

# The centre of Love, Power, Politics, Feminism and Revolution: Brothels and Prostitution perceived Through Bollywood

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## Introduction

Prostitution, brothels, tawaifs etc. are associated with the negativities of the society by the society itself. The question arises as to why a certain section of society is cornered, treated as a minority and what was the history of these people and how they emerged as the most conflicting section of society.

The tradition of dance and song started with the Devadasi tradition. Devadasis were females who were married to a temple, priest or deity before puberty. In the name of Hindu religion, they were married to the priest and the priest asked them to sing and dance. Also, they used to take sexual pleasure out of these girls. The Zamindars and traders also exploited them. These were women of low class (Dalits etc.) who were pushed into this practice in the name of religion and devotion. According to the belief, they were told that this is the way they can submit themselves to the Lord. When the Mughals arrived and conquered India this system further grew dense. Mughals used to give big mansions around the city centre to tawaifs. Every group used to have their mansion. They were also renamed and special authorities were given according to their titles. There were two name titles which were practised. Either 'jaan' or 'bai' was

bestowed as the title and both were differently treated but their professions were the same. Many tawaifs were entitled to huge amounts of gold, money or even land if they were good at their work. The Mughals enjoyed their dance and songs and also provided them with different services if they were their favourite. The zamindars, Hindu kings, chiefs of the soldiers and even the common man had access to these places. However, the treatment done to each of them was different. However, we have very little information about them providing any sexual services. Then came the Britishers who also contributed their bit to this age-old practice. The English people came up with settling certain areas which they fully dedicated to these professions. They were known as red light areas and the houses were now known as kothas. Each Kotha used to have their own Malkin who used to keep different girls under her. These malkins had the responsibility to take care of their kotha. She will take care of the girls and she will do all the money-related deals. She will keep the prices per bed or room. The nayikas or the sex workers were the ones who were giving sexual pleasure to their clients. They were the ones who were using their body to earn money. Also, there were some communities in India which were dedicated towards prostitution in these times. The Bedia

community was recognised as one such community in which the women were asked to give sexual pleasure to the Mughals. They were recruited in the courts as a singer and dancer but they also provided them sexual pleasures. This community continued their services under British patronage too.

Bedia community were recognised as the active protestors against the Britishers when the freedom struggle grew in its form. They came together against the East India Company in the 1857, Sepoy Mutiny. They with the other communities like Kuntals etc. targeted the officials and revolted against them. After their active participation, they were termed as 'Notified Tribes and Criminal Tribes list' and orders were given to either kill them or make them servants and treat them brutally. Not only did these communities continue the trend, but during the British era, many girls came from different parts of the world to be a part of this circle. The European and the Japanese girls were smuggled to India at that time. They were made a part of this profession and forcefully were asked to attract people of Indian origin to become the servants of the British people so that these services would be free for them. This time saw the introduction of separate areas fully dedicated to these prostitutes. British people settled these prostitutes in big cities like Calcutta and Bombay and they were limited to certain areas. There are still some lanes in Kamathipura, Mumbai which was home to these European prostitutes.

There were many stories mentioned that how actively the prostitutes took part in the Independence struggles. They were using their bodies to extract secret messages, to kill some of the officials, to steal their bullets and guns and to attack them when required. Though they are not

mentioned or glorified in any books, novels, articles or stories. They did all these without expecting anything from society. They were as happy as the other people to see the independent sky on the 15th of August, 1947. However, we as a society failed them regularly. After Independence, they had to fight a few struggles to save their own homes. Suddenly people started to see them as a negative or demeaning element of the society. They stopped treating them with respect. They were even denied for their rights. They faced a heavy opposition from the society which was against them. The brothels and prostitution centres were seized and they were asked to stop practising the acts. At that time many social workers, journalists and mafia queens became the voice and argued against such orders. According to SITA, which was passed in the year 1965, they were allowed to carry on their work personally but they cannot operate from the brothels or reserve particular areas for their profession. Even though prostitution was termed illegal, the practices continued further. The Indian government also passed a statement in which they condemned any activity which will be done against these prostitutes and even passed punishment orders for it. These sex workers now moved to the courts and the Government for their basic rights. They wanted their child to be educated in the same school as other children, proper sanitation facilities should be provided, the MNCs should look after their areas and their children should be treated equally. After a long struggle, the government passed the law in 2022 towards the welfare of these sex workers which is there on paper but is still not fully practised.

Bollywood has always represented the issues of society and become the spokesperson for many weaker sections. Similarly, they represented tawaifs, Devdasis, bar dancers and prostitutes in their movies and uncovered the dirty truth of the society. They made sure that the naked and ugly truth of the double-faced society should be visible and they should learn from this representation. When we trace the history of Bollywood representing these minorities, we should start with the movie Mughal-e-Azam which was filmed in 1953. Anarkali was a dancer in the court of Akbar who fell in love with Salim (son of Akbar). Their love was condemned by the ruler and they were asked to end it. The dancer was not fit to marry the would-be king as she comes from a very low profession and society will look down upon her because of her profession. After this, there were many movies made on the representation of the tawaif, concubines, court dancers, prostitutes, sex workers etc. There were always a few similarities in these movies. The movies were always full of colours and too many lights were lit when they were performing. They had bright shades of light too to represent their grace. There were times when they even used dim lights when they wanted to show their struggles. These movies also focussed on scents and flowers. The scents and flowers were always considered to romanticize the scenes. Sometimes different flowers were used to show the symbolic value of the characters and their struggles. There was always a sense of loneliness for these prostitutes and sex-workers. It represented the outcast treatment they received from society. Further in this paper many such themes will be discussed and represented.

### **Chameli: The tale of one impactful night**

Chameli is the protagonist of this movie and the entire movie is based on her life and her meeting a strange man. This movie portrayed its sagaciousness in different ways. This movie was aimed at the unfair practices of the law at that time and even the exploitation being done on these sex workers. This movie unlike the previous movie discussed, was about sex workers and their struggles. The film followed the unities proposed by Aristotle, i.e., it followed the unity of time, action and place in most of the plot. Also, the movie was made with a very small budget and still managed to attract the attention of the people to this subject.

In the opening scene, we find Chameli fighting for her rights. She is asked to go meet a man who is violent when he performs any sexual activity. She repeatedly says no and dashes out of the room. From the time immemorial we have seen that women never had an upper hand in many things. Even when it comes to sexual activity, sometimes they face violence against their consent which becomes fatal for them. When we talk about these prostitutes, they too have faced these vicious acts. However, it becomes difficult for them to either report it or to get treated for the same. They either die with time or home remedies help them to heal slowly. When we talk about the police they think that prostitutes are paid for this only and there is nothing wrong with this. "Duniya haath lagane ke paise deti hai" (we get paid to touch them) and so they think that this is a part of their profession. But the reality is that they are paid for giving sexual pleasure not ending up in hospitals.



Further, we see her storm off and then she meets a total stranger (Rahul) and their conversations carry from there. She confesses to him that she has not taken up this profession willingly. It was the circumstances which led her to this. She even points out that her tragic story is the reason why she can be paid a little extra as the clients sometimes feel sorry for her. Somehow the mere thought gives us shivers that somebody is even using their gloomy story to earn money. Though we can see a sense of strong sisterhood in this movie. Chameli helps her fellow sex worker to get rid of this life and run away with her lover. The sisterhood also signifies the shared bonds built due to collective consciousness. They had a common belief, common sociological set-up, common ideas and above all a common pain. The pain is reflected when she says to him, "Every night we move around in search of new fish for our bait, but it seems that in the end we are sacrificed and eaten." Even though they are surrounded by the chaos, they still make it a point to accept their fate and smile.

A city and its rules are different for a prostitute and it is kind of reflected in this movie. The officer also comes to ask for money from her and have sex with her forcefully. She also is aware that she will be facing troubles and inviting more troubles if she does not mute herself. Her rage is visible but is muted most of the time which represents the weakness of the society. There is still a part of the society which is not free and cannot experience the freedom of India. A part of the society which finds it difficult to believe in the idea of equality. I think that it is important that governments should provide security and rather than just making laws, focus on implementing the laws for this section.

### **Begum Jaan: The Partition Paranoia.**

Begum Jaan's plot is set in the times of Independence and Partition. It shows a different story of how the sex workers dealt with the partition. It again portrays the disheartening and spine-chilling truth of our society.

India got independence but the Radcliffe line which was drawn in the middle never let India enjoy freedom in the correct sense. Hindustan was the original name of India and Pakistan which got divided and formed two smaller countries. The division resulted in struggles, chaos, bloodshed, gory circumstances and the death of humanity. And that death of humanity is more properly underlined by this movie. Begum Jaan was the Malkin or the owner of a brothel centre in the middle of two villages. She is portrayed as a headstrong woman who knows her job well. She knew that she had to protect her girls and she had to look after them too. A girl was brought to her who was raped multiple times and became the victim of the tensions building up in the society due to partition. She was then kicked out by her own family and they disowned her. She was not speaking or crying due to the trauma she went through. Begumjaan accepted her as one of her girls. Sometimes the girls who were disowned by the family, or due to the family's economic stability sold by the family, or abandoned by the family etc. were accepted by the brothels. So, if they had nothing, they had one road left which took them to these brothels. Even though there used to be a hidden desire to meet their loved ones. They wanted to return to their lovers, their father, their mother and the part they were happy in. This is where the grandmother tells the small kid about the story of Meera. Meera was

the epitome of love and devotion towards Lord Krishna.

Freedom was celebrated in every part of India though there was a silent reaction of Begumjaan when the news was announced. She was asked the reason and she replied, "Freedom is a word made only for man. Women are not even allowed to cuss." She highlights the inequality faced by women in the gender race. In contemporary times too, the crimes done to a female are higher in number than the males. No matter how the world has progressed, they were not able to abolish this line of inequality. The women are still sitting in the back seat while society is still driven by a man. She also represents the power of these brothels. She was in direct contact with the King and even the political parties. She represented power, politics and even her realm.

Suddenly she gets a notice and two people arrive and ask her to abandon the Kotha. The same Kotha from where she was working and filling the tummies of the girls. She was asked to leave her identity and choose to live with a different identity in some other place. She confesses that she has never faced any divide in her kotha. Any Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, zamindar or common worker will be the same. She has never asked about their religion, caste, creed and beliefs. Then why suddenly these people are asking her to bifurcate her girls based on their religion and to abandon her identity (her home)? Then she claims that the bodies are of their own, the wishes are of their own and so the law should be theirs too. Then the story of Razia Sultan is sung by the grandmother to a small kid living in the same mansion. Razia Sultan became the ruler after facing too many adversities in her life. Nobody even believed that a woman

could be the ruler of the realms. She will always be remembered as the woman who shattered the convictions of the people around those times. Again, her story becomes the metaphorical representation of the girls in the mansion.

Begumjaan then declares to her girl that she will not leave her home or her space. A place where she came as a bride in the palanquin, where she was declared a courtesan, where she has decided her graveyard space, where she sold her body for years- she never thought that she had to divide that place. She never thought that she would have to abandon her mansion where she was a queen. She made sure that no matter how the people have betrayed her, no matter how the enemies have grown in number, no matter how dangerous can it be, she will fight. She asks her girl to leave but they also stick with her in the fight. They also stood with all their energy to fight with the group of goons. One girl in the dream of getting married to her lover decides to abandon the girls and elope with her lover. When she elopes, her lover betrays her by saying, "Dhandewali ke sirf khareedar hote hain, shohar nahi (Sex-workers have people as customers, not the grooms)" and let her get raped by the people with whom he sends her off. She returns and she kills him. There were guns, bullets fired upon them. They knew that they would die. They were just hoping to embrace their deaths rather than being dead from the bullets of these enemies. When they weakened, they returned to their mansion which was now burning in fire. This time the story of Padmavati is told by the grandma. Padmavati who died on her soil, on her conditions and gracefully embraced the death before getting caught by the Mughals. This shows that they even died in their conditions.

The partition was a cruel decision and people are aware of this. But it was also grim, disgusting and dark, which is highlighted by this story. People turned into monsters and were hungry for each other's lives. People who were asked to abandon their land went into an identity crisis and people who saw violence done to their families suffered trauma throughout their life. Also, the last image which lingers in our hearts after watching the movie is when the small girl undressed when she was trying to elope on the orders of Begumjaan, in front of a police officer who was trying to take sexual pleasure from her mother. This leaves us thinking about how low have we become. The society is getting weaker and weaker due to the constructed laws, beliefs, ideas and rules. They are so much tied in this delusion that the truth is far away from them.

### **Gangubai Kathiawadi: The Rise of a Mafia Queen**

Gangubai was a real-life person who is mentioned in the history of Mumbai. She is recognised as a mafia queen. She fought for the rights of prostitutes and was declared one of the most influential women of her time. We still find her pictures and statues on some of the pedestals of Kamathipura. But her journey was not easy. It was tough and demanded the strength and patience that she had. She changed the thoughts of the people concerning prostitution and asked for the basic rights to be given to them. Her story, her journey and her struggles were portrayed in the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali and released in the year 2022.

Gangubai or Ganga came from a very small village Kathiawad in Gujrat. She was brought to Mumbai by her fiancé in the hope that she would work in the movie industry itself. She will be a celebrated person one day. And the same day she was brought, she was brought to the city of dreams, Mumbai. This movie is a bildungsroman movie which is based on the real-life events in the life of Gangu.

The scene opens with a child who is forced into prostitution who was around 12-year and was sold by her husband to this racket. The malkin of the home forces her and says, "You don't have to open your mouth, just open your legs in front of them." She is traumatised and then Gangubai comes in and rescues her from her malkin. This scene itself establishes how kind was Gangu. She was known for her beauty, honesty and her saviour attitude. She was proud of herself and said, "Gangubai chand hai or chand hi rahegi (Gangubai is moon and she will continue to be the moon)". Prostitution was not always accepted by the girls. It was also forced upon them. It was either forced by the circumstances or family members or sometimes the Malkins who bought them. Though in her reign of Kamathipura, Gangu never took any girl against her own will. She respected the choice of the women in the profession.

Soon we can see a glimpse of her past life. She was assaulted by one of the men who was working for Karim Lala, a great Mafia King of those times. Stitches were applied and she faced a gruesome pain for months. She reached to Karim Lala and raised her voice against the atrocities of his man. Karim Lala being a respectable man then gave her a promise to protect her and he stayed true to his promise. He also helped Gangubai to become the leader of Kamathipura in the elections by allowing



her to sell alcohol in the area. This helped Gangu to earn money and to look after her girls. This also helped Gangu to rise in power and be the spokesperson of this society. Prostitute centres in those times became the power hub and also controlled the economy of the cities. They were emerging as a strong hand and with the support of Mafias, they saw a totally different sky. Gangu on the other hand continued her fight for the well-being of these girls.

Then came the big hurdles- the missionary school beside Kamathipura demanded that these centres should be closed as it reflects the negativities of the society. And then the famous speech of Gangubai came into existence. She asked questions and tried to establish the egalitarianism in the society. She evoked people to consider their profession as any other profession being practised. When prostitutes do not create any divide in their clients then why does society create one? She even revealed that because of these prostitutes' centres, there is less crime against women. The violence is less and the rape being attempted is less due to their existence. She makes them understand the relevance of prostitution. She even asks the government to support her and the girls in her area to get educated and to have basic rights. She urged us to not evacuate Kamathipura as it is feeding around 400 hungry stomachs and the count is growing. She was an icon of feminism and power. She asked for the cerebral equality of the women under her. Under her rule, Kamathipura flourished and became a happy place for the girls. She even made sure that the daughters of the prostitute should not carry the burden of their mothers. They should have their hopes, own dreams and own land where they can happily venture. In this movie, the character of

Gangubai is celebrated but Kamathipura is shown in a new light. The ministers came to ask for the vote which signifies the power and position of this area. It was connected to Mafia Kings, the regulation of the economy and the association with the power. The list gets longer in the reign of Gangubai and she is still being praised in those areas.

### Conclusion

Bollywood has always favoured the minorities and changed the thoughts of the generations. They portray the stark realities, uncover the crooked truths and demean the dirt of the society. It showed the courtesans, sex workers, and prostitutes and became their mouthpiece in their struggle against the unfair treatment of women. However, things have still not changed much. As we read Saadat Hasan Manto who reflected the power of these minorities was still charged for obscenity because of this representation. Since when did they become a minority and the community outcasted by the society?

The first mention of prostitute is in Rigveda where the illicit lover Jara and Jatini is mentioned who was the male and female lover of the married spouse. In the Vedic age too the love outside the wedlock was familiar and rigorously practiced. The idea of prostitution is older than the one who is critiquing it now. With time these prostitutes or the whole act saw its phases. While some were showered with gold and land, some were even asked to move into their own home and some were unlucky to be brutally treated. Even the people in power never chose to listen to them. The voices of these people got muted more often than what we believed.

Many prostitute centres operate regularly and every day they are demeaned for the work they do. Even if they opt to move out, they are not allowed. They are judged by their dark past. And with age, they are left to die. Government too are not able to provide security and basic needs. When the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* was released, many reporters went to that place. They showed us how they are living in an area which is not receiving the proper amount of water, nor their sanitation facilities are good. They are left to manage their problems on their own as nobody is there to listen to them. Finally, they retire to their abode and make things work. At least let these movies voice out their struggles. Let these movies represent a section of our society which gets perishes in the shadows which is unfair to humanity grounds. Let us hope for a better tomorrow for them

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