

CHAPTER 8. SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY: THE RELIGIOUS PARADOX OF PROSTITUTION IN SOCIETY

8.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the most complex sexuality conundrum involving sex and prostitution. As discussed in previous chapters, sex is considered a basic human prerequisite in life, and when society suppresses it spiritually, religiously and culturally, the pursuit of sexual satisfaction will not become obsolete (Bancroft, 2008). In reality, it will backfire and forces the human intellect to source for sexual satisfaction elsewhere outside the religious, spiritual, cultural public barriers that indeed started the profession of prostitution, which is one of the oldest in human history (Salmon, 2008).

Although the practice of prostitution is common worldwide, little is known about the religious, spiritual, social, sexual and historical contexts of prostitution in India. For example, a quick search of the topic keywords “prostitution” in the Web of Science database showed 4424 papers published between 1955 and 2024. When the keywords, “religion and prostitution” were searched, it resulted in 28 papers published from 1992 to 2024. When the topic keywords “Hindu religion and prostitution” were searched, it yielded nothing that shows the least deliberated nature of the topic in science.

Some may wonder, what are the religious, social and historical views of India towards the socially-inflammatory sexuality perspectives of prostitution? Does Hinduism traditionally approve prostitution? Or is it a sinful act? If it is sin, would it be possible for sinners to transform as saints? Henceforward, this chapter provides some insightful perspectives on the odd and seldom-discussed sexuality and spirituality inquiries in social science literature. It

thoroughly reviews the scientific literature and scriptural texts to explore the sexuality history linked to this profession and it also provides examples of how prostitutes can redeem themselves in spirituality pursuing enlightenment, by giving examples from ancient scriptures.

The tantalizing practice primarily involves sex in exchange for money, materials and other desire-driven profits. In today's world, it's considered as commercial sex (Ringdal, 2007). A person who engages in this profession is known as a prostitute or sex worker. The legal, social and traditional status of prostitution varies widely across cultures and countries that range from criminal acts to regulated workforce (Flowers, 1987). Over 40 million prostitutes are reported to exist worldwide and this trade generates over USD 1,200 billion per year (Goldmann 2011; Luscombe 2014). The vast majority of them are females while males too dynamically engage in today's market (Vanwesenbeeck, 2013).

In the earliest known Mesopotamian poems titled the Epic of Gilgamesh (2000 BC) the importance of prostitutes in human civilization was described (Kovacs, 1989). In ancient Mesopotamia, along the Tigris–Euphrates Rivers, there were temples called the “house of heaven” dedicated to deities where prostitution coexisted. But, the practice ceased when Constantine destroyed the temples and replaced them with churches during the 4th century AD (Blundell 1995; Cotterell, 2017). In ancient Greece, both men and women were known to engage in prostitution (Kapparis, 2017). The ancient Hebrew literature describes four angels of sacred prostitution, who had sex with the archangel, Samael (Flowers, 1987). In ancient Rome, the registered prostitutes were called Meretrix while the unregistered ones were known as Prostibulae (Strong, 2016). Scholars however debated whether or not prostitution was religiously sanctioned in ancient Europe (Blundell 1995).

Historians at large view those theologians of the medieval era treated matters involving sex and women as rather vague. Although prostitutes were condemned for their promiscuous behavior, they were also reluctantly accepted for serving a disgraceful necessity in the male-dominated society (Brundage, 1987). Although civic authorities had legislations to deal prostitution, they failed to define it obviously in official records. Only in the thirteenth century municipal records, a chapter on prostitutes was included that designated them as “public girls” who receive two or more men in their homes day or night as visitors and guests. This definition includes prostitutes as women who traded their bodies for a living and that too within the confinement of the designated brothels (Davin, 1940).

Whether those women were forced or willingly entered into the flesh trade was extraneous since medieval authorities braced the practice to maintain public order to primarily entertain men to relieve sexual suppression. Besides, reform and rehabilitation of prostitutes was a key concern because the mere existence of prostitutes in society was recognized as a human weakness in terms of religious perceptions that naturally provoked God’s grace and mercy for redemption (Brundage, 1987). For that reason, the prostitute reform package was created that included either they get married or transferred reclusive convents to mingle into the realms of sexual austerity. Historians consider it as an elusive implication of male ideological control of female sexuality (Hadley 1999).

In contrast, prostitution was legal in ancient China and prostitutes had high social status with professional education and training in the social science subjects of music, arts, literature and poetry (Zurndorfer, 2011). Therefore, they fell in the category of treasured scholars and glorified intellectuals in the Chinese social order. Records of Tang Dynasty’s (618-907 AD) Chinese poetry compilation show great inspirations and contribution of several eminent

prostitutes. The enormous poetic collection titled “The complete poetry of the Tang” contained 49,000 poems, of which 4,000 portrayed prostitutes and 136 were originally inscribed by prostitutes that clearly depicted their historical superiority in literature (Zhang 2011).

8.2. ANCIENT INDIA’S DEVADASI SYSTEM

The ancient Indian law and society texts such as Arthashastra (300 BC) and Kamasutra (1-4 AD) narrate the existence of prostitutes who were known to wear red colored dress and glittering jewelries to attract men (Nag, 1995). The term devadasi originates from Sanskrit language meaning “Servant of God”; they played a key role in preserving classical dances such as Bharatnatyam in Tamil Nadu and Odissi in Orissa. Records indicate that they had contributed immensely to the traditional music industry as well. For example, famous contemporary classical Indian singers namely MS Subbulakshmi, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle originated genealogically from the devadasi community (Torri, 2009).

The matriarchal system of Devadasi historically had a unique tradition of encouraging women to practice and perform as artists without suppressing their physical, emotional and social needs. They were locally known by various names in different parts of India such as Devaradiar or Dasis (Tamil Nadu), Kudikkars (Travancore), Dogams and Sanis (Andhra Pradesh), Basavis and Jogatis (Karnataka), Bhavins or Bhavinis (Goa), Muralis, Jogatis, Jogtinis and Aradhinis (Maharashtra), and Bhagtanis or Bhagtan (Rajasthan) (Torri, 2009).

The scripture Arthashastra has a chapter on the role of manager of prostitutes, but it fails to mention details on sacred prostitutes associated with temples and spiritual sites (Rangarajan, 1987). Likewise, Kamasutra, the authoritative text on sexuality mentions prostitutes, but no

references to the existence of sacred prostitutes associated with temples. Nevertheless, there is a citation of dancing girls in Kalidasa's poem, Meghadoot or cloud messenger that denotes the presence of dancing girls in Mahakaleshwar temple in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh (Chakravarty, 2007). But, there was no evidence linking them to outright prostitution. Therefore, it appears to be a temporary agreement to hire singing girls for shows in certain temple festivities. Kalidasa, by the way, was considered as the historically unique 4th century BC classical poet and dramatist in ancient India (Mainkar, 1978).



Figure 1. My visit to Yellamma goddess temple in Karnataka to understand the ancient devadasi system. But, the practice has been legally banned now by the government (Photos by Anastasia Mikheeva).

While I was taking my course work at SVYASA, I visited the famous devadasi temple located at the town of Saundatti in Karnataka (Figure 1). I was accompanied by the family of one of my classmates. The goddess of the temple is called Yellamma. She has been revered as the goddess of fertility. The temple had a long history of Devadasi practice where young girls were given to the temple to serve as devadasi. Contemporary sociologists consider the practice as a

form of sexual exploitation of the poor lower caste women by the rich upper caste men (Torri, 2009). Nevertheless, the practice has been legally banned by the state government under the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982 and came into enforcement in 1984.

8.3. COLONIAL INDIA'S PROSTITUTION HIGHLIGHTS

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the British colonial administration in India promoted and managed prostitution and the Cantonment Act of 1864 portrays the reality (Legg, 2009). It vividly describes how the government provided for about 15 local women for each regiment (1000 soldiers) of British soldiers. Historical records from the British colonial era showed that in 1806, the city of Calcutta (now called Kolkata) had 2540 women in 593 brothels spreading across 82 streets. Those who were involved in prostitution paid the official tax to the British colonial regime, which contributed about six percent of the city's total revenue (Ghosh and Das, 1990). The British colonial government deliberately promoted prostitution to sexually gratify soldiers and to preserve power without creating any social chaos. A survey conducted in 2012 showed over 10 million prostitutes, of which 100,000 were located in Mumbai city alone (Dogra, 2012).

8.4. RELIGIOUS PORTRAYAL OF PROSTITUTION IN INDIA

Hindu religion clearly recognizes three genders namely man, woman and transgender and the ancient scriptures dictate that all must be treated equally in society (Agoramoorthy and Hsu 2015). When it comes to the topic of sex, the ancient scriptures accept sex among married couples. Upanishads are considered as the knowledge part of the four main Vedas (Witzel, 2003), which is a compilation of poems in one of the oldest world's languages, Sanskrit during 1500-1200 BCE. Among them is Taittiriya Upanishad, which is unique since it defines the

subjective reality in detail. It states that the reproductive organs are meant for procreation and pleasure as well (Sastri, 1903). When pleasure leads to mental or physical violence, it becomes a sin. Although the scriptures neither condemn nor encourage prostitution directly, they forbid men to have sex with prostitutes and unmarried women against their will. When sex becomes harmful to a person, family and society all together, it's forbidden as sin. Culturally, the human body is considered sacred (Pati, 2011) Therefore trading sex for monetary benefits is seen as an unethical pursuit of the pusillanimous people.

Unlike Western culture, sex is not openly discussed in contemporary Indian society (Ismail et al., 2015). But the ancient scriptures warn that men can easily lose control of their senses upon seeing pretty women so they must be cautious at all times. The scriptures compare the action as how a moth gets attracted by the dazzling flames of fire rushes into it to die (Visharadananda, 2003). Scriptures also highlight that a monk who renounced materialistic possessions must beg for food to sustain life and to continue introspection with a constant thought of God (Mitrananda, 2018). Such a renounced monk must not touch women and also avoid their feet touching even a woman-shaped wooden toy (Madhavananda, 2009). Why? A simple touch of a toy can instantly provoke lustful thoughts in mind. So, the popular spiritual scripture Bhagavad Gita, which is considered as a manual for mankind, plainly states that all those pleasures arising from sense objects are the absolute source of misery (Tapasyananda, 2006).

8.5. A SEXUAL SINNER REACHES ENLIGHTENMENT PORTRAYED IN HINDU SCRIPTURE

The scripture Avadhut Gita or song of the free soul highlights an incident involving a king named Yadu who saw a sage named Atri walking along a forest road and was impressed with

his energetic face. So, the king asked how he remained in bliss without emotional support from entities like companionship, family, wealth, position, power, etc. The sage replied that the blissful contentment came from self-realization by the teachings of 24 collective teachers who include earth, air, sky, fire, sun, moon, pigeon, python, sea, moth, elephant, ant, fish, honeybee, deer, raptor, serpent, spider, caterpillar, water, bride, boy, arrow-maker, and a prostitute named Pingala (Rigopoulos, 1998). The sage gained knowledge by observing them. For example, like a python shedding its skin, he learnt to shake off sleep to remain in relentless meditation on the inner self (Haigh, 2007). Likewise, he learnt from the prostitute Pingala about detachment from worldly pleasures (Mal, 1920).

One night, Pingala stood on the balcony to show off her glamour. It became dark so the sage decided to camp before her home in an empty spot. He saw how she was anxiously displaying towards the passing men. Her restless mind dreamt of rich men coming to her, but no one came forward. The time passed by and after midnight, she became more depressed. Suddenly, she felt a strong sense of detachment, with an outburst of instant happiness all over that puzzled her. She then felt disgusted with the materialistic mind that craved for wealth from demoralized men who seek nothing but bodily pleasures from her. She saw for the first time the hollowness of self-created desires and the detachment was so powerful that it hit her like a sharp sword that dismantled sensual bondages linked to her body and mind (Mal, 1920). She realized how miserable she was before and unable to control her mind that prompted her to pursue foolishly in lustful likings of insignificant men. At last, she recognized one thing for certain; the dearest one to her was none other than the Lord who resided in her heart bestowed with everlasting happiness that was the source of energy and prosperity.

By neglecting the Lord, she ignorantly served insignificant men and was unable to attain bliss.

Those men who came forward only brought her grief, fear, anxiety and delusion. She regretted abusing her soul by selling off her body to lust-filled men, who were nothing but objects of misfortune. She realized the perishable body as the house where the sacred soul resides while the skeletal system provides foundation while contents filled with saliva, urine, feces, sweat and blood. Thus, the entire decomposable ingredients neatly wrapped up by an impressive skin that she called the body that harbored nine openings to excrete foul-smelling substances endlessly. In such reality, she foolishly thought that she would get pleasure from the trivial men (Arya, 2017).

Pingala's detachment arisen in her heart awoke the self-inside and she found the ultimate source of universal love that scriptures call it enlightenment. By witnessing Pingala's transformation, sage Atri wrote that she was able to cut herself off from the continuation of desires involving sensual pleasures with men and she blissfully transformed to become a Jivanmukta, the one who assimilated self-knowledge at last (Mal, 1920). The scriptures reiterate a key point clearly that the materialistic desires are the root cause of miseries in life and freedom from desires lead to everlasting bliss (Madhavananda, 2009).

8.6. SINNERS TRANSFORMED TO SAINTHOOD IN CHRISTIANITY

Pingala was not the only sexual sinner who became a saint instantly in human history. There are several such cases in other religions as well. For example in Christianity, there are cases where prostitutes became prominent saints during the medieval era. In fact, Christianity firmly promotes repentance and forgiveness where some prominent prostitute saints became ultimate symbols of reconciliation. A list of those great saints includes Thais, Pelagia, Mary of Egypt, and Mary, the niece of Abraham (Karras, 1990; Porter, 1997; Artman-Partock, 2018). Some

even ended up in prostitution to survive while others entered in search of money, and other avaricious purposes.

When Mary, the niece of Abraham, became an orphan in childhood, her uncle became an immediate guardian. He sent her to a Christian convent for safety, security and spiritual exposure so that she could serve society by spreading spirituality. But, two decades later, a deceitful monk seduced her. But, the young lady was ashamed to confess her sin and escaped the convent to settle in a nearby city where she started to survive as a prostitute. When Abraham heard of her whereabouts, he went to meet his niece in disguise dressed as a local client. After meeting her in privacy, he revealed his identity. Mary immediately fell on Abraham's feet with remorse, confessed to him on what happened to her, and placed her soul under his divine care. Subsequently, both travelled towards the desert for ardent prayers and solemn penances that reformed Mary to her previous sanctity. Few years before death, she prayed and meditated again in the desert in seclusion, and she also did many miracles to help local people. Those miracles went on record and thus Mary finally ascended to sainthood (Karras, 1990).

8.7. SPIRITUAL ACTION PLAN ON HOW SINNERS REVIVE AS DIVINELY PARAGONS

The above cases scripturally show how sinners could be reformed through timely spiritual intervention. Established on the above reported scriptural narrations, I have depicted in Figure 2 specifics on the "7-Step Spiritual Action Plan" to demonstrate how the spiritual transformation happens through seven different performances that include: (i) acknowledging the sin, (ii) confessing sins to repent, (iii) surrendering to God to pursue absolution, (iv) transforming the individual character through dedication, (v) upholding spiritual values and

virtues in life, (vi) seeking spiritual guidance through self-restraint, and (vii) serving others with love and compassion to honor the divine. These seven divine-centric action-oriented performance sincerely undertaken by sinners may appear to be spiritually subjective superficially, but those actions in reality had a subtler ethereal systematic framework to succeed in salvation (Figure 2). I believe that the sacredly inspiring endeavors have great potential to assist leaders, reformers and scientists involved in rejuvenating prostitutes through spiritual, religious, and cultural dialogues in modern society.

First, a sinner must understand their sin and acknowledge the sinful deeds truthfully, which is significant for soul-searching (Galloway, 2011). Truthful acceptance of sins shows the straightforward nature of sinners by consenting and confessing to ethical failures in life. In society, everyone is involved in some sort of unethical deeds in their daily lives, so no one is exempted from committing a sin. That's why accepting sin is a fundamental and critical step for salvation. Secondly, a sinner must reveal the sin and sincerely regret committing it. Most world religions follow this step to help sinners so that they can repent for God's mercy (Cunningham, 2008). As shown in Christianity, the hardest pathway to penance and spiritual revivification starts in the desert in solitude where a seeker must fast, pray, and repent. Be it Moses, Elijah or Jesus, all great divine souls had spent substantial time in desert wilderness isolation to do penance and to pray. Likewise, in Hindu religion, sinners do penance to negate sins and to reduce karmic repercussions. Thirdly, a sinner must genuinely search for mercy and God's absolution (Thurston, 2022). Scientific studies have shown that believing in forgiveness implores salvation and hope (Uecker et al., 2016).

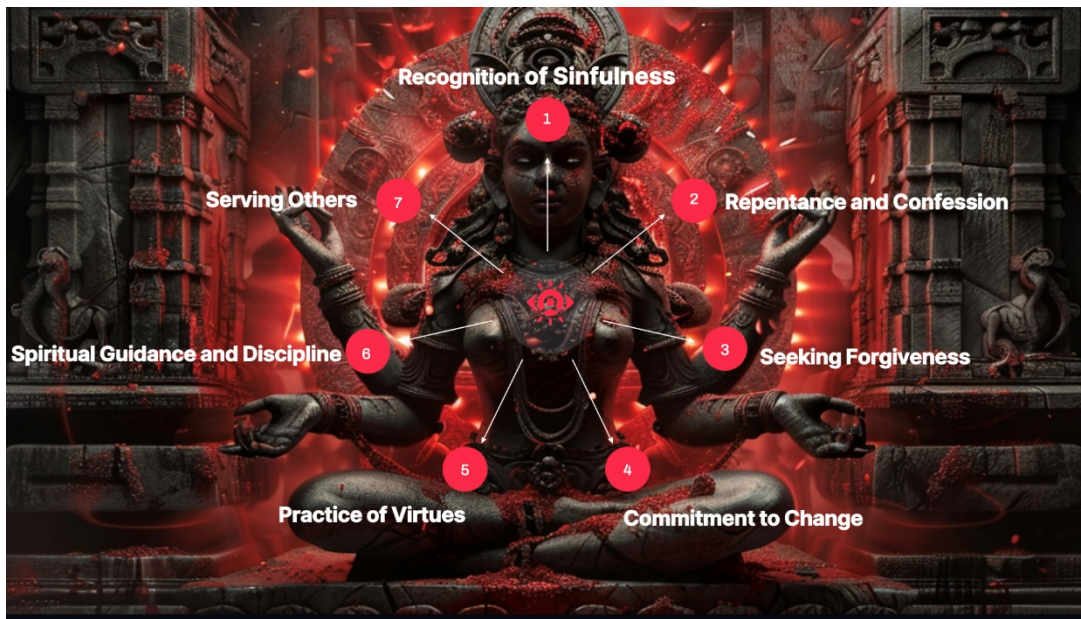


Figure 2. The 7-step spiritual action plan on how sexual sinners become spiritual paragons

The fourth action mandates a sinner must dedicate to change in life and also to maintain moral and spiritual codes of conduct (Loyola, 1901). The fifth action displays how a sinner must adhere to transforming their character through safeguarding ethical values in life that include humbleness, charity, tolerance, compassion, and honesty. If a sinner adopts these transformative behavioral traits, it will change their character as discoursed by gospels (Thomas, 1915; Boswell, 2018). The sixth action advises sinners to source for counseling from sacred masters or spiritual guides to seek out a redemption routine through prayer, meditation, contemplation and fasting. This is a powerful conduit to remain in the spiritual passage to redemption (Floyd, 2010). The last action integrates how a sinner could serve everyone with love and compassion since service to all life forms is deemed solely serving God (Tan, 2006). The outstanding spiritual and philosophical perception of seeing God everywhere and God in all things has been spotlighted both in Hinduism and Christianity. Even poets and mystics

catalyzed by the notion of exploring God in all things have witnessed through experience to the same truthful inference (Gardner, 1954; Clooney, 2016).

During a speech addressed to the Catholic priests in 2016, His Holiness Pope Francis said, “Almost all the great saints were great sinners or, like Saint Therese, knew that it was by sheer grace that they were not” (Lubov, 2024). Similarly, the ancient Indian sage Valmiki who wrote the poetic epic Ramayana was a robber before transforming to become a sage (Venkatesananda, 1988). The scripture *Maha Shiva Puranam* gives specific remedies to come out of all sorts of sins in ones’ life and it mentors the faithful to pursue the goal of enlightenment through total devotion to the eternal inner self (Rajaram, 1918).

Thus, I have introduced the 7-step model in this chapter (Figure 2) to explain on how the moral, religious, and spiritual redemption and revival happens in a spiritually organized manner applicable to all religious practices. These seven steps incorporate crucial aspects of transcendent elevation that include accepting sinful acts, confessing and repenting, seeking God’s mercy, dedication to character adjustment, upholding virtues in life, seeking spiritual guidance with self-restraint, and serving others like serving God. These steps contribute an inclusive structure for the makeover of individual personality from materialistic outlook to spiritual approach. Each stage deals with diverse features of ethical and spiritual progressive features, reassuring sinners to embark on a comprehensive voyage to achieve emotional and spiritual revival.

8.8. IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This chapter presents the multi-layered relationship between prostitution and religious-spiritual morality. If the compassionate nature of religion and spirituality can be understood by people, the taboo and stigma attached to sex and prostitution can be easily defused in contemporary society. Politicians, officials, welfare workers, and leaders of religions and spiritual enterprises need to understand the prospects of religious and spiritual redemption. They have got to adopt an integrated working strategy to generate social support systems prioritizing an overall rejuvenation of people engaged in prostitution through spiritual restoration rather than recommending some fleeting retaliatory psychiatric engagements. The 7-step spiritual action plan presented in this chapter has the potential to reform sinners to become a spiritually-awakened beings with a strategically structured method of spiritual, psychic and moral reintegration. Largely, this action plan underscores individual liability, public backing, and spiritual empowerment.

Unfortunately, long-term scientific investigations are currently lacking to comprehend the impact of religious and spiritual outcomes in the lives of prostitutes to quantify the practicality of change over time. Therefore, studies focusing on various traditions and religions to better comprehend the ongoing routines involving those occupied in the profession of prostitution are urgently needed. It is also necessary to study the efficacy of spiritual and social support systems helping prostitutes, by embracing all three genders amicably. Spiritual organizations, yoga centers and foundations involved in social work should prioritize this task in India.

The 7-step spiritual action plan presented in this chapter can be practically incorporated in

rehab programs for those who need ethical and spiritual transformation in life. Practical training, awareness crusades, policy advocacy exercises, and partnership with rehab centers can be developed to demonstrate the 7-step spiritual action plan benefiting social welfare workers and spiritual counselors who deal with the rehabilitation of prostitutes in contemporary society.

8.9. CONCLUSION

Based on literature survey, I found that world religions in general reflect prostitution as an immoral endeavor. Although Hinduism is not in favor of prostitution candidly, there are cases where prostitutes got incorporated into the spiritual realm; they have been adored for their reverence. An example is the scriptural revelation on the story of Pingala that shows how she attained enlightenment through instant detachment from worldly attachments as witnessed by the celebrated sage Atri. This enigmatic endeavor of sin and sacredness is not only exclusive to Hinduism, but also exists in other religions where prostitutes have epitomized in divinity.

The 7-step spiritual action plan presents a systematic route to spiritual restoration that ranges from recognizing the sin to serving society at large, for the love of God. Each step discourses diverse features of ethical and deific growth, inspiring sinners to commence an all-inclusive voyage towards divine wakening. This chapter has uniquely addressed the taboo and stigma linked to prostitution through a sacred viewpoint offering new corridors for communal amalgamation and individual redemption. In conclusion, it is feasible for sinners to become saints if they achieve the directed goal of self-realization by renouncing worldly attachments, by going beyond body and mind. There's no wonder why the Irish poet Oscar Wilde wrote, "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future".