gail Minault ed., *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1982), 3-53

As it was the wife who ensured progeny, in practicality the onus was on the conjugal sex. Under such circumstances, the caste and gender diktats limited women's sexuality to heterosexual marriage bonds. Under such circumstances, it is possible that the intimate relations with the wife would tend to be more structured and regulated. Though I do not markdown the pleasure aspects of a polygamous household, or a household which had female slaves/servants, what strikes me is the professional women's ability to provide their customers (men) with both the idealist love(seeing that specifically the courtesans were more sought after for their clan rather than just sex) and sexual intimacy. Thus, where women's sexuality, if we limit ourselves to heterosexuality, would have found expression only within the marriage bonds, at times dissociated from individual emotion, paradoxically men had at their disposal these professionals very much outside the same marriage bonds. The bodily experiences of these professional-women make them different from the other women. A foreign traveler, Francois Bernier, has to say that there were many female dancers and public women, who enjoyed great liberty and abounded in large numbers in cities.<sup>57</sup> If that be so, then it is quite clear that the customary ideologies of segregation were compromised in case of these women and their mobility was not curtailed. Consequently any spatial boundary between men and these women was eroded and with an easy access to all the spaces, both female and male gatherings, these professionals were like any other laboring/working women who worked in *inside-public* space and earned their living by performing sexual-labor. A study of their professional career reconstitutes the binaries of inside-outside, in terms of the women and their labor and shows how society garnered women's labor and successfully redistributed the corporal price earned by women in the society.

The commercialization of sexuality embedded within the patriarchal culture reflects upon a continuity between hetero-normative domestic structure and the domestic structure of the professional women. The structural units of professionals were alternate to the domestic units but were not deviant or an alternative society. Their life experiences made them stand outside the moral bounds of the domestic space but they did have a role to play in the larger historical processes. Their presence enlarges conceptual range of people perpetuating patriarchal ideology and hegemonic heterosexuality. Their differently socialized lifestyle did not subvert hierarchies of caste and class, as their work was an expression of sexual politics—of oppression and male domination. In this profession, women sold their bodies and words to anyone who would have granted them with favors and consequently it developed into a profession based on sexual expertise and artistic skill and not as an alternative society. The continuance of this profession demanded constant purchase of young female slaves who were 'taught dances and lascivious songs and all the tricks of their infamous trade'.<sup>58</sup>

For the *devadasis*, I would say such cultic-services with distinct organizational structures and social purposes had due significance in the erstwhile politico-economy. Arguably, these women were not subjected to regular societal sexual regulations, as the ones existing for the others. It will be unjustifiable to see the *devadasis* way of life as just another means to meet sexual needs of some men. The temple dedications had their own politics. The temples were the places from where a good deal of wealth was channeled and redistributed. The political exigencies and material temptations were motivating factors behind the political support rendered to the temples and its

---

<sup>57</sup> Bernier, *Travels in Mogul Empire*, 273-4.

<sup>58</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. I, 58.

functionaries.<sup>59</sup> The kingship successfully augmented political gains by tapping subject's piety.<sup>60</sup> So when the King and his court appropriated the temple and the deity, the *devadasis* who were closely associated with the temple-deity approximated courtesans' relation to the king.<sup>61</sup> The *devadasi* is that category of historical study which occupied the bottom rung in the chain of feudal relations, followed by male members of the temple, local rulers the patrons, and finally the King. The last one successfully absorbed the scared arena of temple where the God held the court exactly as the King did. This also rendered the *devadasi* to the demands of the patrons. Nevertheless, the person of *devadasi* conveyed and preached masses complete surrender to the lord, a necessary backdrop for any socio-political system.

## Conclusion

In this article I have examined the discourse of the sexual-economy of the medieval period in India, with specific reference to prostitutes' and devadasis' professions. These professions were economically and socially rewarding, esp. in case of *devadasis*, thus the motivation to take up these professions came from both these factors. In *devadasis*' case, family's initiation also played an important role. In my understanding, these professionals' social acceptance worked in tandem with their social alienation. While they remained essential to various categorizations, their presence reinforced certain socio-cultural ideologies. The erotic-facet, an essential component of their labor, converged with the group, gender and caste/class hierarchies to (a) create an ideal of the pure, chaste and suppressed erotic identity of the *respectable women*; (b) yield the subordination of specific communities and appropriation of women's labor to certain privilege groups of men; and (c) subject the sexuality and related productive and reproductive capacities of all women to the prescriptive norms. The presence of such laborers complicates our understanding and reflects upon a social process that was surviving and shaping men, women and social institutions. If we look at *devadasis*, whose case is fairly different from the common market women, we see an institution of *devadasi* itself which thrived on an interdependence of temporal and spiritual world and its functionaries, namely temple authorities and the political head of the state. The *devadasis* presence did not wreak havoc on the domestic set-up of the men involved and nor were they in any way competitors to the rural households. Rather their personalities got submitted to the set-up.<sup>62</sup> The women did not suffer from any of the social and moral degradations and

---

<sup>59</sup> Nicholas Dirks has studied South Indian structure and explained some of the intricate features such as relations between social structure and political superstructure, the idea behind the royal grants and the efficacy of rituals. See Nicholas B Dirks, 'Political Authority and Structural Changes in Early South Indian History', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* vol. 13, no. 2 (1976), 126-57. Similar views are also expressed by Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68.

<sup>60</sup> The same was also practiced in North India but in a different way, as rent —free land grants were made to many, including women, who in return were to pray for the long life of the King and perpetuation of his rule.

<sup>61</sup> For an historical development of this institution see: Janaki Nair, 'The *Devadasi*, Dharma and the State', *Economic and Political Weekly* vol. 29/no.50 (1994). Leslie C. Orr has written a fascinating account based on inscriptions and shown the development of *devadasi* institution, as practiced in Tamilnadu, when definition, function and character of temple women underwent change due to developments at various fronts. See *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God Temple Women in Medieval Tamil Nadu* (New York, N Y: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>62</sup> Amrit Srinivasan calls them as 'adjuncts to conservative domestic society not its ravagers': Srinivasan, 'Reform or Conformity', 182.

were acceptable to the society. There were no reforms as such; at least there is no evidence, as one heavily comes across in the colonial period. When new middle-class morals occupied minds of Indian intelligentsia and social reformers in the colonial period, the ideological and material foundation of the system was subjected to what the colonial judicial system termed as 'aberrations in what became identified as (textual) Hindu law'.<sup>63</sup>

In case of courtesans/prostitutes too, there is a lack of evidence on the humiliating aspects of this profession. Of course, they were market women, who worked only for wealth. Nevertheless what they also possessed were skills and accomplishments, at least a section whose élan was a great attraction for the men of wealth and great connoisseurs. In the socio-cultural set-up where music and dance were an integral part of the secular (as well as religious) functions, the services of such professionals were necessary. However, when the boundaries of such an entertainment were transgressed for the sexual pleasure is hard to establish.

This essay proposes that this profession proffers a political discourse and structural framework of gender relations, that is, the nature and basis of the subordination of women and its extent and specific form in Indian society. In the Indian socio-cultural environment a high premium is placed on the (sexual) purity of women and it is central to Brahmanical patriarchy. Because the caste purity is contingent upon it, there is an effective sexual control over the women.<sup>64</sup> My argument is that an easy accessibility of the sex (women), beyond the conjugality, in the form of paramours/sex partners was a way to control the sexuality of many a women. So even if the prostitutes (courtesans and others) and temple women had nothing to do with the institution of marriage and were free from the economic limitations that marriage otherwise imposed on the women, and might have also been autonomous to an extent, nevertheless their identities were a part of larger matrixes of the patriarchal structure. The physical spaces abounding the professional-women clearly reflected different functions and social relations where men produced and the women reproduced in terms of a broader context of relationships, like the reproduction of traditional family and cultural values, of asymmetrical power relations.

The sexual economy presented in the form of prostitutes' and temple-women's hard and skilled labor, the body of these professionals was that site where the state's interests were realized: a state whose interest lay in controlling, economically and ideologically, the productive and reproductive capacities of such women- laborers. Besides them, the men's controlled access to prostitutes (some sort of registration was required) can also be interpreted as a check on male sexuality. Unabated sexual impulses of men were checked and gave way to strict political control. And there could be ideological reasons as well, as the maintenance of the ideological integrity of the *devadasis* system restricted their access to a rich upper-class patron. I would end this essay by emphasizing that the study of role and status of such professionals is compelling in the light that they were just not satisfying the male impulse or just available in the market. Their availability was contingent to their possession of skills

---

<sup>63</sup> Kalpana Kannabiran, 'Judiciary, Social Reform and Debate on "Religious Prostitution" in Colonial India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30/43, Oct. 28 1995, 59-71

<sup>64</sup> For an in-depth study of such patriarchal elements, see Uma Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State' in idem, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of Ancient India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2006), 138-55. In foot- note 8, Chakravarti alerts us that the formation of Brahmanical patriarchy has not been a monolithic process, given the range of social formations

and accomplishments in the fields of music and dance. It is possible to see the experiences and work of these women beyond realist/romantic strands; one being generated from social realities and dictated by different contexts.<sup>65</sup> There are many ways to approach the study of experiences of these professionals and the above analysis focuses on the socio-cultural dimensions of the professionals' activities.

---

<sup>65</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan discusses such strands in her article 'The Prostitute Questions (S), (Female) Agency, Sexuality and Work' *Economic and Political Weekly* (25 April 1992).