

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE SCATTER OF EMPIRE: PROSTITUTION, LAW, AND TROUBLE IN COLONIAL INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the troubled history of law and prostitution in colonial India from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century across contexts of statewide regulatory laws, cantonment codes, municipal rules, and border regimes. It explores how legislation on prostitution was translated from letter into practice, and crucially, how this process of translation was mediated, negotiated, and even appropriated by the targets of law—primarily subaltern Indian women—amid an inconsistent and dispersed everyday imperial state. In doing so, this study frames this history as one of routine disruption whereby a range of ordinary women and men confronted, stymied, and evaded laws around prostitution on the scattered ground of empire. Moreover, it pushes against a historiography on the colonial state, law, and gender in India that has broadly focused on governmental power and its mandate via legislation and codification. Instead, *The Scatter of Empire* foregrounds notions of trouble and disruption to present a new reading of colonial interventions into sexuality as they unfolded on the ground.

Drawing on a range of colonial correspondence and reports, alongside newspapers, institutional records, and previously unexplored oral histories, this dissertation is structured around four episodic moments of legislative and regulatory interventions—evasion, reform, ‘traffic,’ and memory—that are a means to examining creative confrontations with law and empire among various groups of troubling agents. These include subaltern Indian women engaged in prostitution, who appear across this dissertation in terms of their popular legal knowledge, jurisdictional shifting, filing of petitions, evading of surveillance, and refusals to be relocated in the face of multiple scales of coercive measures that placed capacious categories of criminality over them. French women similarly emerge in this dissertation as disruptors of late

colonial border regimes as they strategized their travels to India to engage in sex work from the point of visa applications to the point of border-crossing into British jurisdiction. British soldiers, on the other hand, appear in this dissertation situated differently to trouble, for they did not trouble law and regulations as much as they troubled empire's account of itself through oral histories after the end of empire, which revealed elaborate official worlds of sexual commerce that military authorities had consistently denied during the twentieth century.

This dissertation ultimately makes two key arguments: one, that trouble, challenge, and confrontation—including acts of evading arrest, refusing orders, contesting expulsions, and negotiating borders—characterized encounters with colonial laws on prostitution, even when the threat of coercion, discipline, and punitive action was on the cards. And two, that reading colonial projects to regulate gender and sexuality, and more generally the lives of colonial subjects, in terms of the trouble and confrontation they provoked presents a vastly different reading of empire—one where empire is not a homogenizing and unchallenged force from above, but instead a 'scatter' of legal enforcement, inconsistent communication, clashing laws, and dueling narratives on the ground below. The case for centering the scatter in empire is to, in one sense, puncture the self-regard of empire in imperial histories, and in another, to highlight the trouble, turbulence, and fragility that marked its daily workings.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMSH: Papers of the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene, Women's Library

BL: British Library, London

BPA: Balochistan Provincial Archives, Quetta

DSA: Delhi State Archives, New Delhi

IOR: India Office Records, British Library

IWM: Imperial War Museum, London

LON: League of Nations Archive, Geneva

Mss. Eur.: European Manuscripts, British Library

NAI: National Archives of India, New Delhi

NAM: National Army Museum, London

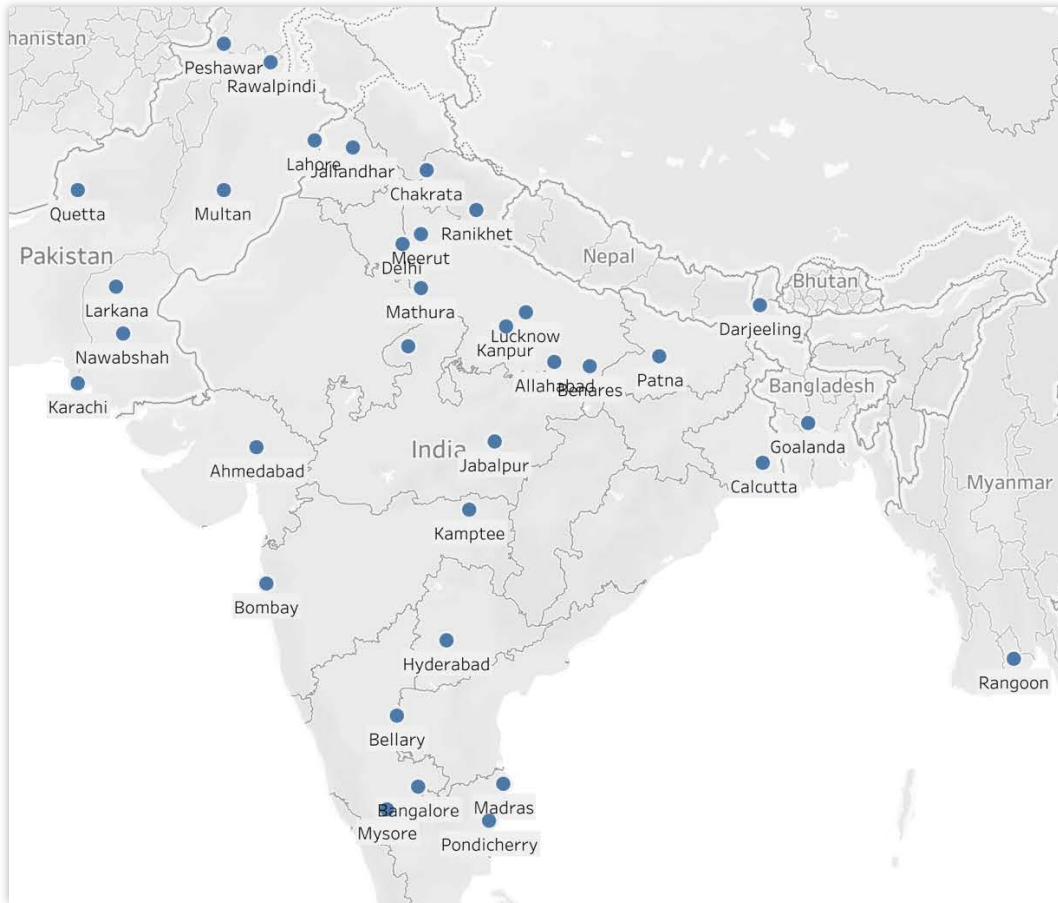
PPA: Punjab Provincial Archives, Lahore

SPA: Sindh Provincial Archives, Karachi

SSC: SOAS Special Collections, London

WL: Women's Library, London School of Economics

## MAP OF LOCATIONS



**Map 0.1** Selected locations in colonial India mentioned in this dissertation. Map by author.

## INTRODUCTION

### PROSTITUTION AND THE GROUND OF EMPIRE

Sometime in 1870, a woman named Gangamani walked into a hospital in Chitpur in north Calcutta. As a woman in possession of a prostitute's registration ticket under the newly implemented Contagious Diseases Act (CDA)—the legislation behind the largest scale of regulating prostitution in colonial India—, Gangamani was attending hospital for a biweekly medical exam to detect venereal diseases.<sup>1</sup> She presented the ticket to the examining doctor, who detected no disease and duly stamped it to indicate so. The routine task was complete and Gangamani left the premises. But the following day, a local inspector received a tip off. Gangamani had attended the medical exam with a registration ticket belonging to another woman, Kadu, who was suffering from a venereal infection, and had sent Gangamani in her place to avoid being admitted to hospital. The police arrested both women. Kadu's punishment was the medical examination she so dreaded. But Gangamani was let go without charges. There was no penalty for impersonation under the CDA.

Some decades later in 1893, this time in Meerut in north India, Munni found herself paying the price for refusing to attend a similar medical examination. The CDA had by now been struck down for years, but military authorities across India found legal backdoors to smuggle stealth systems for the detection of venereal diseases under the pretense of voluntary participation—opting to regulate laboring Indian women residing within cantonments in the name of protecting the health of British soldiers. Munni, however, refused to attend a medical exam as a condition of her residence, and in this instance, she could not be made to attend. But

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix B: Statement of women and others on various matters connected with the working of Act XIV, No. 6, IOR/P/674, 176.

authorities could take measures to make her life difficult. It was hardly a coincidence that around the same time, Munni was slapped with a charge of ‘indecent exposure’ for being seen in public consorting with a soldier.<sup>2</sup> She was imprisoned for eight days. Irrespective of the official claim, Munni was punished for exercising her right to refusal.

Indian women like Munni may have been under the thumb of harsher jurisdiction inside military cantonments, but as women engaged in prostitution increasingly shifted to cities, they found more pathways to defy authorities within expansive municipal limits. Meanwhile, wartime and interwar contexts gave way to stricter measures to combat the international movements of foreign women to engage in prostitution and made new limits out of land borders. Atia, a Baghdadi woman who had resided in Quetta for seven years, received an order of deportation in October 1915, as authorities worried that the presence of certain foreign prostitutes might invite spies to enter India under the guise of being pimps.<sup>3</sup> Atia was deported via Karachi, which, like other port cities in the twentieth century, became a site of contested removal as well as entry. It was here that the Frenchwoman B. D. Andreani would in 1937 convince border agents at the airport to allow her to enter British India without a valid visa under the ruse that she was joining her husband in French Pondicherry.<sup>4</sup> Her actual intention was to travel to Bombay where she had sought income from sex work in the past.

Toward the end of empire in India, however, the government was decidedly less focused on the issue of prostitution. In 1946, a reply from the India Office to a letter from a prominent anti-vice campaigner on her continuing efforts to end stealth practices of regulated prostitution

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<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Special Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Working of the Cantonment Regulations regarding Infectious and Contagious Diseases* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1893), xxv.

<sup>3</sup> Superintendent Police, Quetta to Superintendent Police, Karachi, July 6, 1915, BPA/AGG-E/4314; Deportation Order for Atia d/o Maryam, October 28, 1915, BPA/AGG-E/4314. In this case, Arab and Turkish spies entering as pimps was of particular concern.

<sup>4</sup> Telegram from H. S. Stephenson to Chief Secy. to the Govt. of Sindh, August 20, 1937, NAI/HD-Political/17/116/1937. The airport at Karachi was the first commercial airport to open in colonial India in 1929.

for troops bluntly stated that there was “officially very little concern with this matter.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, the India Office was concerned enough to keep up certain imperial fictions, as they did mere months later when they responded to another inquiry, this time stating that official arrangements for prostitution were “without foundation.”<sup>6</sup> Such denials did little to stop former soldier David Lloyd Griffiths—stationed in India from 1938 to 1942—from recalling in an oral history interview in London in 1977 that he had to be dragged out of a regimental brothel in Lucknow because he had drunkenly stayed past curfew, or that he had intercourse with Indian women in cantonments toilets in the frontier outpost of Landi Kotal. A century on from when Indian women first crafted their acts of evasion under the CDA, and three decades after the end of empire in the Indian subcontinent, the colonial view of things from above continued to be troubled. That is, when they were seen from the ground below.

The encounter between prostitution and empire in India was shaped by, among other things, a complex set of colonial legal interventions. These included medical regulations, both stealth and overt, urban relocations and zoning, the suppression of brothels, and border-policing and visa adjudications. However, these interventions were rarely, if ever, free from the possibility of circumvention, contestation, and challenge. Indeed, where there was regulation, compulsion, policing, and silencing, there was also impersonation, refusal, negotiation, and testimony. Gangamani, Kadu, Munni, Atia, Andreani, and Griffiths may be separated by time, nationality, and the geographies of colonial India, but they all have one thing in common: they were troubling agents on the turbulent terrain of empire. Their capacity to cause trouble, however, was gendered and uneven. British soldiers like Griffiths hardly faced any punitive

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<sup>5</sup> P. J. Patrick, Whitehall to Meliscent Shephard, AMSH, January 30, 1946, IOR/L/PJ/10036. The India Office in Whitehall was a department set up to oversee the administration of colonial India from London.

<sup>6</sup> H. E. Davies, Whitehall to A. Jeans Courtney, April 12, 1946, IOR/L/MIL/13899.

action for overriding regulations around prostitution, which were often in place for their benefit, while Indian and foreign women, but in particular, subaltern Indian women, had to build their capacity to trouble imperial projects. They did so at greater risk by acquiring popular legal knowledge, filing petitions, networking and coordinating, and moving strategically. Such capacity-building, and of course, the ability to act on it, evokes what Antoinette Burton has called “the disruptive work of the colonial subject.”<sup>7</sup> It is this work of disruption that lies at the core of the story this dissertation tells—the story of how a range of ordinary actors in colonial India confronted, stymied, and evaded laws around prostitution on the scattered ground of empire.

*The Scatter of Empire* is in the broadest sense a history of the creative confrontations that characterized the troubled life of law and prostitution in colonial India from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century (c. 1860-1940). But more specifically, its focus is on a subset of troubling agents, primarily the wide-ranging groups of women engaged in prostitution in India—brothel workers, prostitutes, and other laboring women—as well as those subject to laws on prostitution independent of their proximity to sex work—grasscutters, factory workers, and foreign migrant women, among others. However, this dissertation is not strictly a history of prostitution. Rather, it is a history of how legislation concerning prostitution, whether statewide regulations, cantonment codes, municipal acts, or passport rules, was translated from letter into practice, and crucially, how this process of translation was mediated, negotiated, and even appropriated by the targeted women amid an inconsistent and dispersed everyday state. This dissertation puts the disruption of these agents in the lead of understanding laws on prostitution

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<sup>7</sup> Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.

and argues that such an approach paints a drastically different view of the colonial policing of sexuality as it unfolded across the geographies of colonial India.

‘Trouble’ is a key theme in this study. The idea of trouble as the constitutive category of the British Empire has most notably been put forward by Antoinette Burton, who has called for historians to move away from a framework of ascendant imperialism and instead read empire in terms of the “tenuous hold it had on colonial subjects during its troubled life.”<sup>8</sup> This does not entail, as the author cautions, to take empire’s instability as powerlessness, or to mitigate the obvious durability of empire, but rather to recognize trouble as an everyday facet of imperial experience. To make this case, Burton states, is “to argue that empire was...constituted by the very trouble its efforts and practices provoked.”<sup>9</sup> This idea of a routinely troubled colonial state, however, is not new. The subaltern turn in modern South Asian historiography originally pushed the tradition of ‘history from below’ to the forefront of colonial history by placing the revolts and uprisings of peasant communities at the center of understanding relations between the dominant and dominated.<sup>10</sup> Yet, where subaltern histories were primarily concerned with uncovering modalities of power, the category of ‘trouble’ offers something new: the ability to recognize that confrontations provoked by imperial agendas could be characteristic of how colonial power worked *even if* coercion succeeded more often than not. And as colonial historians have more

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<sup>8</sup> Burton, *Trouble with Empire*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Burton, *Trouble with Empire*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> The Subaltern Studies Collective emerged in 1982 and directly engaged with the Cambridge and Marxist traditions of South Asian historiography. Many historians from the collective worked with concepts of ‘peasant-consciousness’ and its logics to contest universalist notions of capitalist development. For key works within the collective, see: Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983); Shahid Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretations of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 66-111; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Also see *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, ed. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). The essays in this volume sought to establish an everydayness to resistance differently from the emphasis on peasants, revolts, and underclasses in subaltern history.



generally articulated, despite the presumptuousness of laws and codes, “colonial rule remained a work in progress right to the end.”<sup>11</sup>

Why, then, should trouble become relevant to a history situated at the intersection of law and prostitution in colonial India? For one, because law and its limits have tended to be read as indicative of trouble in empire—the introduction of legislation on prostitution was only one among numerous colonial projects to exert more control over populations and guard against gender, racial, and sexual ‘disorder.’<sup>12</sup> But more importantly, because it is impossible to write a history of law and prostitution without recognizing the degree to which these laws were breached across a range of everyday encounters. Just as Kadu refused to attend an invasive medical exam in Calcutta in 1870, so too did Munni refuse the same in Meerut in 1893. And just as Gangamani impersonated another to lead authorities astray in 1870, Andreani similarly took on a persona that was not hers to gain entry into India in 1937. In the 1920s, women in Delhi’s commercial areas used marriage contracts to resist the municipal policies of zoning prostitutes out of their neighborhoods, much like women in the city had done during the 1880s to have their names struck off from a register of prostitutes. The archives on law and prostitution in this regard not only become archives of colonial fragility and trouble, but they also become archives of

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<sup>11</sup> William B. Taylor, *Fugitive Freedom: The Improbable Lives of Two Impostors in Late Colonial Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 4. Sean McEnroe (2020, 4) also writes: “Despite the arrogance of colonial maps and flags, it is far from easy to describe how empires were built, controlled, and bounded.” See McEnroe, *A Troubled Marriage: Indigenous Elites of the Colonial Americas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Other significant colonial interventions into gender and sexuality in the late nineteenth century included The Infanticide Act of 1870 and the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (the latter criminalized a range of communities, including the transgender community of *hijras*). On these topics, see Satadru Sen, “The Savage Family: Colonialism and Female Infanticide in Nineteenth Century India,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14(2002): 53-79; Padma Anagol, “The Emergence of the Female Criminal in India: Infanticide and Survival Under the Raj,” *History Workshop Journal* 53(2002): 73-93; Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality, and Colonialism in South Asia* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

subaltern agency among Indian women.<sup>13</sup> What emerges from this history is that state, provincial, and local laws to intervene into the worlds of sexual commerce were everywhere troubled by disruptions on the ground of empire.

Historians of colonial India have extensively addressed issues of legislation and legal codification, while delving to a lesser degree into case law and the procedure of the court.<sup>14</sup> The undoubtedly rich literature on prostitution in colonial India has paid particular attention to governance and legislation as well as the imperial ideologies of codification. In this literature, laws concerning prostitution have been understood as a vehicle for a rule of racial difference by hardening the boundary between colonizer and colonized,<sup>15</sup> a means to translate medical knowledge into colonial power,<sup>16</sup> an act of homogenizing and taxonomizing Indian women,<sup>17</sup> a mode of exclusionary urban governance,<sup>18</sup> an unwitting site of welfare,<sup>19</sup> and a contentious guise

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<sup>13</sup> This claim contrasts with the notion of law and its discourse as obscuring female agency, as put forward in Ranajit Guha, "Chandra's Death," in *Subaltern Studies V*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135-165. Guha famously referred to law at the 'state's emissary' in this essay.

<sup>14</sup> Michael R. Anderson, "Classifications and Coercions: Themes in South Asian Legal Studies in the 1980s," *South Asian Research* 10 (1990): 158-77; Elizabeth Kolsky, "Codification and the Rule of Colonial Difference: Criminal Procedure in British India," *Law and History Review* 23(2005): 631-83; Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and Their Critics, 1793-1905* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980); Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998); Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State, Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); D.M. Peers, "Soldiers, Surgeons and the Campaigns to Combat Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Colonial India, 1805-1860," *Medical History* 42(1998): 137-60.

<sup>17</sup> Erica Wald, "From *begums* and *bibis* to abandoned females and idle women: sexual relationships, venereal disease and the redefinition of prostitution in early nineteenth-century India," *Indian Economic Social History Review* 46(2005): 5-25; Kay K. Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute: A History of the Changing Legal Status of Devadasis in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003); Judy Whitehead, "Bodies Clean and Unclean: Prostitution, Sanitary Legislation, and Respectable Femininity in Colonial North India," *Gender and History* 7(1995): 41-63; Durba Mitra, *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Legg, *Prostitution and the Ends of Empire: Scale, Governmentalities, and Interwar India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); also see Philip Howell, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Hodges, "'Looting' the Lock Hospital in Colonial Madras in the Famine Years of the 1870s," *Social History of Medicine* 18(2005): 379-398.

for social reform.<sup>20</sup> The question of how laws on prostitution worked, how they were mediated and thwarted, and what this might tell us about the primarily Indian and foreign women they targeted have received considerably less attention.<sup>21</sup> Radha Kumar’s apt observation that in much of the literature on colonial law in South Asia “law enforces itself” is just as relevant with respect to the historiography on prostitution.<sup>22</sup>

Where scholarship on colonial law in India has examined how local agents strategized in relation to legal knowledge and its ambiguities—what Lauren Benton has usefully termed ‘jurisdictional jockeying’—the focus is overwhelmingly on litigation and personal law rather than everyday acts.<sup>23</sup> This dissertation builds on this approach to colonial law, in that it traces the translation of law into practice through petitions, complaints, and criminal cases—the formal instruments of legal procedure. However, it also breaks new ground by foregrounding everyday interpretive acts of women informed by legal knowledge—the quotidian practice of law *beyond* the courtroom—, such as maneuvering to elude surveillance in public spaces, confronting law enforcement at the point of arrest or questioning, and seeking legal exemption through informal negotiations and discussions.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 26-51.

<sup>21</sup> Exceptions include Legg, *Ends of Empire*; Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*; Hodges, “‘Looting’ the Lock Hospital.” Recent work has also addressed this neglect from perspectives of everyday policing, see Radha Kumar, *Police Matters: The Everyday State and Caste Politics, 1900-1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Radha Kumar, “Police Matters: Law and Everyday Life in Rural Madras,” PhD diss. (Princeton University, 2015), 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> Lauren Benton, “Colonial Law and Cultural Difference: Jurisdictional Politics and the Formation of the Colonial State,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41(1999): 563-588; idem, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Also see “Forum: Maneuvering the Personal Law System in Colonial India” *Law and History Review* 28(2010): 973-1071 for a series of articles that apply Benton’s arguments on jurisdictional ambiguity to personal law litigation in colonial India.

<sup>24</sup> Rohit De (2018, 4) speaks of the “daily interpretive acts” of ordinary people with respect to the Indian Constitution, though his analysis limits itself to case law. See De, *The People’s Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

The trouble and disruption that characterized the daily workings of law are a core part of this dissertation, but they are also a means to addressing a broader question: how did empire really work? Scholarship on the everyday colonial state in India has characterized it in terms of quotidian disorder, misconduct, and violence enacted through the ambiguous working of the law.<sup>25</sup> Yet, these works have tended to focus not on the everyday acts that evaded or negotiated the law, but on the governance of illegality, or how authorities turned a blind eye to certain practices while policing others. In other words, the disorder that characterizes the everyday state is not brought about by subjects from below, but through government facilitation and tolerance.<sup>26</sup> This is a line of argumentation that this study departs from. Police corruption and misconduct are indeed part of the history of how various groups of Indian and foreign women who engaged in prostitution were able to evade or be unbothered by laws that criminalized them and their spaces of residence and work. However, centering the misconduct or indifference of law enforcement misses the broader picture, namely that the troubled nature of the everyday state, and of everyday empire, was shaped by acts: acts of women escaping from hospitals, illegally crossing borders, and refusing orders. When it came to legislating prostitution there can be no doubt that these acts carried consequences, yet their frequency tells us that there was a great deal more trouble in empire with respect to law and prostitution than has so far been addressed.

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<sup>25</sup> Notable works on colonial India in this regard are Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jonathan Saha, *Law, Disorder and the Colonial State: Corruption in Burma c. 1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Other relevant works include John Comaroff, "Colonialism, Culture, and the Law: A Foreword," *Law and Social Inquiry* 26(2001): 305–14; Timothy Mitchel, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85(1991): 77–96.

<sup>26</sup> The idea of illegality as state 'tolerance' is articulated in Saha, *Law, Disorder*, 5.

**ACT No. XIV OF 1868.**

PASSED BY THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF INDIA IN COUNCIL,  
(Received the assent of the Governor General on the 17th April 1868).

*An Act for the Prevention of certain Contagious Diseases.*

**Preamble.** WHEREAS it is expedient to provide for the better prevention of certain contagious diseases; It is hereby enacted as follows:—

*Preliminary.*

**Short title.** 1. This Act may be cited as “The Indian Contagious Diseases’ Act, 1868.”

**Interpretation-clause.** 2. In this Act—

“Magistrate” means any person exercising the powers of a Magistrate or of a Subordinate Magistrate of the first class, and includes a Magistrate of Police in a Presidency Town :

“Contagious disease.” “Contagious disease” means any contagious venereal disease :

“Brothel-keeper” means the occupier of any house, room or place to or in which women resort or are for the purpose of prostitution and every person managing or assisting in the management of any such house, room or place.

**Extent of Act.** 3. The places to which this Act applies shall be such places as the Local Government shall from time to time, with the previous sanction of the Governor General of India in Council, specify by notification in the official Gazette. The limits of such places shall, for the purposes of this Act, be such as are defined in the said notification, and may from time to time, with such sanction as aforesaid, be altered by a like notification.

*Unregistered*

PRICE FOUR ANNAS.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF  
AGRICULTURE, REVENUE AND COMMERCE, AUGUST 26, 1871.

Working of the Contagious Diseases Act. [Proc. No. 6.  
Index No. 12.]

APPENDIX C.

*Statement of arrests and prosecutions under the Contagious Diseases Act XIV of 1868 in the Town and Suburbs of Calcutta during the year 1870.*

Arrests of unregistered prostitutes under Section 5 of the Act.	Warned and discharged by the Magistrate after being registered after arrest.	Discharged by Commissioners for want of evidence.	BY MAGISTRATE.				Arrests for failing to attend at hospital, and for change of residence without notice.	Warned and discharged by Commissioner.	BY MAGISTRATE.			
			Imprisoned.	Fined.	Warned and discharged.	Acquitted.			Imprisoned.	Fined.	Warned and discharged.	Acquitted.
1,122	1,064	38	4	5	8	3	1,321	637	150	323	226	

17. A woman of Comartolly gives information to a Special Jemadar that Kadoo has venereal disease, and has sent Gungamonee to Chitpore Hospital with her ticket to be examined in her stead. The Jemadar arrests both women, and takes them to Chitpore, where Kadoo is found to be badly diseased. Gungamonee had attended and been examined for her on the previous day. They are brought before the Magistrate. Act XIV provides no punishment for false personation, and Gungamonee is discharged. Kadoo's arrest and enforced examination occurred on the day when, according to the previous entry, her regular inspection was due; she was not therefore on this evidence a defaulter. From her state, as I saw it, there was no doubt that the fraud had been successfully practised before, as the sore was of more than a fortnight's standing—no punishment was awarded.

**Figure 0.1** Three views of empire in the colonial archive. Left: the text of the Contagious Diseases Act. Top-right: the arrests of Indian women for violating the CDA in Calcutta in 1870. Bottom-right: two arrests in the Chitpur neighborhood of Calcutta—the story of Kadu and Gangamani. Sources: *A Collection of the Acts Passed by the Governor-General in Council, 1868* and IOR/P/674. Courtesy of the British Library. Compiled by author.

A helpful way to look at the question of how empire worked is to consider the contrasting views of empire offered from legislation to the point of its implementation (Figure 0.1).

Particularly relevant here are two strategies of reading the city developed by the cultural historian John F. Kasson: the bird’s-eye view and the mole’s-eye view.<sup>27</sup> The bird’s-eye view, as

<sup>27</sup> John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 72-73. Kasson uses examples of cities in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onward. I am grateful to Rochona Majumdar for drawing this work to my attention.

elaborated by Kasson, read the city from above as a “coherent structure, [with] its various parts subordinated to the whole,” and importantly, “flattered the beholders’ power.”<sup>28</sup> This view was similar to that taken by colonial legislation when it read empire from above as an abstraction onto which law could be coherently mapped and implemented. However, this bird’s-eye view of legislation largely overlooked the scattered ground on which the law would be implemented. This ground was instead seen through Kasson’s alternative strategy of reading the city through the mole’s-eye view—a view that disclosed a rather different reality of “fragmentation and...chaos” and shattered any sense of coherence from above.<sup>29</sup> If legislation channeled the self-regard of empire, then the acts of tumult and disruption that deflated this self-regard could only be seen through a strategy of reading empire from below.

It is pertinent to address that this study is not restricted to a single site or region in colonial India. Rather, it deliberately, and sometimes unsettlingly, moves across geographies from Quetta to Bombay to Pondicherry to Lucknow, among other locales. This is because this dissertation follows women as they moved between cities to avoid arrest, were expelled from cantonments, relocated from their places of residence, and gained entry to India at different ports—the breadth and extent of the challenges to empire’s interventions into prostitution cannot be captured in a study limited to a single region. Moreover, the remarkable similarity in strategic responses to laws across India, which indicates commonalities in information, knowledge, and collective tactics, is only seen when assuming this wider scale. Yet, while this dissertation covers large swathes of colonial India, it also remains attentive to the contingencies of place, whether in terms of urban configuration, environmental landscapes, or connectivity. My approach to place in one sense borrows from the methods of Philipp Howell and Stephen Legg, whereby both

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<sup>28</sup> Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 74.

scholars study the regulation of prostitution by going “‘in’ to the local spatial policing of sexuality and ‘out’ to the...imperial state.”<sup>30</sup> However, by moving ‘in’ to various locales via the everyday translation of law into practice, this dissertation also casts doubt on a neat bifurcation between locality/in and empire/out. It instead shows that acts on the ground that stymied or challenged colonial law are in of themselves a way of encountering empire. In other words, empire *was* the ground it was scattered across.

Further, this study considers a longer history of legislation on prostitution from the 1860s to the 1940s. With few exceptions, prostitution only sparingly emerges in the twentieth-century historiography of colonial India, with much of the considerable body of work on the topic focusing on the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> This is partly due to the fact that there is a marked visibility of prostitution in archival material from the period of regulation from the late-1860s to the early-1890s, whereby the topic populates the pages of civil and military proceedings, court judgements, petitions, newspapers, and annual reports. Beyond regulation, from the late-1890s onward, official archives become scattered with respect to the topic of prostitution, which travels between military, municipal, and international records, as well as literary, personal, and oral material. The women who fell within the purview of these laws appear, disappear, and re-appear in these subsets of the archive at different times. British soldiers, on the other hand, never stray too far from the proximity of prostitution within military records, given that authorities retained an interest in knowing the rates at which they were diagnosed with venereal diseases.<sup>32</sup> Covering

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<sup>30</sup> Legg, *Ends of Empire*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Notable exceptions are Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*; Legg, *Ends of Empire*; idem, “Stimulation, Segregation and Scandal: Geographies of Prostitution Regulation in British India, between Registration (1888) and Suppression (1923)” *Modern Asian Studies* 46(2012): 1459-1505. Legg in particular is notable for offering an explanation for how prostitution went from being a problem within the cantonment to becoming a problem within the city at the turn of the century, and how this shaped future legal landscapes.

<sup>32</sup> There is little mention in the archives of venereal diseases among the Indian civil population in the nineteenth century, as it exclusively appears as a military issue in the archive. It was only from the 1920s onward that venereal disease emerged as public health issue beyond military concern. See Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 84.

the troubled life of laws governing prostitution from the nineteenth to the twentieth century requires understanding what shaped them in the first place. The following sections offer an overview of this history as it organizes the chapters of this dissertation, while also elaborating on the themes and interventions outlined above.

### **Colonialism, Legislation, and Prostitution**

The period of regulation that began in the 1860s via the Cantonment and Contagious Diseases Acts is the most studied imperial encounter with prostitution in colonial India.<sup>33</sup> Yet, it was by no means the first significant attempt at legislating and codifying practices of medically examining Indian women for venereal diseases. A number of scholars have shown that the medical infrastructure of regulation that underpinned the CDA had originally been developed during an earlier period of regulating prostitution from 1805 onward in the three Presidencies established by the East India Company.<sup>34</sup> With European troop strength averaging at around 6,000 in the first decade of the nineteenth century and steadily rising, military officials became increasingly alarmed at the high incidence of venereal disease among the soldiers.<sup>35</sup> The early colonial understanding of the matter was no different from what would follow later in the nineteenth century: that VD rates should be curbed by establishing institutes for examining the Indian women who were, without question, transmitters of the disease. The institute of the lock hospital,

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<sup>33</sup> See n15-17 above. The most foundational and pathbreaking works in this regard include Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class*; Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*.

<sup>34</sup> Notable works on the earlier system of regulation include Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India, 1780-1868* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); M. Satish Kumar, "'Oriental Sore' or 'Public Nuisance': The Regulation of Prostitution in Colonial India, 1805-1889," in *(Dis)Placing Empire: Renegotiating British Colonial Geographies*, eds. L. J. Proudfoot and M. M. Roche (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 155-174; Peers, "Soldiers, Surgeons and Sexuality Transmitted Diseases."

<sup>35</sup> Letter from the medical board on the increase of venereal disease in HM's Regiments, 6 Madras Military Consultations, October-November 1838, IOR/P/267/15/107. Excerpted in Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*, 67. The term 'European troops' is sometimes used synonymously with 'British troops,' in this dissertation as both Irish and British men were stationed in India.



where registered women would be subject to unwanted medical exams to detect disease, was first developed in India under these circumstances. In Madras, there was an operating lock hospital for each of the 17 garrisons and cantonments by 1805.<sup>36</sup>

Erica Wald has contended that we cannot properly understand the measures of control instituted in the late nineteenth century without addressing these earlier arrangements. After all, this was the first systematic legal encounter between colonialism and prostitution in India. However, even though medical institutions, surveillance techniques, and even forms of evasion and non-compliance among the targeted women carried considerable similarities between the systems, the scale at which the later legislation was implemented meaningfully distinguishes it from the earlier period. Kenneth Ballhatchet has also argued that the new system was harsher than the one it followed.<sup>37</sup> The reintroduction of regulation via a combination of cantonment regulations and the CDA in 1864 and 1868, respectively, placed the three Presidency towns of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, and close to 50 cantonment areas under the new jurisdiction of regulation. These cantonments housed regiments in permanent barracks, but the areas around them also emerged as commercial centers with marketplaces and opportunities for laboring work, along with provisions for housing women engaged in prostitution in official brothels or *chaklas*.<sup>38</sup> With a significantly larger troop strength of close to 70,000 British soldiers for whose primary benefit the legislation was implemented, tens of thousands of Indian women were now vulnerable and liable to be registered and examined as ‘prostitutes.’

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<sup>36</sup> Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*, 67. See 54-65 for a concise summary of early experimentation with lock hospitals. The earlier system was officially abolished in 1831, but authorities re-established the hospitals at certain stations throughout the 1840s and 1850s. See Kumar, “‘Oriental Sore,’” 163.

<sup>37</sup> Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 33. On the growth of cantonments in India, see T. Jacob, *Cantonments in India: Evolution and Growth* (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1994).

Chapter 1, ‘Evasion,’ however, shows that this wider net of surveillance would provoke more widespread and elaborate methods of disrupting the law. Punitive legislation such as the CDA had to pass through many corridors before it could reach its target, leaving room for it to be intercepted if not evaded by those targets. There was, on the one hand, the text of the law, which stated that “no woman should carry on the business of a common prostitute...without having...evidence of registration.”<sup>39</sup> This evidence was the ticket that Gangamani carried with her into the lock hospital at Chitpur. But on the other hand, there were the everyday interpretive acts by women who took advantage of the legal ambiguity around the term ‘common prostitute.’ There were two key roads for women contesting the legal category of ‘prostitute’: women who outright claimed the label was false and that they did not engage in sexual commerce, and women who argued that the term ‘common prostitute’ within the meaning of the law did not apply to all women engaged in prostitution. Among these women, some reasoned with law enforcement, medical officers, or CDA superintendents based on their own legal knowledge, while others litigated the matter in civil courts for formal adjudication.

Knowledge of the law was also the basis of navigating the scattered and discontinuous landscapes of regulation. Uneven geographies of implementation brought about a range of responses through movement, whether collective movements via railways to areas beyond the jurisdiction of regulation—‘jurisdictional jockeying’ via big technologies—, or strategic navigations of areas subject to regulation through knowledge of the surrounding topography.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, exploring these aspects of how Indian women negotiated their way through and around

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<sup>39</sup> Act XIV of 1868, *A Collection of the Act Passed by the Governor General of India in Council in the Year 1868* (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1868).

<sup>40</sup> This use of mobility bears some parallel with the notion of ‘fugitivity’ as it appears in the history of slavery in the United States. For instance, Tamika K. Nunley (2021) shows how enslaved black women drew on their knowledge of laws and geographies to escape from their oppression and navigate the urban spaces of Washington D. C after their escapes. See Nunley, *At the Threshold of Liberty: Women, Slavery, and Shifting Identities in Washington D. C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), esp. 40-69.

the law also brings completely new elements to this history: the technologies of mobility and the environments of evasion. Much in line with Elizabeth Kolsky's observation that law could provide a language and method for interaction and exchange between colonizer and colonized, the period of regulation was arguably one of the first instances when the imposition of a capacious category of criminality compelled significant numbers of subaltern Indian women to engage seriously with the procedure of the law.<sup>41</sup>

Despite these significant and widespread responses from a range of Indian women, the early historiography of the colonial regulation of prostitution placed a heavy emphasis on race.<sup>42</sup> Philippa Levine's comparative imperial history of the CDA drew critical distinctions between colony and metropole and argued that colonial regulation was "the racial grammar by which colonial difference was self-consciously punctuated."<sup>43</sup> The author argued that race was key to medical understandings of venereal disease that presented interracial sexual mixing as uniquely dangerous, as well as in colonial attempts to segregate brothels for British men—attempts that routinely failed on the ground. In India, authorities did little to limit the mobility of British soldiers in visiting urban brothels, yet, the appearance of 'racial quarantining,' according to Levine, remained key to colonial governance.<sup>44</sup>

However, later histories have pushed against the notion that race was central to every aspect of colonial regulation, and instead attempted to, put regulation in its 'place' by focusing

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Kolsky, "Introduction to 'Maneuvering the Personal Law System in Colonial India,'" *Law and History Review* 28(2010): 974-975. Other instances included the criminalizing of infanticide, feticide, and rape via the Indian Penal Code of 1860. It is worth noting that the IPC also made acts of selling and buying girls for prostitution illegal.

<sup>42</sup> Ballhatchet understood the matter at the intersection of race and class, arguing that short-term sexual relations were facilitated between working-class British soldiers and Indian women, while relationships were discouraged between middle-class officers and Indian women. See Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class*, 162.

<sup>43</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 52. Levine's wide-spanning study covered India, Hong Kong, the Strait Settlements, and Queensland from the late nineteenth century to the First World War. Despite challenges to her homogenizing view of regulation, her work continues to be a commanding text on imperial histories of prostitution.

<sup>44</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 55.

on the governance of prostitution in terms of space and geography.<sup>45</sup> These histories tend to shift from focusing on the racial ideologies underpinning regulation to instead explore how laws on regulation worked on the ground. This scholarship importantly draws attention to understanding regulation as a faltering colonial project. Ashwini Tambe, for instance, refers to the CDA in Bombay as “a failed experiment,” while the category of ‘failure’ also emerges in other studies of regulation.<sup>46</sup> Sarah Hodges does not work with a notion of ‘failure,’ but instead shows how the institute of the lock hospital was repurposed by Indian women as a site of welfare in times of famine.<sup>47</sup> The trouble with regulation in empire thus becomes key to the literature. The question for this dissertation, however, is to focus on who was *causing* the trouble. While scholars may have brought to light women’s evasions via bribes, impersonation, absconding, and hiding, as well as their creative repurposing of the law, there is a sense in which ‘colonial governmentality’ is as implicated as the ingenuity of the agents.<sup>48</sup> Where this dissertation departs is that it centers women’s troublemaking in terms of their knowledge and networking around laws, rather than reading trouble in terms of inadequate policing.

In 1888, measures for the mandatory registration and examination of Indian women to detect venereal diseases were rescinded by order of British Parliament, which abolished key parts of cantonment legislation and the entirety of the CDA. 1888 on paper may appear to be a watershed moment in the colonial history of governing prostitution. It was regarded as the successful culmination of elaborate efforts by anti-regulation networks across the public spheres

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<sup>45</sup> Particularly notable are Howell, *Geographies of Regulation*; Stephen Legg, “Governing Prostitution in Colonial Delhi: From Cantonment Regulations to International Hygiene, 1864-1939” *Social History* 34(2009): 447-467; idem, “Stimulation, Segregation, and Scandal.”

<sup>46</sup> Notably: M Sundara Raj, *Prostitution in Madras: A Study in Historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Konark Publishing, 1993); Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*.

<sup>47</sup> Hodges, “‘Looting’ the Lock Hospital.”

<sup>48</sup> ‘Governmentality’—a term coined by Michel Foucault—here refers to the techniques or forms of modern governance to control and gather information on populations. This dissertation prefers the term ‘modes of governance’ or ‘governmental power’ over governmentality.

in metropolitan Britain and colonial India to force the colonial state's hand as more information about the dehumanizing language of regulation became publicly known.<sup>49</sup> But as many historians have shown, the legacy of repeal is complex. Ballhatchet has focused on the disarray of the new cantonment systems that supplanted the old; Burton has presented the repeal campaign as 'imperial feminism' in action; Levine has read the post-1888 decade as a 'constitutional crisis' between the India Office and the Military Department; Legg has re-assessed it as a 'spatial crisis' with respect to cantonments and municipalities.<sup>50</sup> Little, if anything, has been made of how groups of Indian women gained knowledge of and responded to the repeal of legislation that had for decades criminalized acts of refusal.

Chapter 2, 'Reform,' tells the history of this period of flux when legal systems of controlling women in cantonments and municipalities were rapidly changing and laws were becoming less transparent. The first part of this story takes place exclusively within cantonments. During the 1890s, there was heightened metropolitan scrutiny over military matters in India with respect to practices of medically examining women in cantonments, which shaped numerous amendments to cantonment legislation in ways that both expanded and narrowed the rights of these women at different times. For the military, the CDA repeal did not convey the untenability of regulation as much as it signaled that they had to cover their tracks more effectively. The central question that animates this chapter, then, is how women within cantonments came to know of and act upon their right to refusal when authorities were not forthcoming in making this information accessible.

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<sup>49</sup> The definitive moment of colonial 'scandal' in this period was in 1886 when a military memorandum from the Quartermaster-General in 1886 that ordered for 'sufficiently attractive' women to be registered for the soldiers. For an account of this episode, see Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class*, 55-58.

<sup>50</sup> Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class*, 68-97; Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 127-170; Philippa Levine, "Rereading the 1890s: Venereal Disease as 'Constitutional Crisis' in Britain and British India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55(1996): 585-612; Legg, "Stimulation, Segregation, and Scandal."

Registered women at certain stations were informed by medical officers about the repeal of registration, their right to refuse exams, and their continued access to medical treatment on a voluntary basis.<sup>51</sup> However, this knowledge was not evenly shared across all cantonments, due in part to haphazard communications, but especially to active efforts by military personnel and cantonment staff to ensure that knowledge of refusal did not reach women on the ground. The military hoped that ignorance of the law would win out over knowledge of the law. But individuals like Munni did act on their knowledge, and the attendance of women at hospitals almost always collectively ceased when information on refusal circulated. In such cases, magistrates, medical officers, and military police maneuvered to make the lives of women difficult and used the full scope of their jurisdiction to remove individual women from cantonment areas. Empire rarely shied away from speaking back to refusal.

However, as more women exited the harsher jurisdiction of the cantonment for the surrounding municipality, governing prostitution encountered new challenges. The second part of the story of chapter 2 concerns the new legal frontier of the municipality in the early twentieth century. Up until this point, prostitution had primarily been governed through military provisions, and while the CDA had indeed operated via local civilian institutions where it was implemented, its mandate was statewide.<sup>52</sup> The concern for authorities now was that women engaged in prostitution were becoming scattered and unknowable in municipal spaces despite residing in private homes in plain sight. For instance, when British soldiers became infected with venereal disease after visiting women in the city spaces around their stations, which they did more frequently through their widespread use of bicycles, ‘suspect women’ in the municipality

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<sup>51</sup> Cantonment hospitals for the exclusive treatment of venereal disease were temporarily renamed ‘Voluntary Venereal Hospitals’ between 1888 and 1890. Also see Raj, *Prostitution in Madras*, 153-157.

<sup>52</sup> The CDA was only implemented in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, and very briefly in Lucknow.

were often untraceable.<sup>53</sup> Even when soldiers knew the names of the women, there was no record of where they lived. From the expansive jurisdiction of the cantonment, women now took advantage of the expansive municipality under more lenient jurisdiction.

The key point here was that by pushing more and more Indian women who engaged in prostitution into the expansive and difficult-to-patrol spaces of the municipality, the colonial state had inadvertently relinquished a good part of their control. As Legg notes, the brothel in this time went from being a site of “visibility, knowledge, and security” to being a site of “risk, invisibility, and confusion.”<sup>54</sup> And Indian women, often reduced to a collective during this period with far fewer individual women mentioned in official correspondence, now had a new frontier to disrupt. Only that they would be joined by new groups of foreign women, especially European women, who would also trouble empire as their options for international mobility increased in the interwar years, and cross-border movements for engaging in prostitution landed on the colonial state’s radar.

### **Municipality, Migration, and Empire**

Between the 1890s and early 1900s, various pieces of municipal and police legislation were passed that shifted their target from ‘prostitutes’ to the spaces where women engaged in prostitution could reside and work. In the context of the First World War, wartime emergency measures were deployed to both shut down urban brothels, and to also remove ‘undesirable’ foreign women, as in the case of Atia who was deported to Basra. Laws that had been designed to remove persons from certain jurisdictions—foreigners’ legislation, passport laws, and frontier

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<sup>53</sup> On the advent of the bicycle and other small technologies in India, see David Arnold, *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India’s Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Legg, “Stimulation, Segregation, and Scandal,” 1504. Legg remains the only historian to have drawn the link from ‘cantonments to cities’ as the new frontier of prostitution governance in the early part of the twentieth century. Tambe also covers the shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, but jumps from the end of the CDA to the 1910s without addressing the crucial decades in between.

regulations—were increasingly deployed for the ends of removing women engaged in or suspected of engaging in prostitution. Municipal legislation, on the other hand, was not focused so much on expulsion as much as relocating prostitution away from plain sight. This involved issuing removal orders to women residing in commercial centers and zoning them to specific parts of the city—a governing mandate that scholars such as Tambe have argued gave rise to and shaped the red-light districts of today.<sup>55</sup>

In chapter 3, ‘Traffic,’ I focus on two groups of women navigating new measures to control prostitution: Indian women within municipalities who resided within or in close proximity to the spaces of sexual commerce, and French women travelling to India to engage in prostitution. Specifically, I examine two kinds of limits imposed on these women: the segregation and removal of Indian women from municipal jurisdiction, and the policing of French women crossing borders into the jurisdiction of British India.<sup>56</sup> It was the rhetoric of ‘traffic’ that justified the hardening of limits against both groups—as ‘immoral traffic’ within the municipality, and as the ‘traffic in women’ at the border.<sup>57</sup> This chapter does not narrate these limits in terms of the discourses of governance that shaped them, but keeping in line with the overarching theme of trouble across this dissertation, it evokes limits specifically to examine how they were foiled and breached across India.

However, placing limits was not the only emerging mode of governing prostitution. From the 1920s onward there was a series of provincial legislation passed across India that was directed at suppressing prostitution altogether: making brothel-keeping, public solicitation, living

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<sup>55</sup> Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, 58. Also Legg, *Ends of Empire*, 72. The red-light areas of Kamathipura in Bombay and GB Road in New Delhi, for instance, developed in relation to policies of segregation in the interwar period.

<sup>56</sup> I use the term ‘British India’ in this instance because it denotes a specific jurisdiction in relation to French women, as there were also French settlements spread discontinuously between British jurisdiction.

<sup>57</sup> The origins of the language of ‘traffic’ and its rhetorical purpose are discussed in chapter 3.



off earnings of prostitution, and leasing property for prostitution all illegal acts.<sup>58</sup> Notably, the criminality of living off income gained from prostitution did not refer to women, but to men, however, the outlawing of ‘public solicitation’ did specifically target women with a view to make them less visible.<sup>59</sup> Scholars such as Legg have cited these pieces of legislation to argue that in the 1920s, “the emphasis shifted decisively from toleration and segregation to abolition and suppression.”<sup>60</sup> I argue against such an airtight distinction between the two approaches, and instead articulate a legal paradigm of ‘removal/relocation,’ that looks more closely at how Indian women had to be offered alternative accommodation in order to be lawfully removed from the brothels in which they resided.<sup>61</sup> The shutting down of brothels, a suppressionist tactic, faced considerable challenge if relocation, a segregationist approach, was not possible. While moral panics around prostitution during this time did indeed mark a shift toward abolitionist discourse by discrediting ideas of relocating women, suppressionist laws more often clashed with segregationist approaches as opposed to supplanting them entirely.<sup>62</sup>

What, then, was distinctive about troubling limits in interwar India? On the one hand, Indian women engaged in prostitution in places like Delhi, Quetta, and Larkana had to resist the very act of being zoned within the limits of urban spaces, while on the other, French women entering the British jurisdiction of India had to breach the limits of borders and then avert removal from those borders. For Indian women, municipality-ordered evictions were primarily contested via civil petitions, though marriage contracts, lease documents, and lobbying city

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<sup>58</sup> Legg, *Ends of Empire*, 132. Notably, military cantonments also retained the authority to shut down brothels within their jurisdiction under Section 179 of the Cantonment Code (Act XV of 1910). Adjutant General, India to General Officers Commanding, August 2, 1918, IOR/L/MIL/7/13899.

<sup>59</sup> These were the clauses put forward in the Burma Suppression of Prostitution Act (1921). For a timeline of significant suppressionist legislation, see chapter 3, n16.

<sup>60</sup> Legg, *Ends of Empire*, 124.

<sup>61</sup> The Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act of 1923 was one such example that disallowed segregation in letter.

<sup>62</sup> For a history of how abolitionist discourses on prostitution in India developed against the murder of a brothel worker named Akootai in Bombay, see Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, 100-121.

administrators also played key roles in their resistance. Meanwhile, French women's strategies of disruption were shaped by the fact that, unlike other foreign women in India, they had access to distinct jurisdictions via the French settlements that they were free to enter.<sup>63</sup> French women who travelled to India to engage in sex work had to conceal their intentions at the point of their visa applications and at ports of entry, but their ability to use French jurisdiction to negotiate their way around British India meant that they were also subject to increased surveillance within British territory.

Tambe rightly argues that European brothels were subject to selective tolerance and 'coercive protection' by police authorities.<sup>64</sup> In Bombay and Calcutta, for instance, European brothels and their keepers often registered with the local police. However, we know far less about the acts and negotiations around border-crossing that shaped how European women, but especially French women with their jurisdictional flexibility, such as B.D. Andreani entered India in the first place. Turning an ear to the sounds of this disruption, then, requires shifting away from the mandates of governmental power. Chapter 3 also departs from the tendency among historians of migration to read the developing infrastructure of border policing as a pathway to the modern state, and instead foregrounds the chaos, scatter, and ill-disciplined nature of late colonial border regimes.<sup>65</sup> Beyond what historian Radhika Mongia evokes as the 'sovereign power' of migration bureaucracies, I instead map patterns of mobility that

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<sup>63</sup> The French settlements/municipalities included: Pondicherry, Karaikal, Chandannager, Mahé, and Yanam.

<sup>64</sup> On 'coercive protection,' see Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, 63-68. Also see Tambe, "The Elusive Ingénue: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of European Prostitution in Colonial Bombay," *Gender and Society* 19(2005): 160-179.

<sup>65</sup> Radhika Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Mongia reads migration regimes as a route to the development of the modern state and deploys Foucauldian concepts of biopower, discipline, and sovereign power to understand the development of border bureaucracies. Radhika Singha (2013) has read the mode of introducing passports in India as a form of racial control over Indian migration. See Singha, "The Great War and a 'Proper' Passport for the Colony: Border-Crossing in British India, c.1882-1922," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50(2013): 289-315.

circumvented these bureaucracies similar to how Liat Kozma does for Eastern European women travelling to the Mediterranean.<sup>66</sup>

Approaches to governing prostitution in the interwar and late colonial period had crucially been shaped by tactics of scale, to use language deployed by Legg. At the municipal and provincial levels, this was now the legislative domain of local self-government, whereas borders were policed by the more visible structures of empire, such as the intelligence bureau, passport consuls, and the senior administration of provincial governments. Yet, one domain from where prostitution never quite vanished was the military. By the mid-twentieth century, the context of the Second World War, influxes of soldiers, and the crisis of the Bengal Famine reignited familiar conflicts, namely, inquiries as to whether the military was organizing regimental brothels for the troops through medical examinations of Indian women.<sup>67</sup> The official position in the twentieth century had more or less always been the same: the military did not arrange any brothels for troops and did not compel any Indian women to attend examinations. But when empire departed the Indian subcontinent, its memory would travel back to Britain, where former soldiers would eventually go on the record about those official worlds of sexual commerce that the military had denied existed for much of the twentieth century.

The final chapter of this dissertation, 'Memory,' jumps a few decades ahead in time, and asks what the encounter between empire and prostitution looks like when former soldiers tried to remember it after the end of empire through oral interviews. Unlike previous chapters, chapter 4 does not contend with a core set of legislative interventions. For one, soldiers' experiences in India were more often characterized by impunity in the face of the law than ever being subject to

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<sup>66</sup> Liat Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> Concerns from imperial civil society about rises in prostitution, especially child prostitution, during the Bengal Famine are articulated in L/PJ/7/5853/File 3251.

it. But even if soldiers were not subject to criminal law, they were subject to cantonment regulations, lectures, and information on venereal diseases, and caused authorities much trouble when they tended to disregard official guidance about their sex lives. While this chapter departs from the everyday practices of legislation and the jurisdictional creativity of agents, it does follow the worlds of sexual commerce on the ground of empire—whether organized regimental brothels, informal prostitution within barracks, or soldiers visiting urban spaces of sex work.<sup>68</sup>

On the one hand, soldiers' descriptions of these sites help us understand how colonial dynamics shaped their everyday encounters with prostitution. But perhaps more pertinently for the larger arc of this dissertation, these oral histories—what soldiers remembered—also disrupt empire's record. The 'scandals' of regulation in the late nineteenth century were an emblematic moment that only came to be understood as scandal after investigations into military impropriety were completed.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the language of requiring 'sufficiently attractive' women to be present in brothels for British soldiers had been regarded as so 'scandalous' that it locked the military in a lengthy political battle with repeal campaigners and British parliamentarians.<sup>70</sup> However, it was hardly scandalous when former servicemen provided details of waiting in line for their turn in front of military-run brothels, when they described soldiers gaming systems to identify women who infected them, when they used pejorative language when remembering Indian women, or as Griffiths attested to, had intercourse with laboring women via informal arrangements of sex work in cantonment toilets. There could be no more 'scandal' because there was no fallacy of colonial hegemony left to rattle. But while the information within these oral histories no longer carried

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<sup>68</sup> I take an 'on the ground' approach to examining soldiers' perspectives in this chapter similar to the approach taken in Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> This idea of 'scandal' is articulated in Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 29.

<sup>70</sup> See n49 above. Also, Levine, "Venereal Disease as 'Constitutional Crisis.'"

the possibility of scandal as it would have during empire's tenure, these histories still carried within them the potential to trouble empire's account of itself. The disruptive work of troubling empire cut across themes of evasion, reform, and 'traffic,' but in this instance, memories that revealed what official accounts outright denied turned remembering into an act of troubling.

### **Working in and with the Colonial Archive**

It may seem counterintuitive to look for the agency of women engaged in prostitution in official records that have been shaped to record the scale of their regulation, examination, relocation, and expulsion. Yet, the vast majority of this dissertation has been written using colonial and institutional sources. While the use of government and colonial archives have been indispensable for writing social and legal histories of prostitution, they do not come without difficulties in terms of what is visible and what is silenced.<sup>71</sup> As Durba Mitra has recently cautioned, recovering prostitutes as actors through accounts of the "legal regulation of commercial sex...[tells us] little about the vast array of people, forms of labor, and social practices encompassed by the concept of the prostitute."<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Mitra's intervention into the 'definitional fluidity' of prostitute as a concept is a clarion reminder to not take colonial taxonomies at face value, and to recognize that reading women's diverse engagement with sexual commerce through colonial sources alone is "limited and distorted by an archive that presents [these] women solely through their proximity to prostitution."<sup>73</sup> It is largely due to Mitra's timely challenge to historians that this dissertation makes generous use of phrases such as "women

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<sup>71</sup> Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality," *The American Archivist* 57(1994): 514-527.

<sup>72</sup> Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*, 4-5.

<sup>73</sup> Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*, 78.

engaged in prostitution/sex work/sexual commerce” in order to avoid excessively minimizing them via the term ‘prostitute.’<sup>74</sup>

Yet, there is also a sense in which Mitra underestimates the complexity of the colonial archive. It is of course the case that women emerge in relation to their proximity to prostitution in correspondence that is, after all, concerned with the working of legislation on prostitution. But even within this correspondence, the categories of *naikeens*, courtesans, performing women, cantonment workers, mistresses, and kept women all emerge differently situated in relation to prostitution, even if we grant that these are already filtered down categories. Nonetheless, Mitra’s recasting of ‘prostitute’ as a concept history of deviance asks the crucial question of how women that appear in correspondence on law, disease, and trafficking are ‘marked’ as prostitutes before they enter the archive. The relevant question for this dissertation, however, is how should historians engage with the colonial archive on prostitution when their primary focus lies elsewhere from recovering its complex social worlds?

In this regard, there is an unevenness that operates through this dissertation, which is directly shaped by the scattered archives and collections at my disposal. In terms of the visibility of actors who caused trouble, subaltern Indian women go from being hyper visible in chapter 1, to being largely a collective in chapter 2, to a combination of collective and individual stories in chapter 3, to being either absent or unnamed passive agents in chapter 4—the latter is the only chapter to have a core archive not comprised by government sources (Figure 0.2). French women, on the other hand, are particularly visible in chapter 3 as are British soldiers in chapter 4.

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<sup>74</sup> In this dissertation, I use the terms ‘prostitution’ and ‘sex work’ interchangeably while using ‘sexual commerce’ when I am referring more generally to spaces and places where prostitution takes place. My use of the term ‘sex work’ in historical context is informed by the fact that many of the women who appear in the official correspondence on prostitution likely engaged in prostitution alongside other forms of labor as well, yet the adjective ‘sex worker’ can also limit actors to this labor. This dissertation assumes a heteronormative framework for prostitution because the laws considered here explicitly targeted heterosexual prostitution above all else.

The varying degrees of visibility across time and space also allude to an uneven subalternity. I work with a notion of ‘subaltern’ similar to that developed by Gail Hershatter who conceives of ‘nested’ subalternity defined relationally.<sup>75</sup> In this way, Indian women speaking back to the law through petitions and French women crossing borders without visas can both read as acts of subaltern trouble, yet, both sets of agents by no means encompass the category of ‘subaltern’ in even ways.

<b>Evasion</b>	<b>Reform</b>	<b>‘Traffic’</b>	<b>Memory</b>
Kusum	Munni	Mst. Tajo	David Lloyd Griffiths
Attor	Kalia	Mst. Zainab	E. S. Humphries
Gangamani	Husaini	Angele Coves	Ed Brown
Kadu		Rosetta Ripoll	Ed Davies
Mst. Bhuggoo		Dolores Boronate	H. T. Wickham
Ameer Baksh		Jeanne Farber	Henry John Smith
Waziran		B. D. Andreani	James Henry Bellow
Muntora		Theresa Ribes	Roy Morrison Milner
Parvati		Camille Lafond	Spike Milligan
Gania		Madeleine Fravalo	Stephen Bentley
Sukhmani Raur			Toco Moses Steven
Heera			J. P. Swindlehurst
Kulsum			James McConville
			Norman Harrison
			T. A. Pyne

**Figure 0.2** The names of Indian, French, and British women and men who emerge in this dissertation as ‘troubling agents’ across four chapters. Figure by author.

Troubling agents enter and depart this dissertation in relation to how their fragments are represented across the sources. British soldiers in this dissertation appear very differently from Indian and French women. The men in chapter 4 all spoke or wrote about prostitution, but because their presence does not exist solely in relation to prostitution, they emerge in the archival record as fuller individuals. On the other hand, each woman named above appears in the archive as someone either engaging in prostitution or being a ‘suspect prostitute.’ But this was not the

<sup>75</sup> Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 27.

only criteria of emergence. The above women all came face to face with the law via arrest, false registration, surveillance, cancelled visas, expulsion from hometowns, and deportation notices, among other encounters. One might go as far as to argue that each woman emerges in the colonial archive solely through her proximity to trouble. The colonial archive may thoroughly and unrecoverably limit any understanding of these women beyond their situation to prostitution, or even the fullness of this aspect, but it is far from lacking in terms of what it can tell us about how laws on prostitution were troubled in the first place.

This claim is not intended to suggest that colonial sources are without challenges when undertaking what Anjali Arondekar skeptically calls “the task of historical recuperation,” or what Gail Hershatter more hopefully calls “the quixotic search for agency and resistance.”<sup>76</sup> Working with colonial records also means finding ways to negotiate them between subject and source. Ann Stoler famously critiqued the method of reading colonial sources ‘against the grain’—that is, against the perspective that informs them—because viewing the archive merely as a source, she argued, overlooked how archival forms shape the information they disseminate.<sup>77</sup> Stoler instead devised the method of reading archives ‘along the grain’ in order to mine for their logics, regularities, and consistencies.

To locate breaches and disruptions of law, as this dissertation does, transitioning from ‘archive-as-source’ to ‘archive-as-subject’ is key, because one has to mine for colonial descriptions of trouble before being able to read those descriptions against the grain. Just as colonial taxonomies of prostitution should not be taken at face value, so too should colonial representations of its legal reach not be considered as representation without interrogation. For

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<sup>76</sup> Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 40; Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 27.

<sup>77</sup> Ann Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2(2002): 99.



instance, there is an oft-cited figure that between 1870 and 1888 there were on average 12 daily arrests of women in Calcutta for breaches of the CDA.<sup>78</sup> Often read as evidence of the oppressive nature of the CDA, the figure alone only tells part of the story. These arrests were more often of women who violated the rules of their registration, e.g., non-attendance at hospital, than of non-registered women.<sup>79</sup> In the latter case, the arrested women were discharged after registering, but in the former case, the arrested women generally did face charges, which often carried the punishment of fines and imprisonment. The volume of arrests in this regard are not simply the expression of a wide-ranging police mandate, but a mandate that took shape against the volume of women that were defying the rules of their registration in the first place. When read in terms of the troubled life of enforcing laws against women, the frequency of arrests in Calcutta indicates disruption as much as it does discipline. Recuperating the challenge put up by Indian women is only possible when colonial sources are read both in terms of how they present information (along the grain) as well as scrutinizing that information (against the grain). My approach in this sense partially draws on Arondekar's suggestion of "crafting an archival approach that articulates against the *guarantee* of recovery."<sup>80</sup> However, this dissertation maintains that the impossibility of full recovery in colonial history is not an argument against any kind of recovery.



Structured around four episodic moments of legislative and regulatory interventions—evasion, reform, 'traffic,' and memory—this dissertation makes two key arguments: one, that trouble, challenge, and confrontation, including acts of evading arrest, refusing orders, contesting

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<sup>78</sup> Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*, 81. Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, 153. The original source for this figure is official correspondence from 1884 cited by Banerjee.

<sup>79</sup> See Figure 0.2 for arrest figures from 1870.

<sup>80</sup> Arondekar, *For the Record*, 4. Emphasis mine.

expulsions, and negotiating borders, characterized encounters with colonial laws on prostitution, even when the threat of coercion, discipline, and punitive action was on the cards. And two, that reading colonial projects to regulate the lives of colonial subjects in terms of the trouble and confrontation that they provoked presents a vastly different reading of empire—one where empire is not a homogenizing and unchallenged force from above, but instead a ‘scatter’ of legal enforcement, inconsistent communication, clashing laws, and dueling narratives on the ground below. The case for centering the scatter in empire is to, in one sense, puncture the self-regard of empire in writing imperial histories, and in another, to highlight the trouble, turbulence, and fragility that marked its daily workings.

## CHAPTER ONE

### EVASION: DISRUPTION IN THE AGE OF REGULATION

On May 12, 1870, the Municipal Government of Bombay took the first step in undertaking what would become a controversial and consequential regulatory project of the colonial state: they commenced registration of the city's prostitutes. The Superintendent in charge of implementing the Contagious Diseases Act (XIV of 1868) in Bombay had rented a site for the establishment of a sanctioned lock hospital. Here, women issued registration tickets by the municipality would present themselves for examination, and medical officers would either stamp or confiscate their tickets on the basis of whether they were found infected or not. The CDA was a sweeping law designed to bring various groups of women onto a 'register of prostitutes,' particularly those who exchanged sex for income with British soldiers and sailors. On the outset, colonial governments in India and across the British Empire were keen to justify this policy on the basis of health and sanitation concerns. However, within the pages of official correspondence, administrators were resigned to view regulation as a necessary means to providing safer sexual opportunity for European soldiers abroad. In the two weeks following May 12, the names of 886 Indian women were added to the official register of prostitutes in Bombay.<sup>1</sup> Observing the relative ease with which the women had initially volunteered their names, the Superintendent quipped that they did so because they did not yet understand that the burden was on the government to prove them prostitutes under the law, not on the women to prove otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Report by the Superintendent Contagious Diseases Act to the Municipal Commissioner for the City of Bombay, 15 June 1871, IOR/P/674, No. 12, 193-195. While the names of 64 European women were also added to the register, this chapter focuses on subaltern Indian women and their evasions within the CDA.

As registered women began attending the Bombay Lock Hospital for examination, often catching the attention of passersby as they crowded about the narrow doorways of the building, information pertaining to the CDA began to suffuse Bombay's salons and bazars, causing consternation among the city's prostitutes. The Superintendent described it as a "general panic" whereby these women came to believe that they would be "subjected to every outrage and indignity."<sup>2</sup> What began with some degree of ease soon became a monumental task for the city government. Prostitutes, steadfastly committed to keeping their names off the register, began to evade authorities with surprising effect. Some paid pimps to pose as their husbands, knowing that marriage protected them from the charge of public prostitution. Others brought forward male witnesses to provide favorable character references.<sup>3</sup> Many women, reportedly in the thousands, fled the city for the northern suburbs on the island of Bombay that were beyond the reach of the CDA.<sup>4</sup> Those already registered began to abscond and absent themselves from examination, and others felt comfortable following suit once they realized that punishments for evasion were not especially stringent. Even as special detection agencies surveilled women who sold sex, investigators found that it was near impossible to present witnesses in front of a Magistrate who were willing to attest to buying sex from those women. The Superintendent could no longer find relief in ignorance of the law, and now lamented that the prostitutes of Bombay "began to discover that it was most difficult for [the government] to prove them prostitutes, and how easy it was for them to evade the law."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> CDA Report Bombay, IOR/P/674, 195.

<sup>3</sup> Furnishing character references was an option that was available to women with means and contacts. Elite women belonging to Delhi's former royal households often produced such references as a condition for government allowances in the aftermath of the 1857 Uprising. For example: Ashraf Zamani Begum's Character Certificate by the Citizens of Delhi, c. 1880, DSA/Residency Records (RR)/1880/46. I am grateful to Jenisha Borah for her help with digitally accessing the Delhi State Archives.

<sup>4</sup> CDA Report Bombay, IOR/P/674, 195.

<sup>5</sup> CDA Report Bombay, IOR/P/674, 195.

The early implementation of the CDA in the city of Bombay opens a window into many aspects of law and the everyday. For one, it indicates the rapid rate at which information about laws could spread—leaving us to speculate about the instruments of communication, whether official circulars and announcements or informal word of mouth. It also tells us that this information, when widely known, could be the basis for collective action among women seeking to circumvent laws intended to criminalize them. The actions described by the Superintendent were certainly not of small scale. We also come to know of the byproducts of law—evading the CDA created conditions under which various kinds of male intermediaries involved in sexual commerce, including but not limited to those classified as ‘procurers’ and ‘pimps,’ found their bargaining hand strengthened as many women sought their help and testimony.<sup>6</sup> The CDA may have been sweeping statewide legislation in letter but at the point of implementation it was hardly that. The net of surveillance was uneven and information gathered by investigators did not necessarily translate into criminal convictions. The reality on the ground was that laws on prostitution were routinely subject to evasion via networking and information-sharing among groups of women who had become vulnerable to criminalization.

Concerns about the efficacy of the CDA were expressed across the board from civil surgeons to cantonment magistrates, and line the pages of colonial correspondence on prostitution across India from the Presidencies to numerous cities and towns. On the one hand, this correspondence captures the numerical scale of regulation—the numbers of soldiers infected, women registered, and fines for non-attendance—, while on the other hand, this correspondence

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Walkowitz and Luise White, writing about Victorian Britain and colonial Nairobi respectively, were among the first historians to argue that the legal regulation of prostitution was responsible for empowering pimps and other male intermediaries, and that this development directly exacerbated the vulnerability of various groups of women engaged in sex work. Luise White in particular argues that the CDA “brought men into prostitution in a way they had never been before” (1980, 4). See Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

contains an even greater excess of observations that pertain not to the success of regulatory laws, but rather, to the purposeful, considered, and variegated acts of evading them. From its inception, the regulation of prostitution was a colonial project constantly in trouble.<sup>7</sup>

But why had the colonial state determined it was necessary to regulate prostitution in the first place? From the nineteenth century onward, regulated prostitution had featured across the British Empire, with Ceylon, Hong Kong, and the Straits Settlements being nearby examples. The case of colonial India, however, was set apart by its sheer scale. There had been a significant expansion of cantonment areas in India as many thousands of soldiers were posted there in the aftermath of the Uprising of 1857. Prior to that, there had been an estimated 40,000 European troops in the command of the British Army and the East India Company, whereas by the 1880s, there were 70,000 European troops stationed in over 50 cantonments in the subcontinent—the largest stationed force anywhere in the British Empire.<sup>8</sup>

This formidable military presence came with a new set of problems. Soldiers were now stationed under short-term enlistments of seven years, slashing the former system of primary enlistments by a third.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of them were unmarried and heavily discouraged from forming long-term companionships—a marked departure from the conjugal relationships non-commissioned officers often formed with Indian women during the early nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Under these changing norms and rules, many officials believed that a higher volume of the men would inevitably venture to visit Indian prostitutes and brothels. Erica Wald has noted that “for

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I work with an idea of ‘trouble’ in empire informed by Burton’s *Trouble with Empire*. See Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in correspondence from Principal Medical Officer, HM Forces, India to Secy. to the Govt. of India, Military Dept., Jan 21, 1891, IOR/L/MIL/13834; also see Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 64.

<sup>9</sup> This was still much longer than enlistment terms across other imperial armies, such as the French and German armies, where conscription was between two and three years.

<sup>10</sup> The authoritative account on interracial relationships between British men and Indian women across social classes in the early period of empire in India is provided by Durba Ghosh in *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

much of the [nineteenth] century regulated drink and sex were the only things consistently on offer for the men's 'leisure' activities."<sup>11</sup> It is unsurprising then that venereal diseases were, along with malarial fever, the two most common causes for British soldiers being admitted into hospital throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

The Cantonment Act of 1864 was the first piece of statewide legislation that attempted to address these concerns and curb venereal diseases by including provisions to register, examine, and house prostitutes inside cantonment and regimental bazars, and also allowed for the surveilling of 'suspect' women within a radius of up to five miles beyond cantonments.<sup>13</sup> In 1868, the CDA followed suit to tackle unregulated prostitution within the large Presidency towns of Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. The lock hospital was an important instrument of these Acts, but it was not a distinct feature of the late nineteenth century. Much of the infrastructure of the Cantonment and CDA laws had been part of an older system of registering and examining prostitutes, which had been well-established in the Presidencies of Madras and Bengal from the late eighteenth century until its abolition in the 1830s.<sup>14</sup> The reemergence of this system three decades later was a sign that official concerns around venereal diseases had become relevant again amid a larger soldiery. But it was also an indication that medical and military authorities had failed to reckon with lessons from the past failures of regulation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Harrison, *Public Health in British India: Anglo-Indian Preventive Medicine, 1859–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72. In 1862, British soldiers were infected with syphilis at a rate of 320 to 1000 troops, see Iltudus Thomas Prichard, *The Administration of India from 1859 to 1868: the First Ten Years of the Administration under the Crown*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan and Co.: 1869), 336.

<sup>13</sup> This radius was not definite and could extend well beyond 5 miles if civil or military authorities allowed.

<sup>14</sup> J. Strachey, President, Sanitary Commission, for Bengal, to Secretary to the Government of India, Military Department, 21 March 1864, No. 116, IOR/P/438/27. On the history of the military regulation of prostitution in the early nineteenth century, see Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*.

<sup>15</sup> Wald cites budgetary constraints and inadequate returns as significant reasons for the abolition of the old system.

India's encounter with the widespread regulation of prostitution under the CDA and Cantonment Acts has been the subject of wide-ranging scholarship. This history has been written from a multitude of angles: historians have investigated how laws regulating prostitution informed racial and colonial hierarchies of difference,<sup>16</sup> how multiple groups of female performers and dancers were homogenized into a uniform category of 'prostitute,'<sup>17</sup> how systems of medical knowledge informed colonial approaches to sanitary sex,<sup>18</sup> and indeed, how regulation can be read as a sociological project of taxonomizing female deviancy.<sup>19</sup> These histories generally put colonial disciplining in the ascendancy. But historians have also addressed the idea of the CDA as a 'failed' project from varying perspectives: administrative incompetence, undeterred surges of venereal disease, financial drain, the repeal movement against regulation, and of course, the non-compliance of Indian women.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, even in instances where scholars have addressed methods of evading the CDA within larger histories of regulating prostitution, remarkably little has been made of how popular knowledge of the law, information-sharing, and collective coordination among Indian women were at the heart of the trouble that typified the project of regulation. The prevalence of 'stealth' tactics in the midst of regulation has even been cause for some scholarship to question whether the system of regulation was primarily focused on the disciplinary surveillance of colonial subjects.<sup>21</sup> In other words, was the project of regulation troubled because it was effectively unconcerned with 'trouble'? But such a perspective fails to consider something key: that the

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<sup>16</sup> Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class*; Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics*.

<sup>17</sup> Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance"; Wald, "From *begums* and *bibis*"; Jordan, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute*.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*; D.M. Peers, "Soldiers, Surgeons and Sexually Transmitted Diseases."

<sup>19</sup> Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*.

<sup>20</sup> Raj, *Prostitution in Madras*, esp. 47-60; Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 127-170; Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*; Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, 26.51.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Hodges, "'Looting' the Lock Hospital," 396.



desired aims of colonial law were troubled because the *targets* of legislation made sure they were. And Indian women were persistent troublemakers in the face of the state. They took trains to evade medical examination, navigating landscapes to escape surveillance, refashioned themselves under identities less prone to criminalization, and bribed policemen to strike their names off registers. Might placing the persistence and success of these strategies to evade laws on prostitution at the forefront of the history of regulation reveal something else entirely—far from an indifferent or incompetent colonial state on the ground, a colonial state more shaped by evasion than has so far been acknowledged.

This chapter primarily reads colonial records against the grain to write the history of regulation across colonial India anew by focusing on three instruments of evasion: technology, reclassification, and environments/terrains.<sup>22</sup> In the first section, I explore how Indian women used the widespread technology of railways to evade and abscond from regulated spaces to go undetected in unregulated spaces. I argue that they did so at collective scale and with knowledge of how laws on prostitution worked. The second section examines the myriad ways in which Indian women slipped through loopholes in the law through practices of exemption and reclassification. That is, fashioning or asserting themselves as women with restricted clientele, kept women, and mistresses to avoid being listed on a register of prostitutes via a process of petitioning, impersonation, and bribery. In the final section, I introduce the categories of environments and terrains to document how Indian prostitutes along with British soldiers navigated rivers, canals, and ravines, among other geographies, to escape detection from patrolling policemen and build shadow worlds of sexual commerce—revealing how landscape

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<sup>22</sup> This chapter draws on source material from the three Presidencies of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, Punjab, along with the Northwestern and Central Provinces.

itself could facilitate acts of evasion. Evasion, this chapter argues, was the rule rather than the exception of how regulation unfolded on the ground.

### **Railways: Technologies of Evasion**

In December 1862, the Commissioner of Lahore presented his proposal to establish a lock hospital inside the Walled City to the Government of Punjab.<sup>23</sup> He had been greatly impressed with results achieved in Lucknow, where prostitution had been under a limited form of municipal regulation since 1859, and wanted to replicate the model in Lahore. The Commissioner believed that the best way to achieve this was to create an official register of the city's prostitutes and medically examine them in a civil lock hospital to ensure they were free from venereal disease. For him, this avoided the undesirable option of curtailing the mobility of British troops—after all, the responsibility to not spread contagion was on the women—and offered the men safer conditions when they ventured out of the Mian Meer cantonment into the main city.<sup>24</sup>

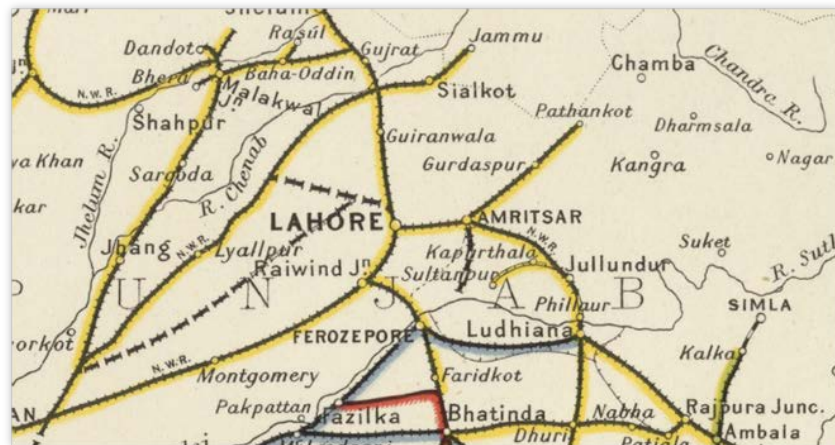
At the time of his proposal, the Commissioner of Lahore initially intended to introduce regulations at a local level. But he foresaw a notable obstacle to his proposal. There was a railroad that facilitated travel between Lahore and the nearby city of Amritsar (Figure 1.1). The Commissioner believed that women engaged in sex work would inevitably use the rail link for easily moving between the two cities, and feared that any measures put in place in one city would be rendered futile if the same measures were not enforced in the other. The Commissioner of Amritsar, meanwhile, also proposed similar plans to establish a lock hospital in 1865, claiming it was not tenable to continue treating prostitutes for venereal diseases at dispensaries

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<sup>23</sup> Comm. & Supt. Lahore to the Secy. to the Govt. of Punjab, 23 December 1862, PPA/Home Department (HD), January 1863, No. 9-10, f. 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> There already existed a lock hospital (established in 1859) inside Lahore's Mian Meer cantonment, however, the cantonment was far off from the city, and as the soldiers frequently ventured out, the Commissioner saw a need for a separate medical establishment in the inner city in particular.

for fear of driving out ‘respectable’ women from these institutions.<sup>25</sup> Despite these early efforts, it was not until the beginning of 1871 that the city of Lahore had a functioning lock hospital— notably after the passing of Cantonment and CDA legislation—while no similar establishment had been set up in Amritsar.



**Figure 1.1** Railroad between Lahore and Amritsar. Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas, 1909*. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library.

These uneven conditions of implementation were precisely those that the Commissioner of Lahore feared. The question was, how did women engaged in prostitution, as well many others who became ‘suspects’ under the new system of regulation, respond? Unsurprisingly, many of them left for Amritsar. The *Avadh Akhbar*, a popular Urdu daily read across northern India, reported in June 1872 that the number of prostitutes in Amritsar had greatly increased owing to ‘newcomers’ from Lahore—women who were described as having been “forced to quit the city on account of the Contagious Diseases Act...[to] seek refuge at Amritsar.”<sup>26</sup> These migrations appear to have occurred gradually during 1872. One indication of this is that the 1873 report on the Lahore Lock Hospital showed over a third—47 out of 130—of registered women

<sup>25</sup> Comm. & Supt. Amritsar to the Secy. to the Govt. of Punjab, 7 November 1865, PPA/HD, November 1865, No. 27-28, f. 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> *Avadh Akhbar*, “Umritsar,” 25 June 1872, Indian Newspaper Reports, IOR/L/R/5/49, 338.

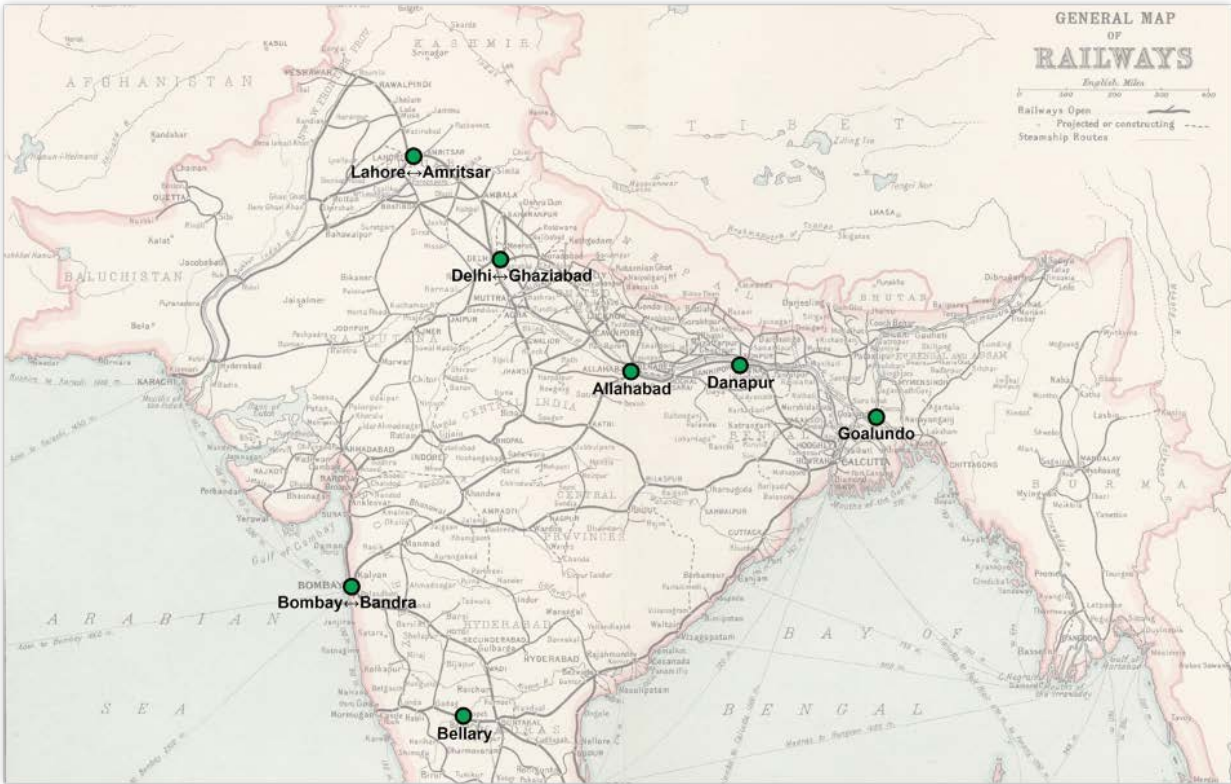
being “absent without leave” during the first three inspections of the year.<sup>27</sup> The Civil Surgeon in Lahore addressed this discrepancy by explaining that those women had left the city in 1872 without giving any notice, and their names were later struck off the register.<sup>28</sup> The women who were recorded as absent toward the end of 1872 only reflected a sample of registered women seeking to evade the system of registration. Taken together with the reporting in the *Avadh Akhbar*, we can be sure that the number of women who left the city in 1872 would have been well over a hundred.

The Commissioner of Lahore may have been astute in his observation that frequent rail travel between Lahore and Amritsar would be an obstacle in the way of regulation in either city, but even he would not have anticipated how quickly large numbers of women came to know of the uneven application of law and put this knowledge into practice. We cannot be certain that *each* of the women who arrived in Amritsar from Lahore took a train to travel there, but we can be certain that the 30-mile journey was most accessible via railways, which were by then a widespread ‘big’ technology. Railways were an ostensible marker of colonial power across colonial India, but they also gave way to a new urban connectedness, especially in the northern belts of India. And for officials, the combination of transport technology with popular knowledge of law proved a headache as far as the implementation of the CDA was concerned (Map 1.1).

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<sup>27</sup> “Lahore Lock Hospital Report, 1873,” Appendix to Home Department Proceedings, June 1874, IOR/P/138.

<sup>28</sup> When registered women did not attend inspection, they were initially marked as ‘absent’ before being struck off the register.



**Map 1.1** Routes and sites of evasion via rail travel in colonial India, 1870s-1880s. Background layer: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas*, 1909. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library. Locations mapped by author.

Railways were an intriguing instrument of evasion, especially if one considers the extent that they could be markers of social order. In the 1870s, railways in India mirrored hierarchies of colonial society through the ordering of carriages by race, caste, and class.<sup>29</sup> Women engaged in prostitution would, along with other laboring women such as sanitation workers and *ayahs* (maids), take up seats in the female reserve compartments in third-class carriages.<sup>30</sup> Their commutes could have been especially contentious as ‘prostitutes’ were explicitly not welcomed in these reserve compartments where there was considerable class- and caste-mixing as seclusion

<sup>29</sup> Laura Bear, *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self* (New York: Columbia University Press), 50.

<sup>30</sup> Ritika Prasad, *Tracks of Change: Railways and Everyday Life in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 71-72. The practice of women engaged in prostitution traveling via third-class carriages most likely continued through the twentieth century. Krishan Chander, a Hindi and Urdu writer who was part of the Progressive Writers’ Movement in 1930s and 1940s in late colonial India, wrote a short story published in 1941 titled ‘A Journey’ that features a courtesan and a man conversing in a third-class rail carriage. See Krishan Chander, ‘Ek Safar,’ in *Tuttay Huay Taaray* (Lahore: Maktaba Urdu, 1941), 99-116.

for women was less accessible in the more expensive first- and second-class carriages. Contemporary newspaper reports also cited cases of ‘respectable’ middle-class women being offended at the notion of sharing a compartment with women suspected of being prostitutes.<sup>31</sup> While no rule barring prostitutes from rail carriages was ever instituted, lower class women traveling alone would have no doubt been the subject of rife speculation.<sup>32</sup>

The case of travel between Lahore and Amritsar is not an indication that hundreds of prostitutes flocked to train stations in one go, but rather, shows us how the process would have necessarily been gradual, with women moving in smaller groups over time. Authorities remained aware of this and accordingly shaped their responses. Over 700 miles from Lahore, in a separate case in the town of Danapur in eastern India, measures were adopted in 1876 to monitor the arrivals of women at the train station. Indian police officers were sent to the platform to watch for any ‘suspicious’ women alighting and leaving for the cantonment bazar, and would note the residence of such women and surveil them to see if they received visits from European men.<sup>33</sup> In response to such surveillance, it was not uncommon for prostitutes, or women vulnerable to arrest more generally, to navigate railway timetables to their benefit. Colonial reports generally suggest that much of these women’s travel occurred in the hours between dusk and dawn. This should not be taken to mean that they only travelled during nighttime, but indicates that the introduction of standardized rail time in India to some degree had the unintended effect of shaping patterns of evasive practices by prostitutes.<sup>34</sup>

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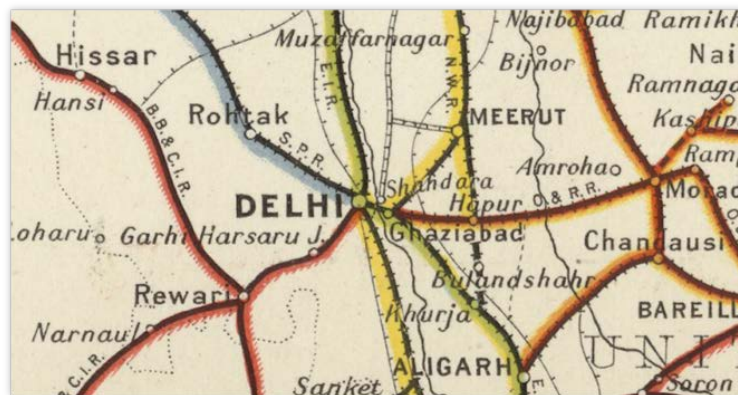
<sup>31</sup> Aligarh Institute Gazette, 15 September 1873, Indian Newspaper Reports, IOR/L/R/4/49. Also

<sup>32</sup> Bear, *Lines of the Nation*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> “Bengal Medical Proceedings,” December 1876. Excerpted in Bear, *Lines of the Nation*, 306n54.

<sup>34</sup> On the everyday impact of standardized time in colonial India, see Ritika Prasad, “Time-Sense: Railways and Temporality in Colonial India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47(2013): 1252-1282.

Strategies of navigating between neighboring cities or towns to evade registration went beyond Lahore and Amritsar. The nearby case of Delhi reveals a similar pattern with regard to travel between the city and the bordering town of Ghaziabad. Delhi and Ghaziabad were less than 20 miles apart and connected by a railroad (Figure 1.2). The *Naiyir-i-Akbar* (Light of Akbar) newspaper reported in May 1872 that there were increasing numbers of prostitutes in the town of Ghaziabad. Notably, this was this after rules to register prostitutes were extended to Delhi in the later months of 1870.<sup>35</sup> The means by which correspondents were able to arrive at the conclusion that the newly arrived women were prostitutes cannot be known. However, their presence prompted the correspondent of the report to call for the extension of the CDA into Ghaziabad—potentially out of fear that there may be an uptick in sexual commerce in the town.



**Figure 1.2** Proximity between Delhi and Ghaziabad. Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas, 1909*. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library.

In Delhi, similar patterns of evasion carried on as women continued to absent themselves from examination throughout 1873, with an average of 12 absences per inspection.<sup>36</sup> Because the suburbs to the left of the Yamuna River such as Pahargunj and Sabzimandi had been brought under Cantonment rules, it is extremely likely that prostitutes and other groups of women at risk

<sup>35</sup> *Naiyir-i-Akbar*, 16 May 1872, Indian Newspaper Reports, IOR/L/R/5/45.

<sup>36</sup> “Annual Report of the Lock Hospital, Delhi, 1874,” Appendix to Home Department Proceedings, May 1875, IOR/P/139.

used the short rail link to travel to the other side of the river to the township of Ghaziabad to flee police and cantonment authorities. That the report in the *Naiyir-i-Akbar* was published in 1872 is no coincidence. The cases of Lahore and Delhi also indicate that short-distance travel was an especially attractive option for evasion because it may have offered more flexibility between migration and commuting. It is worth bearing in mind that it was a greater risk for already registered women to absent themselves from examination than for unregistered women to evade the same. If caught and arrested, the former were subject to fines that varied across locality, but could not go beyond Rs. 100, though in practice it was rare for the maximum amount to be requested from one woman alone.<sup>37</sup>

Contemporary reports such as those in the *Naiyir-i-Akbar* and *Avadh Akhbar* explicitly referred to the ‘CDA’ even when the system of regulation was carried out through Cantonment Act provisions. The terminology of laws for registering, examining, and detaining prostitutes was often muddled. On occasion, the law was even referred to as ‘Lock Hospital Act.’ In Calcutta, the CDA was popularly known as ‘*Choudda Ain*,’ which was the Bengali translation for Act XIV.<sup>38</sup> However, on the ground, the CDA was only ever implemented in the three Presidency towns and very briefly in Lucknow. Across India, regulation—that is, the presence of a functioning lock hospital alongside a legal basis for enforcing the registration and examination of women labeled prostitutes—was more commonly carried out through cantonment legislation in no fewer than 46 cantonments and their surrounding cities, towns, and villages. The spaces across which these rules applied varied considerably depending on locale and population, and sometimes even the extent to which surrounding areas were frequented by soldiers. There was a

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<sup>37</sup> “Officiating Sanitary Commissioner to Secy. to Govt. of North-Western Provinces,” 24 August 1874, No. 61, IOR/P/525, 748.

<sup>38</sup> Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, 148.



lively discussion in local newspapers on whether the CDA was justified or not, but knowledge of how it actually worked was reported on far less.

The astonishingly similar cases of travel between Lahore/Amritsar and Delhi/Ghaziabad do much to demonstrate that tactics of evasion were constantly intertwined with the possibilities of mobility. The ability to use big technologies to depart cities in such considered ways tells us that these movements were not spontaneous or arbitrary, but coordinated methods to fall off the surveillance radar. This kind of migration could potentially occur in spurts as it reportedly did in Bombay, but it was likely more gradual, as indicated by stable rates of absencing in lock hospital reports, as well as by reports of ‘increases’ in prostitutes in the year after the establishment of lock hospitals in the city of origin. Undoubtedly, these women must have also relied on information networks to ensure that regulation was not yet in place at their destination. We can only speculate about the exact nature of these networks, but it might well have included bribing police officers for details on regulated areas, or it could also suggest that after a select few initially attempted it, others saw it to be a worthy path to evasion. Suffice to say, the early years of the 1870s show us just how rapidly multiple groups of women learned to evade registration and examination by moving from spaces of regulation into spaces unpatrolled.<sup>39</sup>

Women who wished to engage in sex work beyond their place of residence also used railways to travel to their place of work during the night and return to their homes by dawn. In Bombay, for instance, the CDA had been subject to sporadic implementation due to its funding being pulled by the Municipal Government as early as 1872 due to exorbitant expenses, and

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<sup>39</sup> There have also been literary representations of how women coordinated travel outside the spaces of regulation. Some contemporary popular chapbooks of Bengali poetry described women in Calcutta rushing for seats on trains to flee to the French enclave of Chandannagar. See Aghor Chandra Ghosh, *Panchali Kamal-koli: Chouddha Ain* (Calcutta: 1873), excerpted in Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, 150-151. I was unable to find corroborating mentions of this travel route in colonial sources. Durba Mitra has recently cautioned against Banerjee’s approach to literary documentation as uncritically ‘real’ documentation (2020, 251n35).

notably, because “the prostitutes began to learn to evade registration.”<sup>40</sup> However, after the CDA was reinstated in 1880, its rules continued to not apply beyond the Mahim causeway that separated the city from its northern suburbs, as had been the case prior when women left for Bandra in 1870 to avoid registration. Recognizing the discontinuous landscape of regulation, women continued to take advantage of cheap railway fares and frequently moved between Bombay and Bandra via trains (Figure 1.3). In 1886, there were reports abound that unregistered women took the train into Bombay at night, engaged in sex work in the parade grounds near the soldiers’ barracks in Fort George, and returned to the suburbs by morning.<sup>41</sup> The combined uses of technology and timing allowed the women to effectively slip under the radar of police surveillance.

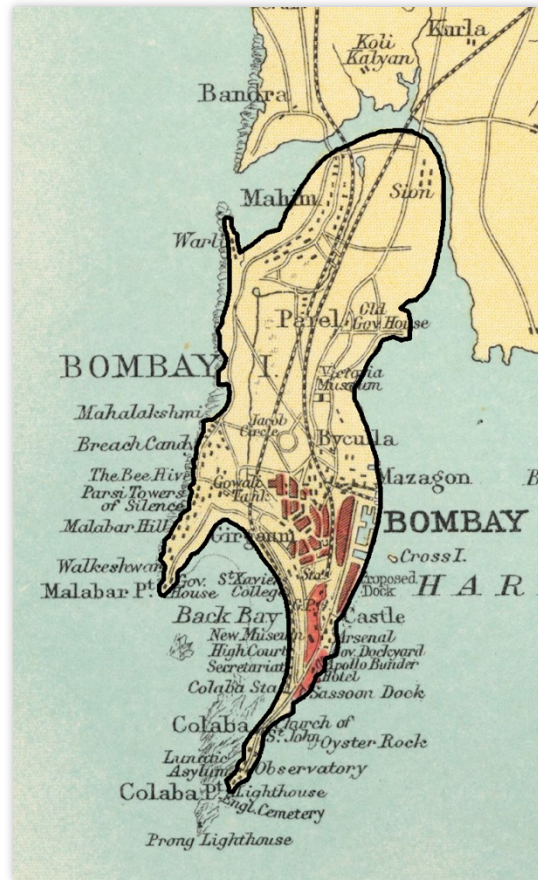
Beyond work and mobility, the Bombay-Bandra rail link was also used to evade other aspects of the CDA, such as medical examinations. In one case, a registered woman named Kulsum travelled to Bandra in March 1887 to escape medical authorities. Official accounts claimed that she did so because she had become infected with syphilis, which suggests that her escape to the suburbs was to avoid detention in the city lock hospital. She was able to evade authorities for six weeks, but was compelled to return to Bombay for examination because her syphilitic infection had become especially severe.<sup>42</sup> Having initially attempt to brave through her physical ailment, Kulsum, like many others, eventually had to make the difficult choice between evading the punitive lock hospital or receiving healthcare.

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<sup>40</sup> Report of the Bombay Prostitution Committee, April 19, 1922, IOR/V/26/803/4; Letter from Accountant General, Bombay, No. 28, March 12, 1872, IOR/P/674.

<sup>41</sup> “Report on Working of CDA in Bombay for 1886,” 25 June 1887, IOR/V/24/2289, 6.

<sup>42</sup> “CDA in Bombay for 1886,” IOR/V/24/2289, 6. Voluntary submission to medical examination was often for reasons of seeking healthcare for venereal disease.

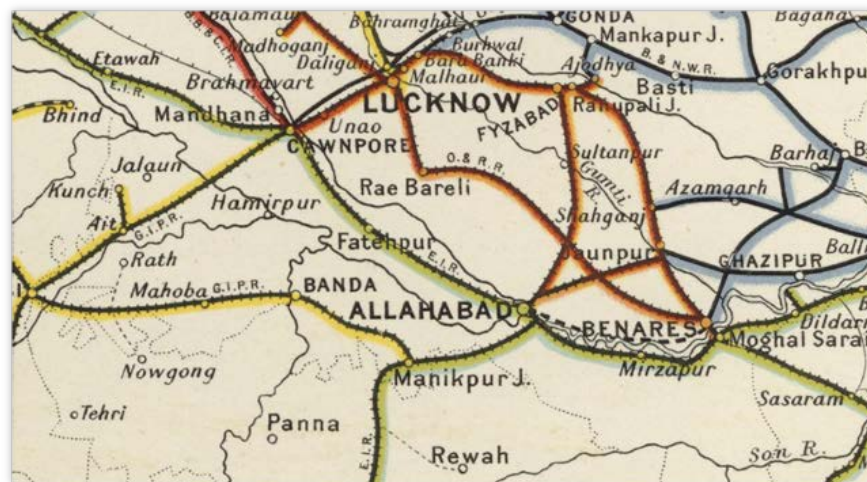


**Figure 1.3** Bombay and the unregulated neighborhood of Bandra (above) connected via the Mahim causeway and rail lines. Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas, 1909*. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library. Outline of regulated area by author.

Much farther north of Bombay, the city of Allahabad in the 1870s also offers comparable cases of evasion via railways. In 1876, there were only 125 registered prostitutes for a garrison strength of 975 in Allahabad—a ratio of roughly 1 to 8. The Surgeon-Major claimed that there were “probably five times as many [prostitutes] in the city and surrounding villages,” and argued that because “three lines of rail meet here,” these women had every facility to avoid registration.<sup>43</sup> The imagery of three major railroads intersecting in Allahabad was evoked in several lock hospital reports, indicating that officials remained anxious about the obstacle of rail

<sup>43</sup> “Report on Lock Hospital in Allahabad for 1876,” No. 31, IOR/P/1203, 171.

travel in the way of regulation (Figure 1.4).<sup>44</sup> The Commissioner of Allahabad Division remarked in 1874 that unsatisfactory rates of registered women was in part due to “facilities afforded by railway communication for escape from punishment.”<sup>45</sup> Allahabad was also a notoriously difficult space to patrol in general because a patch of municipal land ran through the cantonment area. In addition to this, prostitutes and policemen appear to have colluded on numerous occasions. For instance, women who were summoned in front of the Cantonment Magistrate on account of absenting or absconding would receive advance knowledge of this, and use the opportunity to take up temporary residence elsewhere before returning to Allahabad at a later date. Nothing aggravated the project of regulation more than women’s capacity to navigate in and out of the world of sexual commerce and temporarily take up other forms of casual labor—it was precisely these women who emerge in the colonial archive as ‘clandestine prostitutes.’



**Figure 1.4** “Three Lines of Rail Meet Here”: Allahabad Railroads. Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas, 1909*. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library.

<sup>44</sup> Railways are mentioned as an obstacle to registering in additional lock hospital reports from 1874, 1875, and 1877. The three lines of rail were the Bengal and North Western Rail, the East India Rail, and the Oudh and Rohilkhand Rail.

<sup>45</sup> “Report on Lock Hospital in Allahabad for 1874,” No. 61, IOR/P/525, f. 721.

Just as rail travel became a tool to facilitate evasion through movement, rail stations also contentiously emerged as spaces of unsanctioned sexual encounters between British soldiers, railway workers, and Indian women. In Allahabad in 1878, the Medical Officer and Cantonment Magistrate received reports from subordinates that the local rail station was a space where “women openly solicited intercourse with Europeans.”<sup>46</sup> However, there is good reason to question the veracity of such claims, as they often allowed colonial authorities to save face in the wake of rising rates of VD infections. In the nearby town of Benares in the same year, the Medical Officer took issue with the Sanitary Commissioner of the NW Provinces for alleging without proof that soldiers were contracting diseases at the railway station, but admitted that Benares station did not fall under lock hospital rules.<sup>47</sup> Authorities in Roorkee in 1883 engaged in similar attempts to explain the contraction of venereal infections by implicating working women at rail stations whom they pejoratively termed as “coolie-women.”<sup>48</sup> However, scholars who mention reports of prostitution being carried out through rail links, for instance, in eastern India between Danapur and the adjacent city of Patna, also observe that such reports were shaped by the keenness of officials to mark “all bazaar liaisons...[as] prostitution even when they could find no evidence of money having changed hands.”<sup>49</sup> If officials were exaggerating the extent of VD being transmitted through women at the sites of commute, they appear to have underestimated the impact of commuting men.

In 1881, many cases of virulent syphilitic infections were brought to the General Hospital in Calcutta and were found to have originated in the town of Goalanda, the terminus of the Eastern Bengal Railway (Figure 1.5). A surgeon at the hospital speculated that the spread around

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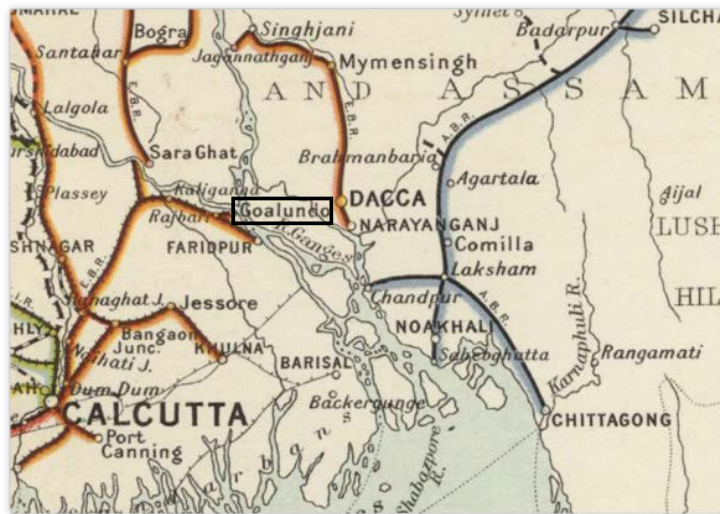
<sup>46</sup> “Report on Lock Hospital in Allahabad for 1878,” IOR/P/1203, 6.

<sup>47</sup> “Report on Lock Hospital in Benares for 1878,” IOR/P/1203, 11.

<sup>48</sup> “Report on Lock Hospital in Roorkee for 1883,” IOR/P/1203, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Bear, *Lines of the Nation*, 80.

Goalanda Station occurred in two ways: one, local boat crews carrying ‘country produce’ to the rail station visited prostitutes in the surrounding bazar and potentially carried syphilis back to their villages; and two, lascars (Indian sailors) who visited sex workers in Goalanda may have carried it via train or steamer into Calcutta, or potentially further east to Assam. However, the surgeon admitted that it was “impossible to say how far the disease among lascars was carried from one place to the other.”<sup>50</sup> The notion that men traveling via railways and not ‘suspect’ women significantly contributed to the spread of VD was something that most colonial officials rarely considered or commented on, but it is an inescapable part of the story of venereal disease. Indeed, the regularity with which rail stations turn up in the archive on prostitution, across locales and among different categories of official correspondence, strongly suggests that the station was an important node in a network of many kinds of non-marital sexual encounters, not just prostitution.<sup>51</sup>



**Figure 1.5** ‘Goalundo’ (*sic*) to the west of Dhaka with Calcutta to the Southwest and Assam to the East. Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas, 1909*. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library. ‘Goalundo’ outlined by author.

<sup>50</sup> “Appendix: Statement by Surgeon Nicholas in Proceedings of a Committee assembled at Calcutta,” IOR/P/1664, No. 39, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Regarding the context of the interwar Middle East, Liat Kozma has remarked that travel could be a site of both movement and recruitment of prostitutes (2017, 79). This can potentially be extended to solo female travelers and railways in India as well.

The use of rail transport by prostitutes as a tool of evasion is eye-opening for a number of reasons. It was at times effective to the point that it left multiple levels of administrators feeling helpless and frustrated because there was little that they could do to avert this kind of movement. Police surveillance was frequently inadequate, and even in cases where police were able to determine that a registered woman had taken leave to abscond, they could only report back to lock hospital authorities rather than arrest the women (unless allowed to do so by the Cantonment Magistrate). Movement proved a most clinical tactic, given that patrolling and monitoring could only be attempted up to a certain point—once ‘suspect’ women began to move, whether in small groups or in the hundreds, the state’s technologies of surveillance (investigation, following, relying on informants) were rendered futile by the strategies of evasion. Indian women ultimately made use of the technologies of colonial modernity to override colonial authority. If railways allowed women to literally disappear off surveillance grids, then acts of reclassification offered another way to make an association with sex work disappear behind categories of identity.

### **Exemption/Reclassification: The Everyday Uses of Law**

In October 1880, two women named Kusum and Attor sat in distress in a police station in Calcutta. They had been arrested on suspicion of engaging in sex work without being licensed under the CDA, and were subsequently registered as prostitutes and subjected to medical examinations.<sup>52</sup> Two days later, however, Kusum and Attor filed charges against the arresting officers for wrongful restraint and confinement. They made several claims: one, they were not public prostitutes but the mistresses of individual men; two, they were brought to the station

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<sup>52</sup> Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal to Police Commissioner of Calcutta, 25 May 1881, No. 2203J, Sanitary Proceedings 1881, IOR/P/1664, f. 259.

under the false pretense of giving evidence on a separate matter; and three, they did not consent to either being registered or examined. The Magistrate who oversaw the case considered the testimonial evidence and agreed that the women were not “‘common prostitutes’ within the meaning of the Act,” and also determined that the police had not behaved in good faith by misleading the women into visiting the station.<sup>53</sup> He ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and fined the arresting officers for wrongful confinement. Despite being silenced by the police, Kusum and Attor had the last word.

The practice of seeking exemption under the law was a crucial method utilized by women to keep their names off the register that moved away from strategizing in terms of movement toward determining one’s status as a ‘prostitute’ in relation to patrons. Because regulation was designed for the explicit purpose of protecting the health of British soldiers, women who did not accept European clients could claim that the law did not apply to them—a strategy that endorsed the façade that the Indian women who were visited by British soldiers were entirely distinct from the ‘ordinary prostitution’ of the civilian population.<sup>54</sup> A claim of exemption generally involved women arguing that they exclusively engaged with Indian men, or in some cases, that they were exclusively attached to individual British men as mistresses, concubines, or ‘kept women.’<sup>55</sup> Regardless of whether such claims reflected women’s realities or were active efforts at reclassification, the objective was always to evade a legal obligation to attend medical examinations. The invasive nature of these exams was not only feared but could also carry fatal consequences. In the south Indian town of Mysore in 1872, a local newspaper reported that a group of women committed suicide because they could not bear the possibility of having their

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<sup>53</sup> Secretary to Police Commissioner Ccutta, 25 May 1881, IOR/P/1664, f. 259.

<sup>54</sup> “Report of the Sanitary Commissioner for Madras,” 1866, *House of Commons Sessional Papers, 1867-68*, Vol. 51, 157.

<sup>55</sup> The vernacular counterpart in Urdu/Hindi is *rakhel*, and its connotation is pejorative.



genitals examined by a male doctor.<sup>56</sup> As with evasion through movement and mobility, the method of exemption similarly benefitted from networked tactics and information-sharing—a fact that was not lost on colonial administrators.<sup>57</sup>

Kusum and Attor may have had the last word with the two police *jemadars* who wrongfully brought them to the station, but how had the women acquired an understanding of the law in order to contest their classification as ‘common prostitutes’? Women who used the instrument of the court to claim exemption were often wealthier women engaged in sexual commerce with access to legal representatives and the capacity to pay court fees. However, the Secretary who submitted correspondence on the case claimed that Kusum and Attor were prostitutes who “were in the habit of standing at their doors and enticing passers-by...ready to receive visits from anyone who was able to pay the price at which they sold their favors.”<sup>58</sup> This claim does not tell us much about the income the two women took in, but it does tell us that they solicited openly and were not selective with their clientele, which rules them out as courtesans or upper-class performing women engaged in sex work. Historians who have considered petitions for exemption under the CDA have tended to focus on the silencing of women’s voices in the archive, or the futility of their efforts other than in cases of wealthier women bribing their way around the law.<sup>59</sup> However, the case of Kusum of Attor shows a notable visibility of women’s protest in the archive, and more importantly, indicates that a much wider net of Indian women had developed popular understandings of the law.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ab-i-Hayat-i-Hindi*, 1 May 1872, Indian Newspaper Reports, IOR/L/R/5/45, 226. It is not known whether these women had been forcibly registered or feared the likelihood of being registered.

<sup>57</sup> “Superintendent Lock Hospitals, Calcutta to Police Commissioner, Calcutta,” No. 6, IOR/P/674, 186.

<sup>58</sup> Secretary to Police Commissioner Calcutta, 25 May 1881, IOR/P/1664, f. 260.

<sup>59</sup> For instance, Levine suggests that the absence of printed petitions in the archive, other than as receipts, indicate “official attempts to play down the volume of female protest” (2003, 103). Mitra argues that the Government of India rejected ‘all petitions’ claiming misconduct on part of the police in Calcutta with respect to forcible registrations, and that police carried on will “little interference from the local government” (2020, 85).

But how could women put these understandings into action? The Benares Lock Hospital report for 1875 offers a window into precisely this question by showing how women utilized their knowledge of law at the moment of their encounters with policemen—a circumstance where they notably had no immediate recourse to legal counsel.<sup>60</sup> The report from Benares is unusual because it contains a singularly rare instance of the list of women added to the register of prostitutes and information on their “arrest or application for registry” surviving in printed form.<sup>61</sup> In one sense, such lists showed the elaborate information-gathering project that accompanied efforts to regulate prostitution. In Benares, 63 women were added to the register, out of which 45 had been arrested and forced to register, while the rest had registered voluntarily. Many of the women had travelled to the district from surrounding areas, potentially driven to do so by shortages in the famine years of the 1870s. Others may well have voluntarily registered to gain access to healthcare and shelter in a subversive use of CDA infrastructure as welfare.<sup>62</sup> However, the fourth entry on the register recorded the arrest of a woman named Ameer Baksh in March 1875 for “practicing prostitution without being registered,” and revealed something crucial. It noted that Baksh resisted her arrest by pretending to be kept by a soldier.<sup>63</sup> Here lay a fragment of subaltern contestation in the margins.

The note, fragmentary as it may be, tells us three things. Baksh attempted to evade arrest and registration as an unregistered prostitute by making a claim of exemption as the ‘kept’ woman of a British soldier.<sup>64</sup> That her name ended up on the register confirms she failed to convince the arresting officer of her status as ‘kept.’ And finally, her claim to exemption was

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<sup>60</sup> Appendix G, Report of the Lock Hospital at Benares for the Year 1875, IOR/P/1002, f. 633.

<sup>61</sup> These lists were handwritten and rarely deemed important enough to be printed with the report. This particular register was the only of its kind that I encountered in printed correspondence.

<sup>62</sup> The argument that Indian women appropriated the CDA infrastructure as a form of medical welfare was first put forward in Hodges, “Looting the Lock Hospital.”

<sup>63</sup> Appendix G, LH Report Benares, 1875, IOR/P/1002, f. 633.

<sup>64</sup> Because the note states ‘soldier’ and not ‘sepoy,’ I will assume that Baksh’s claim involved a British soldier.

recorded as an act of ‘pretending’ by authorities, which made visible her protest as well as its inefficacy. Even as the faintest hint of resistance, the very fact that Baksh was able to of her own accord communicate information to the arresting officer that she believed would obstruct her arrest is the strongest indication that women’s legal contestations travelled well beyond the Magistrate’s court into the spaces of everyday encounters. But what is even more striking is that Baksh was far from the only woman on the Benares register to use the tactics of claiming exemption. There was also Gania (claimed she was kept by a babu), Waziran (came to the cantonment to meet a sepoy), Muntora (kept by a sepoy), and Parvati (kept by a babu). Fragments of ordinary women’s challenges to empire lay hidden in plain sight within a register intended to document empire’s punitive aims of arrest and registry (Figure 1.6).<sup>65</sup> Indeed, these fragments are the greatest caution against reading such registers at their word, that is, taking the act of arrest and registration to be an act of colonial disciplining bereft of any challenge or response.

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<sup>65</sup> Appendix G, LH Report Benares, 1875, IOR/P/1002, f. 633-35. ‘Babu’ connotes a respectable Bengali man.

APPENDIX G.  
 LOCK HOSPITAL REPORT FOR 1876.  
 Nomenclature list of Women registered during 1875, showing the circumstances of their arrest and their state of health when first registered.

Number.	Name.	Date of registry.	Particulars of arrest or of application for registry.	State of health when first seen.
114	Wasina	18th Feb., 1875	Came from Misangar. Applied of her own accord for ticket.	Diseased when first registered.
117	Kalvi	3rd Mar. 1875	Arrested by police Orderly Bazaar, Benares, as an unregistered prostitute.	Diseased when arrested.
118	Nasban	3rd ditto	She comes from Patanpur.	Diseased when first registered.
120	Amir Baksh	20th ditto	She was arrested here by police for practising prostitution without being registered. She pretended to be kept by a soldier.	Diseased when first arrested.
121	Ganga Jala	1st Apl., 1875	Inhabitant of the Sudder Bazaar, arrested by police for being unregistered and living by prostitution.	Diseased when arrested.
122	Hossaini Khannum	3rd ditto	Name. (Not ascertained).	Diseased when first registered.
123	Jaharon	15th ditto	Came from Chakyah, a village in the district. Applied of her own accord for ticket.	Diseased when registered.
126	Musli	17th June, 1875	Came from Gwalior. Applied of her own accord to be registered.	Diseased when first registered.
127	Umri	19th ditto	Came from Mira Moha, in Benares district. Arrested by police for practising prostitution in cantonment without a ticket.	Diseased when arrested.
130	Janki	24th ditto	Arrested by police near Nidder tank, a street-walker on the 21st June, 1875.	Much diseased when arrested.
131	Gauri	25th ditto	A native of Oudery Bazaar. She was arrested in an empty servant's house in cantonment and registered.	Slightly diseased when arrested.
132	Kashin	29th ditto	Arrested by police as a prostitute without a ticket.	Diseased when first arrested.
133	Behania	29th ditto	Arrested at Labhars for practising prostitution without a ticket.	Healthy.
137	Bhagwanis	19th July, 1875	Came from Misangar. Arrested on the road near the Native Infantry lines.	Diseased when arrested.
138	Bhagwanis	19th ditto	Arrested by police at Campalga Street-walker. Arrested near the Artillery hospital by police. She comes from Bahalin, Misangar district.	Ditto ditto.
139	Jumri	14th ditto	Brought by police from Orderly Bazaar.	Ditto ditto.
141	Nasban	17th ditto	Diseased when arrested, but now nearly well.	Diseased when arrested.
142	Murti	19th ditto	Arrested at Tulahad, Benares, by police as an illicit prostitute.	Ditto ditto.
143	Nasban 7th.	19th ditto	Comes from Puhari, city of Benares. Arrested at Raja Bazaar, at the house of Bhagwanis, a prostitute, by Lock Hospital constable Bandish.	Ditto ditto.
146	Sitah Jan	31st ditto	(Not ascertained).	Healthy.
148	Nasli	Ditto	Arrested by police as an unregistered prostitute in the name, Rajghat.	Diseased when arrested.
149	Rahmin	Ditto	Rajghat woman. Arrested by police on the 31st July, 1875.	Healthy.
150	Chutki	Ditto	Arrested by police at Rajghat on the 30th July, 1875.	Diseased.
151	Ram Kalia	Ditto	Arrested by police at Rajghat on the 29th July, 1875, as an illicit prostitute.	Diseased when arrested.
156	Gangadasi	2nd Aug. 1875	Came from Patnahad about six or seven months ago. Arrested at Rajghat by police on the 29th July. She had severe primary syphilis while at Rajghat, and was treated in the Government Charitable Dispensary.	Diseased with gonorrhoea when arrested.
159	Benasia	14th ditto	A native of Bahagan, in district Benares, a maid to Pildwaris two months ago, says her husband is a punkah coolie in the European lines, but she was arrested twice before last year as a prostitute frequented by Europeans. Arrested by police on the 14th August, 1875.	Diseased when arrested.
161	Mahubhan	3rd ditto	Came from Larkhous; was registered there. Applied of her own accord for ticket.	Healthy.
163	Bahman	Ditto	Came from Larkhous; was registered there. Applied of her own accord for ticket.	Ditto.

APPENDIX G.—(continued.)

Number.	Name.	Date of registry.	Particulars of arrest or of application for registry.	State of health when first seen.
164	Gauk	26th Aug., 1875	Came from Hachapur, in Benares district, says she was kept by a Hindu in the Commissioner's office. Arrested by police in civil lines as an unregistered prostitute.	Diseased when first arrested.
167	Phulbanis	17th Sept., 1875	Coelia woman; arrested by police near the Artillery barracks on the 19th August. She lives at Pandapur, and is in the employment of Mr. Lockhart, contractor.	Diseased when arrested.
168	Musli	19th ditto	Came from Kirpur, in Benares district, and applied to the hospital for treatment; she has been at Benares in the city for a year.	Diseased long before arrested.
169	Pickali	2nd Novr., 1875	Came from Chisra, in Amangah district. She states that she was kept five years by a Bengali Hindu called Chander, who is employed as an Emigration Agent, and lives near Bahman; she says he diseased her and then turned her out of doors. Arrested on the 2nd Novr. 1875, near station and dispensary, Sudder Bazaar, by Lock Hospital constable Jaggi. Registered at Benares.	Diseased when arrested.
171	Janki	29th ditto	Came from Jampur and applied of her own accord for ticket. Healthy. Run away and was arrested on the 24th December. She was then diseased.	Healthy.
172	Gangis	6th Decr., 1875	Arrested in Cudrey Bazaar by Sub-inspector Mahjan Lal on information given by a prostitute named Bahban.	Diseased when arrested.
173	Lakki	20th ditto	She came from Amangah and applied of her own accord for ticket.	Healthy.
180	Bhagya	22nd Jan., 1875	From village Bahadur, in sila Benares, arrested also for a white ulcer Duwahn Dhat. Arrested near Nidder as a street-walker by Lock Hospital constable Bandish. Much diseased, eight months in hospital after arrest.	Much diseased when arrested. (Right month in hospital)
115	Faigh	18th Feb., 1875	Arrested at Pildwaris as an unregistered prostitute.	Diseased when arrested.
113	Bibi Jan	18th ditto	Came from Misangar; registered of her own accord.	Diseased when first registered.
112	Khalraton	Ditto	Came from Calcutta, where she was registered. Applied of her own accord for ticket.	Diseased.
118	Jibia	2nd Mar., 1875	Arrested at Pandapur by police as an unregistered prostitute.	Diseased when arrested.
124	Parbatis	21st June, 1875	From Marwan; arrested by police as a prostitute frequented by Europeans, and not registered.	Ditto ditto.
125	Wasina	17th ditto	Came from Allahabad, arrested by police in Sudder Bazaar as she had no ticket.	Healthy when arrested.
124	Pahari	29th ditto	Arrested at Nadair by police as a street-walker. She comes from Pandapur in Benares district.	Diseased when arrested.
124	Allanahki	9th ditto	Has been registered at Allahabad. Applied for her ticket.	Healthy.
159	Janki the 2nd	22nd ditto	Came from Misangar; arrested by police at Nadair as an unregistered prostitute.	Diseased when arrested.
150	Jumri	31st July, 1875	Arrested by police at Rajghat on 29th July, 1875, as an illicit prostitute.	Ditto ditto.
158	Musli	12th ditto	Street-walker. Arrested near cantonment for a year, and has been diseased ten months before arrest.	A loushous man of disease.
147	Pierl	21st ditto	Arrested by police as an unregistered prostitute.	Healthy when arrested.
148	Nasban the 6th	16th ditto	Coelia Larkhous, registered in Lock Hospital. Applied of her own accord for ticket.	Healthy.
161	Nandri	21st ditto	Arrested by police as an unregistered prostitute.	Ditto.
165	Nasban	4th ditto	Brought to hospital from Nadair by two registered prostitutes. She came from Jampur, and lived out of doors on the grounds near the Ough and Mohilband.	Diseased when arrested.
144	Janki	21st ditto	Halfway terminus. Arrested by police at Rajghat on 20th July, 1875, as an illicit prostitute.	Ditto ditto.
155	Benasia	27th ditto	Arrested at Pildwaris as an unregistered prostitute.	Healthy.

APPENDIX G.—(concluded.)

Number.	Name.	Date of registry.	Particulars of arrest or of application for registry.	State of health when first seen.
160	Muhammadi	16th Aug., 1875	Came from the village of Tikari (in Benares district) and was arrested by police near barracks on the 13th August. She admitted at once that she was diseased.	Much diseased when arrested.
157	Wasina	11th ditto	She says she is an inhabitant of Allahabad and has been here about three weeks; she lived in city for 17 days and then came to cantonment to meet a sepoy. Arrested near Native Infantry lines by police.	Healthy when arrested.
168	Kabairi	18th ditto	A girl living at Misangar in Benares district; arrested several times in cantonment as a street-walker; dreadfully diseased when first arrested; badly behaved, always running away and living in the open or in empty houses in cantonment. Diseased both times she was registered in 1875.	Dreadfully diseased.
161	Janki	2nd ditto	Came from Amangah and lived at Khabali for two and a half years; arrested by the police. She says she was kept by a sepoy for upwards of two years, and that she has two children by him, but that he has now left her as he has taken on with another woman. She has gonorrhoea.	Diseased.
163	Benava	27th ditto	States that she came from Jampur eight days ago, and had no means of getting food but by prostitution. Arrested by constable Bandish in the soldiers' garden, on the evening of the 26th August. She had gonorrhoea.	Slightly diseased when arrested.
158	Munton	14th ditto	A native of Delhi; came here some weeks ago and says she was kept by a sepoy, 15th Native Infantry, called Ganga. She was arrested by police as a non-registered prostitute.	Slightly diseased when arrested.
165	Rahiman	3rd Sept., 1875	Came from Jampur. Applied of her own accord for a ticket.	Diseased when first registered.
166	Punhi	15th Oct., 1875	Came from Amangah as a beggar and came to hospital, as she says she was too much diseased to get any thing to eat by prostitution. She states she has been four months in Benares city; came to cantonment occasionally; she was induced by some other woman to come to hospital for treatment.	Much diseased when arrested.
168	Rukminis	2nd Novr., 1875	Came from Amangah to work as a punkah coolie; when discharged from her punkah, she took to prostitution. Arrested by Lock Hospital constable Bandish, near the soldiers' garden.	Diseased slightly when first arrested.
170	Kudni	25th ditto	Arrested by police at Pildwaris as a prostitute without ticket.	Healthy when arrested.

**Amir Baksh**  
 20th Mar., 1875  
 She was arrested here by police for practising prostitution without being registered. She pretended to be kept by a soldier.  
 Diseased when first arrested.

Figure 1.6 Top-left to bottom-left: the list of women added to the register of prostitutes in Benares, 1875, with entries of the five women who resisted their arrest highlighted. Bottom-right: Fragment from Ameer Baksh enlarged. Source: IOR/P/1002. Courtesy of the British Library. Compiled and modified by author.

While popular readings of law extended into multiple spaces of subaltern engagement, the procedures of the court and police station were where they were most visible. In Multan in south Punjab, many prostitutes left the city after compulsory registration was introduced in 1868, but some returned in 1872 to claim exemption—possibly after becoming aware of its success as a strategy to keep one’s name off the register. The Lahore-based newspaper *Aina-i-Aib Numa-i-Hind* reported a scene at a district court where a group of these women reasoned in front of a Magistrate that because they had “dealings only with the Natives and not European soldiers,” they should not be compelled to register.<sup>66</sup> This was a request for exemption rather than an act of reclassification, as certain classes of women engaged in prostitution did not accept visits from British men in any case. On this matter, it was observed by the Deputy Commissioner in Delhi in 1873 that “a very large number [of the city’s prostitutes] would not let a [British] soldier come within a mile of them.”<sup>67</sup> In Multan, the women attending court were granted exempt status, but were also subject to a condition that stipulated they would have to pay a fine of Rs. 100 if they were caught exchanging sexual services with any Europeans. This fine was legally the maximum the women could be charged, but in practice fines tended to hover around the single-digit mark.<sup>68</sup>

The correspondent of this report curiously questioned this ruling, arguing that such a measure only served to protect the health of Europeans and not Indians. Indian men, too, deserved to be protected from venereal disease in the correspondent’s view. This remark is indicative of a budding discourse in the press about differential treatment between Indian and European men with regard to prostitution. Debates on this topic can also be located in earlier letters to newspapers, some published by the *Avadh Akhbar* in 1862, in which Indian men

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<sup>66</sup> *Aina-i-Aib Numa-i-Hind*, 9 May 1872, Indian Newspaper Reports, IOR/L/R/5/45, 258.

<sup>67</sup> “Annual Statement of the Delhi Lock Hospital for 1872,” DSA/Lock Hospital (LH)/1873/73.

<sup>68</sup> The amount of the fine possibly also reflects the status of the women claiming exemption.

complained of being priced out by upper-class courtesans in Lucknow, while calling upon the government to regulate the prices of prostitution to make it more affordable for day laborers who earned only a rupee a day.<sup>69</sup> Entitlement to the spaces of sexual commerce was something shared by both British and Indian men.

All the while, the courtesans and dancers who combined sexual patronage with performance traditions were concerned that they might be reduced to mere prostitutes under the law. In Lucknow, which had a prominent and historical courtesan tradition since the late eighteenth century, Indian members of the Municipal Committee shared the concern that the city's artistes may be obliged to register as prostitutes under the CDA. In 1868, they furnished a list of about 50 well-known courtesans and succeeded in convincing authorities to exempt them from registration.<sup>70</sup> However, ethnographic accounts from women who had careers as courtesans in the twentieth century in Lucknow convey that the police continued to send *jasus* (spies) to courtesan households frequented by British soldiers in order to inspect the sanitation of those spaces.<sup>71</sup> Exemption from the register did not exempt courtesans from surveillance.

In Bombay, a local group of *naikeens* (courtesans) also relayed their apprehensions about registration to the CDA Superintendent. The Superintendent agreed that it would be harsh to make them register as they “were women of...respectability who merely gained their living by singing and dancing at the parties of the native gentry.”<sup>72</sup> However, taking a different view from authorities in Lucknow, he noted that if they “*combined* prostitution with dancing and singing” they would be compelled to register. In Calcutta, the Commissioner of Police offered another,

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<sup>69</sup> Avadh Akhbar, 9 April 1862. Excerpted in Veena T. Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 138-139.

<sup>70</sup> Oldenburg, *Colonial Lucknow*, 140. Oldenburg cites a municipal resolution from July 16, 1868, indicating early days of CDA implementation.

<sup>71</sup> Oldenburg, *Colonial Lucknow*, 141.

<sup>72</sup> CDA Report Bombay, IOR/P/674, 198.

narrower, definition of ‘prostitute’ under the law by defining it in terms of “all women who in an open manner, gain their livelihood by a life of prostitution.”<sup>73</sup> “Women who only receive visitors occasionally in secret, and who reside with one man,” he argued, “should not be treated as prostitutes.”<sup>74</sup> Other officials strongly disagreed, and argued that groups such as courtesans “are not mistresses...but prostitutes of a superior class...with incomes sufficient to enable them to evade the law by bribing.”<sup>75</sup> The category of ‘public prostitute’—one that was critical to court rulings and grants of exemption across India—was thus defined in terms of one’s proximity to sex work as well as one’s accessibility *as* a sex worker. Where this definition was narrow, many Indian women made attempts to place themselves outside of it.

Alongside seeking exemption under conditions of exclusively accepting Indian clients, the strategy of reclassifying oneself as ‘kept women,’ ‘mistresses,’ or even wives of individual men had enormous import. For women claiming to be ‘kept’ or ‘mistresses,’ those who could readily rely on men to corroborate such claims were especially successful. This gave their claims more credibility in the eyes of the law, and the men in any case had little to lose because they were rarely punished for abetting women deemed prostitutes. In a striking story from Bombay, a well-dressed Indian man professing to be the *mukaddam* (chief) of a mercantile firm paid the CDA Superintendent a visit. He did so to attest that a woman who had received a formal caution from the police to register as a prostitute or face arrest was in fact his mistress.<sup>76</sup> On the basis of his testimony alone, the Superintendent granted his request that she be exempted under the law. However, follow-up investigations showed that the man was an ordinary laborer, and that the

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<sup>73</sup> Stuart Hogg, Circular Order, 20 September 1869, No. 6, IOR, P/674.

<sup>74</sup> Hogg, Circular, IOR, P/674.

<sup>75</sup> J.C. Brown Inspector General of Hospital, Indian Medical Dept. to Offg. Secy. To the Govt. of Bengal, 4 May 1871, No. 97, IOR, P/674.

<sup>76</sup> CDA Report Bombay, IOR/P/674, 190.

woman was, in official parlance, a ‘common prostitute.’ Neither individual was able to be traced after their act of deception. While colonial accounts of evasion had a tendency to be sensationalist, they often maintained details even when to the embarrassment of authorities, as in this case of an elaborately planned impersonation.

In Bareilly, Staff Surgeon Triphook was similarly frustrated by the strategies of unregistered women in convincing him they were ‘kept.’ He observed that as more decisions went in the favor of women making such claims, others took advantage and “*became* concubines or kept women to soldiers...and were able to defy [him].”<sup>77</sup> In one case from 1874, an *ayah* (maid), formerly in the service of a Commissariat Sergeant, later became a ‘kept woman’ to a man in the Royal Artillery.<sup>78</sup> Not required to attend the lock hospital for medical examination, she reportedly continued to engage in prostitution and received visits from merchants in the Saddar Bazar (cantonment marketplace), while also residing in the cantonment bungalows. Triphook’s attempts to register her were futile, as even the Cantonment Magistrate ruled in her favor, affirming that she was someone’s ‘private’ woman and not a ‘public prostitute.’

Cases of women reclassifying themselves as married women to evade registration were less common than claims of being ‘kept.’ In Madras in 1871, Muslim women produced *nikahnamas* for this end, but the Medical Officer suspected that they bribed *qazis* to endorse the certificates, and at one point, even ceased recognizing them as authentic documents.<sup>79</sup> The early implementation of the CDA bred much confusion about whether the status of wife offered absolute protection from being a ‘suspect prostitute.’ In Allahabad in 1873, one Musammat Bhuggo Hulwain, was erroneously registered as a ‘prostitute’ because she drew a court-ordered

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<sup>77</sup> Report of the Lock Hospital at Bareilly for 1874, No. 61, IOR/P/525, 602. Emphasis added.

<sup>78</sup> LH Report for Bareilly, 1874, No. 61, IOR/P/525, 602.

<sup>79</sup> Health Officer, Madras to Secy. to Govt. of Fort St. George, April 1, 1871, No. 17, IOR/P/674.



monthly stipend of two rupees from her husband. A desperate Mst. Bhuggo was alarmed to find she had been registered and petitioned to have her name removed. She claimed she was wrongly registered on misrepresentation by her husband who was looking for an excuse to cease paying her stipend.<sup>80</sup> Her case was transferred to the Government of the North-Western Provinces but we do not know if her stipend was restored or if her name was struck off. Even though marriage successfully shielded many women from the label of ‘prostitute,’ Mst. Bhuggo found herself in trouble because men could also exploit the CDA to harm Indian women irrespective of marital status. Overtime, marriage did ultimately emerge as a legitimate means to being removed from a ‘register of prostitutes.’ In Secunderabad in 1887, four women successfully had their names struck off the register “on the plea of marriage.”<sup>81</sup>

In cases where neither exemption nor reclassification were options, some women partnered up to craft another kind of impersonation: attending examination with a different woman’s ticket. In 1870 in Calcutta, a woman named Gangamani attended a medical exam at Chitpur Hospital in place of her friend Kadu, who had reportedly contracted a bad infection and did not want to risk admission to the hospital. Police at a local station were tipped off about the impersonation, and arrested both Kadu and Gangamani.<sup>82</sup> However, when brought before a Magistrate, both women were released as there was no punishment for impersonation under the CDA, and Kadu’s official examination date had not yet arrived. Neither woman had broken the law, but they had certainly vexed the Commissioner of Police, Stuart Hogg, who stated “there was no doubt that [Kadu and Gangamani’s] fraud had been successfully practiced before.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Index to the Proceedings of the Home Department, September 1873, Part B, No. 3. Mst. Bhuggo’s petition most likely no longer survives, but a fragment of the case is listed in the index to routine matters not printed (B files).

<sup>81</sup> Annual Report of the Lock Hospital at Secunderabad, 1887, January 2, 1888, IOR/P/3195.

<sup>82</sup> Appendix B: Statement of women and others on various matters connected with the working of Act XIV, No. 6, IOR, P/674, 176.

<sup>83</sup> Appendix B, No. 6, IOR/P/674, 176.

Both women either had similar identifying features, or tampered with their tickets to modify this information to ensure that no suspicion arose at the point of the exam.<sup>84</sup> The arrest of the women was notably not the result of any loose ends within their ruse, but due to a tip from an informant. Hogg was likely correct when he surmised that Kadu and Gangamani's collaboration was an act that had succeeded in the past.

In the large-scale operation of the CDA in Calcutta—a significant 6,700 women were on the register as early as 1869—policemen were instrumental in shaping how laws worked in their districts, and their cooperation could be the difference between whether a woman's name ended up on the register or not.<sup>85</sup> The case of Sukhmani Raur from 1869 was an early sign of policemen colluding to deceive women into registering as prostitutes.<sup>86</sup> Raur was a factory worker who claimed she was intimidated into attending the police station, where she volunteered her identifying information, but did not know that this would be used to register her under the CDA. A month later, Raur was arrested for non-compliance with the terms of her registration and convicted by the District Magistrate. However, Raur did not relent in the face of this injustice, and her appeal against her conviction reached the Appellate High Court of Calcutta, which quashed her conviction in September 1869.<sup>87</sup> Raur had succeeded on this occasion, but it was clear that entering names onto a register of prostitutes was a callous and reckless exercise when compared to the diligence and due process required to strike a name off of it. The case of Kusum and Attor decades later in 1880 is further indication of how Indian women continued to bear the brunt of wrongful registrations by the police.

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<sup>84</sup> Registration tickets contained information about physical features and identifying marks.

<sup>85</sup> Commissioner Of Police, Calcutta to Secy. to the Govt. of Bengal, March 8, 1871, No. 204, IOR/P/674.

<sup>86</sup> Occasionally romanized as 'Sukhimonee Raur.' Raur's case is a more cited act of resistance and mentions of her petition are made by both Sumanta Banerjee (1998) and Durba Mitra (2020).

<sup>87</sup> Sukhmani Raur's case is summarized in the *The Weekly Reporter, Appellate High Court*, vol. XII, Criminal Rulings (Calcutta: Bengal Printing Company, 1870), 55-57.

Despite these combative encounters, there was also room for collaborative engagement between police and suspect women, many of whom sought to cut deals to their benefit. In 1870, a woman named Heera had been in hiding from prostitution patrols after defaulting as a registered prostitute. She was found and arrested by a British inspector in south Calcutta and taken to the local police station.<sup>88</sup> After she reportedly confessed her absenteeism to a junior police officer and was released on bail, it was discovered that her testimony could not be found in the station Section Book “*out of which several leaves ha[d] been torn.*”<sup>89</sup> Heera’s ‘confession’ was apparently tossed out just one day after her arrest, with senior inspectors believing that she had, like many others, bribed her way around the law. On other occasions, inspectors also suspected junior police of tampering with their handwritten register of prostitutes, specifically changing information about the ages and distinguishing physical features of specific women who likely paid bribes to have their records altered.<sup>90</sup> ‘Corruption’ of this kind was prevalent enough that officials recommended that the surveilling of Indian women be undertaken by European rather than Indian police—revealing both a mistrust of Indians and how the agenda of the state could be appropriated by police at the point of implementation.<sup>91</sup>

Women like Kusum, Attor, and Ameer Baksh, among others, all negotiated the writ of the colonial state through popular knowledge, petitions, and bribes. Arrest and registration data revealed challenges to colonial law through traces of subaltern contestation, just as handwritten records of surveilled women were vulnerable to alteration by police collaborators. Where some women catered to an exclusively Indian clientele, they worked through the loophole of

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<sup>88</sup> ‘Prostitution patrols’ is sometimes the name given to police patrols who surveilled women under CDA rules.

<sup>89</sup> Appendix I: Statement of women and others on various matters connected with the working of Act XIV, No. 6, IOR, P/674. 188. Emphasis in text.

<sup>90</sup> Appendix I, No. 6, IOR/P/674, 188.

<sup>91</sup> T. G. Hewlett, Acting Sanitary Comm. of Govt. of Bombay to Chief Secy. to Govt. of Bombay, June 28, 1876, No. 32, IOR/P/1664.

exemption, while others actively undertook efforts to reclassify themselves as ‘kept women’ or ‘mistresses’ to evade the law. That Triphook observed women *becoming* ‘concubines’ to keep their names off the register demonstrates the collective and networked nature of reclassification practices, and above all, their effectiveness in defying the law. From the site of arrest to the police station to the courtroom, subaltern women’s strategies to evade arrest, exempt themselves from the law, and petition to expose the misuses of the law demonstrate how colonial practices from above provoked a range of disruptions from below.

### **Environments/Terrains: Evasive Landscapes**

As Indian women built a shadow system of evading registration, so too did they build a shadow world of sexual commerce under the nose of the seeing state.<sup>92</sup> This involved purposeful uses of geographies and environments: crossing rivers, hiding in ravines and canals, and navigating forests. The limits or edges of regulated spaces as such became target areas for unsanctioned exchanges of sex between Indian women and British soldiers. The latter especially emerged as key actors in stymieing the working of regulatory laws as they navigated space within and outside of the cantonment to evade rules intended to curb their VD rates. For women and soldiers, engaging in sexual commerce outside of the system of regulation crucially involved using environments and terrains to one’s advantage.

British soldiers and troops—the broad category that encompassed non-commissioned officers such as privates, corporals, and sergeants in India—had been the subject of many concerns among commissioned officers pertaining to their lower-class status and so-called sexual nature. At least this is what the President of the Sanitary Commission in Bengal expressed in

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<sup>92</sup> I use the phrase ‘seeing state’ in similar ways to historian Radha Kumar. See Radha Kumar, “Police Matters,” PhD diss. This dissertation has more recently been published as the monograph *Police Matters*, in which the terminology of ‘seeing state’ is used less.

1864 when he stated that “well-meaning but impractical men [must not] put a stop to prostitution by the power of the law... [as] prostitution...[is] an inevitable fact.”<sup>93</sup> The Surgeon-General of Bombay made the same point even more explicitly with his opening sentence in an 1886 memorandum on the CD Acts: “I commence with the indisputable proposition, that men will be immoral [and] it cannot be expected [among those] situated as soldiers and sailors, that there shall be no incontinence.”<sup>94</sup> Given that such views were widespread, the regulation of prostitution had partly been a concession that little could be done to prevent British soldiers from seeking sex. They could, however, be guided to engage with registered Indian women to avert the unacceptable possibilities of same-sex relations and masturbation.<sup>95</sup>

But repeated efforts to bring the regulated spaces of prostitution closer to the quarters of soldiers belied the reality that sex between British men and Indian women was predominantly exchanged outside of these official arrangements. Even within the space of the cantonment—the most heavily surveilled space of regulation—soldiers sought sex from unregistered Indian women in plain view. These encounters would at times be crudely documented in colonial correspondence. In one instance from 1874, the Medical Officer in Meerut reported that “an unregistered woman was caught in the act of sexual intercourse with a soldier in broad daylight in an unroofed barrack” in the cantonment.<sup>96</sup> In Lucknow, there were descriptions of incidents from 1877 where “[one] soldier patient in hospital effected intercourse in the ward,” and “[another] soldier effected intercourse in the dining-hall of his barrack.”<sup>97</sup> The blame for such

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<sup>93</sup> J. Strachey, President, Sanitary Commission, for Bengal, to Secretary to the Government of India, Military Department, August 13, 1864, No. 116, IOR/P/438/27.

<sup>94</sup> Memorandum on the Contagious Diseases Act, by William J. Moore, Surgeon-General, October 1886., January 28, 1888, No. 320, IOR/L/MIL/7/13815. The word ‘incontinence’ in this context referred to sexual self-restraint.

<sup>95</sup> Among medical officers in the army, it was erroneously believed that masturbation and homosexuality caused more lasting physical harm for soldiers.

<sup>96</sup> Medical Officer to Secretary to the Cantonment Committee, Meerut, January 5, 1875, No. 31, IOR/P/525.

<sup>97</sup> Annual Report on Lock Hospital, Lucknow, for the Year 1877, IOR/V/24/2290.

encounters was unsurprisingly placed squarely on the women, with officials lamenting that “the *unprofessional* prostitutes...are the cause of the lock hospital system being of so little use.”<sup>98</sup>

Frustration in this regard was common, but officials still relied on information provided by police, cantonment workers, and other informants to know the movements of soldiers and Indian women in order to propose where to extend regulated space to—or, to propose ways to incentivize soldiers to not venture into those places.

There was nonetheless a naivete on part of military officials in believing that certain spaces of sex work would be “notoriously inaccessible” to British soldiers.<sup>99</sup> This was a belief that especially persisted in relation to mountainous hill stations in northern India, where soldiers had fewer opportunities to engage with local women compared to cities and towns. However, there was little by way of policy that could prevent soldiers from, in the words of one official, “contriving to defeat the plans arranged for [their] health.”<sup>100</sup> And in hill stations such as Ranikhet, the local geography played an important role in aiding different actors to override rules. Soldiers would walk up to four miles beyond the station to the narrow valleys of the *khuds* or ravines and, as officials feared, “run all risks with...strange women.”<sup>101</sup> The outdoor temperature was another factor facilitating their walks, as the cooler climate of the hill stations encouraged longer strolls, and more opportunity meet women well beyond the barracks.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Linday Neill, Offg. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces to the Offg. Secretary to the Government of India, July 6, 1878, IOR/P/1338. Emphasis in text.

<sup>99</sup> Strachey to Secretary, No. 116, IOR/P/438/27.

<sup>100</sup> Lt.-Colonel T. H. Chamberlain, Cantonment Magistrate Ranikhet, to Comm. Kumaon, August 25, 1871, No. 2, IOR/P/674.

<sup>101</sup> Chamberlain to Comm. Kumaon, No. 2, IOR/P/674. ‘Khud’ comes from the Hindi word *khud*, and refers to a deep ravine in India.

<sup>102</sup> Since the introduction of the CDA in Calcutta, for instance, there was greater prevalence in VD during the months of cold weather. Payne to Comm. Police Calcutta, June 11, 1878, No. 19, IOR/P/1002.

At the barracks themselves, soldiers also sought out laboring women who cut grass and sold wood, pejoratively termed by officials as ‘coolies.’<sup>103</sup> When these women had to leave the barracks to attend nature’s call, soldiers would follow to solicit them. To avoid this, military officials requested to place latrines nearby to keep the women within certain limits. This, however, proved futile as soldiers were able to negotiate with young Indian boys employed as cooks to arrange meetings with the women at other times.<sup>104</sup> As laboring and unregistered women engaged in sex work, the grasscutters and wood-sellers were vulnerable to arrest, but when patrols were sent out to search for them, they would avoid detection by hiding in the ravines neighboring the barracks.<sup>105</sup> Because these ravines effectively served as large ditches, they were difficult to patrol and inspect, particularly after dusk, which is when soldiers tended to frequent them the most.

The use of darkness or lack of illumination to elude the watch of authorities was a tactic deployed with considerable success by Indian women as well. Requests and calls to improve patrols during the hours of nighttime were expressed in reports from Punjab to Burma. Engaging with soldiers in the dark in ravines also benefited Indian women in another way: the darkness prevented soldiers from identifying them as unregistered prostitutes in daytime. Yet, while consorting in the dark offered some women anonymity, it consequently made registered women more vulnerable. Soldiers who were found infected with syphilis or gonorrhea were prodded to identify the woman who they believed infected them (that British soldiers may have been infecting Indian women was a rare acknowledgement). In most cases, soldiers feared punitive

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<sup>103</sup> C.A. Elliot, Offg. Secretary to the Government of North-Western Provinces to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, February 24, 1872, No. 20, IOR/P/674. ‘Coolie’ was pejorative term used in colonial parlance to refer to indentured labor, though the term more broadly came to refer to someone paid to do menial work, see Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>104</sup> Elliot to Secretary, February 24 1872, No. 20, IOR/P/674.

<sup>105</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel T. H. Chamberlain, Cantonment Magistrate to Officiating Senior Assistant Commissioner, Kumaon, No. 20, 7 January 1872, IOR/P/674

action, such as having their pay docked, and preferred to give up a registered woman rather than admit that they could not remember the woman due to drunkenness or darkness. In one case from the lock hospital at St. Thomas Mount in Madras in 1873, 19 out of 20 women identified by soldiers as diseased were found free from infection.<sup>106</sup> When such discrepancies arose, senior officials knew who to blame. A Surgeon-Major from the Central Provinces noted that “soldiers point out [wrong] women when they...do not know the women they have had connection with...[because] it has taken place in the dark or the soldiers have been...stupid from drink.”<sup>107</sup> Yet, authorities did little to avert the problem.

Beyond illumination, or lack of, topographies continued to be relevant. Near Ranikhet hill station was Chaubattia Hill, which was a non-permanent station with a similar natural landscape, only that the placement of the barracks created new opportunities to avoid detection. The temporary camp was pitched atop the hill next to side slopes and canals that were “covered with thick jungle.”<sup>108</sup> The landscape combined with the natural concealment of the area allowed soldiers and women to travel to the side slopes and nearby ravines undetected, perhaps even in the hours of daylight due to the forest. Descriptions offered by officials indicate that the women who traveled here to meet soldiers were, as in Ranikhet, laboring women seeking to gain income. They accepted lower fees compared to those accepted in the regimental brothel and were described by officials as being induced by “the exhibition of a small coin.”<sup>109</sup> Economic pressures predictably played a key role in strengthening the negotiating hand of soldiers when it came to sex work beyond the system of regulation. Evading law was one thing, but for Indian

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<sup>106</sup> Raj, *Prostitution in Madras*, 55. Raj also talks about soldiers using darkness to their benefit but does not consider the flipside of women utilizing it to evade surveillance.

<sup>107</sup> Annual Report of the Lock Hospital, Kamptee, for 1886, February 11, 1886, NLS/Medical History of British India (MBHI).

<sup>108</sup> Annual Report of the Lock Hospital, Ranikhet, for the year 1875, February 10, 1876, No. 20A, IOR/P/1002.

<sup>109</sup> Annual Report LH, Ranikhet for 1875, No. 20A, IOR/P/1002.



women there was little chance of evading the gendered and racial asymmetries that shaped prostitution in a colonial setting.

Tactics of escaping and hiding were also frequent occurrences within the spaces of the cantonment, notably lock hospitals and barrack halls. When Indian women surreptitiously entered the barracks, they had to be adroit to avoid being caught. In 1878, one woman in the Lucknow cantonment had been sleeping inside a large rum-barrel within barrack lines and went undetected for an undisclosed period of time before she was discovered and arrested.<sup>110</sup> The assumption that she had been engaging in sex work was derived from the fact that she was found to be infected with syphilis upon examination. Such reports emerge in the colonial record to the great frustration of officials as even one unregistered woman in the barracks could undercut the entire project of regulation.

Within the lock hospital, on the other hand, various methods of escape were deployed. Detained women often did so by scaling the palisade or fencing around the building. For instance, in 1877, farther east in Rangoon, several women engaged this strategy during nighttime.<sup>111</sup> In some cases, there were reports that friends of these women, or men identified as pimps, would bring rope and bamboo ladders to aid the act of escape, but the palisade was low enough to allow solo escapes as well. The presence of a *durwan* (nightwatchman) did not avert these escapes as the *durwan* could not be held responsible for guarding every part of the lock hospital wall throughout the night. The success of the tactic continued into the following year, when 21 escapes by scaling were recorded in Rangoon.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Annual Report of the Lock Hospital, Lucknow, 1878, IOR/V/24/2290.

<sup>111</sup> Annual Report of the Lock Hospital, Rangoon, 1877, IOR/V/24/2297.

<sup>112</sup> Annual Report of the Lock Hospital, Rangoon, 1878, IOR/V/24/2297.

While scaling walls was common across lock hospitals in India, other methods of escape required considerable ingenuity. In a staggering instance from 1874, one woman who was admitted to the lock hospital in Benares was discovered to have escaped by “squeezing herself out through the hole under the seats of the latrines.”<sup>113</sup> In the late nineteenth century, in the absence of any underground sewage system, low-caste sanitation workers were employed to manually collect fecal matter. This likely meant that the woman in question used the hole under the latrine to dig her way out of the privy as it was typically located at the edges of property to ease collection.<sup>114</sup> Knowledge of such sanitation infrastructure, and thus, the ability to appropriate it, likely traveled via subaltern networks of low-caste workers.<sup>115</sup>

Upon her escape, the unnamed woman was tracked by two police constables to the nearby Haraura camp—a musketry camp for rifle practice for troops in the winters—where officials claimed she travelled to solicit British soldiers. The constables arrested her and brought her back to the lock hospital where she stayed until her VD infection subsided—an act that the Medical Officer readily admitted was illegal as regulation did not extend to where she was arrested. Because officials were stunned by her method of escape, they installed iron bars over the openings beneath the latrines to prevent similar escapes. There is little to no information pertaining to escape via latrines at other stations, which indicates that the act may have been shaped by infrastructural contingencies at Benares. Nonetheless, records of different methods of women escaping lock hospitals go a long way to establish that the facility functioned more as a prison than a hospital, and that the women were more inmates than patients.

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<sup>113</sup> Med. Officer to Officer Comm., IOR/P/1002.

<sup>114</sup> On the development of modern toilets, see Yui Masuki, “Historical Development of Low-Cost Flush Toilets in India: Gandhi, Gandhians, and ‘Liberation of Scavengers,’” *Sanitation Value Chain* 2(2018): 3-26.

<sup>115</sup> I am grateful to Ahona Panda for bringing this to my attention.

While cantonment authorities had no trouble restricting Indian women from moving around or entering the cantonment area, they were far more reluctant to restrict the movements of British men due to not wanting to infringe their ‘liberty.’<sup>116</sup> This was attempted in Jabalpur in 1877, where officials tried to prevent soldiers from meeting with unregistered prostitutes by implementing a rule that forbade them from going into town without written permission—effectively consigning them to cantonment limits without it. However, the limits of cantonment land ran around a nearby *maidan* (park square) that was a green space. Indian women who wanted to gain entry into the barracks after nighttime used the expansive area to their advantage. In one officer’s description, they “came from the town to the station, and prowled about in a neighborhood of the large ‘maidan’ [a]round which the Cantonment boundary runs...[they] eluded the watch of the Police, and solicited soldiers with great success.”<sup>117</sup> *Maidans* were also common spaces for soldiers to venture into to solicit sex. To the north in Benares, diseased soldiers would tell officers they were infected in the *bazar* (marketplace) but among themselves in the barracks, they would state “on the *maidan*.”<sup>118</sup>

As *maidans* became a key site for sex work in relation to soldiers, registered prostitutes complained to cantonment authorities that they were not receiving customers in their regimental housing, and needed to shift their work to outdoor spaces in order to compete with unregistered women.<sup>119</sup> The notion of ‘competition’ in this regard paints a grim image of the economic precarity faced by women who were engaged in sex work near cantonment limits. Unregistered women did offer soldiers more competitive prices, anywhere between a few paises to one anna,

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<sup>116</sup> ‘The liberty of the soldier’ is a phrase that continually appears in colonial correspondence in this regard.

<sup>117</sup> A. H. L. Fraser, Offg. Asst. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Central Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 11 April 1877, IOR/V/24/2295. The word ‘maidan’ means square.

<sup>118</sup> Report on the Lock Hospital at Benares for the year 1874, January 30, 1875, No. 61, IOR/P/525.

<sup>119</sup> Extract from Proceedings of Cantonment Committee, Bareilly, March 12, 1875, No. 61, IOR/P/525.

compared to registered women who expected four annas per visit.<sup>120</sup> However, this kind of competition was indicative of a financial desperation that was to the detriment of many women and was exploited by British men. In some cases, there were reports that unregistered women exchanged sex with soldiers for loaves of bread.<sup>121</sup> The pressures of political economy remain the necessary context for understanding such increases in informal sex work.



**Figure 1.7** Calcutta's Fort William, Hooghly River, and Howrah. Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas*, 1909. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library.

With respect to the environment, what becomes clear overall is that when cantonment limits were marked by difficult-to-navigate spaces—canals, ravines, forests, and slopes—it was conducive to increased evasions of law. However, one natural environment that marked the edges of where Cantonment or CDA laws applied proved especially challenging: the limit of rivers. In Calcutta, the regulated city was separated from the western suburb of Howrah by the Hooghly River (Figure 1.7). Howrah was, in the eyes of lock hospital officials, a “convenient

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<sup>120</sup> Sixteen annas made up one rupee and four paisas made up one anna. These prices are corroborated in both colonial and anti-vice activists' reports. See Report of the Lock Hospital in Benares for the Year 1874, No. 61, IOR/P/525; Rate of pay of women, c. 1892, WL/AMSH/C/02/02, Box 091, Folder 1.

<sup>121</sup> Report on the Lock Hospital at Benares for the year 1874, January 30, 1875, No. 61, IOR/P/525.

refuge for...unregistered [women] and defaulters” during the early 1870s.<sup>122</sup> In the evenings, people reported seeing the river “covered in boats full of women” coming from Howrah into the city to engage in sex work during the night, and they were seen to leave the *ghats* (riverbanks) before sunrise.<sup>123</sup> Just as travel between Bandra and Bombay was facilitated by a short rail link, the regulated city of Calcutta and its unregulated suburb of Howrah were only separated by a boat ride across the Hooghly.

The Commissioner of Police in Calcutta recognized the importance of river-crossing to evade arrest, but now also worried that the construction of the Howrah Bridge over the Hooghly would create more opportunities to escape detection.<sup>124</sup> The completion of the bridge in 1874 did generate more options for mobility, and was used by troops from Fort Williams to cross over into Howrah for the same reasons that the women came to Calcutta. Evasions associated with river-crossing persisted to the north of Calcutta as well, where the Hooghly separated the Barrackpur Cantonment from the town of Serampore, and officials worried that the river posed a challenge to regular examinations as registered women could not be expected to “cross the river at all seasons.”<sup>125</sup> So perturbed were these officials at the calculated use of the river as a margin of regulation, that the Surgeon-Major in Calcutta bluntly observed: “on the one side a prostitute is liable to the law, on the other side she laughs at it.”<sup>126</sup>

Riverbanks were particularly difficult spaces to patrol, and evasive practices could continue even when the law was extended to either side of a river. The Attock Fort in northwest Punjab bordered the banks of the Indus, and since 1873 registration had been applied across a

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<sup>122</sup> Surgeon-Major Payne to Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, 1 February 1871, No. 6, Working of CDA in Presidency Towns, IOR/P/674, 186.

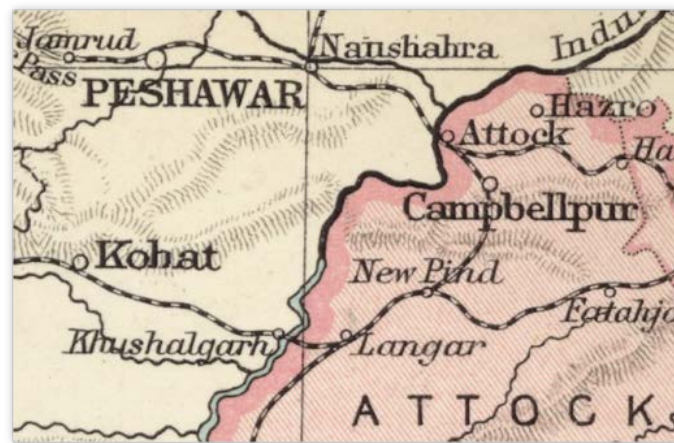
<sup>123</sup> Payne to Commissioner Police, Calcutta, IOR/P/674, 186.

<sup>124</sup> S. Hogg, Commissioner of Police, Calcutta to Secy. to Govt. of Bengal, 18 March 1875, No. 33, IOR/P/525, 363.

<sup>125</sup> Reports by Commissioners of Patna, Presidency, Cooch Behar, and Chota Nagpore Divisions on Working of Lock Hospitals in 1874, 14 June 1875, No. 23, IOR/525, 454.

<sup>126</sup> Payne to Commissioner Police, Calcutta, IOR/P/674, 186.

three-mile radius on both the Peshawar side and Rawalpindi side of the river (Figure 1.8).<sup>127</sup> However, the construction of the Attock railway bridge in 1882 as a pedestrian crossing above the Indus not only increased mobility across the river but also “brought together...a large concourse of people” to the locality.<sup>128</sup> Despite the extension of regulated space, prostitutes were still able to gather at the riverbanks opposite the Fort in the town of Khairabad and go undetected while soldiers were more than willing to cross the river to meet them as well.



**Figure 1.8** Indus River between Peshawar and Attock. Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India Atlas, 1909*. Courtesy of the Digital South Asia Library.

Navigating geographies in and around the cantonment, as well as at the limits of regulated spaces, proved crucial for mastering the craft of evasion. Whereas rail travel was primarily a tool for evading registration through movement to unregulated space, geographies such as rivers, ravines, hills, and forests, along with the spaces of the cantonment, were navigated to both evade registration and to create shadow worlds of sexual commerce within regulated spaces that would go undetected by policemen and patrols. However, the dynamics of sex work in these spaces invariably strengthened the bargaining hand of British soldiers, who defied a system set up for their benefit to take advantage of the cheaper price of sex outside of it.

<sup>127</sup> Attock Lock Hospital Report, 1873, Appendix to Home Department Proceedings, June 1874, IOR/P/138.

<sup>128</sup> Surgeon-General, Punjab to Secy. to Govt. Punjab, Reports on Lock Hospitals in Punjab for 1882, PPA/Civil Secretariat Library/M.25.

The fixed price of sexual encounters within regimental brothels pushed them to plummet in other places. For unregistered Indian women who engaged in sex work near barracks, success in evading detection and registration hardly amounted to dictating the terms of negotiation with British soldiers. And for soldiers, getting caught hardly carried the same consequences.

### **Colonial Hubris Undone**

Histories of prostitution in colonial India have generally read the era of regulation from the 1860s to the 1880s to be a pernicious project of hardening racial hierarchies and controlling unfree colonial subjects. Situated at the gap between law and practice, this chapter instead shows that regulation was at every step circumvented through the everyday evasions of ordinary women whose acts exposed the uneven terrains of empire on the ground. Even as the letter of regulation marked huge numbers of Indian women as prostitutes and identified them as the origin of venereal diseases, what remains striking is how effectively resistance materialized through the vessels of technology, exemptions, and environments.

Indian women endlessly frustrated colonial authorities as they utilized the railways to escape centers of regulation, defaulted from lock hospital examinations, and recruited the help of Indian men to push back against harassment and cautions from authorities. They did so in ways that demonstrated knowledge of how laws *worked*, even if they did not have a grasp on the exact content of those laws. Groups of women drew on information about which spaces were regulated and which geographies were more difficult to patrol. This knowledge was spread through what we may call subaltern networks of communication—information that spread via informal word of mouth—, insider intelligence, and through the activity of evasion itself. The more women were successful in bypassing registration and absconding, the more those methods were put to use by others. Moreover, honing in on the role of local police and

their collusions with wealthier women shows us that when laws passed down administrative ladders into everyday encounters, the Indian policemen who implemented them across also had a say in their working.

By fixating exclusively on prostitutes as ‘problems’ to be addressed, the colonial state entirely overlooked the role of British soldiers, who were themselves instrumental in shaping the inefficacy of regulated prostitution. Officials defended the sexist double-standards underpinning regulation by treating soldiers’ sexual desires as innate and immutable. But as historian Laura Briggs aptly points out, “ [no one] ever suggested that the vast numbers of unmarried women missionaries that encircled the globe were in need of paid sexual service to maintain their health.”<sup>129</sup> This double-standard was also apparent in how authorities used descriptive categories for practices of evasion among soldiers and prostitutes: when prostitutes crossed rivers to retreat to unregulated spaces they were, in the words of one official, ‘laughing’ at the law, and when soldiers strolled beyond the cantonment to meet women for casual and inexpensive sexual encounters, they merely preferred it over the unexciting and ‘repugnant’ option of buying sex from regimental prostitutes. Indeed, Indian women and British men defied the law from drastically unequal positions of power: the former bypassing laws that criminalized them and the latter defying a regulatory regime set up to benefit their health.

Beyond punitive colonial governance, the encounter between prostitution and empire in late nineteenth-century India was an encounter of resistance, evasion, and disruption. The development of popular legal chicanery among ordinary women turned them into formidable opponents of civilian governments and military authorities, and their everyday acts are a clarion

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<sup>129</sup> Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and US Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 24.



reminder to not mistake the rhetoric of colonial law with its enforcement on the ground, or, as Ashwini Tambe cautions, we “risk mirroring the hubris of colonial imagination.”<sup>130</sup> Colonial hubris was undoubtedly punctured when an international repeal movement against the CDA laws gained credence in the late 1880s and animated arms of anti-vice activism around the British Empire. On the surface, the movement forced an official re-assessment of policies to regulate prostitution and led to a complete rescinding of the legislation in India in 1888. But this was hardly the last word on the matter.

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<sup>130</sup> Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, 26.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REFORM: LAW IN FLUX AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

On September 4, 1888, a group of 50 women who were in-patients being treated for venereal disease at the Secunderabad Lock Hospital orchestrated a breakout. They picked the lock of the newly installed backdoor and escaped from the hospital during nighttime.<sup>1</sup> The Medical Officer at Secunderabad was alarmed when he learned about the development—and also expressed disappointment that the women took with them the government-provided garments intended for the use of admitted patients.<sup>2</sup> But this alarm was ill-judged. Earlier that day, the same Medical Officer had read out a military order to the admitted women that had been distributed among various cantonments across India.<sup>3</sup> The order reinforced the commitment to new rules that disallowed the compulsory examination of women engaged in prostitution by dictating that lock hospitals should operate as “purely voluntary institutions” under the most recent Cantonment Act (Act III of 1880), and that the detention of women under treatment should cease.<sup>4</sup> As with much of the collective action that women undertook in response to their medical regulation, the breakout at Secunderabad was based on the transmission of information. The only problem was that this information should not have been news to the women.

Some months earlier in June 1888, the House of Commons in Britain had passed a motion to repeal measures for compulsorily registering and examining women under a system of

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<sup>1</sup> Medical Officer, Lock Hospital, Secunderabad to Cantonment Magistrate, Secunderabad, September 5, 1888, No. 95, NAI/Foreign Dept. (FD)-B/95-105/1889.

<sup>2</sup> These are referred to as government saris in the Medical Officer’s letter.

<sup>3</sup> Memorandum No. 3704-D, Military Dept., September 4, 1888, NAI/FD-B/95-105/1889.

<sup>4</sup> Draft Telegram No. 3603-J, Foreign Dept., September 6, 1888, NAI/FD-B/95-105/1889.

regulation in India—effectively outlawing the CDA and clauses of the Cantonment Act.<sup>5</sup> Repeal had been the culmination of collaborative efforts in the late 1880s between anti-vice campaigners in India and Britain who appealed to parliamentary authority to call for an end to regulatory procedures set up in the name of reducing venereal diseases.<sup>6</sup> In the following month of July, the Military Department reluctantly followed through on the parliamentary order and circulated an official notice to inform various central and provincial authorities to immediately cease operations under the old system of regulation.<sup>7</sup>

The chain of communication, however, was anything but straightforward. In the Central Indian Agency, as late as September 1888, there were only two spare copies of the July notice, which had in any case not been distributed to all Cantonment Magistrates.<sup>8</sup> In Bangalore, mandatory medical examinations were still continuing. And the Resident in Mysore was called upon to intervene when it appeared that police were continuing to issue tickets to registered women. Reports of variation and inconsistency in practices were concerning, and fresh off the heels of damaging portrayals of the CDA as ‘licensed vice’ by repeal campaigners, the India Office was under pressure to provide evidence that repeal was being realized in practice. A second military notice was issued in September 1888 to be widely distributed among the relevant authorities reminding them of the new parameters. In the Princely State of Hyderabad, the Resident reported back that examination and registration had discontinued immediately upon

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<sup>5</sup> Hansard, House of Commons, vol. 326, June 5, 1888, 1187-1216.

<sup>6</sup> Notable figures were Josephine Butler and her Ladies National Organization that would later become the British arm of the international Association of Moral and Social Hygiene.

<sup>7</sup> Secy. to the Govt. of India, Military Dept. to Quartermaster-General India, No. 3006-D, July 26, 1888, House of Commons (HC)/Sessional Papers (SP)/East India/Vol. 64/1893-94.

<sup>8</sup> Central Indian Agency was the name given to smaller agencies and residencies in Central India (e.g., Indore, Bhopal, and Gwalior) that fell into the category of ‘Princely States’—states with local rulers that had subsidiary alliances with the Government of India.

receipt of the order issued in July.<sup>9</sup> However, the breakout in Secunderabad Cantonment, just four miles from the city of Hyderabad, revealed something very different.

That 50 women had escaped seemed inexplicable to hospital staff. Up until the day the women broke out, the Medical Officer claimed that they “showed no signs of discontent,” and even noted new freedoms in the hospital, namely allowing friends and family to bring the women coffee and *paan* (betel leaves).<sup>10</sup> Most significantly, he claimed that the women already knew their stay in the hospital was subject to their consent, even as he read the rules of the new lock hospital system to them. As to why the women would want to escape a voluntary situation, the Medical Officer speculated that they had become agitated and impatient due to not being discharged, having seen a batch of 32 women released in the days prior after they recovered from syphilitic ulcers and gonorrhea. However, the official version of events—where on the morning of the breakout the women were voluntarily patients in the hospital, only for them to become disgruntled and escape at night—hardly adds up.

Rather, what transpired on the night of September 4 painted another picture altogether. 50 out of 52 women who were inpatients actively collaborated to escape from the barred premises of the hospital—a collective action that prompted even the Medical Officer to note that the women “concerted a combined leaving.”<sup>11</sup> The notice that was read out to the women earlier that day informing them of their right to leave was likely the first time any of them came to understand they would not be breaking any laws or be subject to fines by exiting the hospital, and they duly obliged. Far from being voluntarily present, their admission as in-patients at the

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<sup>9</sup> Resident of Hyderabad to Foreign Dept., September 20, 1888, NAI/FD-B/95-105/1889. Residents were senior officials posted to Princely States who were responsible for overseeing the alliance between the Government of India and local rulers. The city of Hyderabad was the capital of Hyderabad State.

<sup>10</sup> Med. Off. to Cant. Mag., NAI/FD-B/95-105/1889.

<sup>11</sup> Med. Off. to Cant. Mag., NAI/FD-B/95-105/1889.

Secunderabad hospital had been abetted by an ignorance of law. After decades-long measures of compulsory detention in lock hospitals, the women now knew that they were free to leave. The question was, did women elsewhere know as well?

Just as ignorance of the law had been an asset for civil and military officials implementing the CDA, notably in terms of compelling women to register as prostitutes, so too was ignorance an asset now, whereby thousands of Indian women enmeshed in the institutes of regulation (e.g., station lock hospitals) did not always know the altered rules of detention. What had been referred to in the colonial record in the past as ‘absconding’ was now an exercise of free will. However, like with most colonial endeavors, this was not how it played out on the ground, as cantonment authorities continued to make provisions for examining and detaining women engaged in prostitution throughout the 1890s because many of them were not aware of a right to refusal. Officials and police were in no hurry to inform them either.

As much as the Government of India had hoped to put the matter to rest, 1888 did not mark an immediate shift in the legal landscapes of regulating prostitution. If anything, it marked a shift from transparency to secrecy as military authorities were ordered to cease generating and circulating registers of women who were attending examinations. But these orders were far from immediate to the workings of cantonments as shown by disparate communications, and the absence of registers did not put a halt to surveilling ‘suspect’ women either. Instead, a new Cantonment Act (XIII of 1889) gave way to more scandal and it included clauses that were deemed a backdoor to continuing the medical examination of women under the veneer of voluntary participation. Newspapers reported on it as being a clandestine ‘revival’ of the CDA.<sup>12</sup> The capacity under the new legislation to expel women from cantonments on account of having a

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<sup>12</sup> *Jam-e-Jamshed*, June 10, 1889, IOR/L/R/5/144.

venereal disease was, as scholars have shown, tantamount to “tethering women to supervision regardless of legal compulsion.”<sup>13</sup> Reworked methods of surveillance persisted, but implementing them furtively meant that the record on their operation was comparatively thinner.

Unlike the periods of regulated prostitution (1860s-1880s) and the relocation and elimination of brothels (1920s-1940s), the years in between cannot be said to have a defining legal impetus. The decade after 1888 was perhaps most significantly a time when military authorities, whether medical officers, army surgeons, or magistrates, defied parliamentary orders by surreptitiously continuing to medically regulate groups of women residing in the cantonment.<sup>14</sup> Philippa Levine most famously read this period as a time of ‘constitutional crisis’ where the topic of venereal diseases created political trouble between different arms of empire from Whitehall to the cantonment.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Stephen Legg has argued for reframing the 1890s as a ‘spatial crisis’ by arguing that it gave way to the altered geographies of the intensely-policed cantonment and the difficult-to-manage municipality.<sup>16</sup> In his reading, the turn of the century initiated the transition from ‘cantonments to cities,’ that is, from regulating the spaces of prostitution within cantonment areas to segregating them via municipal laws.<sup>17</sup>

Approaches to prostitution at the turn of the century also went beyond the clash between empire, governance, and metropolitan society. Whereas the era of the CDA had expanded the spaces of sexual commerce to various geographies beyond cantonments, as well as increasing numbers of brothels in municipalities, the period from the 1890s onward saw the social acceptability of women engaged in prostitution narrow. The late nineteenth and early twentieth

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<sup>13</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 308.

<sup>14</sup> Arnold P. Kaminsky, “Morality Legislation and British Troops in Late Nineteenth-Century India,” *Military Affairs* 43(1979): 78-84; Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 127-128.

<sup>15</sup> Levine, “Venereal Disease as ‘Constitutional Crisis.’”

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Legg, “Stimulation, Segregation and Scandal,” 1463.

<sup>17</sup> Legg, “Stimulation, Segregation and Scandal.”

century was notably when vernacular literatures, especially within Urdu and Hindi public spheres, came to depict prostitutes as ‘fallen women’ worthy of condemnation.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the brothel, once a space of visible regulation, was increasingly becoming an perceived site of peril and trafficking in cities that needed addressing.<sup>19</sup> All the while, military authorities in India also shifted tact slightly and looked to redirect British soldiers toward ‘leisure’ beyond sex and drink, including participation in sports, music, and temperance associations.<sup>20</sup> More than ever before, approaches and attitudes to prostitution were making a turn from regulation to reform.

But there is a lesser told story at the underside of reform that concerns, as much of this dissertation does, Indian women such as those in Secunderabad—caught up in old, new, and reworked systems of regulation—and how they came to understand their rights under these new regimes. The murkiness around new cantonment regulations can in one sense be read as an attempt to ensure that information did not trickle down to the actors whose rights were expanded by them. Yet, government orders were also differently interpreted in ways that indicated incompetence as much as callousness as to the appropriate application of law. The effect was, regardless, the same: rules on the non-compulsion of attending medical exams did not always reach the women whom it made freer subjects. Whereas legislation that criminalized women at the scale of the CDA could provoke information ‘panics,’ laws that decriminalized certain acts

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<sup>18</sup> Sarah Waheed, “Women of ‘Ill Repute’: Ethics and Urdu literature in colonial India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 48(2014): 1-38; Alison Safadi, “The ‘Fallen Woman’ in Two Colonial Novels: Umra’o Jan Ada and Bazaar-e-Husn/Sevasadan,” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 24(2009): 16-53. Notable texts include: Sarfaraz Husain Azmi Dehlavi, *Shahid-e-Rana* (Meerut, 1897); Mirza Muhammad Ruswa, *Umra’o Jan Ada* (Lucknow, 1899); Munshi Dhanpat Rai, *Shah Begum: Yaane Ek Bazari Mehvish ka Fasana* (Lahore, 1903), BL/Vernacular Tracts (VT)/3234e; Munshi Premchand, *Seva Sadan* (Calcutta, 1919).

<sup>19</sup> Legg, “Stimulation, Segregation, and Scandal,” 1504.

<sup>20</sup> On approaches to reforming the soldier earlier in the nineteenth century, see Douglas M. Peers, “Privates off Parade: Regimenting Sexuality in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire,” *The International History Review* 20(1998): 823-854; idem, “Soldiers, Surgeons and Sexually Transmitted Diseases.”

curiously travelled more gradually. The lesser told story at the turn of the century, then, does not concern, as so many histories have, tensions between repeal campaigners and the military, or the governing norms shaping newer legal interventions into prostitution, but rather, how the shift from regulation to reform was experienced on the scattered ground of empire in the form of inconsistent regulatory landscapes and uneven knowledge of laws among Indian women. This chapter is primarily concerned with this story.

The following pages examine how Indian women navigated rapidly changing colonial approaches to regulating prostitution in the two decades after the abolition of the CDA by asking a new set of questions about how knowledge of cantonment rules was transmitted among women even as their access to information was stymied. This chapter also considers how military authorities responded to Indian women learning of and acting upon their right to refusal from the early-to-mid 1890s by becoming more severe with their regulations in the late 1890s and early 1900s. This period saw harsher but less visible systems where women residing in cantonments either attended examinations or were expelled outright, which coincided with falling rates of venereal infections among British soldiers, and consequently, diminishing interest in Britain about the ‘scandal’ of regulation.<sup>21</sup> What authorities did not quite foresee, however, was that pushing more and more women engaged in prostitution out of cantonments allowed them to hide in plain sight by scattering them across municipal spaces. At a period of flux at the turn of the century, Indian women engaged in prostitution went from a moment of hyper-visibility under the CDA to becoming consigned to the cantonment, and then dispersed in the municipality. Yet,

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<sup>21</sup> Chart I ‘Admission Rates for Venereal Disease Among British Troops in India,’ August 12, 1905, IOR/L/MIL/7/13881.



despite limited options for disruption under more severe rules and regimes, trouble always remained on the cards.

### **Reading Repeal from Below: Information and Transmission**

In August 1888, upon orders from the Military Department, cantonment authorities in Lucknow ended their practice of keeping registers of women engaged in prostitution and recalled all active tickets issued to women residing in the regimental brothel.<sup>22</sup> The orders mandated that authorities ought to operate lock hospitals as voluntary institutes but did not specify precisely how. The Cantonment Magistrate applied a particularly narrow interpretation of ‘voluntary’ as he allowed weekly examinations to continue but granted that women would no longer be subject to fines for non-attendance. The surveillance of women also continued, albeit in subtler ways. Women who were newcomers to the cantonment, unmarried and in search of a steady income, were required to attend the station lock hospital for medical examination as a condition for permission to reside in the area. In doing so, the Medical Officer in charge kept an up-to-date list of women in the cantonment that effectively doubled as a register of women suspected of engaging in prostitution. Moreover, the Cantonment Magistrate neglected to inform the women that the examination was to be periodical and not a one-off. The repeal of the CDA may have defanged municipal authorities with respect to surveilling and arresting women suspected of prostitution, but it did little to reduce the authority Magistrates held within cantonments.

The passing of the CDA/Cantonment repeal via a parliamentary motion had been of great embarrassment for the military in India—that the issue needed to be taken up in the House of Commons was an indication of the mistrust that parliamentarians felt toward military officials

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<sup>22</sup> Report of the Special Commission appointed to inquire into the Working of the Cantonment Regulation regarding Infectious and Contagious Diseases, 33, HC/SP/East India/Vol. 64/1893-94.

and vice versa. Behind closed doors, even the Viceroy and his Secretary of State frustratingly fumed at the repeal campaigners who they termed the “raging sisterhood,” and resented the attention they had cast upon the system of regulation.<sup>23</sup> But in the weeks and months that followed, the reception of repeal among the Indian press was broadly positive. In south India, the bimonthly Tamil newspaper *Calaunidhy* reported that the repeal was a “move in the right direction,” while similar sentiments were expressed in the north in Meerut’s *Najm al-Akhbar*, which thanked members of the British Parliament.<sup>24</sup> In London, the weekly *Medical Record* also noted that popular feeling in Britain had helped “overthrow...the system of compulsorily examining women engaged in prostitution” in India.<sup>25</sup> The agitation against the CDA had notably connected reformist strands of civil society between colony and metropole.

Yet, it remained unclear what repeal would look like in practice. If it took the form of the 1889 Cantonment Act, then it was not much different from what it replaced, according to one report in the *Bombay Samachar*, which stated that “there seems to be little or no difference between the repealed Contagious Diseases Act and the Cantonment Bill.”<sup>26</sup> The report went on to claim that keeping women under systems of medical examination was tantamount to ‘supplying’ them for military men. Along with smuggling provisions for regulation under the thinly veiled guise of cantonment rules, repeal also manifested in terms of cosmetic changes to language in government correspondence. One military official advised that reports on the workings of the station hospitals that treated VD should now take care to replace the term “Lock Hospital” with “Voluntary Venereal Hospital.”<sup>27</sup> Beyond these interpretive acts, there was also

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<sup>23</sup> Lord Dufferin to Lord Cross, June 1, 1888, Mss. Eur/F130/11A. For a fuller account of the repeal campaign and the revelations that compelled parliamentary intervention, see Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 91-119.

<sup>24</sup> *Calaunidhy*, July 1, 1888, IOR/L/R/5/105; *Najm al-Akhbar*, June 24, 1888, IOR/L/R/5/65.

<sup>25</sup> “Our London Letter,” *The Medical Record*, June 9, 1888.

<sup>26</sup> *Bombay Samachar*, August 16, 1889, IOR/L/R/5/144.

<sup>27</sup> C. J. Lyall, Offg. Secy. to the Govt. of India to Secy. to the Govt. of N.W. Provinces, June 7, 1890, IOR/L/MIL/7/13832.

the fact that knowledge of repeal had simply not trickled down to the point of practice. Indeed, this had been the case not too long ago when the CDA appeared to be in full operation between its suspension and repeal.<sup>28</sup> As late as May 1888, the Police Commissioner of Bombay claimed he had no knowledge of the Act's suspension.<sup>29</sup>

Back at the Lucknow cantonment, periodical examinations openly continued beyond 1888—not for want of information, but because officials curiously believed this adhered to the principles of voluntary participation even as examinations were a condition for residence. It was not till March 1892, the Magistrate claimed—as part of an investigation in Britain into the working of cantonment rules—that he first received specific guidance from the Government of India on what precisely was meant by a ‘voluntary’ system, effectively admitting that the meaning of the system in the four years prior had been subject to his interpretative power.<sup>30</sup> This new guidance clarified that the keeping of any list of women who were attending periodical examinations, as the Medical Officer had been doing, was against the law. The Magistrate took the opportunity to inform the women attending hospital that “they were free to attend examination or not as they pleased.”<sup>31</sup> Once the women came to understand their right to refusal, many of them unsurprisingly stopped attending the hospital, and examinations decreased until they were almost at nil. The fact that marked decreases in women’s attendance at hospitals almost always followed notices of non-compulsion is the strongest indication that their attendance was shaped by concerns of arrests and fines. In other words, it was not informed.

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<sup>28</sup> The CDA was suspended in March 1888 before it was eventually repealed in June 1888.

<sup>29</sup> Unknown to A. S. Dyer, May 16, 1888, WL/AMSH/C/02/01.

<sup>30</sup> Report of the Special Commission, 33, HC/SP/East India/Vol. 64/1893-94.

<sup>31</sup> Report of the Departmental Committee appointed to Enquire into the Rules, Regulations, and Practice in the Indian Cantonments, xiii, HC/SP/East India/Vol. 64/1893-94.

Many Indian women may also have been cautious about the repeal of a system that for decades sought to coerce them and not immediately acted on information.

The abolition of the CDA raised a number of official concerns about how women infected with VD would continue to receive healthcare. Lock hospitals had primarily been introduced at scale in the 1870s to support the operation of regulation, but they also served to segregate healthcare among women. Widespread access to lock hospitals ensured that ‘respectable’ Indian women suffering from VD no longer had to go to the same dispensaries and hospitals as the Indian women engaged in prostitution—this was a segregation supported by an emergent class politics in India too. The potential shutting down of lock hospitals gave way to concerns about whether sex workers would be welcomed back by other patients into general wards. In the Presidency of Madras, the Surgeon-General put forward that this was a reason to maintain lock hospitals at a reduced scale, and questioned whether the women who attended lock hospitals would “readily go to ordinary hospitals [as] the lock they know and have confidence in.”<sup>32</sup> The claim that these women had ‘confidence’ in a hospital that detained them was belied by the Surgeon-General’s very next statement. He noted, just three weeks after the parliamentary motion to repeal, that around 60 Indian women were attending the lock hospital daily, but cautioned that “a large falling off in these numbers may be expected as soon as the women *realize that their admission is voluntary*.”<sup>33</sup> The onus was on the women to learn about the new parameters of voluntary participation, not on the cantonment or hospital staff to inform them. They were now at the behest of information.

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<sup>32</sup> G. Bidie, Surgeon-General, Govt. of Madras to Chief Secy. to Govt. of Madras, June 25, 1888, No. 27, IOR/P/3195.

<sup>33</sup> Bidie to Chief Secy., IOR/P/3195. Emphasis added. Around 5 European and mix-raced women (referred to as ‘Eurasian’) also attended this hospital.

In the coming months, it was found that many women in Madras did in fact realize that their attendance at the newly-named voluntary venereal hospitals was voluntary—a clearer statement on their confidence in ‘the lock’ than anything the Surgeon-General had claimed. In seven military stations in the Madras Presidency, the admissions of women into hospital exponentially declined between 1887 and 1889. In Secunderabad—the site of the September 4 breakout—admissions of women decreased from 654 in 1887 to only 4 recorded admissions in 1889.<sup>34</sup> In Bellary, 473 admissions of women in 1887 reduced to 35 in 1889. The Medical Officer reporting the figures noted that “compulsion ceased at each of these stations about the end of August 1888,” which in his view created much difficulty by way of placing checks on the spread of venereal disease.<sup>35</sup> The most effective measure of determining *informed* voluntary participation within systems of medical examination was thus not what was reported by the Magistrates and Medical Officers, but the rates of attendance among women residing in the cantonment, for few women wished to subject themselves to invasive genital exams unless absolutely necessary for their health.

The figures at Madras spell out a clear story of women recognizing their right to non-compulsion, but discrepancies at other cantonments tell a familiar story of the irregular implementation of government orders. At several stations in Bengal, women continued to be added to ‘registers of prostitutes’ throughout 1888—despite acknowledgement that the government notice dated July 26, 1888 had been received at those stations. In Danapur, 41 women were listed as registered prostitutes through to December 1888, and 25 had been added during the year. The Patna Commissioner’s personal assistant pointed out in his marginal notes

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<sup>34</sup> J. A. Hanbury, Principal Medical Officer, Madras to A. Kenney-Herbert, Secy. to Govt., Military Department, July 10, 1890, IOR/L/MIL/7/13902.

<sup>35</sup> Medical Officer to Secy., IOR/L/MIL/7/13902.

that “these names should have been struck out in accordance with the orders,” and requested the Commissioner to mandate their removal.<sup>36</sup> The situation was not much different 290 miles away in Barrackpur, a municipality just outside Calcutta, where 25 women remained on the register at the end of 1888 and 14 were added during the year. The reporting officer again noted that this was “in contravention of the orders contained in the [government] letter,” but that orders had been issued to put an end to the practice.<sup>37</sup> And in Darjeeling, it was similarly the case that “orders...regarding the abolition of compulsory registration...have not been carried out.”<sup>38</sup> Based on registration numbers, it appeared that cantonment authorities in Bengal had treated government orders with the utmost apathy and regulation had continued unabated.

Yet, registration numbers alone indicate little about whether women within a certain cantonment had knowledge of altered rules. Their presence on the lists could even be chalked down to a clerical error as they may have been registered prior to the CDA repeal in June but not struck off after—the very existence of an active register of women was nonetheless a violation of repeal as it had been set forth by the government. However, to adjudicate whether the women knew that non-compulsion was the order of the day after June, the relevant information once again pertains to the average attendance of registered women in hospital.

In Danapur, for instance, attendance and registration numbers were consistent—out of 41 registered women, 41 were attending examinations—indicating that regulation prevailed largely due to registered women being unaware that non-attendance was no longer a criminal offense. In Darjeeling, periodical examinations were similarly followed by registered women throughout 1888 even though complaints of non-attendance ceased after April. But in two municipalities

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<sup>36</sup> Returns of Cantonment Lock Hospital for Danapur for the year 1888, September 26, 1889, IOR/L/MIL/7/13903.

<sup>37</sup> Returns of Cantonment Lock Hospitals in Bengal for the year 1888, June 22, 1889, IOR/L/MIL/7/13903.

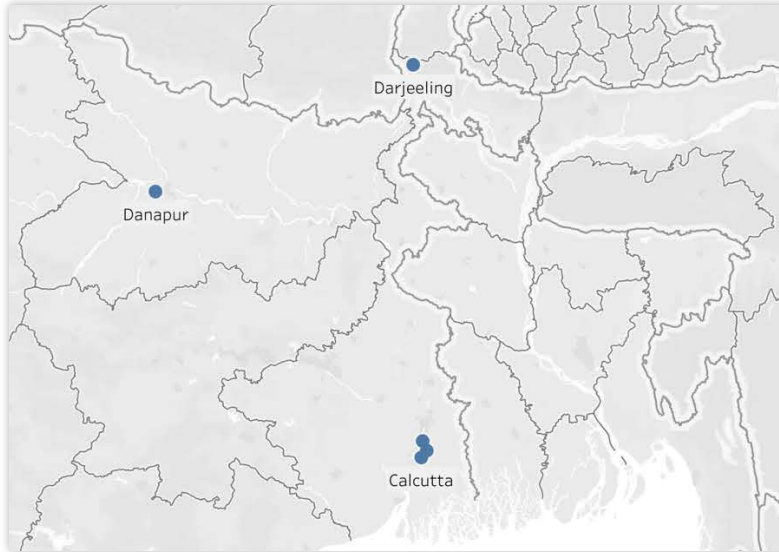
<sup>38</sup> LH Returns in Bengal for 1888, IOR/L/MIL/7/13903.

closer to Calcutta, Dum Dum and Barrackpur, the numbers told a rather different story. In Dum Dum, women stopped attending examinations after September, though there were no corresponding numbers of registration either, which suggested that all practices of regulation had ceased at the station. In Barrackpur, however, there was a clash between registration and attendance. While 25 names appeared as ‘registered,’ none were added after August, and the average monthly attendance reduced to nil around the same time. The continued presence of 25 women’s names on a register may have been in error, or, less charitably, a deliberate smokescreen to conceal the voluntary status of the system. Nonetheless, whatever the reasons for the continuation, they were rendered irrelevant as knowledge of non-compulsion among the women had won out.

The new regulatory landscape in Bengal was uneven in terms of both practice (e.g., register-keeping) and knowledge (e.g., non-attendance). The only consistency was that at some point in 1888 complaints of non-attendance to the Magistrate ceased at all cantonments. Even so, it remains unclear why women at certain stations knew of non-compulsion (e.g., Barrackpur) while women elsewhere did not (e.g., Danapur). Could it be that the proximity of Barrackpur and Dum Dum to Calcutta—where the operation of the CDA had been suspended in 1883—played a role? In Calcutta, the Act was suspended due to its unjustifiably vast expenditure, though there remained provisions for registering smaller numbers of women near Fort William.<sup>39</sup> With only 20 or so miles separating the three areas, women at Barrackpur and Dum Dum may well have known more about how non-compulsion worked given their proximity to a city where fewer women were compelled to attend lock hospitals, at least since 1883. The same information might have taken longer to travel to the farther off stations of Danapur and Darjeeling (Map 2.1).

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<sup>39</sup> Peary Mohun Mukherjee, Honorary Secy. to British Indian Association, to Secy. to the Govt. of Bengal, November 17, 1887, No. 38, IOR/P/3915.



**Map 2.1** Proximity of Bengal Command Stations to Calcutta (Barrackpur and Dum Dum are clustered with Calcutta and not labeled). Map by author.

But knowledge of the abolition of the old system could only travel—whether through networks of migrant and mobile women enmeshed in those systems, announcements, or newspaper reports, among others—if the rules were made public in the first place. In the colony of Aden, for instance, which was governed as a settlement in the Bombay Presidency until 1932, officials readily admitted that throughout 1888 “the new rules were not made public, and the women attended the periodical examination as usual.”<sup>40</sup> Being a port city on the Arabian Gulf, Aden was isolated from the geographies of colonial India across which information about the new rules could travel. Authorities did not convey information about the voluntary nature of the new system in 1889 either, given that there were 104 admissions of women at the venereal hospital during the year—a relatively high number for a station with a troop strength of less than 800 that could not occur in the absence of mandatory periodical exams.<sup>41</sup> It is unlikely the authorities would have gotten away with deliberately concealing the rules to this degree in India,

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<sup>40</sup> Report on Lock Hospitals in the Bombay Command for 1888, July 13, 1889, IOR/L/MIL/7/13905.

<sup>41</sup> Report on Voluntary Venereal Hospitals in the Bombay Command for 1889, August 28, 1890, IOR/L/MIL/7/13905.



considering that the cases of Danapur and Darjeeling at the very least provoked a reprimand from administrative assistants and reporting officers.

In Bombay, the discontinuance of the CDA and the non-attendance of women went hand in hand. On July 1, 1888, the day the CDA was discontinued, 29 out of 31 admitted women left the city lock hospital.<sup>42</sup> The introduction of the Act in Bombay had prompted a wave of evasive activity at the earliest stages of CDA implementation—it was unsurprising that repeal would also draw an immediate response from the affected women. On the other hand, stations in Bombay Command, which cut across a greater geography including the Central Provinces, did not receive orders to discontinue mandatory examinations until later that month. While the circulation of such orders among officers did not guarantee or even facilitate information reaching the women, the news was not secret for long. By the end of August, government orders abolishing practices of registration and examination “became known to the women.”<sup>43</sup> As a result, the majority of them discontinued their attendance at most station hospitals. In the following year, the former lock hospitals in Hyderabad, Karachi, and Kamptee were closed due to lack of patients, and hospitals at six other stations were “reduced to the lowest scale.”<sup>44</sup> Notably, within the Mhow cantonment in the Central Indian Agency—where the July resolution had been sparingly distributed—women continued to periodically attend examinations through to 1890. Whether information was not trickling down to the officials in charge or there were deliberate attempts to conceal it is unknown. However, military communication could also have been slower to penetrate the structures of governance in Princely States.

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<sup>42</sup> Report on the Working of the Contagious Diseases Act in Bombay for 1888, January 5, 1889, IOR/L/MIL/7/13818.

<sup>43</sup> Report on LHs in Bombay Command, 1888, IOR/L/MIL/7/13905.

<sup>44</sup> Report on VVHs in Bombay Command, 1889, IOR/L/MIL/7/13905.

There was one intriguing development among the women who continued to visit the venereal hospitals of their own volition: they were changing the way they received healthcare. At several stations, including Pune and the nearby cantonment of Khadki, women either refused to be admitted if they were found infected or explicitly attended as outpatients regardless of what was recommended by hospital staff. In 1890, all 23 women who were treated at the Pune cantonment hospital were treated as ‘outdoor patients.’<sup>45</sup> Comparatively, at Khadki, where the British troop strength was around 700, only three women attended the cantonment hospital in 1889, and out of the three, two attended as outpatients. In addition to attendances decreasing or completely ceasing, women now came to understand that they could access free healthcare to treat venereal infections on *their* terms as outpatients—a contrast to the 1870s when appropriations of the CDA as healthcare for famine-affected women came with the conditions of detention.<sup>46</sup>

Across stations in the Bengal, Madras, and Bombay commands, the approaches of cantonment authorities in communicating the new rules were varied: some practiced inaction to delay the transmission of information, and others actively concealed information to carry on procedures of regulation. The range of official responses, however, also included transparency and direct communication. In Delhi, where the lock hospital was operational under CDA rules, compulsory attendance of registered women was discontinued on August 31, 1888. On their last day of attendance, the women were informed that they were no longer obliged to attend the hospital, but that “it would be kept open for the treatment of all women...suffering from venereal disease.”<sup>47</sup> The Surgeon in charge at Delhi, like his colleague in Madras, hoped that the hundreds

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<sup>45</sup> Quarter Master General, Bombay Army to Secy. to Govt., Military Dept., Bombay, February 1, 1892, IOR/L/MIL/7/13905.

<sup>46</sup> See Hodges, “Looting the Lock Hospital.”

<sup>47</sup> Annual Report of the Delhi Lock Hospital for 1888, January 8, 1889, NLS/MHBI/75115615.

of women that had attended under conditions of obligation had enough confidence in the system to continue utilizing it as a form of healthcare. But the results were the same: attendance decreased to nil, and in October 1888, the lock hospital staff were dismissed due to the lack of operations. Women seeking healthcare could still request to see a doctor by informing the *chowkidar* (guard) in front of the non-operational building, but none did so, despite messaging to encourage women to attend. It was unsurprising that the 77 women who attended the lock hospital in August would prefer to seek healthcare under less coercive circumstances or to potentially even take up other forms of labor for income. But officials curiously held on to the view that a system set up to coerce Indian women into medical examinations for benefit of the health of British soldiers was one that those women had confidence in.

The question of how rapidly women who were engaged in prostitution within cantonments learned of new rules that no longer compelled them to be examined was mixed. At multiple stations in Madras, the spread of this knowledge caused attendance to completely diminish toward the end of 1888, which was also the case across the Bombay Command barring the Mhow cantonment. In Bengal, results varied, and it appeared that women were likelier to know of and act on the rule of non-compulsion when they were closer to other stations where the same was occurring. Proximity could also influence strategies. In the case of Pune and Khadki, stations that were four miles apart, women similarly began to approach healthcare around VD as outpatients.

Official policies of communicating the abolition of the CDA system overall varied. In some cases, notices were read out, and in others, authorities engaged in inaction and waited for the women to blink first. Further, reluctance to act on orders of abolition and expressions of frustration with women's attendance being made voluntary became more frequent in colonial

correspondence after 1888. Officials lamented rises in VD among British troops and hardly missed an opportunity to blame the voluntary nature of the system. But such a view was only possible from above where the assumption that there had been a complete overhaul of the old regulatory landscape could take hold. The Secretary of State, Lord Cross, expressed this view when he wrote to the Viceroy “deeply regret[ting] the increase of disease,” but noting that the increases “relate to a period when restrictive measure were entirely withdrawn...for four months of [1888], and for the whole of 1889.”<sup>48</sup> It was not until 1890, he noted, that the new Cantonment Act gave authorities more control over persons within cantonment limits.

Cross’s claims that restrictive measures were completely withdrawn was of course proven wrong by what had been occurring on the ground. Information had reached cantonments inconsistently, and had on occasion been deliberately concealed. In some cases, authorities held out hope that ignorance would prevail, and in many cases women’s knowledge of non-compulsion won out. However, Cross was right to note that the application of the new Cantonment Act beginning in 1890 would change things, for it targeted the *conditions* under which Indian women could continue to remain in cantonment areas.

### **‘Rereading the 1890s’ Redux: The Crisis on the Ground**

Once the deliberately opaque Cantonment Act came into play, it aroused suspicion among an international network of missionaries that the Government of India was continuing to periodically examine women for venereal diseases by setting it as a condition for their residence inside the cantonment. These suspicions ultimately led to the creation of two investigative committees: a parliamentary committee chaired by the Under-Secretary George Russell and a special commission led by civil servant Denzil Ibbetson. The Russell Committee was to consult

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<sup>48</sup> Lord Cross, Secretary of State to Lord Marquis, Governor-General of India, April 23, 1891, IOR/L/MIL/7/13834.

evidence gathered by two American missionaries, Elizabeth Andrew and Katherine Bushnell, who conducted investigations at 10 military stations in north India in 1892, whereas the Ibbetson Commission was to conduct its own cantonment visits to determine whether regulations were consistent with the order of parliamentary repeal.<sup>49</sup> Both were to furnish reports concerning the working of cantonment regulations with respect to prostitution that constituted a mammoth project in information-gathering including correspondence, interviews, and testimonial evidence.<sup>50</sup> This degree of scrutiny put military authorities on the backfoot, for they could not be seen to be permitting cantonment practices below that defied parliamentary dictates from above—the ‘constitutional’ crisis that Levine argued casted prostitution *as* politics in the 1890s.

There were, however, other markings of trouble brewing on the ground: most notably, the trouble of communication. When Liberal MP James Stansfeld questioned the then Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, Lord Roberts, as part of the Russell Committee hearings, Stansfeld probed him about precisely this. He pointedly asked why certain communications within military command pertaining to the Act were marked as ‘confidential’ when “the changes...after...1888 should [have been] generally and widely known” to the Indian public and especially to the women who fell under the rules.<sup>51</sup> Roberts replied that the channels of communication went from general officers to subordinates at particular regiments, and that it was the latter’s job to inform the women that their attendance at hospitals was not compulsory. Stansfeld prodded that there ought to have been means to “deliberately and systematically ...bring new arrangements to the knowledge of all parties concerned,” and not merely to

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<sup>49</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 110.

<sup>50</sup> *Report of the Committee appointed by the Secretary of State to inquire into the Rules, Regulations, and Practice in the Indian Cantonments and elsewhere in India with regard to Prostitution and to the Treatment of Venereal Diseases* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1893). For a thorough account of the politics behind the creation of the committees and their enquires, see Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class*, esp. 68-95.

<sup>51</sup> *Report of the Committee*, Appendix I: Minutes of Evidence, 75.

officers.<sup>52</sup> Roberts offered evasive answers to this line of inquiry and defended the chain of communication. But Stansfeld's questioning had hit the mark: whether during the 1870s or the 1890s, the military had never been interested in informing Indian women of their rights in either the municipality or the cantonment—especially if it was their right to refusal.

However, the challenge for women now was not merely recognizing that the old CDA/Cantonment system had been repealed, but also understanding what had replaced it. In other words, they shared the interpretive task of determining what the 'voluntary' parameters of the new Cantonment Act were, that is, if they knew it was voluntary at all. Notably, the continuation of regulatory provisions via routine legislation provoked far less circulation of information than the introduction of regulation had done via the CDA.<sup>53</sup> Indian women as a collective were in this case at a disadvantage. The point of information between the cantonment authorities and the women on the ground ought to have been middlepersons such as the *chaudari* (chief) of the Saddar Bazar or the *mahaldharni* (matron) with whom authorities had collaborated in the past to recruit more registered women during trooping season.<sup>54</sup> Yet, there is little to indicate that these figures played a role in facilitating women's appropriations of colonial order as policemen had done during the CDA era.

In the 1890s, cantonments sought to tap into these established networks in order to reopen brothels in the bazars. However, they kept the new arrangements under the books: the registers would remain closed and tickets would not be issued. At the Meerut cantonment, the Artillery Adjutant wished to reopen the regimental *chakla* (brothel) in 1890, and turned to the old

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<sup>52</sup> *Report of the Committee*, Appendix I, 76.

<sup>53</sup> The distinctiveness of the CDA also came from the fact that it was independent statewide legislation that gave municipalities wide-ranging powers exclusively for dealing with women suspected of engaging in prostitution.

<sup>54</sup> 'Saddar Bazar' was the name given to the general cantonment bazar. Regiments (infantry, artillery etc.) also had their own bazars. In Bombay Command Lock Hospital reports, such women are referred to as 'detective dais.' *Dai* was another term for matrons.

*mahaldharni* to recruit women back, though this brothel remained open for only nine months, and the women found themselves displaced when turned out of the regimental bazar. The precarious residence of women in regimental areas created an unprecedented demand for accommodation in the Saddar Bazar, where more and more women earning income from prostitution now sought housing. The decision to allow women engaged in prostitution to take up residence in the Saddar Bazar was a means to put more distance between the regimental areas (e.g., infantries and artilleries) and brothels, but maintaining the place of the latter within the cantonment.

Ibbetson's Special Commission visited Meerut's Saddar Bazar in June 1893 and were told by informants that some government land had been allotted to a woman named Hira "as a private speculation" to operate as a *chakla*.<sup>55</sup> Unable to designate a building an official brothel, the cantonment had effectively outsourced the work of brothel management to a middleperson—an early example of how issues of property and prostitution had already begun to collide and would continue to do. In 1893, there were around 71 women residing in the *chakla* who engaged in sex work in various regimental bazars as well as the Saddar Bazar. Whereas medical examinations had ceased for the period between 1888 and 1890, the periodical inspections were reintroduced sometime during 1890. However, with renewed scrutiny upon cantonments and their operations, especially following the investigations conducted by Andrew and Bushnell, authorities were under pressure to ensure that the attending women understood their examinations were voluntary. If the latter part of 1888 was anything to go by, informing already

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<sup>55</sup> *Report of the Special Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Working of the Cantonment Regulations regarding Infectious and Contagious Diseases* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1893), 12. Hira was identified as a prostitute by the Commission.

attending women that their attendance was voluntary was as clear an indication as could be that it was not so in practice.

One unnamed woman in the Saddar Bazar told the members of the visiting Ibbetson Commission that some weeks earlier staff at the cantonment hospital asked several women as a group whether they “came of their own will.”<sup>56</sup> When the women answered in the negative, they were reportedly told they did not have to come if they didn’t want to. But the same woman also went on claim that there was precedent for the punishment of non-attending women, citing the story of a woman named Munni, who refused to attend examinations and was imprisoned for eight days. The Commission made inquiries and found that the registered case against Munni showed a criminal charge for engaging with a soldier in public rather than non-attendance at hospital.<sup>57</sup> Irrespective of whether the claim about Munni and the soldier was true or not, cantonment authorities had changed the way they punished disobedient women who exercised refusal. Because non-attendance was itself not a crime, they had to find different grounds for punishment—in Munni’s case, it was ‘indecent exposure’ in public. The women at Meerut reported that if their examination resulted in a diagnosis of VD, they had little choice but to accept their detention in hospital or risk losing their place of residence within the cantonment, which was direct consequence of tethering accommodation to examination.

The Medical Officer in charge of the Cantonment Hospital at Meerut, on the other hand, claimed that he followed orders directly from the Magistrate, and even when he received official circulars casting doubt over the operation of periodically examining women for VD, the interpretation of said circular was always up to the Magistrate even if other Commanding Officers disagreed. He was adamant that the examinations were not in any way an indication that

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<sup>56</sup> *Report of the Special Commission*, Appendix, xxv.

<sup>57</sup> *Report of the Special Commission*, Appendix, xxv.



the attending women were ‘licensed’ by the government, and contended that this was often explained to the women by the hospital staff. He was curiously silent about whether the women understood that attendance itself was non-compulsory, and that connecting examinations to their application for residence was a violation of what were meant to be the voluntary parameters of the system. In the case of Munni, her non-attendance at hospital may well have been informed by knowledge that the system was meant to be voluntary, but she was still slapped with a criminal charge that led to a week’s imprisonment—the strongest indication that at Meerut the exercise of refusal was met with harsh measures. Even under the guise of a reformed system, authorities continued to make use of cantonment powers to target women they deemed disobedient.

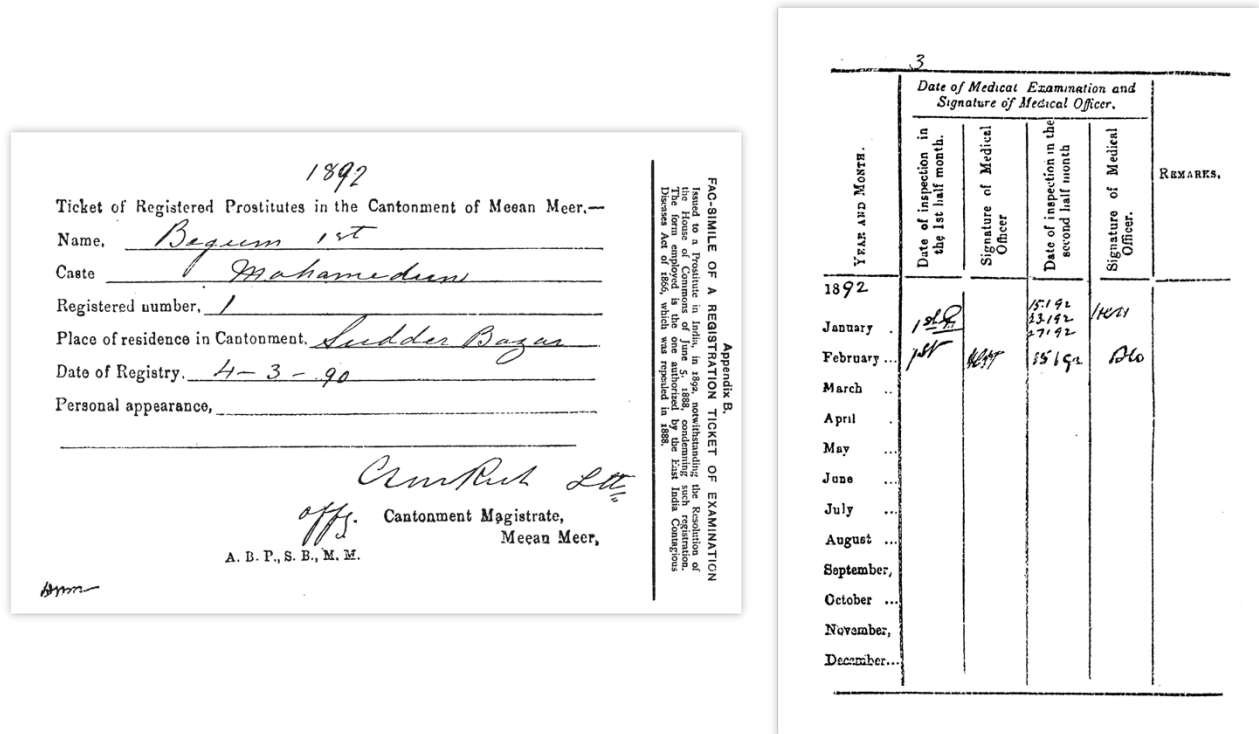
One of the more sensational finds from Andrew and Bushnell’s investigations considered by the Russell Committee was the revelation that registration tickets were still being issued at the Meean Meer cantonment in Lahore. Meean Meer had a significant troop strength of over a thousand, but also had one of the highest instances of venereal disease, with over half of the soldiers admitted for VD infections in 1889.<sup>58</sup> There had been some inconsistencies at the station in the wake of abolishing the lock hospital system: the register of prostitutes closed at the end of August, but curiously reopened with 54 names in October, before closing again at the end of December.<sup>59</sup> Records of average attendances at hospital were not maintained after September, but a new record for women attending periodical examinations was opened in October 1889, which doubled as a register similarly to the operation in Lucknow. But authorities at Meean Meer were carrying out the highly irregular measure of also issuing physical registration tickets. This was discovered when Andrew and Bushnell visited the Meean Meer Lock Hospital, where

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<sup>58</sup> G. Farrell, Inspector General of Civil Hospitals in Punjab to Chief Secy. to Govt. of Punjab, May 13, 1890, NLS/MHBI/75115615.

<sup>59</sup> Annual Report of Meean Meer Lock Hospital for 1888, February 1, 1889, NLS/MHBI/75115615.

they found counterfoils from a blank receipt book kept by the hospital staff that turned out to be the stubs of registration tickets (Figure 2.1). Other forms at the facility showed that requests for issuing such tickets all had to be approved by the Cantonment Magistrate, indicating that the practice was institutional. No mention of licensing or ticketing found its way into official correspondence on Meean Meer.



**Figure 2.1** Registration Ticket from Meean Meer, c.1892, introduced as evidence by Elizabeth Andrew and Katherine Bushnell. Source: *The Queen's Daughters in India* (1899).

Complaints arising out of the findings from Meean Meer were put forward to the Government of India, who tried to pass off the case as exceptional relative to other cantonments. However, the situation at Meean Meer was comparable to the operations at other stations such as Lucknow and Meerut, considering that permission for women to reside in the cantonment was tethered to their medical examinations. The only clear-cut 'exception' was the issuing of tickets. But even so, other factors at Meean Meer do stand out. Despite the fact that their register officially closed in 1888, there is nothing to suggest that authorities took the initiative to inform

the concerned women that their attendance could only be voluntary from thereon—as had been done in Delhi. The brief reopening of the register in October gives every indication that authorities were holding out hope that ignorance among the women would prevail.<sup>60</sup>

It is similarly telling that registration at Meean Meer was revived as early as October 1889 in the form of lock hospital attendance records, whereas no such resumption was reported in the nearby cantonments of Jalandhar and Ferozepur.<sup>61</sup> In fact, in Jalandhar, women from neighboring villages travelled to the cantonment Saddar Bazar in increased numbers knowing that they could no longer be registered and compelled to attend examinations.<sup>62</sup> In Meean Meer, the Medical Officer deliberately offered no information beyond quantitative returns in his annual reports, which, when considered alongside other inconsistencies, suggests that there were active attempts to conceal public knowledge of non-compulsion at the station. This would explain why tickets were discovered at Meean Meer but not at any nearby cantonments.

The cantonment scandals of the early 1890s, cast by historians as moments of crises, both constitutional and spatial, are considered here instead at the axis of knowledge and communication. Information pertaining to cantonment regulations travelled within the military command via obtuse channels of communication and often did not reach Medical Officers, let alone become the object of knowledge among Indian women in the Saddar Bazars. However, beyond scattered communications, the cases of Meean Meer and Meerut also show that authorities actively tried to conceal regulations from becoming public knowledge and punished informed women who exercised their right to refuse examinations. When read from below, the 1890s are seen not in terms of tensions between Whitehall and the military, or as hardening the

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<sup>60</sup> Report of Meean Meer LH, 1888, NLS/MHBI/75115615.

<sup>61</sup> Annual Report of Meean Meer Lock Hospital for 1889, March 7, 1890, NLS/MHBI/75115615.

<sup>62</sup> Annual Report of Jullundur Lock Hospital for 1888, January 10, 1889, NLS/MHBI/75115615.

divide between cantonment and municipality, but instead, as a tussle between Indian women and military authorities. The women jostled for information in order to exercise their right to reside in cantonments without intervention, whereas authorities scrambled to limit their exercise of this right by making the women's capacity to reside conditional upon medical examinations.

In 1893, the publication of the two committee reports into the workings of cantonment regulations revealed in the clearest terms that the army in India was systematically defying parliamentary orders—of course, the charge that they were violating Indian women's rights was of little, if any, note. The military was nonetheless compelled to forgo many powers it exercised over Indian women in the cantonment, even if only as a temporary measure to save face amid widespread scrutiny.

### *Empire Speaks Back to Refusal*

Sometime before June 1895, two women named Kalia and Husaini had quietly left Mathura, a town 93 miles from Delhi, for the long northward journey to the hill station of Chakrata. Kalia, in particular, was on the radar of military officers in Mathura because investigations into the spread of syphilis among five British soldiers there within five weeks had supposedly traced the men back to her. The Surgeon-Captain at the Station Hospital in Mathura thought it prudent to inform authorities in Chakrata as “it would be desirable to have her expelled from cantonments if she is living there now.”<sup>63</sup> Kalia, who was recognizable by a mark on her forehead, left with Husaini before any action could be taken in Mathura. Still, authorities were hopeful the women could be dealt with in Chakrata. However, the Medical Officer there cautioned that “absolutely nothing” could be done under the newly amended Cantonment Act (V of 1895). Women

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<sup>63</sup> Surgeon-Captain L. E. Anderson, in charge Station Hospital, Muttra to the Principal Medical Officer, Meerut and Bundelkhand Districts, June 21, 1895, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

suspected of being infected with venereal disease could not be compelled to attend hospital nor could their non-attendance be cause for expulsion. In fact, a Principal Medical Officer with seniority reprimanded the Surgeon-Captain at Chakrata, noting that “such women can only be turned out of the regimental bazaar,” and not from the Saddar Bazar.<sup>64</sup> Kalia and Husaini may have evaded the eye of authorities, but on this occasion, they had not broken any laws either.

If Kalia and Husaini were en route to the Chakrata cantonment, as officials at Mathura alleged, they would have found that Indian women at their destination had also been troubling authorities of late. At Chakrata, a system of medically examining women had been in place throughout 1894. This would be confirmed by later correspondence, but the report on the Cantonment Hospital from 1894 only implied so by stating that there was a class of women in-patients that “prevented the general public from seeking admission.”<sup>65</sup> However, in 1895, the women who attended hospital reportedly came to know about the cantonment ‘scandals’ brewing above, or, in the words of the Medical Officer, they “became aware of the *agitation* in England, and no longer sought medical aid.”<sup>66</sup> Roughly around the time when Kalia and Husaini left for Chakrata, the Cantonment Hospital had emptied out. The women there had refused to be subject to any further medical regulation and authorities could barely conceal their frustration. The Medical Officer noted: “40 of these women plied their trade, unchecked and unmolested...at Chakrata, with considerable pecuniary profit to themselves.”<sup>67</sup> It is possible that Kalia and Husaini may have decided to make the long journey to Chakrata from Mathura because they had knowledge that controls over women there ceased around June in 1895.

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<sup>64</sup> Principal Medical Officer, HM Forces to Principal Medical Officer, Bengal Command, July 9, 1895, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

<sup>65</sup> Annual Report on the Cantonment Hospital in Chakrata for 1894, July 6, 1895, IOR/L/MIL/7/13913.

<sup>66</sup> Report of Medical Officer in Chakrata, November 22, 1897, excerpted in Summary of Reports Received in Explanations of Variation in VD Admissions Among British Troops for 1894-1895, March 23, 1898, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877. Emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> Report of Medical Officer in Chakrata, November 22, 1897, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

Under new cantonment provisions, authorities were stripped of the ability to expel women refusing examination and doctors could now only ‘request’ women to attend hospital.<sup>68</sup> Indian women seeking work in cantonment areas could as a result exercise more freedoms than before and not face the same degree of surveillance. Whilst the amended Cantonment Act had been brought about through political pressure from Britain following evidence gathered by anti-regulation campaigners, the participation and responses of Indian women in their findings were indispensable. Women informed investigators of their experiences at cantonments and spoke out about the conditions of residence and punishments for disobedience. In many cases, their collective non-attendance in response to learning that examinations ought to operate on a voluntary basis was considered as evidence by committee members of the non-voluntary operation of those systems in the first place. Indian women may have been relegated to a space of non-agency in the reporting of missionaries, but they certainly played an important role in shaping understandings of cantonment regulations.<sup>69</sup>

The remarkable claim that the women at Chakrata station ceased attending examinations because they became aware of an ‘agitation’ against such practices among reformers in Britain is especially striking. The crisis that became known as the “Indian Cantonments Scandal” was reported on in widely circulated newspapers.<sup>70</sup> But more importantly, the fact that committees had begun conducting on-site investigations would have also necessarily alerted the women to the fact that protest against the regulations was growing. Officials derided the development that women who once acted in fear of compulsory examinations now acted with awareness of their

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<sup>68</sup> H. B. Thornhill, Cantonment Magistrate, Chakrata to Senior Medical Officer, Chakrata, June 27, 1895, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

<sup>69</sup> Ratnabali Chatterjee (1993) has drawn attention to the how protest against the regulation of prostitution saw Indian women engaged in sex work rapidly transition from criminal to victim in missionary discourse. See Chatterjee, “The Indian Prostitute as a Colonial Subject: Bengal, 1864-1883,” *Canadian Woman Studies/Le Cahiers De La Femme* 13(1993): 51-55.

<sup>70</sup> “Indian Cantonments Scandal,” July 16, 1894, *Times of India*.

right to not attend. The Magistrate in Ranikhet lay the blame for increases in venereal infections—which was a significant 77 per cent of troops at the station in 1896—on “ignorant hill women” who had once been ‘kept in check’ by regulations but now openly solicited soldiers due to the fact of “the abolition of examination becoming widely known.”<sup>71</sup> Information was now circulating at a more rapid rate, yet there is little to indicate that authorities were not banking on the currency of ignorance even as the limits of punitive power inside the cantonment became well known in the mid-1890s.

Significant increases in venereal disease, both in primary and secondary infections, coincided with the amended Cantonment Act, and military officials were keen as ever to explain the increases in terms of efforts to hamper their powers. In Jhansi in the Bundelkhand District, the Medical Officer expressly stated that he “attributed the great increase in 1895 to the suspension of the Contagious Diseases Act in a district noted for the immorality of the female population.”<sup>72</sup> He further remarked that the Act had been a deterrent on the “open immorality of coolie women, other than prostitutes”—the claim being that the absence of regulations and knowledge of such was pulling more groups of laboring women (deemed ‘openly immoral’ in colonial parlance) into seeking income from prostitution.

But as authorities focused on their limited abilities to act against women, and the fact of more women knowing those limits, they ignored other pertinent factors on the ground, such as famine, which developed in many parts of India in the late 1890s, and caused the number of women turning to prostitution for survival to swell.<sup>73</sup> To the east of Jhansi, there was Nowgong,

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<sup>71</sup> Cantonment Magistrate, Ranikhet, to Medical Officer, Chaubattia, June 11, 1897, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

<sup>72</sup> Report of Medical Officer at Jhansi, March 10, 1898, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877. The CDA was never in application at Jhansi—it was explicitly designed for Presidency Towns—but the term ‘Contagious Diseases Act’ came to stand in for any system of regulating prostitution in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>73</sup> On the connections between prostitution and famine across modern history see Cormac O Gráda, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), esp. 59-63.

where a famine began in 1895, and the station Medical Officer claimed that this “caused many low caste women to take to prostitution.”<sup>74</sup> With regard to VD rates, however, officials believed this was not as much of a concern as there was a perception that women who hadn’t engaged in sex work would be less liable to spread disease—that British troops would spread disease to them was not given the slightest consideration, nor did the military discuss measures to boost famine relief efforts.<sup>75</sup> Medical authorities within the military remained convinced that the problem of unprecedented VD rates was connected more to the abolition of regulatory controls than to famine and economic pressures.

Nonetheless, the abolition of these controls did not mean that women within cantonments were no longer subject to harsh measures. In Barrackpur toward the end of 1895, the homes of women engaged in or suspected of engaging in prostitution were demolished.<sup>76</sup> The Medical Officer claimed that these houses were ‘out of repair,’ though the act of demolition seems no less than an attempt at displacement, as the women were unable to secure alternative accommodation in the cantonment, and thereby compelled to depart. Their reported attempts to engage in sex work in outdoor settings failed as military police supposedly took stringent measures to prevent open solicitation. Because station returns from Barrackpur in 1895 showed a considerable 22 per cent decrease in VD rates, army officers were desirous of connecting the displacement of women with the decline in infections to both justify removing the women from their homes and, perhaps, to encourage the practice of demolition elsewhere. But as the demolitions occurred too late to have any impact on the 1895 returns, senior officers instead claimed they took place in 1894,

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<sup>74</sup> Report of Medical Officer at Nowgong, November 27, 1897, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877. The caste status of the women is likely speculation on the Medical Officer’s part.

<sup>75</sup> Newspapers heavily criticized government responses, or lack of, to the famines. A report in Lahore’s *Koh-i-Nur* on September 29, 1896 specifically called out the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab for holidaying in the hill station of Simla while people suffered from shortages and ballooning grain prices on the ground.

<sup>76</sup> Report of Medical Officer in Barrackpore, n.d., IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.



even though the station Medical Officer stated in two places that they were carried out later in 1895.<sup>77</sup> Whether this discrepancy was a clerical error or a deliberate attempt to skew facts is unknown, but regardless, the fact that the displacement of the women in Barrackpur did not contribute to lower VD rates remained unaddressed.

In actual practice, the dispersal of women engaged in prostitution from Cantonment Saddar Bazars to spaces beyond it did not eliminate access to sexual commerce for British soldiers, but only scattered it in spatial terms. While authorities had attempted to cast displacement in a positive light in Barrackpur, there was a contrasting response far west in the frontier outpost of Quetta in Balochistan. Here, the closing of the cantonment brothel in 1895 similarly spread the women who resided there to public streets across the town, but in this case, authorities were frustrated with the lack of central control over the spaces of prostitution.<sup>78</sup> In the absence of organized police surveillance, the women in Quetta also acquired easier access to liquor to incentivize soldiers to visit them. Pushing these women out of cantonments was a punitive response to more women becoming informed of their right to not be examined, as well as a desperate strategy to reduce VD rates. However, by driving women out, authorities also pushed the activity of sexual commerce from the cantonment into municipal space.<sup>79</sup>

Officers in military command were also becoming increasingly vexed with attempts by missionaries to interfere with the sexual habits of soldiers through letters, pamphlets, and lectures.<sup>80</sup> In some cases, persons identified as ‘midnight missionaries’ tried to mediate at the site of the brothel itself by waiting outside the building and intercepting British soldiers to try to

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<sup>77</sup> Memorandum by W. G. Macpherson, Deputy-Assistant Director, Army Medical Services, April 19, 1899, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

<sup>78</sup> W. Galbrath, Commanding Quetta District to Principal Medical Officer, Bombay Command, September 4, 1897, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

<sup>79</sup> This brothel closure ultimately led to one of the earliest proposals to relocate women into a segregated area in Quetta, but the proposal was rejected. See chapter 3.

<sup>80</sup> This was explicitly mentioned by the Commanding District Officer in Quetta in 1897.

convince them to turn back.<sup>81</sup> Such acts often led to skirmishes not only between the soldiers and the missionaries, but also with the women working in the brothels who resented outside attempts to influence their prospective clients. The Commissioner of Police in Bombay reported that policemen had become the target of harassment by the three parties when they attempted to prevent such conflicts in public streets in the city.<sup>82</sup> While the Government of India had a stake in portrayals of missionaries as being excessively meddling with the order of things, such reports do much to convey that brothel workers frequently had adversarial relations with the missionaries who claimed to be aiding them.

The problem of the unprecedented scale of VD among British troops, nonetheless, remained a serious one. In the late 1890s, several thousands of British soldiers were “*constantly* in hospital for venereal disease.”<sup>83</sup> Many stations reported more re-admissions than in previous years, and these figures importantly did not include one-off admissions or mild cases where soldiers were treated as outpatients. The issue as described by military authorities was dire enough to suggest that a large portion of the soldiery in India were not fit to serve in the field and only fit enough for “service under peace conditions.”<sup>84</sup> Military authorities continued to assign a large portion of the blame for high incidences of VD to Indian women such as Kalia and Husaini. However, as the amendments of 1895 meant that their immediate course of action could no longer be pushing for harsher controls over these women, their instinctive response was to turn

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<sup>81</sup> On the tactics of midnight missionaries beyond India, see Annet Mooij, *Out of Otherness: Characters and Narrators in the Dutch Venereal Disease Debates, 1850-1990* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 39.

<sup>82</sup> Lord Lansdowne, Governor-General of India to Lord Cross, Secretary of State, May 8, 1894, IOR/L/PJ/6/373/File 813.

<sup>83</sup> Lord Hamilton, Secretary of State to Lord Elgin, Governor-General of India, March 26, 1897, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877. Emphasis added.

<sup>84</sup> Hamilton to Elgin, IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

more Indian women out of military spaces, even to the point that laboring Indian men protested that they could not bring their wives into cantonment areas.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the ‘panic’ among cantonment authorities of being stripped of their powers over Indian women, the 1895 amendments were short-lived. Only two years later, the Military Department informed Whitehall that the repeal of the 1895 Act was unavoidable.<sup>86</sup> They claimed that the major practical issue was not, as reformers had contended, reinstating the right to keep a register of women—for the names and occupations of all cantonment residents were already on the books—but to reinstate the ability to know which residents were diseased via periodical examinations. The amended Cantonment Act (XV of 1897) to be implemented in 1898 would thus allow for the reintroduction of a system of examining women and also return to the Magistrate the power to turn individuals out of cantonments for refusing examination. The right to refusal—a right that was unevenly known, actively concealed, and then gradually spread among the Indian women it concerned—was explicitly struck down.

On the surface of it, it seemed that the military had gotten its way by succeeding in making the cantonment less inhabitable for more and more laboring Indian women. But neither military authorities nor local governments were prepared for women engaged in prostitution to be spread across municipal spaces at the turn of the century, which on the one hand blurred the boundaries between cantonment- and city-spaces, and on the other, spelled new challenges in the way of controlling groups of women turned out of the cantonment. As historian Sumanta Banerjee notes, “the cantonments were back at square one...still coping with the rise in venereal diseases...and desperately experimenting with one legal measure after another.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> In October 1897, a group of grass-cutters in Calcutta petitioned the Garrison Quartermaster at Fort William that they were troubled by the exclusion of their wives from the area. Excerpted in Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class*, 94.

<sup>86</sup> Military Department to Lord Hamilton, Secretary of State, May 18, 1897, IOR/L/MIL/713877.

<sup>87</sup> Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, 168.

## **Navigating the Scatter of Prostitution**

In the first week of January 1901, there were violent skirmishes between British military police and a group of three Indian men in the south Indian cantonment of Bellary.<sup>88</sup> The conflict arose in response to a group of Indian women being expelled from the barracks for engaging in prostitution. The three Indian men were fined 2 annas each by the Sub-Magistrate. In the same month, a member of the military police in the Jalandhar cantonment in Punjab assaulted an Indian man and a woman alleged to be a prostitute.<sup>89</sup> But whereas the report recorded an assault by a British soldier, it was the unnamed Indian man who was sentenced to six months imprisonment and fined a hefty Rs. 30. Some months later in Allahabad, a private employed as military police was alleged to have been assaulted with sticks by Indian men referred to as ‘prostitute touts,’ or pimps, late into the night. The men who participated in the assault apparently escaped.<sup>90</sup> While there was a tendency to report these confrontations in ways that exaggerated assaults on British soldiers, the colonial record overall did show that Indians were far more often assaulted by soldiers. In one such example from October 1900 in the city of Peshawar, a private was confined “for striking a prostitute.”<sup>91</sup> The brief report on the incident included the detail that “the woman was drunk,” and that the Commanding Officer had chosen to dispose of the case.

These skirmishes at the beginning of the twentieth century were in one sense routine affrays in the more regulated site of the cantonment, but they also pointed to a larger trend of military power bleeding into civilian matters, and perhaps, the ensuing resentment of Indians toward this development. The jurisdiction of military police was limited to regimental lines,

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<sup>88</sup> Cases of assaults on British soldiers by natives during 1901, NAI/Defense-A/2433-2437/1902.

<sup>89</sup> Cases of assaults on British soldiers, 1901, NAI/Defense-A/2433-2437/1902.

<sup>90</sup> Cases of assaults on British soldiers, 1901, NAI/Defense-A/2433-2437/1902.

<sup>91</sup> Cases of assaults of alleged assaults on natives by British soldiers during 1900, NAI/Defense-A/2433-2437/1902.

which allowed them to turn the women out of the barracks at Bellary, but it did not allow them to exercise the same authority in the broader space of the cantonment. Soldiers overstepping this jurisdiction could create trouble. In Danapur, for instance, military police arrested an Indian man distributing *araq* (locally brewed liquor) within the general cantonment, prompting locals from the adjoining villages to arrive in numbers and rescue the man.<sup>92</sup> No charges were brought against the Indian men because the military police did not have the authority to make such an arrest in the first place—knowledge of which may have caused the confrontation. The growth of such incidents prompted a debate among military officials over whether to extend the jurisdiction of military police, and in 1901, a proposal was introduced in the Bengal Command to allow the military police to operate under civilian police powers to arrest persons suspected of crimes within cantonment limits. Prospective crimes into which the military could intervene notably included acts such as “a prostitute loitering or importuning.”<sup>93</sup> The proposal was considered undesirable by the Quartermaster General and shot down, but taken together with the skirmishes above, it points toward the colliding of cantonment and civil matters.

Meanwhile, regulations within cantonments continued to make them oppressive spaces for Indian women. By the early 1900s, the military had reinstated provisions of the expulsion/examination paradigm, where cantonment-residing women could either attend medical exams or be removed without recourse to refusal. The provisions did not strictly target women engaged in prostitution, and instead tied examination for venereal disease to general procedures around detecting contagious diseases. Authorities understood that the explicitness of regulatory practices pertaining to prostitution was proportional to how heavily those practices would be scrutinized. The women caught within the examination/expulsion paradigm knew this as well. In

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<sup>92</sup> Statement by W. B. Wilson, NAI/Defense-B/1127/1901.

<sup>93</sup> Statement by W. B. Wilson, Military Member of Council, May 17, 1901, NAI/Defense-B/1127/1901.

1901, a group of women from Quetta sent a petition to the Principal Medical Officer in the Bombay Command to complain of compulsory bi-weekly examinations and the keeping of a register of prostitutes—language that they understood would conjure images of the dreaded revival of the CDA. However, the Commanding Officer in Quetta countered that there was no ‘register of prostitutes,’ only a “list of women attending hospital or women reported by the police.”<sup>94</sup> He continued, “the police keep a list of women of bad character who may or may not be prostitutes.” This was as explicit an admission as any that such lists amounted to anyone *suspected* of engaging in prostitution. But it also illustrated changing rhetoric: the register of prostitutes was now a list of women of bad character, which blurred the boundaries between prostitution and deviance, but also revealed how a register of prostitutes could amount to surveilling laboring women in general.<sup>95</sup>

The outcome of the petition put forward in Quetta finds no mention in the record. However, the fact that it was filed is some indication that the women attending hospital still had cards to play within the system of examination. Several years later in 1907, staff at the same cantonment hospital were entertaining possibilities for extending the space because it had become overcrowded with women admitted for venereal disease. 44 women in-patients were being accommodated in a space intended for a maximum of 30, and were being “crowded out of the wards into the verandah and small court yard.”<sup>96</sup> The Medical Officer feared that if they could not find a rapid solution to the discomfort faced by the women that there was a “risk of the whole system for the control of venereal disease...breaking down,” while the Civil Surgeon also

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<sup>94</sup> General Officer Commanding Quetta District to Principal Medical Officer, Bombay Command, September 3, 1901, NAI/Defense-A/1676-1685/1902.

<sup>95</sup> The argument that the term ‘prostitute’ as it appears in nineteenth- and twentieth-century records in India has been used to describe various forms of deviance as opposed to actual women engaged in sexual commerce is put forward in Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*. See Introduction.

<sup>96</sup> Medical Officer, Quetta Cantonment to Secy. Cantonment Committee, Quetta, May 22, 1907, BPA/Revenue Commissioner General Records (RCG)/3736.

worried that the system was teetering on the brink of collapse.<sup>97</sup> He noted ‘indications’ among the women that pointed toward “a decrease if not total discontinuance...at any date” of the practice of voluntary attendance.<sup>98</sup> However, he cautioned that an extension of the hospital could be interpreted as more restriction and aggravate their already “uncertain attitudes” toward attendance. Despite their expansive jurisdiction, officials in Quetta knew that the functioning of the system of examination relied on the women playing along, and those women always could choose to stop, even at some cost to themselves. The looming threat of petitioning or refusing was a constant reminder to authorities, in Quetta and elsewhere, that they did not hold all the cards when it came to their negotiations with Indian women.

The proposal to extend the hospital at Quetta became more complicated in light of another obstacle: the vacant piece of land proposed as the area of extension was applied for by a local Muslim organization to create a passage to the neighboring Sufi shrine of Pir Bukhari (Figure 2.2). The Secretary to the Cantonment Committee, however, did not see a problem because a ‘high wall’ would surround the hospital to “prevent its being a nuisance.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, others warned that “it is undesirable to annoy the Muhammadan community” by extending a space frequented by certain classes of women closer to a religious site.<sup>100</sup> The hospital was ultimately never extended into the vacant area, as authorities found it preferable to risk women’s non-attendance than potentially troubling the Muslim community who frequented the shrine—both options were, regardless, far from ideal from their perspective. But the case of Quetta in the early 1900s reveals two important things. One, even with powers restored under the latest Cantonment Act, cantonment operations of medically examining women were only ever one expression of

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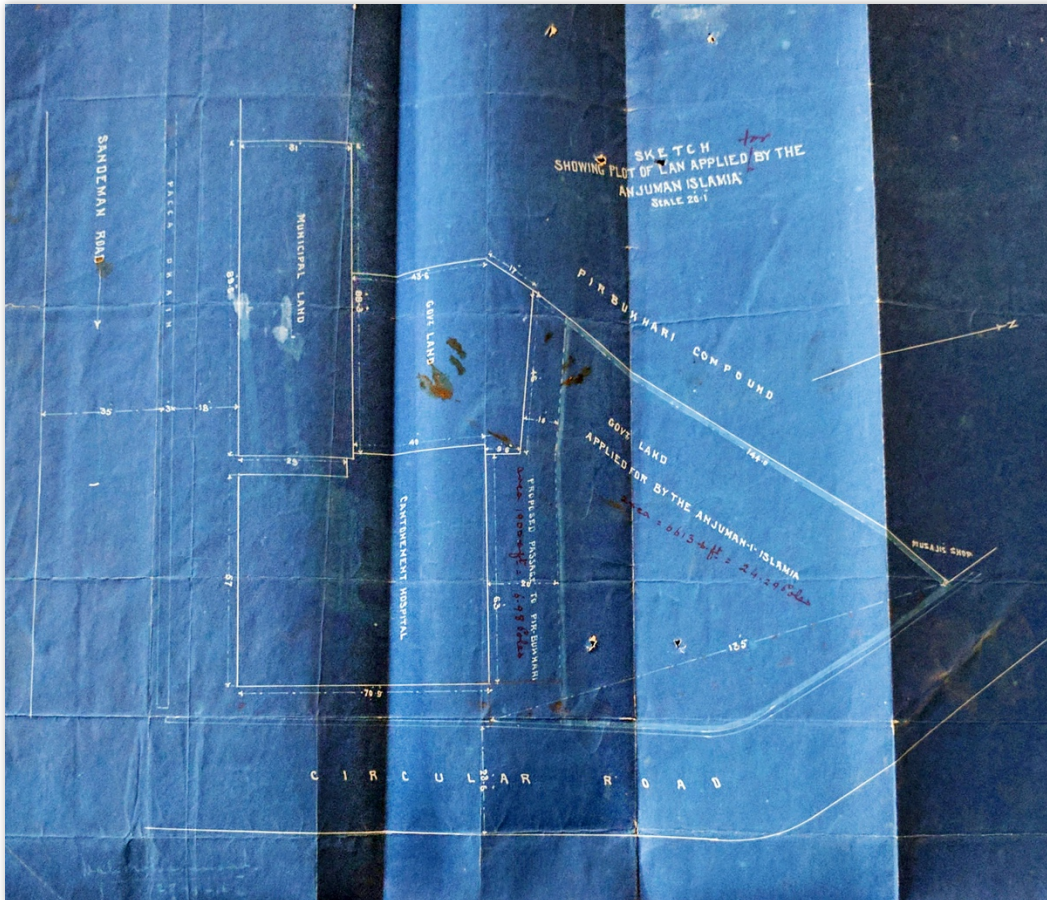
<sup>97</sup> Medical Officer to Secy. Cant., BPA/RCG/3736.

<sup>98</sup> Civil Surgeon, Quetta, to Political Agent, Quetta-Pishin, September 24, 1907, BPA/RCG/3736.

<sup>99</sup> Secy. Cant. Committee, Quetta to Political Agent, Quetta-Pishin, September 3, 1907, BPA/RCG/3736.

<sup>100</sup> Civil Surgeon to Political Agent, BPA/RCG/3736.

collective refusal away from collapsing. And two, there was a flipside to the spatial politics of prostitution, namely that urban expansion could just as easily encroach upon the spaces visited by women engaged in sexual commerce.



**Figure 2.2** Blueprint of Vacant Space Between Hospital and Shrine. Source: BPA/RCG/3736. Courtesy of the Balochistan Provincial Archives.

At other cantonment hospitals, the early 1900s revealed familiar attempts at obscuring procedure. At Ahmedabad, for instance, the hospital staff's claim to run a voluntary operation was contradicted by their own figures. From 1900 to 1901, over 200 British soldiers diagnosed with venereal diseases were treated as out-patients, whereas 55 Indian women infected with the same diseases were treated as in-patients. Ostensibly, the women were required to be admitted while the men were not. In a departure from the early-to-mid 1890s, women now had less of a say on how they received healthcare. And while admitted women could request to be discharged



against medical advice, those who did so “immediately left the station,” indicating the strict implementation of the examination/expulsion paradigm. At Ahmedabad, the windows at the cantonment hospital were also lined with iron bars, which was read by senior officials as clear-cut evidence of non-voluntary participation.<sup>101</sup> The iron bars were taken down a month later, but this hardly meant that the women would not continue to be admitted without their informed consent.<sup>102</sup> Appearance continued to matter more than practice. Nonetheless, the possibilities of escape at Ahmedabad and the petitions at Quetta show that forms of resistance were always around the corner, even as authorities learned to effectively disguise controls over women within routine procedure.

Outside the cantonment, however, the situation had unfolded differently. In Bangalore, which was not a cantonment town but a hybrid military and civil station with a large garrisoned British force, authorities were struggling to exercise command over municipal space.<sup>103</sup> In 1900, the staff at the station hospital treated 57 British troops infected with VD, but were unable to take any punitive action against the women who they suspected of spreading these diseases because of one crucial factor: they did not know where any of the women lived. Based on information provided by soldiers, only three cases out of 57 could be traced to individual women at their place of residence. The women were otherwise scattered all over Bangalore and only had municipal rules preventing solicitation to go up against. Neither military nor civil authorities could not find the homes of women engaged in sex work—this was notably also an indication that they did not reside in known brothels—, and these women could not be compelled to attend

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<sup>101</sup> Principal Medical Officer, HM Forces to Lieutenant-General Commanding the Forces, Bombay, October 23, 1901, NAI/Defense-A/1676-1685/1902.

<sup>102</sup> Major J. R. Stuart, Medical Officer, Ahmedabad, to Station Staff Officer, Ahmedabad, November 8, 1901, NAI/Defense-A/1676-1685/1902.

<sup>103</sup> Bangalore was part of the Residency of Mysore, and was not directly under British control. The point of contact between the Military Department and the local government was the Resident in Mysore.

hospital in any case. Under the circumstances, it was proposed to incorporate provisions of the Cantonment Act into Bangalore Municipal Law to make refusal to attend and be admitted to hospital for contagious diseases a ‘penal’ offense.<sup>104</sup> Between such proposals to either extend cantonment law into civil space, or to extend civil powers into army hands as seen in the case of military police, the intent was the same: enact more control over women who hid in plain sight.

The proposal was nonetheless contentious. The homes of women engaged in prostitution and the spaces of sexual commerce were scattered to the point that military leadership and the Resident in Mysore did not think more regulatory controls to be workable in Bangalore. Upon further discussion, even the Principal Medical Officer who proposed the idea frustratingly conceded that “there is no getting at the women in their houses, [and] no one knows where they live.”<sup>105</sup> Moreover, women who engaged in outdoor sex work primarily did so in expansive areas such as plains and *maidans* that could not be effectively surveilled without large numbers of police—and even with such a police presence, the Cantonment Act did not criminalize the presence of these women, only acts deemed ‘loitering’ for the purposes of prostitution. It is noteworthy that authorities could not in this instance benefit from a network of informants to aid them in finding the whereabouts of certain women, whereas such networks had yielded many anonymous tips in the past.<sup>106</sup> It is further an indication that military spheres had become notably separate from urban networks of information—a separation perhaps brought about by the strict concentration of regulation to cantonment-spaces in the wake of CDA abolition.

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<sup>104</sup> W. Taylor, Principal Medical Officer, HM Forces, India to Military Department, August 10, 1899, NAI/Defense-B/1188-1191/1900. The PMO-HM was the highest ranked medical officer in the British Army in India.

<sup>105</sup> W. Taylor, Principal Medical Officer, HM Forces, India to Quartermaster General, June 29, 1900, NAI/Defense-B/1188-1191/1900.

<sup>106</sup> Especially during the CDA era where anonymous reports or ‘tips’ were materialized to target individuals.

Beyond an absence of knowledge about specific women's residences, there was also the matter of soldiers' mobility to contend with. The regimental quarters in Bangalore were "scattered about" and soldiers often moved between military and civil geographies on a daily basis, making it difficult to monitor them in municipal areas.<sup>107</sup> The proposal contended that bringing these spaces under specific cantonment controls to banish and relocate suspect prostitutes outside of them would allow for more efficient surveilling of soldiers. Even so, senior officials unanimously considered the proposal undesirable given that extending cantonment law offered no guarantee of locating the women in question. Nonetheless, the case of Bangalore importantly showed that prostitution was becoming more dispersed outside cantonments, and that proposals to extend cantonment regulations into municipal space, or to alter municipal regulations to exercise more control over suspect prostitutes, were becoming more common. This was particularly so in light of developments across India where women exiled from cantonments were settling in municipal areas in the immediate vicinity knowing that they could not be subject to the same monitoring there.<sup>108</sup> The distinctions between cantonment and municipal space—at least in terms of interventions into prostitution—were beginning to wither.

It was in this respect that small technologies also became relevant to navigating the dispersed landscapes of sexual commerce. The advent of the bicycle allowed soldiers a degree of mobility to explore areas around cantonments unlike before. The use of bicycles in India became more widespread in the early 1900s as modes of commuting and leisurely travel across a developing network of urban roads.<sup>109</sup> Whereas cantonment rules could generally be applied to a

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<sup>107</sup> Telegram from Resident in Mysore, May 7, 1900, NAI/Defense-B/1188-1191/1900.

<sup>108</sup> A. H. L. Fraser, Off. Secy. to the Govt. of India, Home Dept. to Chief Secy., Govt. of Punjab, September 10, 1899, IOR/L/MIL/7/13881.

<sup>109</sup> Arnold, *Everyday Technology*, 52. Arnold notes that up until the 1930s bicycles were exclusively imported goods that could be repaired within India.

radius of up to four miles beyond it—this range had been determined by the distance soldiers tended to cover in their walks—the everyday use of personal bicycles by the men to “take long rides into the country” prompted the Quartermaster General in 1904 to propose to extend regulations around prostitution to a radius of 12 to 15 miles beyond the cantonment.<sup>110</sup>

The responses from civil officials were severe and called the proposal ‘monstrous’ while bringing to light that the proposed radius could bring brothels and suspect prostitutes among populations of over 200,000 persons under cantonment control.<sup>111</sup> Others questioned whether the distance of a bicycle ride could ever serve as justification for extending cantonment powers to such an extent, and even suggested disallowing the use of bicycles if they exposed soldiers to more temptations than “when forced to use [their] legs.”<sup>112</sup> The point that well-behaved rather than drunken soldiers were the ones who ventured for bike rides of 10 to 15 miles was also raised to suggest that bicycles did not necessarily give a certain kind of soldier more access to spaces of sexual commerce.<sup>113</sup> The proposal was unsuccessful, but it revealed how banishing suspect prostitutes from the cantonment, coupled with emerging small technologies, had given way to less visible worlds of sexual commerce.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the imperative to locate and banish women engaged in sex work as well as to segregate the spaces of prostitution had begun to shift from military to municipal jurisdiction. During this time, legislation was passed in Punjab, the United Provinces, Bombay, and Burma, among other provinces, that explicitly targeted loitering, soliciting, and brothel-keeping as municipal issues.<sup>114</sup> However, these newer regulations could

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<sup>110</sup> A. B. Fenton, Quartermaster General, India to Secy. to the Govt. of India, Military Department, March 17, 1904, NAI/Defence-A/117-122/1905.

<sup>111</sup> Memorandum from Denzil Ibbetson, July 19, 1904, NAI/Defence-A/17-122/1905.

<sup>112</sup> Memorandum from E. DeBrath, July 16, 1904, NAI/Defence-A/117-122/1905.

<sup>113</sup> Memorandum from E. R. Elles, July 21, 1904, NAI/Defence-A/117-122/1905.

<sup>114</sup> These include the Punjab Municipal Act (XX of 1891), the United Provinces Municipal Act (I of 1900), the Bombay Police Act (III of 1901, and the Burma Municipal Act (III of 1903).

not be acted upon in as blanket a manner as military regulations within cantonments, as jurisdiction lay with local governments and required the sanction of District Magistrates or Commissioners, or formal complaints from multiple residents. While the strict forms of control from the cantonment may have not straightforwardly translated into the municipality, it was clear that legislative interventions into prostitution had found a new frontier.<sup>115</sup>

### **Indian Women and the Price of Empire**

1899 marked the year of the publication of Mirza Ruswa's *Umra'o Jan Ada*, a fictional autobiography of a courtesan of Lucknow that was arguably the first popular Urdu novel in India. *Umra'o Jan* was part of an emerging literature on the figure of the prostitute as she found condemnation as a 'fallen woman.'<sup>116</sup> However, the novel also bears some distinction, as it focuses on the experiences of courtesans in the mid-nineteenth century, whose worlds did not clash much with the quarters of middle- and upper-class women.<sup>117</sup> As such, the eponymous courtesan of the novel is not quite as condemnable as her late nineteenth-century counterpart of the prostitute, who is there to bear the brunt. This archetype appears in the novel as a woman named Abadi, who was once the courtesan's protégé, but went wayward when she began accepting all kinds of clients, engaging in prostitution at local fairs, soliciting men with liquor, and focusing on monetary gain above all else. Her character bears a tragic fate, landing in the hospital after becoming feeble and enervated from contracting syphilis.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> This point is made particularly well by Stephen Legg (2012) in "Stimulation, Segregation, and Scandal."

<sup>116</sup> See other Urdu and Hindi works from this genre in n20. A contrasting approach to 'fallen women' was taken by Rabindranath Tagore through a sympathetic portrayal of widowhood in the Bengali novel *Chokher Bali* (1903).

<sup>117</sup> Safadi, "The 'Fallen' Woman in Two Colonial Novels," 26. On the how courtesan communities in Lucknow were impacted by colonial efforts to regulate them, see Veena Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," *Feminist Studies* 16(1990): 259-287.

<sup>118</sup> Mirza Ruswa, *Umra'o Jan Ada*, trans. David Matthews (Calcutta: Rupa and Co., 1996). Abadi's story is told from 164-169.

Abadi only finds brief mention in Ruswa's *Umra'o Jan*, but her condemnation in terms of her accessibility is a crucial reflection of how prostitution becoming more public-facing had narrowed its social acceptability and elicited calls for reform.<sup>119</sup> In this regard, Abadi was not very different from the women who military authorities wanted to control within, or banish from, cantonment spaces, and the commentary on her bears much resemblance with contemporaneous colonial descriptions of Indian women engaged in prostitution—notably as harbingers of disease. But the portrayal of prostitutes as 'fallen women' was also distinctly shaped by the perception that the spaces of sexual commerce and the spaces of 'respectable' society had come too close together, and signaled that the reformist debate around what to do with prostitution at the turn of the century had penetrated vernacular literary spheres as well.

This chapter began with the abolition of the CDA in 1888, which was the rescinding of the largest scale of intervention into prostitution in India. This did not eliminate regulation as much as introduce modified practices such as voluntary participation into continuing measures for controlling venereal diseases—a veil of reformism that cloaked regulation. In contrast to the wide circulation of information on prostitution laws in the 1870s and 1880s, the years between 1888 and 1897 saw Indian women within cantonments rely on decidedly smaller networks of informants as women attending examinations fell in number, but those that remained were subject to the harsher jurisdiction of cantonment regulations. Military authorities sought more control by holding out hope that these women would remain ignorant of new rules or by deliberately misleading them. Staff at hospitals rarely explained to women that they had a right to refuse examination unless they were formally obligated to do so. Under these conditions, the very fact that women across India collectively stopped attending cantonment hospitals or

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<sup>119</sup> On the meanings of outer/public spaces and their association with prostitution, also see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Open Space/Public Place: Garbage, Modernity, and India," *South Asia* 14(1991): 15-31.

orchestrated escapes from them when they did learn of this right shows that their willingness to act on information had not ceded. On rarer occasions, individual women going against the grain also find the briefest mention in the record, such as the case of Munni in Meerut, who faced dubious charges for refusing to attend hospital.

The military, however, responded to increasing numbers of Indian women acting upon their right to refusal by reintroducing the threat of banishment after briefly suspending it, and began expelling more and more unwanted women from cantonment spaces regardless of their intention to engage in prostitution. This gave way to a scatter of women suspected of being prostitutes ensconced across municipal spaces who became untraceable if they did not reside in known brothels. The heavily-policed cantonment may have been the site of regulations and disruptions in the early-to-mid 1890s, but the increasing navigability between the cantonment and municipality closer to the early 1900s—shaped by the expulsion of women into city-spaces, the limited jurisdiction of military police, and the uses of small technologies of mobility—took the reformist question of what to do with prostitutes increasingly away from the space of the cantonment. Petitions, escapes, and the ever-present possibility of collective refusals to attend cantonment hospitals always remained on the cards, but the strategy of slipping under the radar in municipalities was emerging at some scale as well. Indeed, policies of relocating women, segregating brothel areas, and condemning prostitution as ‘immoral traffic,’ which would shape interventions into prostitution from the 1920s onward, found their origin in developments at the turn of the century.



In the summer of 1907, John Morley, then Secretary of State, wrote a letter to the Viceroy of India, Lord Minto, assuring him that Lady Minto had safely departed London for the long journey to Simla. Wishing the Viceroy a happy reunion with his wife, Morley was sure to add

that bearing such family dislocations was no small part of the “price we have to pay for empire.”<sup>120</sup> Amid routine communications, Morley also cautioned Minto about another matter, namely that there appeared to be “signs of some revival of...regulation” pertaining to venereal diseases in cantonments.<sup>121</sup> Morley cited data showing variations between annual rates of VD within single regiments as well as across different stations, arguing that too much variation was cause for suspicion. He worried that “the whole truth did not come out [after 1888] ...and that cantonment regulations were so engineered as to let the old abuses return by the back door.”<sup>122</sup> Morley referring to the CDA model of regulation as ‘old abuses’ reiterated the official stance that the policy had been departed from, at least in letter. Yet, these ‘abuses,’ once openly implemented and then furtively reintroduced with the sanction of senior military authorities, were long after their supposed abolition also defended by various British officials as the price of keeping an army in India—seemingly, another ‘price of empire’ to pay. Fortunately for Morley and the others, this was a price paid by Indian women.

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<sup>120</sup> Lord Morley to Lord Minto, July 5, 1907, European manuscripts (Mss. Eur.)/D573/2, f. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Morley to Minto, Mss. Eur./D573/2, f. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Morley to Minto, Mss. Eur./D573/2, f. 5-6.



## CHAPTER THREE

### ‘TRAFFIC’: THE LIMITS OF EMPIRE IN INTERWAR INDIA

In October 1927, the Frenchwoman Angele Coves set off from Algiers en route to Bombay after being granted a visa to attend to her dressmaking business at Hornby Road. Her travels, however, drew the attention of the Intelligence Bureau in India, who believed that Coves and the three women she was travelling with were prostitutes and brothel-keepers engaged in the ‘White Slave Traffic.’<sup>1</sup> They warned border authorities to not allow the women to disembark at Bombay. But as the Government of Bombay was unable to substantiate these claims, Coves and her companions did not face expulsion from India.<sup>2</sup> The intelligence arm of the British Empire nonetheless continued to follow the Frenchwoman even after her departure from Bombay. In September 1929, the British Consulate in Algiers informed authorities that they suspected she was planning to return to India. Coves must have had an inkling that she was being surveilled, because she instead filed her visa application in Marseilles a month later, hoping that consul officers there were unaware of the claims against her. She now stated that she wished to return to India to dispose of her dressmaking business. But her strategy foundered and her visa was not approved. As authorities grew increasingly suspicious of her motives, Coves decided to take matters into her own hands.

In November 1929, Coves managed to embark for India and soon reached the French settlement of Pondicherry, where she was permitted to reside without a visa or permit. The intelligence and police in nearby Madras, however, were stunned at how Coves managed to get

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<sup>1</sup> Telegram from Secretary of state for India, London to Viceroy, Simla, October 18, 1927, NAI/HD-Jails/414/1927.

<sup>2</sup> Draft letter from Govt. of Madras, December 29, 1929, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930. The Govt. of Bombay, however, did state it would proceed against the women “if they happen to gain entry into that Presidency *for purposes of prostitution*” (emphasis mine), NAI/HD-Jails/414/1927.

there, as her name was not recorded on any register of sea arrivals to Pondicherry.<sup>3</sup> They surmised she must have reached by train from Madras, violating the passport rules of British India that required her to hold a valid visa. Unable to take action in Pondicherry, authorities were told to be on alert if she attempted to re-enter Madras. But in the following weeks, Coves slipped under the radar and took a nighttime train out of Pondicherry to Madras, from where she travelled to Chandannagar—another French-administered municipality outside of Calcutta. Once more, authorities were caught by surprise as the Frenchwoman travelled across British India from one French settlement to the next.

Coves's desired destination was in fact Calcutta, where she claimed her business was now located—her address of 99 Karaya Road was a location police were quick to identify as the “prostitute quarter of Calcutta.”<sup>4</sup> However, Coves's tactics had by now drawn the attention of multiple agencies. Special Inspector Tassaduq Hussain of Madras notified the Calcutta Special Branch to be on the lookout for her if she attempted to enter the city. As Coves did not want to risk deportation, she petitioned the Secretary of State in Council in January 1930 for permission to enter Calcutta, arguing that claims about her being a prostitute were false and that she never wished to ‘entice’ any woman to work in a brothel.<sup>5</sup> In a subsequent petition, she stated that her permanent home and business were in Calcutta and that she was desperate to reach there.<sup>6</sup> The petitions were either dismissed or not considered by the Government of India.

Despite facing many obstacles, Coves remained committed to entering British India. A year later, she applied for a new passport, this time at the French Consul in Hong Kong, and was

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<sup>3</sup> Report of HBM Consul Officer in Pondicherry, March 15, 1930, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Inspector General of Police, Madras, December 20, 1929, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

<sup>5</sup> Memorial of Angele Coves to Secretary of State for India in Council (via British Consul at Pondicherry), December 28, 1929, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

<sup>6</sup> Memorial of Angele Coves to Secretary of State for India in Council (via British Consul at Pondicherry), January 16, 1930, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

granted a visa by the British Colonial Secretary there some months later in April 1931. Soon after, Coves alighted for Bombay via the S.S Cracovia, and upon arrival, began residing at the Apollo Chambers Hotel. Authorities in India now faced even greater embarrassment. Officiating Secretary W. Gladding was alarmed at how Coves had on a “third occasion...managed to find her way into India in spite of...efforts to keep her out.”<sup>7</sup> Labeling her a ‘white-slave trafficker,’ Gladding remarked that Coves’s repeated success in entering India was a “poor commentary of [government] efforts to meet...obligations.”<sup>8</sup> Senior officials from police departments to the India Office now decided that Coves would once and for all be expelled from India. The Government of Bombay drew up a deportation notice under the Foreigner’s Act (Act III of 1864), and the Foreign Office sent her information and status as a ‘prostitute’ to all British Consular and Passport Officers to ensure she would not be granted a visa again.<sup>9</sup> She was deported out of Bombay sometime in the fall of 1931. Four years after she first bypassed authorities, the Government of India finally found a way to keep Angele Coves out.

In interwar India, allegations of engaging in ‘traffic’ were often the basis on which authorities deemed Coves and other mobile women like her to be undesirable visitors. The idea of a traffic in women, however, was not a new one. It first developed in the late nineteenth century when narratives of “women and girls procured for immoral purposes abroad” became nodes around which imperial social reformers organized and pressured colonial governments.<sup>10</sup> In 1899, Britain’s National Vigilance Association led the first International Congress on White Slave Traffic, and in 1904, several European states, including Britain, acceded to the

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<sup>7</sup> Draft letter to Govt. of Bombay, July 16, 1931, NAI/HD-Political/197/1931.

<sup>8</sup> Draft letter to Govt. of Bombay, NAI/HD-Political/197/1931.

<sup>9</sup> The deportation of Angele Coves is recorded in Annual Reports on Traffic in Women and Children: Report of the Indian Government for 1931, ‘Repatriation and Deportation,’ LON/R3061/34495.

<sup>10</sup> Definition of ‘traffic’ taken from the text of the International Agreement for the Suppression of ‘White Slave Traffic,’ May 18, 1904.

International Agreement for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic—the first convention on an issue that would animate discourses on prostitution for much of the twentieth century.

That an emphasis on traffic initially centered on white women reflected colonial anxieties about European prostitutes engaging with local men in British colonies that was routinely expressed by officials. The Quartermaster General in Simla noted in 1913 that “it is most derogatory to the ruling race that white women, *even if not British*, should be able to carry on their trade of prostitution.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a church leader noted of white prostitutes in India: “[they] are an unspeakable degradation to us.”<sup>12</sup> But as significant was the desire to police racial categories and punish transgressions via prostitution, it was only one part of the narrative of how single European women like Angele Coves emerged as suspect ‘traffickers’ in the interwar period.<sup>13</sup> This was a development arguably more shaped by the increased possibilities of international migration and movement, as seen in Coves’s elaborate travel itinerary (Map 3.1).

Reformist approaches to prostitution such as the rhetoric of condemnation, segregating prostitutes, and suppressing and abolishing brothels had been evolving since the turn of the century.<sup>14</sup> However, the interwar period was when this advocacy acquired a definitively transnational character. The era in between the wars certainly signaled new waves of mobility and migration, but it also signaled the emergence of borders and mandates, and the development

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<sup>11</sup> Quarter-Master General W.E. Bunbury to General Officers Commanding Division, October 20, 1913, BPA/AGG-General (AGG-G)/03723. Emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> General Superintendent, Wesleyan Methodist Church, Lucknow to Commander-in-Chief, India, August 24, 1909, NAI/Defense/1705-06/1911. Also see Harald Fischer-Tiné, “White women degrading themselves to the lowest depths: European networks of prostitution and colonial anxieties in British India and Ceylon, ca. 1880-1914,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40(2003): 163-190.

<sup>13</sup> Ashwini Tambe has argued that police offered protection to European sex workers in order to assuage colonial fears of interracial sex, and even abetted the coercion of these women. See Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, esp. 52-78.

<sup>14</sup> Tambe (2009) and Legg (2012) have traced the development of prostitution into a distinctly urban issue in India to the beginning of the twentieth century. In chapter 2, I argued that reformism within regulatory approaches—making the scale of regulation smaller but the rules harsher—narrowed the spaces of resistance and refusal for Indian women and ultimately drove them out of military cantonments to become scattered across municipal spaces.

of international norms under the incipient League of Nations. Borders were hardened as a means to curtail movement for purposes of prostitution, and the ‘traffic’ in women had become an international issue with rising deportations and repatriations (mostly of women) for cases of movements to engage in sex work. Whereas some individuals left of their own accord, others, such as Coves, had to be forced out. Between 1922 and 1933, close to a hundred persons were issued orders to leave India for prostitution and trafficking (Map 3.2).<sup>15</sup>

But the idea of policing borders was very much a local one as well. Within India, municipalities ordered the removal of brothels from neighborhoods, cities expelled prostitutes from its limits, and authorities followed the local cases of ‘traffic’ across provincial lines. Underpinning these acts of removal, relocation, and redrawing of the limits of prostitution were a series of municipal and provincial laws passed in the 1920s and 1930s that were explicitly designed to address prostitution through means of segregation or suppression.<sup>16</sup> As Stephen Legg has shown, ‘traffic’ was addressed at multiple scales of governance.<sup>17</sup> A commitment to anti-trafficking on an international stage in the form of greater limits on borders was reflected in a local, municipal, and provincial focus on the limits of urban space in India, where Indian women engaged in sexual commerce were now scattered after being driven out of cantonments.<sup>18</sup> But

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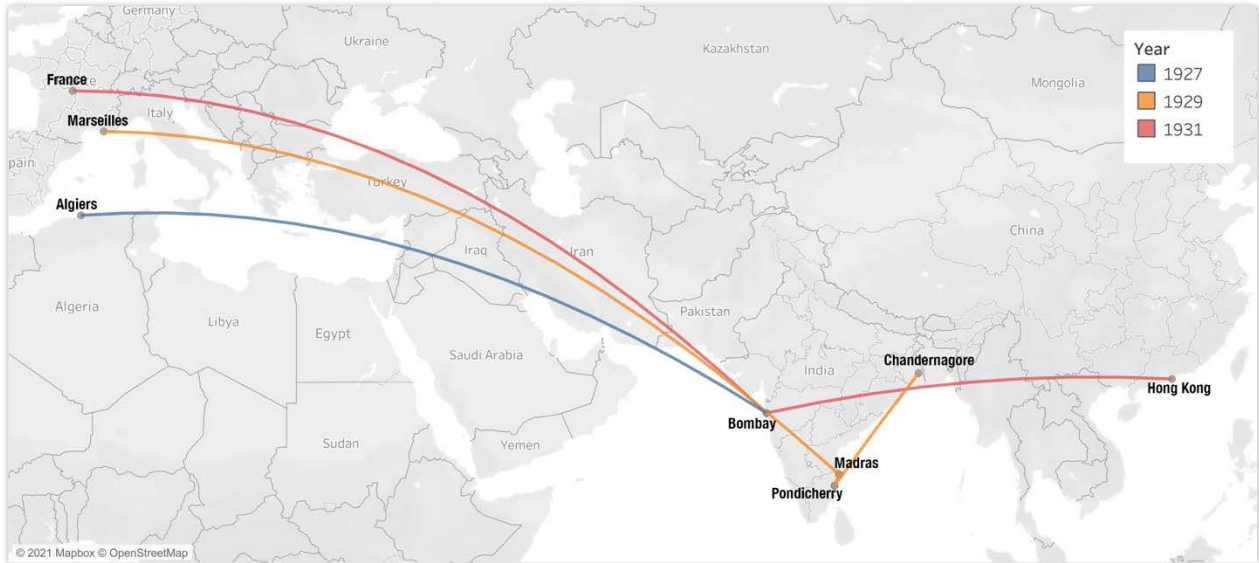
<sup>15</sup> This data is sourced from League of Nations Committee on Traffic in Women and Children Annual Summary Reports between 1922 and 1933. For full data, see Appendix A. After 1933, India stopped sending deportation data on foreign women and men in relation to trafficking—possibly because this information was no longer being collected centrally or because League oversight became weaker and authorities more lenient. This number only includes cases where formal deportation orders were served to compel individuals to leave India that were subsequently reported to the League. It is possible that many individuals accused of trafficking voluntarily departed India without receiving these orders.

<sup>16</sup> Various state/local laws include but are not limited to: The Suppression of Brothels Act in Burma (1920), The Prevention of Prostitution Act in Bombay (1923), The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act in Calcutta (1923), The Prevention of Prostitution Act in the United Provinces (1930), The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act in Madras (1930), Suppression of Immoral Traffic Bill in Punjab (1934).

<sup>17</sup> Legg (2014) takes a ‘scalar’ approach to the issue of interwar prostitution by examining the governmentalities of prostitution across three levels: city, state, and empire. See Legg, *Ends of Empire*.

<sup>18</sup> See chapter 2 for how harsher cantonment regulations pushed the spaces of prostitution into the municipality.

hardened limits, whether international or local, were hardly foolproof—that Angele Coves was able to enter India on three occasions is some indication.



**Map 3.1** Angele Coves’s movements to and deportation from colonial India, 1927-1931. Map by author.



**Map 3.2** Deportation routes from colonial India for cases of ‘traffic,’ 1922-1932. Sourced from League of Nations Committee on Traffic in Women and Children Annual Reports. Map by author (see Appendix A for data).

Strategies of survival among Indian and foreign women on the ground took shape against these contemporaneous interventions into prostitution. Resistance to border controls acquired an increasingly mobile character as international itineraries, alongside established inter- and intra-city movements, became crucial tactics of evading colonial oversight. Similarly, deportation, expulsion, and removal orders also became matters of contestation and refusal within cities. Not only did women engaged in sexual commerce have to negotiate emerging systems of policing physical borders and limits, they also had to contend with a widespread network of abolitionist activism that collaborated with the colonial state to achieve the ends of eliminating brothels—ends that required relocating prostitutes from their places of residence. Newer economies of evasion would thus develop against more varied systems of surveillance.

It is no coincidence that these strategies took shape against the backdrop of interwar governance. Whereas the interwar period has generally been understood by historians as a dynamic time of optimism and changing diplomatic norms, it has more recently become relevant for understanding the changing legal and geographic landscapes of prostitution.<sup>19</sup> Wartime mobilization across empires had generated a greater demand for brothels, which gave way to government and military authorities working with anti-vice campaigners to protect soldiers from the risk of venereal diseases. This was a surprising collaboration, since military officials in the British Empire had continually locked horns with repeal campaigners in the late nineteenth century to protect their right to medically examine Indian women.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Most significant in this regard are Legg, *Ends of Empire*, 12; Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*, 14. Also see “Claims to Protection: The Rise and Fall of Feminist Abolitionism in the League of Nations’ Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, 1919 – 1937,” *Journal of Women’s History* 22(2010): 90-113.

<sup>20</sup> This repeal movement led by Josephine Butler and her Ladies National Association would shape the imperial networks of abolitionism in the twentieth century.

The expansion of sexual commerce in the early twentieth century brought about what Stephanie Limoncelli has called the first international movement to combat sex trafficking.<sup>21</sup> On the outset, this was an alliance between feminist organizations and state and international actors that intended to decriminalize women engaged in sex work, but instead devolved into increased oversight over undesirable migrant women. As such women experienced increased scrutiny, the language around them also blurred. In international and colonial documents, the categories of prostitution, brothels, and trafficking collapsed into one, and now appeared almost exclusively as problems to condemn and eliminate—‘traffic’ across borders was ‘immoral traffic’ within the borders of colonial India. But where scholars have attended to the politics of interwar prostitution in relation to racialized governance, municipal politics, abolitionist thought, and international norms, the underside of how ordinary actors spoke back to authority in this moment remains unaccounted for.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, hardly any work on interwar prostitution has trained its eye on trouble and resistance amid a new order.<sup>23</sup>

This chapter, then, examines interwar regimes of segregating and suppressing brothels, policing borders, and expelling prostitutes in terms of the disruptions to their order—allowing for a new history of resilience, fugitivity, and defiance among women caught within the nested structures of local, imperial, and international authority. Two groups of women lie at the heart of this chapter. The first are Indian women who jostled with authorities in the wake of anti-prostitution legislation introduced at state and local levels during the period of limited self-

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<sup>21</sup> Stephanie Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking: The First International Movement to Combat the Sexual Exploitation of Women* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Especially relevant in this literature are Legg, *Ends of Empire*; Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*; Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking*; and Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*.

<sup>23</sup> Legg, Kozma, and Tambe all refer to women’s resistance in varying degrees, but center an analysis of governance in their narratives. Recent work on the French Empire has shown women’s strategies of circumventing regulation in Martinique during the 1940s, see Caroline Séquin, “The Shifting Contours of Colonial Prostitution (Fort-de-France, Martinique, 1940-1947)” *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 50(2019): 19-36.



government under dyarchy (1919-1935). During this period, prostitution was not strictly made illegal but the brothel became a target of elimination. This brought property and spatial limits to the forefront of women's strategies. This period was also accompanied by a marked rise in a brand of abolitionism that cast many Indian prostitutes as women without agency and brothels as blanket sites of trafficked women. How some women responded to these discourses is also part of a larger story of disruption in this time.

French women are the second group this chapter focuses on. Being the largest denomination of registered European prostitutes in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, they managed a precarious presence in these centers amid stricter border regimes. Angele Coves and her contemporaries nonetheless negotiated their precarity by networking tactics to bypass border patrols—tactics that included coordinating backstories, presenting identical residential addresses, and offering similar explanations for reasons of travel at ports of entry. Whereas white women in colonial India have largely been understood in terms of how their presence extended and troubled the imperial project vis-à-vis racial and sexual digressions, I offer the counter-point that beyond their liminal identities, European prostitutes could trouble empire as willful disruptors of colonial order.<sup>24</sup> Strategies to cross borders among French women and refusals to be relocated or exiled among Indian women laid bare the troubled ground of empire as authorities struggled to keep up with insufficient communications, uneven information, and clashing laws pertaining to prostitutes. And when these women contested the limits of borders and neighborhoods, they revealed another set of limits: those of empire itself.

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<sup>24</sup> Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History*; Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*; Indrani Sen, *Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India, c. 1820-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

## The City is the Limit: Putting Prostitution in its Place

In progressive writer Ghulam Abbas's (1909-1982) Urdu short story *Anandi* (1940), members of the Municipal Council of an unnamed city gather to discuss a pressing problem that concerns a group of women identified as *zanaan-e baazaari* or prostitutes.<sup>25</sup> These women reside and conduct their trade in one of the city's busiest thoroughfares where all citizens go for their consumer needs. But members of the council are upset that respectable families, notably daughters and daughters-in-law, are obligated to pass through the seemingly undesirable spaces of prostitution. For them, the presences of prostitutes not only risks corrupting young men and women who visit the commercial street, but had degraded the quality of the neighborhood with higher instances of murder, drug use, and bankruptcy. The culprits of this degradation, they attest, are none other than the prostitutes.

The question now is how to vacate the women from the city. As the President of the Municipal Council noted "this is also no easy task, for their numbers are not ten, twenty, but go into the hundreds, and then there is also the fact that many of the women own houses."<sup>26</sup> But after a month of debate, it was decided that the municipality would buy out the women's homes and relocate them to a place six kilometers from the main city—a place where no 'respectable' person would be forced to encounter them. Women affected by the order protested and refused to leave their homes. At first, their non-compliance earned them fines and jail time, "but ultimately

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<sup>25</sup> Ghulam Abbas, "Anandi (City of Joy)," trans G.A. Chaussee, *Annual of Urdu Studies* 18(2003): 324-339. '*Zanaan-e-baazaari*' literally translates to 'women of the marketplace.' Ghulam Abbas was born in Amritsar. He was associated with the Progressive Writers Movement of the 1930s and 40s, which was a broad association of Urdu and Hindi writers that were leftist and anti-imperial in orientation. Notably, their works were among the first to portray sex workers in humanizing and realistic ways, as opposed to casting them under the trope of 'fallen woman.'

<sup>26</sup> Ghulam Abbas, "Anandi," *Rekhta*, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.rekhta.org/stories/anandi-ghulam-abbas-stories?lang=ur>. My translation.

there was no gainsaying the will of the Council, and the women were left helplessly to forebear.”<sup>27</sup> They were eventually relocated to a new settlement outside the city.

Abbas’s *Anandi* captures a crucial debate that had developed during the interwar years around the question of whether prostitutes should be segregated from society, or whether their trade ought to be suppressed altogether. The debate in India had broadly vacillated between these strategies, but in 1917, the murder of a young woman named Akootai who had been subject to torture and abuse in a brothel in Bombay—dubbed the Duncan Road case—generated enough press coverage and discussion to set the stage for abolitionist legislation in the name of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Acts (SITAs) that were introduced in the 1920s.<sup>28</sup> These acts crucially made illegal the existence of brothels, public solicitation, and living off income from prostitution for men. Meanwhile, the work of vigilance and social associations in ‘rescuing’ women from brothels and rehabilitating them in shelters accompanied the abolitionist project. Yet, the emergence of SITAs does not amount to a unitary tale of suppressing prostitution across India, nor does it indicate a clearcut distinction between segregating prostitutes and suppressing brothels. The removal of brothels and relocation of prostitutes, as will be shown, were often parallel processes.

The meeting of the Municipal Council in *Anandi* nonetheless alludes to very real urban concerns around prostitution that became widespread in the interwar period—concerns informed by an increasing perception that the quarters of prostitutes had come too close to the quarters of respectability. This was refracted through other contemporary literature as well, most famously

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<sup>27</sup> Abbas, “Anandi,” 327.

<sup>28</sup> “The Duncan Road Tragedy: To the Editor of the Times of India,” *Times of India*, April 9, 1917, 7. On the murder of Akootai and the scandal generated by the Duncan Road trial, see Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*, esp. 79-99. In Bombay, the law was called the Prevention of Prostitution Act. On the emergence of SITAs, see Legg, *Ends of Empire*, esp. 95-168. See n16 above for a chronology of some of the legislation. The acronym SITA was also an allusion to the goddess Sita from the Hindu epic *Ramayana* who reformers had appropriated for abolitionist ends.

in Hindi writer Premchand's *Sevasadan* (1919), a well-known commentary on prostitution in which the middle-class protagonist's home is a stone's throw away from the house of a *tawa'if*.<sup>29</sup> While the notion of 'respectability' could connote class and comportment, it appears to have had a broader meaning in relation to prostitutes, and may well have amounted to simply being outside the vicinity of prostitution.<sup>30</sup> For instance, in correspondence on the removal of prostitutes from the Tando Alam district in Sindh, the President of the Municipality noted "the houses of prostitutes...are in close contact with the houses of respectable persons[,] *both the rich and the poor*."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the association of prostitutes' quarters with crime, as expressed by the Council in *Anandi*, was also a common theme in municipal petitions, such as one submitted to the Delhi Municipal Committee in 1928 that complained of a rowdy clientele in Chowri Bazar engaged in fighting, throwing bricks, and even murdering.<sup>32</sup>

*Anandi* also addresses the stringent protest put up by the women in response to their mandated relocation: "[they] refused and endured heavy fines; some even went to jail."<sup>33</sup> However, the author concludes that the women were ultimately helpless in the face of the Municipality's will. Abbas's commentary on the municipal politics of prostitution was published in 1940, but municipalities across India had been addressing the very issues taken up in *Anandi* much earlier in the twentieth century. The Delhi Municipal Committee (DMC), for instance, was notable in its attempts to remove women engaged in sex work from certain parts of the city. In 1922, the Committee took its first significant action in this regard by prohibiting the residence of

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<sup>29</sup> Premchand, *Sevasadan*, trans. Snehal Shingavi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005). *Tawa'if* does not lend itself to easy translation and can have multiple connotations depending on context. In this case, the term is meant to indicate a woman engaged in prostitution above all else.

<sup>30</sup> On the politics of respectability and prostitutes in the Urdu public sphere in the twentieth century, see Waheed, "Women of 'Ill Repute.'"

<sup>31</sup> President, Tando Adam Municipality, to Collector of Nawabshah, March 8, 1938, SPA/Commissioner's Record (CR)/35139. Emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup> Petition from Lala Madan Mohan Lal, February 22, 1928, excerpted in Legg, *Ends of Empire*, 59-61.

<sup>33</sup> Abbas, "Anandi," 327.

women deemed prostitutes from all areas of the city other than select marketplaces in areas of Chandni Chowk, and “issued notices [to the women] ...for evacuating.”<sup>34</sup>

Several women, however, objected to the orders and filed cases in the Civil Court arguing that they should not be subject to removal because they were not ‘public prostitutes’ as per the Municipal Act under which the notices were issued.<sup>35</sup> In Delhi, the women’s cases were initially dismissed in district courts, but upon appeal, were given another hearing at the High Court in Lahore in 1926—four years after the original order. Justice Jai Lal, the judge on that occasion, ruled in favor of the women. He held that the women did engage in prostitution, but as ‘kept women’ rather than ‘public prostitutes’—a category he believed only applied to women shown to be “available at any time *to the public at large*.”<sup>36</sup> The question of who constituted a ‘public prostitute’ under the law was once again up for contestation, and the demographics of a woman’s clientele remained central to the answer. Just exemption and reclassification had been tactics of choice in the late nineteenth century to evade registration, so too did they become tactics for women to skirt their displacement in the twentieth century. And similar to how cantonment authorities, lock hospital officers, and policemen had been frustrated decades before, the local council now also felt thwarted. In the years to come, the Secretary to the DMC would concede that this ruling made the Committee’s position weaker, and that the task of collecting evidence to prove each woman to be a prostitute was “beyond [their] capabilities.”<sup>37</sup> Abbas’s *Anandi* had overlooked something important: the Municipality could just as easily become helpless in the face of the challenges that women threw their way.

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<sup>34</sup> Secy. to Central Social Service League, Delhi, to Chief Commissioner, Delhi, December 7, 1930, DSA/Chief Commissioner (CC)/Education/1930/4-30.

<sup>35</sup> Similar civil suits were also filed in Simla around the same time.

<sup>36</sup> Secy. to Chief Commissioner, DSA/CC/Education/1930/4-30. Emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> Note by Rai Bahadur Sohan Lal, Secy. to DMC, February 26, 1929, DSA/CC/Education/1929/6-6.

### Removal, Relocation, and Resistance

In cities such as Delhi, Amritsar, Lahore, and Simla, Section 152 of the Punjab Municipal Act (Act III of 1911) gave local councils the authority to relocate groups of women believed to be prostitutes. Relocation as a segregationist policy in the twentieth century evolved out of practices at the turn of the century that dispersed prostitution away from cantonments into municipal space, and placed those spaces ‘out of bounds’ for troops. In 1895, the Government of India admonished authorities in Quetta for attempting to relocate the city’s dispersed prostitutes into a brothel or *chakla*—arguing that doing so amounted to a “State regulation of vice,” and that the “continuance of any system in which...women are compelled to live in a ‘*chakla*’ could not be permitted.”<sup>38</sup> This was notably in the same year that the amended Cantonment Act of 1895 was passed, which removed the capacity of military authorities to turn out women suspected of engaging in prostitution from the general cantonment area. In the mid-1890s, authorities were careful to not give off any semblance of regulatory control over prostitutes, whether in appearance or practice. But more significantly, as an early attempt at relocation, this proposal anticipated a key municipal approach in the interwar period: segregating prostitutes.

Segregation did not strictly target the person of the prostitute as mandatory medical examination had done, but instead targeted the space of the brothel—where persons engaged in prostitution resided and worked. Section 152, for instance, allowed local bodies to prohibit the keeping of brothels and residing of prostitutes from certain limits within the city or town.

However, such prohibitions also had their own limitations, because as councilors at the DMC

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<sup>38</sup> Deputy Secy. to the Govt. of India to AGG Balochistan, February 2, 1895, BPA/AGG-G/04188. The closing of the cantonment brothel that led to the dispersal of women in the municipal town is discussed in chapter 2.

noted, women gaining income as prostitutes had the right to ‘citizenship’ and “to live somewhere in peace.”<sup>39</sup> Because they could not be displaced, they had to be relocated.

Proposals to relocate women engaged in sex work in Quetta may have been scoffed at in 1895, but by 1918, they were being seriously considered. In this case, segregation emerged as a solution to the problem of dispersed brothels and prostitutes. The motivation here was importantly not themes of respectability or social nuisance, but rather, hygiene and protection from venereal disease for Indian and British soldiers in the nearby cantonment. Authorities had wanted to use wartime laws to shut down the city’s brothels, but found that they could not expel the women who worked in those brothels other than in cases where they were diseased or openly solicited. Section 152 of the Punjab Municipal Act was held up as a model to emulate in the Quetta Municipal Law, and a proposal to “close down the brothels and permit the women to live in a locality removed as far as possible from the vicinity of the Cantonments” was deemed a feasible one.<sup>40</sup> Under new additions to municipal law, the women would be confined to that locality, which would be placed out of bounds for the soldiers, and refusal would potentially result in fines and imprisonment. Prostitutes would be put in their place.

The success of proposals in Quetta did not necessarily extend elsewhere. Back in Delhi, where the DMC had confined prostitutes to the bustling marketplace of Chowri Bazar, the Municipality was by the late 1920s considering new proposals to relocate ‘undesirable’ women even farther away from commercial areas. One member of the DMC, however, spoke against relocating the women to less congested zones outside the main city, as it would lead them to “solicit on the road side and in fields.”<sup>41</sup> Keeping them in limits within the city was preferable,

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<sup>39</sup> Note by Secy. to DMC, DSA/CC/Education/1929/6-6.

<sup>40</sup> General Commanding Officer, Quetta to Adjutant-General, India, September 18, 1918, BPA/AGG-G/04188.

<sup>41</sup> Note by Secy. to DMC, DSA/CC/Education/1929/6-6.

but the bigger challenge was how to relocate women who actively resisted the classification of ‘public prostitute.’

Chowri Bazar went from being a site of relocation in 1922 to being a site of removal in 1929. It was home to many performing women engaged in prostitution, often termed ‘singing and dancing girls’ in official parlance. Secretary Sohan Lal of the DMC did not wish to contend much with the performance aspects of their labor and believed that they were prostitutes who simply charged their clients more money. However, he cautioned that if the Municipality attempted to remove them, they would have to prove in each case that “a particular dancer is a public prostitute as well.”<sup>42</sup> In this regard, he noted the women’s strategic uses of marriage contracts to aid in reclassifying themselves as performers not prostitutes—whether the contracts were intended for this purpose or not is not known. The marriage contracts are named exclusively as *nikahnamas*, indicating the significant Muslim demographic among the women of Chowri Bazar. These women were also well aware of the importance of property in disputing their relocation. The *balakhanas* or upper-story apartments in which they resided and used as prostitutes’ quarters were often rented out in the names of their husbands. Resigned to the fact that few neighbors would testify to certain women being prostitutes, Lal maintained it was “better to let the sleeping dogs lie.”<sup>43</sup>

Similar to the proposals in Delhi and Quetta, in the mid-1920s multiple districts in the province of Sindh, namely Nawabshah, Shahdadpur, and Larkana, began introducing or extending provisions to remove brothels.<sup>44</sup> That urban prostitution outside of the Presidencies and major cities was being perceived as a problem was also an indication of the growing

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<sup>42</sup> Note by Secy. to DMC, DSA/CC/Education/1929/6-6.

<sup>43</sup> Note by Secy. to DMC, DSA/CC/Education/1929/6-6.

<sup>44</sup> District Magistrate, Nawabshah, to Assistant Commissioner, Sindh, December 8, 1925, SPA/CR/32329.



population of those towns, and moreover, of the development of places of residence alongside places of prostitution. But a sense of inconvenience to ‘respectable’ society did not go away with segregation either. In Larkana in 1934, a report in the publication *Alamgir* accused the municipality of corruption for not responding to complaints by residents about women engaging in prostitution through “the agency of some women of ill-repute” in certain districts.<sup>45</sup> The report called for an extension of the Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act to Larkana, claiming that places where it had been extended, such as nearby Sukkur, did not experience the presence of prostitutes. The District Magistrate of Larkana shot back that claims that other towns did not experience similar problems were “strictly incorrect,” but did not address the allegations of corruption.<sup>46</sup> Collusion had nonetheless been a widespread tool of evasion between prostitutes and authorities, and it is unsurprising that it featured when governing prostitution was devolved to local municipal bodies.

As civil cases, marriages, and leases became critical ways in which Indian women attempted to frustrate the aims of local bodies in confining and relocating them, mobile women who were not confined to a single property caused other kinds of concerns as they could not be enmeshed in the removal/relocation paradigm. In this regard, ‘prostitution booths’ at religious fairs—in this instance, temporary huts with bamboo flooring that could be concealed—became sites of contention and alluded to the peripatetic nature of prostitution around cities and towns. In 1934, C. Burgess, a worker from the Indian Red Cross Society and an abolitionist activist, visited women working in huts at Bhit Shah Fair near the Hyderabad district in Sindh.<sup>47</sup> When she asked

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<sup>45</sup> District Magistrate, Larkana, to Commissioner, Sindh, and Collector of Larkana, September 24, 1934, SPA/CR/32091.

<sup>46</sup> District Magistrate to Commissioner, SPA/CR/32091.

<sup>47</sup> Bhit Shah is the location of the shrine of the Sindhi Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif. We know that 12,000 pilgrims attended the fair in 1936 (two years after C. Burgess’s visit), making it the second-largest fair in Sindh at the time. See *Annual Report on Public Health in Sindh* (Karachi: Government of India Press, 1938).

them about their economic prospects, almost all of them responded that they earned more income through prostitution than through other kinds of work. One woman described as being feeble even told Burgess that she resorted to prostitution because she was too weak to do other kinds of labor. Older women, described in pejorative language by Burgess as “haggard old thing” charged lower prices at 2 annas per client, whereas younger women charged up to two rupees.<sup>48</sup> The women told Burgess that they could expect to earn between Rs. 50 and Rs. 100 at the fair. It is notable that these women responded to Burgess by emphasizing their economic precarity—a context often forgotten in discourses that marked prostitutes as a social nuisance or victims of ‘traffic.’ Similar to the tactics of relocation, the Sindh Government was in this instance able to discourage this activity by targeting land use for the purposes of prostitution, and effectively disallowed it on government land while encouraging private landowners to do the same.

However, an awareness of the intertwined worlds of economic precarity and prostitution did not necessarily yield humanizing discourses either. A decade before Burgess’s visit to Bhit Shah, then anti-colonial leader Jawaharlal Nehru had written an article criticizing the Allahabad municipality’s resolution to relocate the city’s prostitutes to a remote part of the town. Nehru put forward that there was an ‘economic cause’ for prostitution but was also “scandalized at the residence of prostitutes in our midst.”<sup>49</sup> Nehru’s abolitionist ideals of eliminating prostitution from society, however, clashed with some of his practical suggestions. On the one hand, he argued that “brothels or regular houses of prostitution” should not be permitted, but on the other, he proposed that women engaged in prostitution should be prevented from residing near

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<sup>48</sup> Report of C. Burgess, Red Cross Society, June 4, 1934, SPA/CR/25717. In local currency, annas were 1/16 of a rupee.

<sup>49</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, “The Treatment of Prostitutes by the Municipality,” June 10, 1923, Nehru Memorial Library, P. D. Tandon Collection/File No. 1/Acc. No. 886, p. 2. This piece was transcribed and circulated by Tandon himself. It is unclear to whom it was addressed to originally. I am grateful to Sanjukta Poddar for providing me with a copy of this source.

“colleges, schools, and hostels,” and should avoid appearing on the balconies of their residence so as to not solicit publicly.<sup>50</sup> But abolitionists like Nehru had to contend with the fact that women engaged in sex work had a right to live somewhere, and the question was always ‘where’?

This very question was discussed in the small town of Sukkur in Sindh in 1936, where the Municipal Council was presiding over a meeting discussing the removal of a brothel. The President of the Municipality introduced a familiar problem: for scores of years prostitutes had resided on Shikarpur Road, where there was once a sparse population of migrant workers, but which had since developed into a busy and highly populated main road. The prostitutes were now undesirable and their presence drew “bad characters...after sunset and till late hours of the night.”<sup>51</sup> One woman had also been murdered in the area. Complaints arising out of the ‘open exhibition’ of prostitutes, along with nighttime noise and music, were putting pressure on the Municipality to do something. The President of the Council then presented a familiar proposal: remove the individual women from Shikarpur Road and relocate them five or six kilometers away, for the women could not be removed “without making arrangements for locating [them] elsewhere.”<sup>52</sup> Yet, acquiring land at the relocation site would open the municipality to a host of new challenges.

There was plenty of legal precedent to remove the women from their individual homes on Shikarpur Road, but acquiring land for the purpose of housing prostitutes was far more contentious. Once the relocation site was identified, the Municipality could not directly collect rent from prostitutes, even though the President believed there were financial gains in doing so.

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<sup>50</sup> Nehru, “Treatment of Prostitutes,” 3.

<sup>51</sup> President, Sukkur Municipality, to Secy. to the Govt. of Sindh, July 23, 1936, SPA/CR/36614.

<sup>52</sup> President to Secy. to Govt., SPA/CR/36614.

Instead, it was proposed that they acquire the land for ‘public purpose’ and sell the plots on the new land at concession rates, or even for free, to persons who were willing to build new housing for the prostitutes and collect rent from them—effectively outsourcing the women’s accommodation to members of the public.<sup>53</sup> But shifting responsibility away from the municipality could also give way to other issues, such as private landlords refusing to rent out property to relocated women.

This had been the case in Delhi in 1939 where proposal to relocate women away from Chowri Bazar had been subject to continuous challenge through the 1930s. When it was proposed that the women be relocated to Roshanara Road, those women marched in protest to the Chief Commissioner’s Home to contest their relocation.<sup>54</sup> Some individuals managed to enter the office of the Secretary of the DMC to directly express their concerns, and explained that the landlords in Roshanara Road refused to rent out property to them whereas the landlords in Chowri Bazar had no issues doing the same. They also formally petitioned the DMC in July 1939 with these concerns, knowing that they could not be removed without access to alternative accommodation. The same month, the DMC had a special meeting where they resolved that “the status quo be maintained as far as Chawri Bazar is concerned.”<sup>55</sup> The women had resiliently put a halt to their relocation temporarily, but their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. By 1940, the DMC agreed to relocate the women of Chowri Bazar, who had for so long contested removal from their homes, to Garstin Bastion Road, or ‘GB Road’ as it is known today. After years of persistent challenge from the women, the municipality had finally found a site it resolved to banish prostitutes to.

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<sup>53</sup> “Sukkur News: Land for New Brothel,” *Sind Observer*, July 7, 1936.

<sup>54</sup> *Hindustan Times*, July 9, 1939. These newspaper reports were first discussed in Legg, *Ends of Empire*.

<sup>55</sup> “Localities prohibited for keeping Brothel or residence of Public Prostitutes,” DSA/CC/Local Self-Government (LSG)/1940/2-97.

Similar concerns about private landlords were not expressed in the correspondence on Sukkur, where efforts to relocate prostitutes in Sukkur were ultimately hampered by clashing legislation—a kind of microcosm of the clash between the practice of segregation and suppression. On the one hand, under the Bombay Municipal Boroughs Act, the women from Shikarpur Road could only be relocated if they were offered alternative accommodation. But on the other hand, constructing and renting out houses that could potentially be used as brothels was not something that could be permitted under suppressionist legislation that made brothel-keeping illegal. Legal regimes that discouraged prostitution through bans on brothels and solicitation thus jostled with regimes that underscored the right of women engaged in prostitution (which was not by itself illegal) to not be displaced and have access to accommodation. The right to housing collided with the right to shut down brothels. Indeed, alongside the active efforts of Indian women to resist and disrupt the processes of their relocation, dueling legislation also played its part in the project to put prostitutes in their place.

*Petitioning in Exile: The Case of Musammat Tajo*

As women contested their removal by asserting their right to housing among other things, what happened to women who were outright expelled from spaces? The expulsion of Indian women under colonial orders on account of being troublemaking or diseased prostitutes had occurred throughout the nineteenth century—developing as early as 1813 when so-called ‘dissolute’ European women were removed from military cantonments, and treated as prisoners until they were sent back to metropolitan England.<sup>56</sup> As Indian women began to find work in cantonments as laborers (e.g., grass-cutters, milk-sellers, maids), numerous pieces of cantonment legislation tethered them to systems of medical examination and gave the Magistrate powers to remove

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<sup>56</sup> Wald, *Vice in the Barracks*, 142.

women engaged in prostitution. In one instance from 1908 in the Quetta cantonment, a British soldier falsely identified one Musammat Zainab as having infected him with venereal disease, who was ordered to leave the city as a result.<sup>57</sup> In her appeal, it was noted that Mst. Zainab was not a prostitute but a 55-year-old woman who only attended the cantonment hospital to receive dental care. The Agent to the Governor-General (AGG) in Balochistan declined to interfere in her case—a decision exhibiting the harsh and punitive consequences of false identification for many women.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond what soldiers did, authorities still had many legal routes to expel ‘undesirable’ women, especially in a highly-manned frontier outpost like Quetta. Controlling prostitution was now focused on removal from urban space: relocating women and shutting down their places of work. However, without the pretense of disease or nuisance, criminal legislation had to be deployed. This was done in the case of Musammat Tajo, a woman who had worked as a prostitute in Quetta up until her expulsion from the city in 1923. The circumstances of her case were that she was married to a man named Ghulam Rasool when she entered into a second marriage with Ahmed Ali Shah in 1923, leading to Rasool filing a criminal case against Shah.<sup>59</sup> It was reported that months later Mst. Tajo left Shah and absconded with another man named Nur Mohammed, leading Shah to file a criminal complaint against them. The Political Agent, F. McConaghey, claimed that there was an imminent rupture of peace as a result of the rifts between these parties and presumably their tribes as well. Identifying Mst. Tajo as “sole cause of trouble [who] was a prostitute in the past,” McConaghey determined that “her presence in Quetta [was] likely to cause...bloodshed especially as she [had] begun to visit the tribal area.”<sup>60</sup> He

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<sup>57</sup> Petition of Mst. Zainab to AGG, Balochistan, 1908, BPA/AGG-Essential (AGG-E)/4298.

<sup>58</sup> On soldiers’ tactics of falsely identifying women to cantonment authorities, see chapter 1, esp. 34-35.

<sup>59</sup> Sheikh Khizar on behalf of Musammat Tajo to AGG, Balochistan, August 15, 1931, BPA/AGG-G/02381.

<sup>60</sup> Political Agent, Quetta-Pishin, ‘Order to expel Mst. Tajo,’ May 7, 1923, BPA/AGG-G/02381.

ordered her banishment from Quetta under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which allowed for the removal of persons that had “occasioned quarrel likely to lead to bloodshed.”<sup>61</sup>

The context of Mst. Tajo’s expulsion involved many moving pieces, including colonial stereotyping of tribal societies as prone to violence. Her status as a prostitute, however, contributed significantly to a perception of her as a troublemaker and undesirable person, especially considering that none of the men mentioned in the case were issued removal orders—the common occurrence of gendered double-standards informing colonial responses. In 1931, Mst. Tajo’s brother Sheikh Khizar filed an appeal to the AGG for the return of his sister to Quetta. Khizar argued that Tajo was in poor health, and as such unlikely to threaten the peace, while also noting that the circumstances under which the order was issued were no longer applicable: Rasool had since remarried and Shah had left Quetta altogether. AGG Alexander Cater rejected the petition, stating of Mst. Tajo: “this woman is obviously a most undesirable person and is likely to cause more trouble if allowed to return to Quetta.”<sup>62</sup>

But Mst. Tajo did not relent. Six months later, while residing in the Sibi district, she filed a new petition of her own accord, where she introduced more information to support her case. She stated that she had been working as a prostitute for around six years prior to 1923, and did so in the *chakla* (possibly referring to the confined *chakla* in Quetta) with the consent of her then husband Rasool, who lived off some of her earnings. She also claimed that her expulsion was not indefinite and meant to last a period of six months only. She went on to state that there was no precedence for indefinitely expelling prostitutes from Quetta, and cited cases where women who

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<sup>61</sup> Section 36, Frontier Crimes Regulation, 1901. On the colonial use of the FCR, see Benjamin D. Hopkins, “Frontier Crimes Regulation and Frontier Governmentality,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 2(2015): 369-389.

<sup>62</sup> Order on Mst. Tajo Case, Court of AGG, Balochistan, September 7, 1931, BPA/AGG-G/02381.

were expelled were allowed to return and resume their professions.<sup>63</sup> Her plea for clemency was grounded in undoing misrepresentations of the case by presenting, in her view, the truth and merits of the matter. AGG Cater, without explanation, rejected her application again just three weeks after filing.

It seemed that no information could move the AGG or Political Agent to change their view on Mst. Tajo's case, but a few years later an emerging set of factors shaped the case in new ways. In 1935, Quetta was impacted by what was then the most devastating earthquake in the Indian subcontinent, leading to the deaths of scores of thousands of individuals. Mst. Tajo was herself not affected, but under the extraordinary circumstances, she requested and was granted permission from a Claims Commissioner to salvage the property of her friend who had perished in the disaster. In August 1936, Mst. Tajo returned to Quetta for the first time since her expulsion, and attempted to convert her permission to enter into a permanent rescinding of the original expulsion order. In May 1937, while still in Quetta, she filed an application for this purpose, but was soon after arrested by police and convicted by the District Magistrate of violating the removal order with jailtime and a hefty fine of Rs. 200.

Mst. Tajo again appealed to the court. She requested to be let out on bail until a final decision was made on her petition to rescind the original order. The judge overseeing her application for bail recommended clemency, but the District Magistrate, firm in his view that Mst. Tajo was "a woman of bad character, who [was] likely to be a source of friction and bloodshed in [the Quetta] district," decided to withdraw the case from his criminal court and transferred it to court of the AGG.<sup>64</sup> Whereas Cater as AGG had rejected Tajo's case twice, the

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<sup>63</sup> Mst. Tajo to AGG, Balochistan, February 22, 1932, BPA/AGG-G/02381. Mst. Tajo only listed the names of women allowed to return to Quetta. They include: Jano, Mehtab, Gulzar, Rajo, Aziz, and Makhtor.

<sup>64</sup> Order of District-Magistrate, Quetta-Pishin, September 25, 1937, BPA/AGG-G/02381.



AGG on this occasion was Ronald Wingate, who took a different tone. He noted that Mst. Tajo had been in Quetta for several months prior to her conviction, and that no breach of peace that was so feared of had in fact occurred. Critically, he ruled that when Tajo was granted permission to recover property in Quetta, it cancelled the previous order of expulsion. He followed up that the punishment meted out to Tajo by the District-Magistrate for violating the order was “drastic and unnecessary” and revoked it.<sup>65</sup> Fourteen years had passed since Mst. Tajo was banished from Quetta, but she was now finally able to reside at home in peace.

Mst. Tajo’s case refracts the challenges and difficulties in standing up to stringent legal regimes such as the FCP. Mst. Zainab, for instance, was not even afforded consideration. But where Mst. Tajo’s story stands out is her persistence through the instrument of the court. The women in Delhi and Simla who filed civil cases against their removals were contesting relocation and confinement, but not outright expulsion. Mst. Tajo fought her case while in exile for over a decade, and her unrelenting conviction that an injustice had been done to her remains significant. In contrast to many of the women who were relocated, Mst. Tajo was convicted in criminal court, which made the position from which could resist even weaker. Tajo’s status as a prostitute had been central to her expulsion, and the Political Agent, AGG Cater, and District-Magistrate were sure to comment on her unwantedness in relation to her history of sex work. Officials rarely missed an opportunity to remove prostitutes. Moreover, the stark contrast of AGG Wingate’s approach and his reprimanding of his District-Magistrate demonstrates that inconsistency and disagreement within colonial administrations continued to have a say in shaping the uses of law. What is without doubt, however, is that Mst. Tajo’s persistence eventually landed her back home (Figure 3.1).

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<sup>65</sup> Order of AGG, Balochistan, October 28, 1937, BPA/AGG-G/02381.

**ORDER.**

This woman is obviously a  
most undesirable person & is  
likely to cause more trouble  
if allowed to return to Quetta,

**ORDER.**

This application is  
rejected.

*M. Cater*  
A.S.S.  
15/3/32

In these circumstances I must hold that the District  
Magistrate, Quetta-Pishin's order was drastic and unnecessary.  
I hereby quash it and direct that the District Magistrate, if  
he thinks fit, should issue a fresh order under section 35  
of the Frontier Crimes Regulation expelling her from Quetta.

Quetta,  
The 28th October 1937.

*s.d. R. E. L. Wingate*  
Agent to the Governor General  
in Baluchistan.

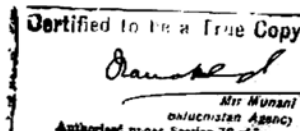


Figure 3.1 Rulings on Musammat Tajo's Petitions, 1931-1937. From top to bottom: AGG Cater's ruling on September 7, 1931; AGG Cater's second ruling on March 15, 1932; AGG Wingate's ruling on October 28, 1937. Source: BPA/AGG-G/02381. Courtesy of the Balochistan Provincial Archives. Compiled by author.

Let us now return to Abbas's *Anandi*. What would become of the relocated women forced into a new settlement to carry on their work as prostitutes? Initially skeptical of how they would earn income in a desolate setting far away from the city, fourteen particularly well-off women from the old prostitute's quarter used the earnings from their properties to develop the new settlement. They invested in the construction of new homes and drew small-scale commercial ventures to the area, such as shopkeepers, grocers, and food and drink sellers. Over decades, an entire city soon grew around the original settlement and came to be known by the name of 'Anandi, the City of Bliss.' The commercial street where the once relocated prostitutes resided remained the heart of the city. But *Anandi* ends with the meeting of another Municipal Council—this time in the city of Anandi—where members are discussing proposals to remove the women of the marketplace, who are a stain on city's image and a nuisance to society. They resolve to relocate the prostitutes 12 kilometers from the city. Much like the *zanaan-e-baazaari* in *Anandi*, Indian women who earned their living as prostitutes would learn that every settlement, every town, and every city had its limits for them to challenge and disrupt. Just like the state had its limits for foreign women to confront.

### **The State is the Limit: Borders, Visas, and Deportations**

The League of Nations has in many ways become synonymous with the category of interwar. Its creation in 1919 meant that there was now an international body that had the authority under a Covenant to 'supervise' member-states—among which India was the only non-self-governing member—as they addressed social problems such as children's welfare, drug use, and took measures to combat the worldwide 'traffic in women and children.' The League attempted to do away with the language of 'white slavery' and instead instituted the Committee on Traffic in Women and Children (CTWC) to annually gather information from members states about cases

of kidnapping and abduction for the purposes of prostitution ('offenses discovered'), existing laws on brothel-keeping and trafficking as well as mechanisms for implementing them, and deportations connected to cases of international traffic. In this regard, the implementation of measures to combat 'traffic,' which intimated movement across borders, did not include targeting prostitution per se, but limiting the international mobility of women travelling alone.<sup>66</sup> This was acknowledged by colonial officials, who noted that the blanket prohibition of foreign women already engaged in prostitution in India "would mean an embarrassingly large number of deportations."<sup>67</sup>

Deportations on grounds of 'traffic' became more common through increased uses of the Foreigner's Act for the purpose of removing persons suspected of engaging in sexual commerce, including prostitutes, brothel-keepers, and pimps. The Act allowed local governments to remove foreigners from India if they had been detained under its provisions, which included passing through British India without a valid visa. However, removing foreign prostitutes was by no means novel to the interwar period. Methods of expulsion had been developing during the 1910s when European women developed a presence outside of the Presidency towns in northern Indian cities such as Rawalpindi and Lucknow, as well as Quetta.<sup>68</sup> Before the removal of such women gained sanction under international norms, their undesirability was expressed in terms of the disrepute they allegedly brought upon the 'ruling race,' and similar to their Indian counterparts, their proximity to the spaces of 'respectable' people.

A significant example that demonstrates earlier precedence against foreign women is when authorities in India undertook an elaborate effort to remove 'hostile aliens,' including

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<sup>66</sup> Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> W. T. M. Wright, Joint Secy. to the Govt. of India to the Under-Secretary of State to India, February 1, 1923, Employment of foreign women in licensed houses: dossier on India, LON/R668/D. 23350/No. 26736.

<sup>68</sup> Removal of white prostitutes from certain localities, NAI/HD-Police/124/1912.

prostitutes, during the First World War. The Governments of Bombay and Bengal—areas where the largest numbers of foreign prostitutes resided and registered—were locked in discussions on how to repatriate German and Austrian prostitutes back to Europe. The Government of Bengal wished to deport them while officials in Bombay wanted to exempt them from repatriation and internment for fear that it was inappropriate for ‘public women’ to be repatriated on the same ships as “respectable women and young children and missionaries.”<sup>69</sup> However, others, including military officials, disagreed, arguing that if exempted, “a virulent German prostitute might be able to do a good deal of harm,” and that repatriation was “an excellent opportunity for getting rid of some of the European prostitutes of the Presidency Towns.”<sup>70</sup> Initially, the Government of Bombay produced lists of Austrian prostitutes in Bombay to be left at large—exemptions that were informed by the fact that most of these women were from Galicia and Bukovina, and unsympathetic to Germany. Ultimately, however, the Government of Bombay ordered that a total of 22 women (all but one being Austrian) were to be deported from India via the Golconda steamship in Calcutta.

The use of wartime circumstances to deport European prostitutes irrespective of individual circumstances demonstrates that expelling ‘troublemaking’ foreigners, but especially European women, from India preceded the uptick in actions taken against such women during the 1920s and 1930s. Legislation such as the Defense of India Act was also amended to allow for the closing of brothels under its command.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, the supervisory position of the League of Nations did in fact put added pressure on governments to *appear* to be effective in dealing

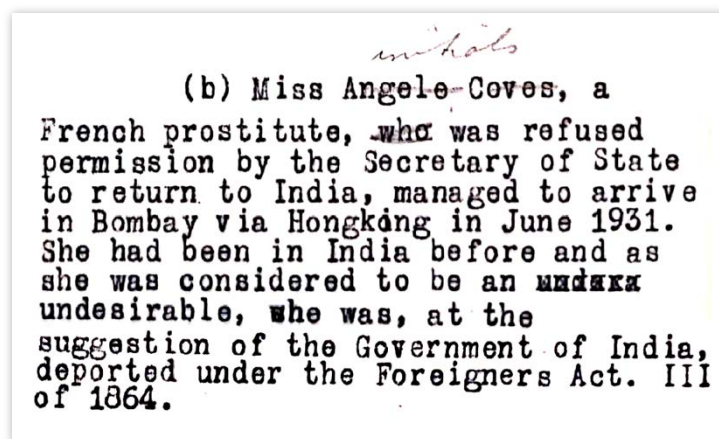
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<sup>69</sup> S.R. Hignell Telegram to the Govt. of Bombay, October 10, 1915, NAI/HD-Political/243/277/1915. Other parts of this file referred to the predicament of repatriating prostitutes as including an “incongruous element in a shipload of respectable people.”

<sup>70</sup> R. Craddock Telegram to Govt. of Bombay, October 12, 1915, NAI/HD-Political/243/277/1915.

<sup>71</sup> AGG Balochistan to the Foreign Secy. to Govt. of India, November 25, 1918, BPA/AGG-G/04188.

with cases of trafficking, which in turn, made prostitutes, procuresses, and victims out of internationally mobile women.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the advent of international norms on prostitution—through the language of ‘traffic’—turned various marginal women into suspects if not criminals.<sup>73</sup> Even so, the task of implementation was monumental in the face of what the British representative to the League of Nations called the ‘tricks’ of evasion such as changing nationality and pro-forma marriages.<sup>74</sup> Angele Coves may have ultimately been expelled from Bombay—it was in a list of deportations furnished by the Government of India for the CTWC that I first encountered her name (Figure 3.2)—but her case provides a crucial window into the tactics of French women overriding authorities and borders in and around interwar India.



*initials*  
(b) Miss Angele-Coves, a French prostitute, ~~who~~ was refused permission by the Secretary of State to return to India, managed to arrive in Bombay via Hongkong in June 1931. She had been in India before and as she was considered to be an ~~undesirable~~ undesirable, ~~she~~ was, at the suggestion of the Government of India, deported under the Foreigners Act. III of 1864.

Figure 3.2 Draft description of Angele Coves's deportation. Source: LON/R3061/D. 34495/No. 37572. Courtesy of UN Archives.

### *Angele Coves between Empires*

To tell the fuller story of Angele Coves let us move some steps back from her deportation to the day when she visited the British Consulate in Algiers in September 1927 to apply for a visa to India. Algiers was a port city in France's empire where there was regulated prostitution and

<sup>72</sup> Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*, 13-15.

<sup>73</sup> Ashwini Tambe makes this point about legislation passed under pressure from abolitionist activists in Bombay.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum by the British Representative, March 21, 1923, Employment of foreign women in licensed houses, LON/R668/D. 23530/No. 27337.

several hundred women registered as working in brothels at the time.<sup>75</sup> Coves was a French woman born in Algiers, but she presented a passport that had been issued by the French Consulate at Bombay in January 1927, establishing that she had been residing in India earlier in the year. In Bombay, she claimed to have a dressmaking business known as “Paris Modes” at 55 Hornby Road—located near the soldier’s garrison in the Fort district where Anglo-Indian and European brothels were also located. Coves stated that she was returning to India to take charge of her business and was granted the visa on the same day.<sup>76</sup>

Two days later, another Frenchwoman named Rosetta Ripoll of Algiers deposited an application for a visa to India, claiming that she had been employed by Angele Coves as an assistant to work in her dressmaking business. The consulate accepted her reasons for traveling and also granted her the visa. In the following week, two other women, Dolores Boronate and Jeanne Fabrer, were granted visas to India after they stated they wished to join their husbands in Bombay. Passport control officers would later note that the appearance of similar applications should have aroused suspicion—particularly in light of the fact that consul staff were instructed to especially scrutinize the applications of “young women proposing to travel alone.”<sup>77</sup>

After the four Frenchwomen in Algiers were granted visas through separate applications to travel to Bombay, a cycle repair man named Louis Cachia visited the consulate in Algiers to present new information about the case. Claiming that he was the ex-husband of Rosetta Ripoll, the supposed assistant at Paris Modes, he alleged that the four women granted visas did not intend to travel to Bombay for their stated reasons but to work in a brothel owned by Coves that was cloaked in the guise of a business. Cachia appeared to have an intimate knowledge of

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<sup>75</sup> Limoncelli, *Politics of Trafficking*, 125. Also see Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>76</sup> Memorandum by G. P. Churchill, British Consul-General Algiers, October 10, 1927, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.

<sup>77</sup> Instructions regarding granting of Passports, Endorsements, and Visas for India, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.

Coves's history, stating that she was unable to make a living in Marseilles as a prostitute and had thus travelled to Bombay where the "demand for [European prostitutes] exceeded the supply."<sup>78</sup> Coves had apparently returned to Algiers later in 1927 with 'ample means' and even acquired new property, but was allegedly now encouraging other women to return to Bombay with her as 'assistants' in her business.

Marseilles incidentally was the main point of departure for French women leaving for North Africa and the East, and also gained notoriety as an exit port for victims for trafficking.<sup>79</sup> Its reputation as such must have lent credence to Cachia's claims in the eyes of passport officers, who accepted his version of events and now sought to seize the Frenchwomen's passports in order to cancel their visas. But when consular officers approached the police in Algiers, they did not agree that there were grounds to force the women to give up their passports and refused to act. The alternative strategy was to send a telegram to border control officers in Bombay in order to stop the women alighting at the port. Yet, these attempts at communication were also unsuccessful, as border agents did not receive the information in time or missed it, and the women entered without any known difficulty. After arriving, Angele Coves reportedly spent her time between Bombay and Calcutta, but neither the Bombay nor the Bengal Government were willing to take action under the Foreigner's Act, even though they believed she was a "voluntary prostitute."<sup>80</sup> It seemed that Coves and the three women had managed to establish a presence in India in spite of the efforts of multiple arms of administration to stop them.

The speculative and sensationalist nature in which the consular office relayed the stories of these women being granted visas and failed attempts to cancel those visas overlooks

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<sup>78</sup> Memorandum by G. P. Churchill, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.

<sup>79</sup> Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*, 87.

<sup>80</sup> Draft letter from Govt. of Madras, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.



something more pertinent: the coordinated nature in which Coves and her colleagues visited the Consulate in Algiers in the first place. The women allowed for days to pass in between their applications to arouse less suspicion. Coves and Ripoll made explicit that they were known to each other, but were not traveling together, whereas the other two women stated their intent to travel in relation to visiting their husbands. Claims of joining spouses were common as women were regarded as genuine migrants to the colony if they came as wives.<sup>81</sup> However, the veracity of these claims could be dubious. For instance, Dolores Boronate applied for a new visa to India a few years later without any reference to meeting a husband.<sup>82</sup> In a later case from 1937, another Frenchwoman, B. D. Andreani, arrived in Karachi from Marseilles without a valid visa, but was granted a transit visa at the port of entry because she claimed she was joining her husband in French Pondicherry.<sup>83</sup> Just as Indian women had used the appearance of marriage contracts to avoid the label of prostitute, so too did European women make joining their husbands in India a basis for being internationally and locally mobile, although husbands could also double as souteneurs and live off the earnings of their wives from prostitution.<sup>84</sup>

Coves's and Ripoll's stated association with Paris Modes was unsurprising as many European women claimed dressmaking as an occupation at the point of visa applications. At times, this was a strategy to conceal their intent of crossing borders for the purpose of sex work, and on other occasions, the promise of dressmaking work was used by brothel-owners or pimps to convince unsuspecting European women to travel to port cities like Bombay.<sup>85</sup> In the same

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<sup>81</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 252.

<sup>82</sup> Telegram from Consul General, Algiers to the Chief Secy. to the Govt. of Bengal, May 12, 1931, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.

<sup>83</sup> Telegram from H. S. Stephenson to Chief Secy. to the Govt. of Sindh, August 20, 1937, NAI/HD-Political/17/116/1937.

<sup>84</sup> For instance, there was a perception that European prostitutes, more so than American, Canadian, and British prostitutes, were less independent and more reliant on networks of intermediary men, e.g. pimps and souteneurs.

<sup>85</sup> League of Nations, *Commission of Enquiry into Traffic in Women and Children in the East: Report to the Council* (Geneva: 1933).

year that Coves travelled to India without a visa, two Italian women holding French passports identified themselves as dressmakers when applying for entry into India at Pondicherry.<sup>86</sup> And outside of India, French women who landed in Singapore from France or Saigon to seek income as prostitutes also fashioned themselves under the same occupation. The proclivity toward the profession also hints at the development of dressmaking into a small-scale industry in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>87</sup> Professions such as dressmaker, modiste, milliner, and artist were not mutually exclusive with working as prostitutes, and as seen in the cases of performing women, courtesans, and devadasis in India, engaging in sexual commerce could and did overlap with other kinds of labor. Coves and Ripoll, in this instance, certainly coordinated their stories, but there is little to indicate that Ripoll was coerced or misled to do so. In sensationalizing this case through the charged language of ‘traffic,’ consular officers missed out on the mundane and networked trickery (to use the British representative’s word) by Coves and her companions.

### Evasion and Imperial Disorder

The case of Coves already tells us a great deal about the complex world of emergent mobility, economic opportunity, and hardening border controls behind the international standard of ‘traffic.’ However, as Coves was firmly on the radar of the Home and Foreign Office after 1927, she would have to find new ways to circumvent their renewed conviction to restrict her entry into India. By 1929, authorities had determined that Coves’s claims of owning a dressmaking business in Bombay on Hornby Road were false, and that she remained “engaged in smuggling...in the White slave traffic.”<sup>88</sup> Despite the continued labeling of Coves as a trafficker,

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<sup>86</sup> Report from Sub-inspector of Police at Pondicherry, November 30, 1929, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.

<sup>87</sup> League of Nations, *Commission of Enquiry into Traffic*, 276.

<sup>88</sup> Draft letter from Govt. of Madras, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

no substantiating information is presented other than the association of women traveling to earn income from sex work with the category of ‘trafficker.’

When Coves returned to Algiers in 1929, she was under the radar of the British Consulate there, prompting her to apply for a new visa to India in Marseilles instead. Incidentally the address listed by Coves on her latest application, 99 Karaya Road, was the same address Dolores Boronate listed on a subsequent application that was approved—a fact that explicitly alluded to the networks of information-sharing that shaped French women’s strategies to acquire visas.<sup>89</sup> Notably, this location was known to both police and abolitionist activists as the ‘European Brothel Quarter’ of Calcutta (Figure 3.3). As Coves’s name was on a ‘Suspect List,’ her application needed referral and was forward to authorities in Paris and Delhi. Such lists were crucial for passport control officers but prone to risk, as updates were often not wired in time and even misspellings could result in the granting of visas to persons deemed ineligible to enter India.<sup>90</sup> The Intelligence Bureau in Delhi recommended to refuse her visa and cancel her existing one, which she did not appear to know was valid.<sup>91</sup> As authorities scurried to present their views on the case, information was likely missed and the Embassy in Paris did not see any objection to allowing Coves to leave on her existing visa. Coves even deposited 1000 francs with the Consulate in Marseilles to telegraph her information for endorsement to the Commissioner of the Crime Investigation Department in Calcutta, showing that she remained a woman of means and contacts.<sup>92</sup>

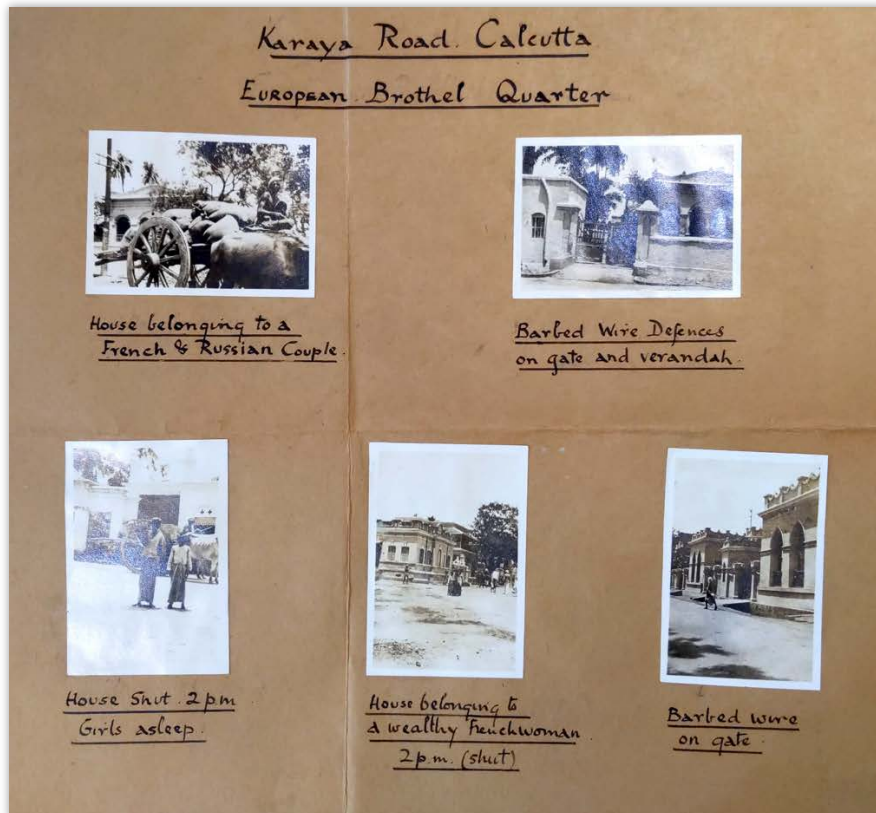
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<sup>89</sup> Telegram from HBM Consulate in Algiers to Chief Secy. to the Govt. of Bengal, May 12, 1930, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.

<sup>90</sup> The Consul General at Algiers for instance, granted a visa in 1937 to a Frenchman believed to be a pimp because his name, Llambias, was misspelled as Lambias on the ‘Suspect List’ at hand. HM Consul General Algiers to British Passport Control Officer, Paris, October 30, 1937, NAI/HD-Political/17-82/1937.

<sup>91</sup> Draft letter from Govt. of Madras, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

<sup>92</sup> Frank S. Gibbs, Marseilles, to Captain Jeffes, Paris, October 11, 1929, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.



**Figure 3.3** Photos of Karaya Road in Calcutta, 1929. Compiled and captioned by abolitionist activist Meliscent Shepherd of the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene. Source: AMSH/C/05/03. Courtesy of the Women’s Library.

A key theme that emerges from the correspondence on Coves is the haphazard nature of communications between different arms of government: embassies, intelligence, police, border agents, home officials. It is clear that each agency had individual pieces of information on the case, but no department understood the case in its entirety *as it unfolded* despite attempts to streamline communication. This was a reality that Angele Coves was aware of, and informed her decision to apply for her visa in Marseilles with the view that her particulars had not been shared by the Consulate at Algiers. Exploiting the dispersed nature of imperial governance was after all

what enabled Coves to arrive in Pondicherry in October 1929 where she initially lodged at the Grand Hôtel d'Europe that was established in 1891.<sup>93</sup>

The French settlement of Pondicherry was an oft-frequented stop in the travels of many French women engaged in prostitution in India, most commonly as a place of transit rather than a destination, with many women benefitting from the porous and unmanned boundaries between French and British India. The uses of French settlements as enclaves against British jurisdiction cut across many groups, most notably among anti-colonial dissidents, but there was also precedent for their use by prostitutes.<sup>94</sup> In the early days of the operation of the CDA in Calcutta, there were stories abound that many Indian women fled to Chandannagar to evade registration and continue their work as prostitutes in emerging brothel districts.<sup>95</sup> In the interwar period, French women clearly used a similar tactic with regard to Pondicherry, and Angele Coves was only one among many women who took advantage of the dual border regimes.

The abovementioned B. D. Andreani also maneuvered around the ambiguity between British and French border regimes in India. She flew to Karachi in 1937 without a visa, but was allowed to disembark by border agents at the airport. She then submitted an application to the Government of Sindh for an exemption for not having a valid visa, and requested a transit visa on the basis that she was meeting her husband in Pondicherry. To strengthen her case, she noted that the newly emerged Air France had no direct flights to her final destination.<sup>96</sup> Both requests were granted, but the Government of Sindh later viewed this as a failing, because while Andreani was

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<sup>93</sup> Similar cases not discussed in this chapter include those of Madeleine Fravallo (arrived 1935), Theresa Ribes (arrived 1938), and Camille Lafond (arrived 1930), among others, who also benefitted from the haphazard nature of imperial/international/multi-departmental communication in time-sensitive situations of granting visas.

<sup>94</sup> Pondicherry was especially important for the Indian independence movement. It served as a safe haven for anticolonial activists as well as a site through which revolutionaries could smuggle arms, while also being a place where nationalist writing flourished uncensored.

<sup>95</sup> Prankrishna Dutta, *Bodmaesh Jabdo*, 1869, excerpted in Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, 149.

<sup>96</sup> The airline Air France had come into existence only a few years earlier in August 1933.

not on any ‘Suspect List,’ she was the subject of a Foreign Office warning circular that had been missed by visa-granting authorities. Once again, the issuing of information was not tantamount to relevant government bodies knowing that information.

Andreani did not proceed to Pondicherry, but appears to have instead taken the train from Karachi to Bombay. A few weeks after her arrival, she called the Passport Office to request that her transit visa be converted into a regular visa for a stay of six months in Bombay. It was at this point when Andreani’s earlier travels from Sartène to Bombay in 1935 became relevant, when she reportedly worked as a prostitute in Colaba and Malabar, and solicited clients by distributing calling cards.<sup>97</sup> Although the strategy of changing visa status while already in India worked for many French women, Andreani’s request was denied. The Government of Bombay considered Andreani to be an objectionable presence and an “undesirable character,” and told her to leave Bombay or be deported from it.<sup>98</sup> Andreani was not on the radar of authorities when she made her request for a six-month visa in Bombay. Given the relative ease with which she had been able to talk her way into a transit visa on arrival, along with the incompetence of governing authorities, it is likely that she felt confident her request would be granted. But less than a month after she landed in Karachi, Andreani sailed back from Bombay to Marseille.

As for Angele Coves and the conclusion of her story, after landing herself in Pondicherry, she had unsuccessfully attempted to apply for permission to enter British India at the consulate there in late 1929. Without a valid visa, Coves instead took advantage of the fact that “passengers pass[ed] freely from French to English territory” and that there was no serious

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<sup>97</sup> Letter from Commissioner of Police in Bombay, 21 April 1936, NAI/HD-Political/17/52/1936. Distributing calling cards had become a more common method of seeking clients among prostitutes in the twentieth century. These cards were collected by League of Nations investigators as part of their work on trafficking, see LON/S168/3. Incidentally distributing notices of advertisements for prostitutes was something that could be outlawed municipally. For instance, in the Delhi Durbar Police Act of 1911.

<sup>98</sup> Report from Commissioner of Police in Bombay, 23 July 1937, NAI/HD-Political/17/116/1937.

scrutiny of people unless they were transferring from ships to trains.<sup>99</sup> The Intelligence Bureau in Delhi was alarmed, but as another consul officer noted, there was an assumption that French nationals arriving in Pondicherry by train “ha[d] already gone through the...formalities of getting their credentials examined.”<sup>100</sup> There was even acknowledgement of her tact, with one person noting that it was easy for a ‘clever woman’ like her to get around the system. This, it should be noted, was a contrast to how Indian women’s tactics of evasion were perceived by authorities.

But even as Coves had not been successful at the British Consulate in Pondicherry, it remained a site of much confusion because visas were frequently granted to French women who went on to work as prostitutes in Bombay and Calcutta. By way of explanation the Consul Major Tranchell told the Foreign Office in London in 1930 that he “was not aware that prostitution as such was a bar to entry into India” after being questioned on why he granted two ‘suspect’ prostitutes visas to enter British India—revealing inconsistent understandings of border policing itself.<sup>101</sup> Tranchell also admitted that lack of coordination was a significant problem, and recommended that Consulates in Algiers or Marseilles should directly warn him of women refused visas via letter or wire post. Admittedly, no such communication reached the Colonial Secretary in Hong Kong, who granted Coves a new visa to travel to Bombay in 1931—her final visit to India that culminated in her deportation back to France that same year.

The confusion and inconsistency around policing the entry of women such as Angele Coves demonstrates the larger challenges faced by nascent border regimes that had not yet developed the mechanisms or streamlined communications necessary for implementing their controls. European women with French passports evaded these controls through information

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<sup>99</sup> HBM Consul in Pondicherry to Madras Police, 7 March 1930, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

<sup>100</sup> Report of HBM Consul Officer in Pondicherry, 15 March 1930, NAI/HD-Political/17/44/1930.

<sup>101</sup> Major H. B. Tranchell, HBM Consul in Pondicherry and Karikal, to Secy. of State for Foreign Affairs, London, March 24, 1930, IOR/L/PJ/6/1985/File 3547.

sharing, fashioning themselves into different professions, dangling the garb of marriage to conceal their intent, and above all, exploiting the chaotic implementation mechanisms at multiple ports of entry into India (Bombay, Madras, and Karachi, to name a few). But unlike the consul officers, policemen, border agents, and government officials who they were up against, French women in India *networked* their strategies of evasion, shared contacts and information, and their successes were in no small part a result of this coordination.<sup>102</sup> Under the oversight of the League of Nations, deportations connected to ‘traffic’ continued to rise through the 1920s, though the Government of India ceased sending this data to the League after 1933.<sup>103</sup> What was clear, regardless, was that the ‘limits’ of regulating women engaged in sexual commerce had long left the military space of the cantonment from the turn of the century and now constituted the limits of colonial India itself.

### **The Limits of Empire**

The history of prostitution in interwar India is in significant part a history of the elusive lives of evasion and disruption in the midst of emerging paradigms of policing space and borders. Angele Coves, Musammat Tajo, B. D. Andreani, and the women of Chowri Bazar may have been separated by space, means, borders, and nationality, but they all shared a commitment to speaking back to authority at different scales: local, provincial, imperial, and international. Coves and Andreani took advantage of a chaotic empire unevenly felt on the ground, which weakened its ability to deliver on border policing. Their stories demonstrate that passport and foreigners’ legislation shaped at statewide levels and promoted in international forums was haphazardly mis-

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<sup>102</sup> For instance, consider the uses of similar addresses: Coves and Boronate listed 99 Karaya Road on their applications (arguably a brothel owned by a mutual contact), whereas multiple French and other European women listed the Taj Mahal hotel in Bombay as their address.

<sup>103</sup> See n12.



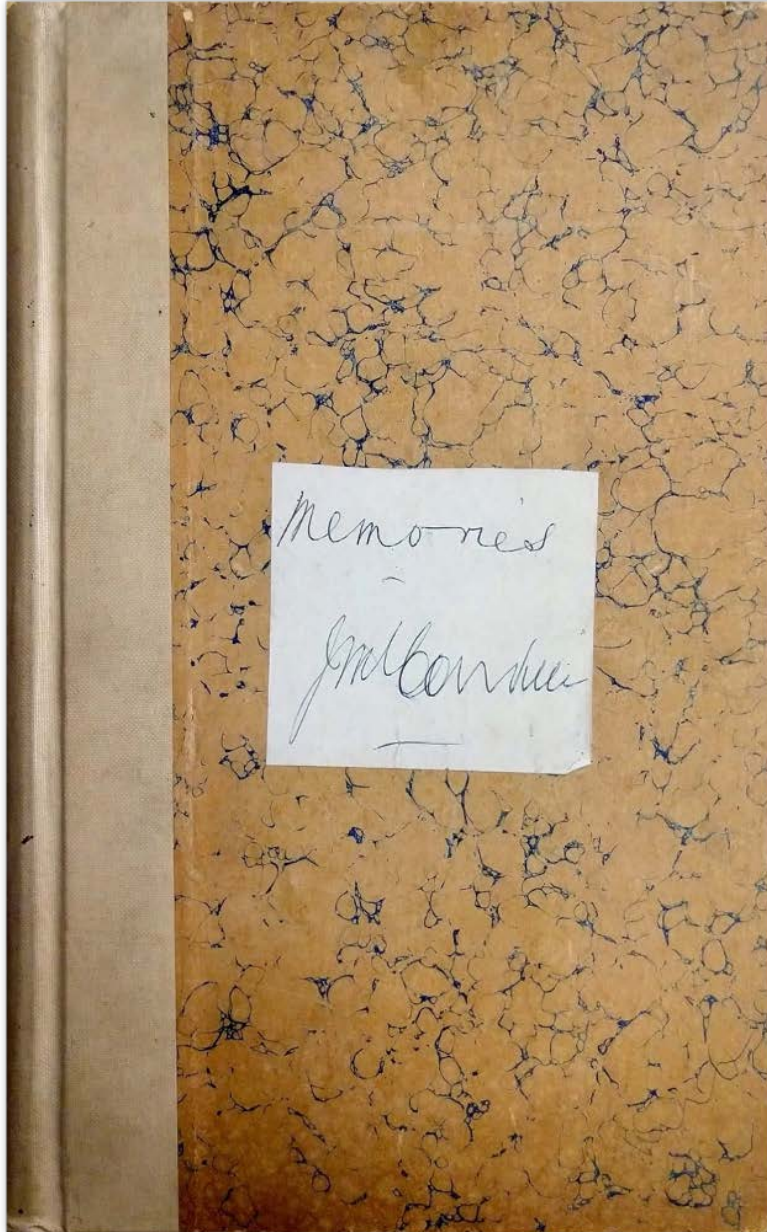
implemented at the actual ports of entry—a throwback to the failure of the Contagious Diseases Act that was circumvented by Indian women in its local iterations.

The rhetorical uses of ‘traffic’ appear most starkly in colonial discussions on foreign women, but peel away when honing in on the local contexts of Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan. Indian women were accused of ‘trafficking’ in contexts of local abductions and kidnapping, but not for being prostitutes who exercised mobility. Anti-trafficking rhetoric nonetheless still undergirded the response to prostitution in the interwar area and also shaped the recasting of Indian prostitutes as an urban nuisance engaged in ‘immoral traffic.’ However, while mobility and movement became crucial tools in the arsenal of European women evading the state, Indian women resisted by refusing to leave their quarters of residence. Where French women had to go under the radar, Indian women had to affirm their right to residence as citizens.

What emerges here is a history of limits: Indian women confined to space and exiled beyond it, and French women confined behind and within borders. The projects of relocating prostitutes away from society meanwhile created the expansive red-light districts of GB Road in Delhi and Kamathipura in Bombay—the limits of sex workers today. But limits did not deter the Indian women who petitioned, refused to leave, and appealed to return, nor did it deter French women who networked their evasion from the consulate to the port of entry. Prostitution may have been put in its place but that place was subject to reclamation and subversion, as Ghulam Abbas deftly showed in *Anandi*. Beyond being a story of the marginalization of sex workers through removals, relocations, and deportations, interventions into prostitution during the interwar period were at every step subject to disruption and contestation by Indian and French women—acts that exposed the limits of the city, state, and empire itself.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MEMORY: PROSTITUTION AND TESTIMONY AT THE END OF EMPIRE



**Figure 4.1** 'Memories.' Unpublished memoirs of Lt. Col. James McConville. Source: NAM/1974-08-82. Courtesy of the National Army Museum.

On March 25, 1946, the Methodist Reverend A. Jeans Courtney of Derby penned a letter to the India Office in Whitehall (Figure 4.2). He was concerned that “a number of soldiers [returning from India]...ha[d] stated that brothels are run for the troops in that country.”<sup>1</sup> The reverend wanted to know whether the Government of India ran such military brothels and specifically asked for “information either denying or substantiating” these claims.<sup>2</sup> An administrative officer in Whitehall proposed to write a very brief response to the letter, which was dispatched a few weeks later, and predictably reiterated the official position held by Whitehall by issuing a blanket denial about brothels for British troops in India.<sup>3</sup> However, the reply notably went on to state that “Any statements made by soldiers who have returned from India that such institutions have been organized for them...are entirely without foundation.”<sup>4</sup>

Anti-vice campaigners from Britain to Hong Kong endeavored to keep investigating the question of regulated brothels in colonies during the postwar era, and frequently wrote letters to Whitehall citing evidence from the ground to demand accountability.<sup>5</sup> The question was nonetheless becoming increasingly irrelevant as an imperial concern in an age of rapid decolonization, as brothels were now primarily municipal and social concerns within nation-states.<sup>6</sup> British rule came to an end in the South Asian subcontinent when India and Pakistan gained independence in August 1947, along with Sri Lanka and Burma in 1948. The gradual

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<sup>1</sup> A. Jeans Courtney to the India Office, March 25, 1946, IOR/L/MIL/13899.

<sup>2</sup> Courtney to India Office, IOR/L/MIL/13899.

<sup>3</sup> Unnamed administrative officer to H. E. Davies, n.d., IOR/L/M/13899.

<sup>4</sup> H. E. Davies to A. Jeans Courtney, April 12, 1946, IOR/L/MIL/13899.

<sup>5</sup> The Association of Moral and Social Hygiene similarly wrote to Whitehall in April 1946 to draw attention to the problem of ‘traffic in women and children’ in Hong Kong after the war, and pleaded for more welfare workers to support women and children in need of protection.

<sup>6</sup> In 1956, the Republic of India passed the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act. State governments would publish administrative reports on the working of the law, see *Administration Report on the Working of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act, 1956* (Madras: Government of Madras Printing, 1966). The Islamic Republic of Pakistan published similar reports on the status of prostitution, see *Report of the Commission for the Eradication of Social Evils* (Karachi: Government of Pakistan Press, 1965).

withdrawal of military forces ended a presence of British soldiers in the region that dated back nearly two hundred years to the East India Presidency armies of the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

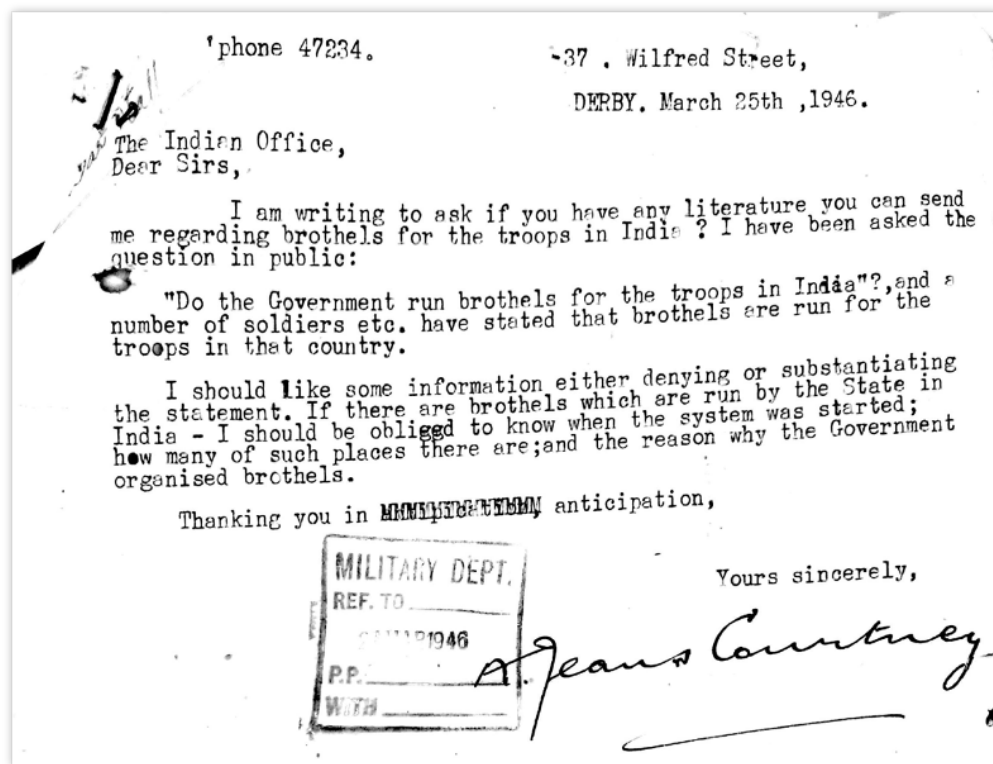


Figure 4.2 Reverend A. Jeans Courtney’s letter to the India Office in Whitehall, March 1946. Source: IOR/L/MIL/13899. Courtesy of the British Library.

As nationalist and anticolonial movements gained ground in other parts of the British Empire, significant waves of decolonization took place in Southeast Asia in the late 1950s, and in Africa in the early 1960s. By the 1970s, Britain’s empire had seemingly come to an end—yet, the end of empire hardly spelled the end of imperial influence. The integration of former British territories into the political association of the Commonwealth tempered the blow to national pride among the British public that came with the loss of colonial holdings.<sup>8</sup> Postwar migrations to Britain from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean shaped new social demographics that elicited

<sup>7</sup> “The British Withdrawal from India,” *The Journal of the Royal United Services Institution* 93(1948): 355-357.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Elizabeth Stockwell, “Britain and Decolonization in an Era of Global Change,” in *The Oxford Handbook on the Ends of Empire*, eds. Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 16.

hostile responses from white Britons and reinforced the colonial dynamics of racism.<sup>9</sup> Empire, in many ways, had come home to Britain.

The persistence of imperial culture was likewise expressed through colonial understandings of the past. “We said at the end of the war, here it is...gave it to them on a plate,” remarked an elderly Henry John Smith regarding the end of British rule in India while at his home in London on October 7, 1976.<sup>10</sup> Smith—who had been a corporal in the British Indian Army during the 1930s—was sharing his views in conversation with sound archivist Margaret Brooks, with whom he had agreed to interview as part of an oral history initiative led by the Imperial War Museum.<sup>11</sup> He added, “it’s in a sorry state now, is India...the whole of it going back to sand and dust, [to] what it was centuries ago.”<sup>12</sup> His casual rendition of India’s struggle for independence from colonial rule was arguably reflective of then widely-held views in Britain that afforded Indians little to no agency in the process of decolonization.<sup>13</sup> The former serviceman, however, did not meet with Brooks to talk about the decline of the British Empire—a development more immediate to the time he was in—but to talk about his experiences *of* empire at a time when Britain’s imperial past was rapidly becoming marginal. The memories of Smith and others like him nonetheless ensured that empire was never too far from home.

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<sup>9</sup> The UK National Front—a merger between the far-right British National Party and the League of Empire Loyalists (an organization that originally campaigned for the restoration of the British Empire)—reached its height of electoral influence in the mid-1970s.

<sup>10</sup> Henry John Smith, interview by Margaret Brooks, October 7, 1976, recording, IWM/Sound Collection (SC)/836.

<sup>11</sup> The aim of these early interviews was to gather testimony from former servicemen stationed abroad in the British Empire. A corporal was a non-commissioned officer (NCO) who was one class above a private. I use NCO and soldier synonymously in this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836.

<sup>13</sup> Similar views were expressed in contemporary literature such as Paul Scott’s *The Raj Quartet* (the last novel in this series was published in 1974). For a critique of this literature, see Salman Rushdie, “Outside the Whale,” *Granta*, May 1, 1984. On the greater impact of decolonization within British society see *British Culture and the End of Empire*, ed. Stuart Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

Margaret Brooks was an early practitioner of the developing craft of oral history that had gained prominence in Britain in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> She would put adverts in local papers to find prospective interviewees and travel to their homes to speak with them. Reflecting on her time as an oral historian, Brooks would later recall that nervous interviewees were often assuaged by being in the familiar space of their homes.<sup>15</sup> When she sat down with Smith, early topics of their conversation were lighter fare: how Smith came to know of his posting to India, his reaction to it, and the sites he passed aboard his troopship before arriving at the port of Bombay. Recalling sights, sounds, and the weather put Smith at ease. But the conversation took a notable turn around the half an hour mark, when Brooks, without warning or intimation, asked Smith about prostitution. “What about the official brothels for the troops?” she said.<sup>16</sup> 30 years after Reverend Courtney’s letter to Whitehall, the question had again become relevant.

Matters of sexual life periodically came up during interviews with soldiers formerly stationed abroad, and the 1970s was a relatively permissive time for these questions to take hold. The decade primarily remembered in Britain as a time of economic decline between the “swinging sixties” and the Thatcherite 80s was conversely a time of progress for gender relations.<sup>17</sup> Still, many interviewees tended to be reserved or uncomfortable when asking questions about sex and brothels.<sup>18</sup> Brooks, for her part, was more assured. Smith, too, was not caught off guard and confidently answered the question like it was any other. He recalled his experiences at holiday summer camps set up in northern hill stations such as Ranikhet where

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<sup>14</sup> The independent journal *Oral History* came into print in 1971 and the Oral History Society of Britain formed in 1973, while oral history broadcasts were also becoming more common through radio.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Brooks, interview by Robert Wilkinson, February 2, 2013, recording, BL/Sound/C1149/30.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Morgan, “Britain in the Seventies – Our Unfinest Hour?” *French Journal of British Studies* [Online] 22(2017). <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/1662>.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, Charles Allen and Conrad Wood—the two other interviewees discussed in this chapter—were audibly uncomfortable when they broached the topic.

there were no official brothels and very few women to speak of, but noted that the troops “managed without them until they got down onto the plains,” referring to cities and towns where there were cantonment and urban brothel areas.<sup>19</sup> Brooks followed up and asked Smith, who had been a married man during his time in India, about the attitudes of wives to military brothels. “One of amusement,” Smith responded—cheerfully and unperturbed by this line of questioning.<sup>20</sup> It was a matter of ‘ribaldry,’ he said, and relayed a story often told in the cantonment messes about a soldier asking his wife for a single rupee to go to the brothel, and the wife obliging to get rid of him. Smith said that there was a kind of banter around brothels that caused ‘endless fun’ among married couples in the barracks.

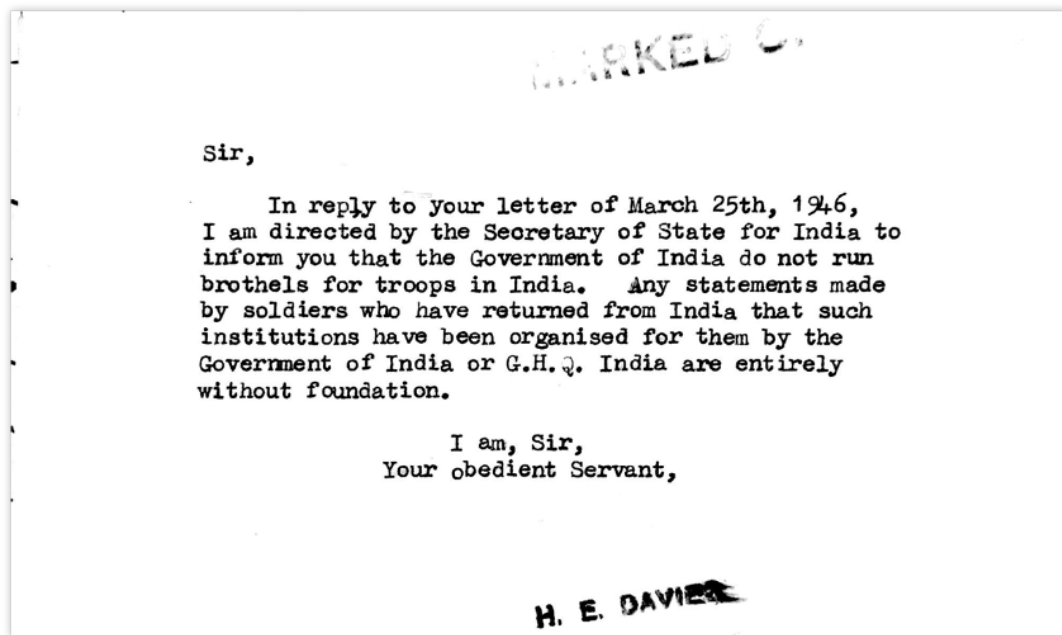
There was a notable pause. Smith was perhaps taking too lightly what was intended as a serious question about prostitution. Brooks wanted to draw out a more weighted response from the interviewee. She switched gears and asked “it must have been hard work for the poor girls, were they all Indian?” This question and the shift in conversation to prostitutes instead of brothels immediately put an end to Smith’s jovial demeanor and injected a seriousness into his voice. The ‘work’ of Indian women engaged in sexual commerce was hardly ever a concern for military authorities or British soldiers. But it was now a concern for Brooks, and consequently, a concern for Smith for grapple with. He hesitated, but in a somber tone, recalled that Indian prostitutes were often very young girls, and went as far as to suggest that every second or third Indian woman he encountered was a prostitute. Believing that he was indulging one too many memories, Smith paused to ask if they were still ‘on the air,’ to which Brooks encouraged him to

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836. Interestingly, this stands in contrast to the experiences at hill stations like Ranikhet where there were reports that the difficult-to-patrol topography made it easier for soldiers to meet local women outside the barracks. It is possible that soldiers had less freedom to leave the barracks or that Smith did not personally have knowledge of soldiers going on strolls far from the barracks. On Ranikhet during the period of regulation, see chapter 1, esp. 33-35.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836.

carry on. “Oh, I mustn’t...no, I mustn’t,” came the response.<sup>21</sup> Memory had come back to trouble Smith—and perhaps to also trouble the official record on colonial India (Figure 4.3).



**Figure 4.3** Whitehall’s reply to Reverend Courtney, April 1946. Source: IOR/L/MIL/13899. Courtesy of the British Library.

A few things stand out from Smith’s exchange with Brooks. His reluctance to speak about prostitutes was a common occurrence among former servicemen, but what was striking was how his initial eagerness to speak about brothels starkly changed into reticence when the questions turned to the Indian women who worked in those brothels. Remembering ‘official brothels’ and how they operated was one thing—this was a question of recalling procedure. Remembering the women who exchanged sex for income and *putting a face* to their memory was quite another—for this, at the very least, was a challenge to recognize their personhood. More than often, the response from interviewees tended to be to evoke these women in terms of either condescension or contempt, and rarely much else. Smith was no anomaly in this regard.

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836.



Beyond Smith negotiating the terrain of his memory, what he revealed to Brooks in terms of content is even more crucial. Several decades after the India Office—which had consistently covered up the truth about regulated prostitution in India for over half a century—issued a blanket denial to Reverend Courtney, here was Smith, in his own words and on the record, not only confirming the existence of official brothels for troops, but remarking on how brothels were so ingrained in military life that they were joked about in cantonment messes. The truth about military brothels and regulated prostitution in empire had hardly been a secret. But on the record oral interviews by servicemen attesting to the fact were novel and unprecedented. Statements once dismissed as ‘without foundation’ by Whitehall were now to be recorded on tapes, transcribed, and catalogued. Official narratives of empire presented as fact were to be disputed, and indeed, troubled by oral testimonies.

This chapter examines the trouble with empire and prostitution through the oral histories of former British soldiers stationed in India. It is primarily concerned with how the memories of prostitution, expressed by these men decades after the end of empire, revealed worlds of sexual commerce across multiple locales that were either denied or silenced in colonial accounts. Experiences of and around prostitution colored the memories of daily life among men such as Henry John Smith across various locales in India between the 1920s and 1940s (Map 4.1)—a period during which legal approaches to prostitution sought to either abolish or relocate brothels (the segregation/suppression paradigm discussed in chapter 3), while hardening effort to police single women crossing borders to India.<sup>22</sup> The colonial state at multiple levels of governance—municipal, provincial, and central—was eager to support the rhetoric of anti-trafficking and abolishing prostitution, yet, the personal histories of these men demonstrate of how little the

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<sup>22</sup> See chapter 3 for relocation/removal approaches to brothels, and deportations of foreign women from India.

military in particular was concerned with the matter. On the ground, authorities had all but accepted brothels as a fixture of everyday cantonment life in India and former servicemen attested to this fact in vivid detail in their interviews. Like in preceding chapters, I utilize the mole's-eye view of empire to focus on what animated the everyday spaces of confrontation between regulation and practice, and in particular, articulate the flagrant flouting of rules by British men, who frequently did so with impunity.

The British men interviewing about their experiences as servicemen unsurprisingly constitute the most archivally visible clients of Indian and European women engaged in sex work—always in close proximity to archival records on prostitution due to persistent military concerns about venereal diseases, while also being represented in private papers and oral histories.<sup>23</sup> Their testimonies after the end of empire of participating in and observing the spaces of prostitution, both in cities and cantonments, refracts a history of far more access to urban prostitution and organized brothels than military authorities were willing to admit to. The tensions between soldiers and the empire they served in India in this regard was not on the grounds of law, but rather, shaped by how the oral histories of former servicemen revealed what the colonial state had done its best to silence in the interwar and late colonial period.

This silencing was not limited to official archives, but is also encountered in the descriptions of anti-brothel campaigners, who visited major cantonments to find that women residing there were compelled to attend medical exams that were kept off the official books. For instance, several Indian women residing in a recognized brothel at the Multan cantonment told

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<sup>23</sup> There is little doubt that when it comes to the presence of recorded information about male clientele in colonial India, that British soldiers are by far the most represented in official colonial sources. Indian men of different classes who visited prostitutes and courtesans have however featured in vernacular chronicles and literature in various languages, including Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali. This chapter does not explore oral narratives from the Indian, Asian, and European women who participated in sexual commerce in colonial India because these are far and few, and where present, are heavily ventriloquized, e.g. coerced testimony from prostitutes in legal proceedings, interviews conducted by Christian missionary workers that are transparently ideological.

the campaigner Katherine Dixon in 1918 that attending the medical exam was a *hukm* or order.<sup>24</sup> The descriptions of such arrangements had littered official correspondence in the late nineteenth century, but in the twentieth century, and notably after the First World War, they found mention mostly through the investigations of campaigners, who themselves were treated with increasing suspicion by military police inside cantonments.<sup>25</sup> To counter this silencing, oral testimonies—which have been largely elided by historians of colonial India despite finding prominence in histories of postcolonial South Asia—are especially illuminating in centering the ordinary agents of soldiers both as purveyors, and to a lesser degree, targets of colonial power.<sup>26</sup> Oral histories feature here as both source and subject, as I consider how everyday encounters around sexual commerce were differently mediated, remembered, and relayed decades later in Britain from the 1970s onward. In doing so, I explore what it means to navigate the notion of memory *as* history.

This chapter utilizes two major oral history collections.<sup>27</sup> One, a standalone collection on the experiences of the British in India titled ‘Plain Tales from the Raj,’ which was commissioned for broadcast on BBC radio in 1974. The interviews for this collection were conducted by historian Charles Allen who also generated a bestselling book out of the material.<sup>28</sup> The second collection is the sound archive of the Imperial War Museum that includes significant content on servicemen in India through interviews dated from the 1970s to the 1990s. Margaret Brooks and

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<sup>24</sup> Katherine Dixon to Alison Neilans, Secy. of AMSH, February 23, 1918, WL/AMSH/C/04/02.

<sup>25</sup> In Dixon’s visit to the Mian Meer cantonment in Lahore, a British soldier on police duty questioned Dixon and her team as to why they were there, with a view that they ought to leave. Dixon to Neilans, WL/AMSH/C/04/02.

<sup>26</sup> The genre of oral history has been especially instrumental for writing histories of the Indian Partition from below. Foundational works include Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Understanding the articulation of memory beyond a descriptive sense, and as an act giving meaning to the past, I take the view put forward in Alistair Thomson, “Memory and Remembering in Oral History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald Ritchie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77-95.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Allen, *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the Twentieth Century* (London: Time Warner Books, 1988; repr. 1975).

historian Conrad Wood were the primary sound archivists conducting interviews for this collection. Wood conducted most of the interviews with servicemen stationed in India, having completed his doctoral dissertation on peasant rebellion in colonial India.<sup>29</sup>

These two collections have received the scantest of attention from historians of colonial India, one may surmise, due to the near absence of Indian voices within them. Yet, despite the difficulty of working with material where Indians, especially subaltern Indian women, are remembered through an unforgivingly colonizing gaze, these oral records of the experiences of ordinary Europeans in India are worthy of far greater scrutiny than they have received.<sup>30</sup> After all, reading acts of trouble through the agents that served empire without being subject to its rule of difference paint an image far more chaotic than what empire would like its beholder to see. The fact that these interviews are largely accessible as sound recordings also allows for a fuller analysis of the material given the meaningful role that tone, expression, and silences play in shaping an individual's testimony and its reception. I anchor my analysis around a dozen of these interviews, and read them against the private papers of soldiers to explore the contrasts between remembering and contemporaneously commenting on prostitution (Table 4.1).

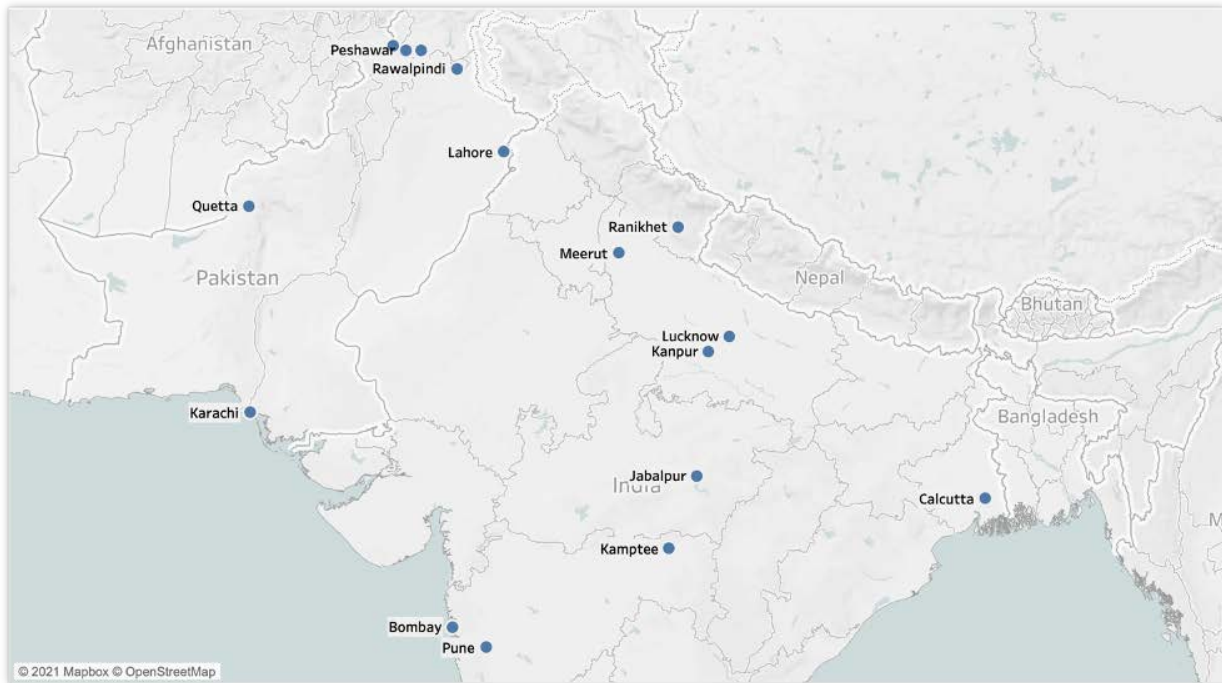
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<sup>29</sup> Conrad Wood, "The Moplah Rebellion of 1921-22 and its Genesis," PhD diss. (School of Oriental and African Studies, 1975).

<sup>30</sup> Exceptions include Mary A. Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics, and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), which substantively engages with the Plain Tales collection.

Name of Officer	Source Material	Locations
David Lloyd Griffiths (1938-1942)	Oral History	Kanpur, Landi Kotal, Lucknow
E. S. Humphries (1907-1911)	Oral History	Jabalpur, Lucknow, Ranikhet
Ed Brown (1919-1929)	Oral History	Bombay, Nowshera
Ed Davies (1924-1936)	Oral History	Meerut
H. T. Wickham (1904-1922)	Oral History	Calcutta, Peshawar
Henry John Smith (1934-1940)	Oral History	Bombay, Quetta, Ranikhet
James Henry Bellow (1937-1938)	Oral History	Kamptee, Rawalpindi
Roy Morrison Milner (1935-1938)	Oral History	Lucknow, Ranikhet
Spike Milligan (1918-1927)	Oral History	Pune
Stephen Bentley (1927-1933)	Oral History	Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar
Toco Moses Steven (1919-1937)	Oral History	Rawalpindi
J.P Swindlehurst (1919-1921)	Private Papers	Lahore
James McConville (1899-1914)	Private Papers	Calcutta
Norman Harrison (1943-1945)	Private Papers	Rawalpindi
T. A. Pyne (1942-1946)	Private Papers	Bombay

**Table 4.1** Non-commissioned and commissioned officers that are cited in this chapter, their years spent in India, and notable locations from their testimony and writings. Note: Spike Milligan was himself not a soldier but spent time in the Pune cantonment as the son of an NCO. Table by author.



**Map 4.1** Locations identified in oral testimonies and private papers consulted for this chapter (Landi Kotal and Nowshera are not labeled). Map by author.

In the following sections, I consider how soldiers received and responded to institutional attempts to inform them on the dangers of venereal diseases and to dissuade them from sexually engaging with Indian women. Much like soldiers had ignored the official rulebook in the late nineteenth century, so too did they similarly resent being lectured on safe sex in the late colonial period, and remained unwilling to take orders or accept guidance on the matter of their sex lives. I then use soldier testimonies to examine formal and informal economies of prostitution, while also considering perspectives on the Indian women engaged in these economies. In a marked continuity from the late nineteenth century, I show that while soldiers visited urban and cantonment brothels, they preferred systems of informal prostitution within the barracks that they also had an active role in shaping. In the final section, this chapter returns to Henry John Smith's interview, and introduces other elaborate testimonies, to investigate the uneven terrains of memory and empire. These memories give us an intimate glimpse into the colonial worlds of sexual commerce as these men remember them. Perhaps more importantly, as this chapter argues, memories of empire from below also shattered its self-regard held above.

### **Soldiers and Information in Empire**

British soldiers were the largest subset of Europeans in India. At the beginning of the twentieth century, active British personnel in India numbered at just under 75,000, which was about half the number of Indians serving in the army at the same time.<sup>31</sup> NCOs like Smith were posted across 100 cantonments in cities and towns that included the Presidencies of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay and were on short-term enlistments of around seven years, as had been customary

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<sup>31</sup> *Our Indian Empire: A Short Review and Some Hints for Soldiers Proceeding to India* (Simla: Government Central Branch Press, 1917, 18, BL/Mss. Eur./C340/4. This number does not include British volunteers and volunteer reserves. The full strength of the British armed forces in India, which included the numbers of Indians alongside Britons, was around 350,000 in 1911.

since the transition from Company to Crown Rule.<sup>32</sup> However, unlike Smith, the vast majority of these men were unmarried.

The military presence of soldiers seeped significantly into the social lives of Indians, especially when it came to issues of violence, justice, and sexual propriety. Stories about misbehaving and drunk British soldiers lined the pages of local newspapers across the country, as did stories about how their egregious crimes—abusing, injuring, assaulting, and even murdering Indians—frequently went unpunished in courts of law, with local reporters often commenting on the racist double-standards that protected Europeans from accountability.<sup>33</sup> In unpublished and likely covert correspondence, the Medical Officer at a cantonment hospital in Punjab noted that the women working at the military brothel there complained that military police sexually assaulted them and did not pay them, while one individual woman filed a complaint that a soldier killed her *murgi* (chicken) that she likely kept for sustenance.<sup>34</sup> In a chilling account of the colonial impunity, James McConville, a corporal in India during the early twentieth century, remarked in his memoirs in a paragraph casually placed between descriptions of marriage and football that “it was always said...that no European would ever get hanged for killing a native,” and that excuses were always found to minimize murder charges against Britons (Figure 4.1).<sup>35</sup>

In this climate, soldiers were routinely the source of complaints from ordinary Indians, whether it pertained to everyday acts of violence or the frequent miscarriages of justice. But among these, particularly controversial and sensational was the existence of official brothels in

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<sup>32</sup> This length of conscription was longer relative to other empires at the time, notably the French Empire.

<sup>33</sup> On everyday acts of violence committed by soldiers in India and differentiated colonial justice, see Kolsky, *Colonial Justice*, esp. chapter 1.

<sup>34</sup> Extracts from ‘Venereal Register, Ferozepur Cantonment Hospital,’ August 19, 1913, compiled by Katherine Dixon, WL/AMSH/C/04/02. This register was found by Dixon through her investigative work at the time—such explicit correspondence ceased to be printed and sent to London.

<sup>35</sup> James McConville, *Memories*, manuscript, f. 25, Papers of Lt. Col. J. McConville (Bundle 1), NAM/1974-08-82.

which registered prostitutes who were mostly Indian sold sex to British NCOs—a history of military regulation that, as we have seen, traversed from statewide CDA laws in the nineteenth century to Cantonment policies in the twentieth century. Military attempts to curb VD rates via this legislation was not only a marked failure but regulatory laws instead coincided with stark increases in the numbers of brothels.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, military policy on prostitution, among other factors of urban growth, had contributed to the expansion of sexual commerce in India to the point that brothels came to be seen as problems of significant state, provincial, and municipal concern by the 1920s.

The subject of regulation received considerable coverage in the vernacular press, with newspaper reports arguing that the use of state funds to maintain brothels and medically examine prostitutes “in order to satisfy the lust of British soldiers” was especially repugnant and shameful on part of the British government.<sup>37</sup> Other reports stated that ‘supplying’ women to military cantonments had “demoralized the Indian public” and revealed the lack of discipline and moral control among the soldiers.<sup>38</sup> Such thinking was on the rare occasion even shared by colonial administrators, with the Lucknow City Magistrate once claiming that “it was unjust to the tax the citizens in order that the British soldier should be provided with clean women.”<sup>39</sup> But military brothels and their beneficiaries, i.e. soldiers, remained a significant target of outrage among the civilian population. What had made matters more alarming for the government were the markedly lower rates at which Indian soldiers became infected with venereal diseases compared

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<sup>36</sup> See chapter 1 for argument that popular understandings of law allowed various groups of Indian women to strategize against it via means of transport technologies, navigating environments, and claiming legal exemptions. Regarding increases in brothels, under the CDA, the number of brothels in Bombay, for instance, peaked at 291, while by the 1930s this number went as high as 600 according to police estimates. See Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct*.

<sup>37</sup> Bodh Sudhakar, May 16, 1888, INR, IOR/L/R/5/143.

<sup>38</sup> Bombay Samachar, 10 June, 1889, INR, IOR/L/R/5/144.

<sup>39</sup> “Captain Fendall Currie, Officer Deputy Commissioner Lucknow to Commission, Lucknow Division,” 23 March, 1878, in *Fourth Annual Report on the Working of the Lock-Hospitals in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, p. 80, IOR/V/24/2290.



to British soldiers. That Indian soldiers were primarily married men appears to have been a factor in the lower incidence of infection among them.

It is unsurprising then that the theme of sexual conduct was a recurring feature of interviews with former NCOs. While there appears to be an awareness on part of the interviewers that such a thing as ‘official’ brothels existed, it is without any recognition of the role that organized prostitution played in the longer history of empire and British military presence in India. Between the BBC and IWM collections, not every serviceman was asked about brothels and prostitution, but those that were generally gave thorough answers—most often, but not always, at a distance from the space of the brothel itself to ensure that they did not implicate themselves as participants or sex buyers. In an early review of the ‘Plain Tales’ broadcast, historian Victor Kiernan noted that “where there is most candor all round, and most novelty, is on the theme of sexual conduct.”<sup>40</sup> The gains of this oral history, Kiernan remarked, were made possible by the more ‘socially permissive’ era in which the interviews were taking place in Britain. Kiernan was importantly commenting on an edited broadcast that was carefully curated to not reveal the most descriptive memories about prostitution. It was the unedited recordings that contained the most candor of all.<sup>41</sup>

### *Negotiating Information and Risk*

Before embarking for India in 1919, Private J. P. Swindlehurst recalled the lectures on sex education his platoon received while still in Staffordshire. The Medical Officer cautioned the men against drinking too much, but particularly warned them that the man “who goes in for

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<sup>40</sup> Victor Kiernan, “Review of Plain Tales from the Raj,” *Oral History* 6(1978): 124.

<sup>41</sup> These survive in recordings and transcripts.

women” would get “scant sympathy” if he contracted venereal disease.<sup>42</sup> Swindlehurst had attended similar lectures while in France during the First World War, so this was nothing new for him. He did note that the lectures often led to talk about women in the barrack halls, and that at the time “some chap who [had] been to France and visited the brothels behind the lines [could] keep an audience of fellows...attentive for hours.”<sup>43</sup>

Other soldiers in British garrisons, prior to their postings in India, similarly described conversations within barrack rooms as consisting of men bragging about their connections with prostitutes, with one remarking that it “would have astonished anyone chancing to hear it by its extremely immoral nature.”<sup>44</sup> The occasional distribution of tracts by the Army Scripture Reader along with mandatory visits to church, this soldier said, had little influence on the mentality of the men.<sup>45</sup> Yet, despite the prevalence of prostitution near garrisons in Britain, many missionaries in India would frequently cite the “solicitations of bad [local] women” as being the primary cause for soldiers caving to sexual temptation.<sup>46</sup> The reality was that soldiers acquired considerable knowledge about brothels and prostitution, and the manners of engaging with them, well before they ever set sail for India.

The appointment of Lord Kitchener as Commander-in-Chief of India in 1902 had ushered in a significant period of reform in the British Army where more emphasis than ever before was placed on the moral nature of the British soldier—and more efforts were taken to create opportunities for ‘leisure’ beyond sex and drink. Under Kitchener’s influence, authorities actively encouraged giving lectures and distributing pamphlets on the dangers of visiting brothels

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<sup>42</sup> J. P. Swindlehurst, *Personal Diary (PD)*, October 1 1919, *Private Papers of J. P. Swindlehurst*, IWM/Documents/10415.

<sup>43</sup> Swindlehurst, *Diary*, October 1 1919, IWM/Documents/10415.

<sup>44</sup> *Experiences of a Soldier*, 1891, manuscript, NAM/1970-08-13.

<sup>45</sup> *Experiences of a Soldier*, NAM/1970-08-13.

<sup>46</sup> Max Wood Moorhead to King George V, 16 April, 1913, letter, IOR/L/MIL/7/13890.

and contracting venereal disease. This material began to be distributed by missionaries and chaplains as men were embarking on troopships in Britain, and it continued in India, where lectures were held, and circulars and bulletins were put up in the barrack square. Such material tended to emphasize the importance of self-restraint, hygiene, and spiritual well-being, and often cited the overconsumption of alcohol as an explanation for why soldiers visited brothels or solicited women in the streets.

Soldiers, however, did not necessarily take well to this development. Roy Morrison Milner, who disembarked at Karachi in 1935 and was posted in the Northwest Frontier, said that his regiment had lectures where they were told the best way to avoid getting VD was “not to indulge,” and with an animated laugh added “which none of us believed anyway.”<sup>47</sup> Speaking to interviewer Charles Allen, Stephen Bentley, who was posted to Lahore in 1927, recalled that the troops were ‘embarrassed’ to receive pamphlets that told them not to go down to the brothels. But rather than show their embarrassment, they “they took all the literatures...and stuffed it in their back pockets and never read it.”<sup>48</sup> The corporal James McConville, however, did keep a copy of a widely distributed memorandum issued by Lord Kitchener for soldiers preparing for service in India, which suggests that a small minority did take the guidance seriously.<sup>49</sup> This particular memorandum advised soldiers that “the common women...[and] regular prostitutes in India are almost all...infected with disease,” and that “diseases passed on from one race of men to another always increase in severity.”<sup>50</sup> In conjunction with citing self-restraint and duty as motivating factors for soldiers to keep healthy, the ‘dangers’ of Indian women were often invoked in racist ways to dissuade the men from associating with them.

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<sup>47</sup> Roy Morrison Milner, interview by Margaret Brooks, January 27, 1977, recording, IWM/SC/865.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Bentley, interview by Charles Allen, 1974, recording, BL/Sound/C1510/06.

<sup>49</sup> Kitchener Memorandum, 23 October, 1905, Papers of Lt. Col. J. McConville (Bundle 2), NAM/1974-08-82.

<sup>50</sup> Kitchener Memorandum, NAM/1974-08-82.

Yet, much of this messaging also included partial information about what to do with regard to hygiene and medical reporting if soldiers contracted a venereal disease. Equipped with different kinds of preventative knowledge, soldiers made little attempt to avoid buying sex, but as Milner stated, “they took precautions beforehand, and they took precautions afterwards.”<sup>51</sup> Milner embarrassingly said “I’m not going to have this recorded” before he presumably detailed to Brooks what those precautions were off the record. Private Ed Davies might have underplayed the precautions when he said that soldiers “[had] facilitates back at the barracks to syringe themselves out.”<sup>52</sup> Lectures and literature, in spite of their cautionary tone, contained within them the concession that soldiers would behave as they wished.<sup>53</sup>

An arguably more effective deterrent for the soldiers were the military penalties they incurred as a result of becoming infected. Milner plainly said that contracting a venereal disease “cost an awful lot of money” for soldiers who were already on a low rate of pay.<sup>54</sup> On the matter of pay, Stephen Bentley recalled that he could not even afford to buy beer on his salary of barely a rupee a day. On top of the low pay, Bentley spoke of ‘stoppages’ or deductions as being startlingly “iniquitous” by taking funds for barrack management and repairs out of soldiers’ pay as opposed to the cantonment fund.<sup>55</sup> NCOs did not take kindly to this. Thomas Pyne, who was stationed in India in 1942, wrote in his memoirs: “Wise to turn your back on the problem, which the powers that be did, and place it on the shoulders of the ignorant?”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Milner, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/865.

<sup>52</sup> Ed Davies, interview by Charles Allen, 1974, recording, BL/Sound/C1510/23.

<sup>53</sup> This was not unique to messaging in India by any means. A venereal disease pamphlet in the possession of an NCO posted to Brussels during the Second World War runs down a list of harms caused by syphilis, and at the bottom reads ‘IF YOU DO RUN A FOOLISH RISK’ before giving guidance on how to stay protected. ‘Venereal Disease,’ 1945, pamphlet, Papers of Gnr. Albert Thomas, NAM/2009-09-19.

<sup>54</sup> Milner, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/865.

<sup>55</sup> Bentley, interview by Allen, recording, BL/Sound/C1510/06.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Pyne, *No Hero Here! The story of an ordinary man who was called to fight a war from October 1939 to May 1946*, p. 40, IWM/Documents/17390.

While the loss of pay while on VD treatment did dissuade a few, it could just as easily encourage soldiers to hide their diseases and not seek treatment. This would be difficult in severe cases, but far likelier with cases of secondary infection. In the past, such developments had prompted authorities to cancel penalties altogether because they came to believe that far from being a deterrent, it gave way to the dangers of concealment—a counterproductive development given the importance of early treatment in addressing syphilitic infections.<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that treatments for VD were especially painful before the discovery of penicillin in 1929. The use of mercury injections for urethral therapy was the most common method throughout the nineteenth century, whereas arsphenamines became more popular as relief medication during the early twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> Pyne jokingly remarked that unpleasant stories about instruments being inserted into the urethra “did more for the practice of celibacy” than anything else.<sup>59</sup>

What is clear is that there was an institutional attempt by British military authorities in India to educate European soldiers on the dangers of visiting brothels, informally buying sex, and soliciting sex from women. Whether it was in the form of tracts, pamphlets, lectures, or bulletin notices placed above urinals in cantonment toilets, the message was clear: it was painful and costly to contract VD and soldiers should steer clear of anything that may increase their temptations, including alcohol (Figure 4.4). Medical officers were sure to include the painful nature of VD treatments in their lectures to soldiers. Soldiers were also informed about the particular problems associated with consorting with Indian women and the more severe strains of VD that existed in India—these attempts, it will be seen, undoubtedly helped to shape their racialized understandings of prostitution. Brothels in the city were always put ‘out of bounds,’

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<sup>57</sup> Surgeon-Major-General A. F. Bradshaw to Adjutant-General in India, 15 October, 1892, correspondence, IOR/L/MIL/7/13847.

<sup>58</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 76.

<sup>59</sup> Pyne, *No Hero Here*, p. 40, IWM/Documents/17390.

but brothels in the barracks were a different matter. Soldiers, however, had other ideas, which included sneaking away to brothel areas in the city, creating networks of informal sex exchange within the cantonment, implicating the wrong women as having infected them, and frequenting cantonment brothels that were rarely acknowledged at an ‘official’ level during the interwar and late colonial period. No amount of information or risk factor tended to substantively alter their strategies in engaging with prostitution. The next sections will address these stories by soldiers in their own words.



**Figure 4.4** Two sketches by Sgt. Norman ‘Tiger’ Harrison while in India, c. 1943. On the left, a soldier in a urinal stall stares at a bulletin on venereal disease. On the right, an inebriated soldier is carried away by two officers. Such sketches also show how official messaging on VD and drink was internalized by the intended subject of soldiers. Source: NAM/2002-03-60. Courtesy of the National Army Museum.

## Everyday Economies: Prostitution and Empire

Charles Allen, historian and the sole interviewer for the 'Plain Tales' collection, did not seem too comfortable asking his interviewees about prostitution. While speaking to H. T. Wickham, who was posted to the cities of Lahore and Peshawar until 1922, Allen audibly stuttered when saying "You mention that there were in fact until a certain...in your lifetime...prostitute quarters for the troops."<sup>60</sup> After an elderly Wickham responded yes, Allen followed up "Could you tell me more about that? Because that's a surprising fact." But the fact was not as surprising, nor was speaking about it as novel as Allen might have preferred to let on. Regulated brothels had existed well before Wickham's time in India, and even before the emergence of formal oral history initiatives, NCOs who returned to Britain did give interviews about prostitution in India, usually to repeal activists seeking to make a case against the government with regard to regulated brothels.<sup>61</sup> What was novel about Wickham's interview and countless others, nonetheless, was that they were not being ventriloquized, and that their interviewers were not there to, at least outwardly, pass judgement on the information they would provide.

Wickham said that during his time in Peshawar in the Northwest Frontier, prostitutes' quarters were frequented by his fellow British soldiers or 'Tommies' without any prohibition, but could not recall the official line as to whether soldiers were discouraged to do so. Wickham did remember the protests of upper-class British women against licensed brothels but joked that their influence did not extend to the Peshawar cantonment. Remarking upon Calcutta in eastern India, Wickham spoke of the 'parading' French prostitutes in the city who travelled in carriages and told soldiers where to meet them. "Of course, they were foreign, you see," Wickham added of

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<sup>60</sup> H. T. Wickham, interview by Charles Allen, 1974, sound recording, IWM/SC/4971.

<sup>61</sup> The activist J. Graham Spencer, for instance, interviewed several returned NCOs in Britain to gather information about the continuation of regulated brothels after their 'official' repeal. Interviews contained in the correspondence of Henry J. Wilson, WL/AMSH/C/02/02, Box 091, Folder 1.

the French women, suggesting that the openness with which European prostitutes solicited was markedly different and well beyond what Indian women might get away with in public. “A lot of the soldiers who wanted to get a bit of sex, managed to,” he said.<sup>62</sup>

Others, however, believed that one of the greatest deprivations British soldiers felt in India was the lack of contact with women. The idea that soldiers were starved for such interactions was shared by Spike Milligan, who was the son of a soldier stationed in Pune and spent his childhood in the married quarters of the cantonment there. Milligan used to go talk to the unmarried soldiers in the barracks, who welcomed conversations with him. The soldiers would ask him whether he had a sister, and questions like “Has she got nice legs? Has she got big titties? Have you seen her in the bath?”<sup>63</sup> Milligan joked “I could have made a lot of money just describing my sister, my fabulous sister which I didn’t have.”<sup>64</sup>

Army signaller E. S. Humphries said this changed only when they happened to be posted to cities like Lucknow and Jubbulpore “where there was a Eurasian gathering which were able to organize dances and that sort of thing.”<sup>65</sup> There was a clear preference of associating with ‘Eurasian’ or Anglo-Indian women as opposed to Indians. Allen—who it seems had an off the record agreement with his interviewees when they could expect questions about prostitution—used Humphries’s anecdote about social life to segue into the topic and said “Could you go on...now I believe the doctors used to give you a sort of talk...didn’t they, about...tell me about that.”<sup>66</sup> It is not clear-cut to the listener what Allen was referring to, but despite this Humphries knew he was asking about the lectures on prostitution.

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<sup>62</sup> Wickham, interview by Allen, recording, IWM/SC/4971.

<sup>63</sup> Spike Milligan, interview by Charles Allen, 1974, recording, BL/Sound/C1510/09.

<sup>64</sup> Milligan, interview by Allen, recording, BL/Sound/C1510/09

<sup>65</sup> E.S. Humphries, interview by Charles Allen, transcript, SSC/OA1/36/T.

<sup>66</sup> Humphries, interview by Allen, transcript, SSC/OA1/36/T.



Humphries responded that him and his colleagues were more interested in long-term commitment, which provided a ‘barrier’ against thoughts of sex alone, stating “some of us had in our minds the ideal pure girl of great dignity who we one day hoped...would...become the mother of our children.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, around him he saw that ten per cent of the British Army were infected with VD, and in his view, the severest cases that occupied venereal wards of hospitals showed “the great danger of promiscuous intercourse with the Indian women of the fields.”<sup>68</sup> Humphries does not offer reasons for why he singled out working Indian women other than recalling the words of a Medical Officer who would warn them that “if [they went] trundling off into the village fields,” it would be calamitous because “all the *tree rats*...that was [the officer’s] name for the girls who work in the fields...are syphilis bound.”<sup>69</sup>

Humphries and the Medical Officer seemed content to refer to certain classes of Indian women using this pejorative language. Ed Davies offered similar descriptions of women who he termed “grass *bibis*,” or in his words, Indian women who “used to walk the roads, stripped to the waist, [whose] breasts are bare.”<sup>70</sup> Like Humphries, Davies said that “you could get a hold of any of those *bibis*,” but at the expense of contracting a VD infection. Davies suggested that soldiers came into closer contact with these groups of women when they were away from brothel areas, potentially referring to hill stations in northern parts of India or outposts at frontiers. Both Humphries and Davies appear to seriously exaggerate sexual access to laboring Indian women—in terms of their pejorative labeling and the physical descriptions they provide—almost

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<sup>67</sup> Humphries, interview by Allen, transcript, SSC/OA1/36/T.

<sup>68</sup> Humphries, interview by Allen, transcript, SSC/OA1/36/T.

<sup>69</sup> Humphries, interview by Allen, transcript, SSC/OA1/36/T. Emphasis mine.

<sup>70</sup> Ed Davies, interview by Charles Allen, recording, BL/Sound/C1510/23. *Bibi* is a common South Asian term used to refer to women.

intimating that these women had little purpose other than to await the arrival of British regiments so that they could solicit them.

Wickham, Humphries, and Davies all relay information about brothels, solicitation, and Indian and European prostitutes and laboring women, though none come close to placing themselves at the site of a brothel. Humphries does, however, offer an anonymous account of a soldier he knew who regularly visited brothels. He recalled,

[There was] one soldier in my barrack room in Ranikhet who...had been in India for some time. He was a staunch, stocky...[and]...capable soldier. Each payday at about two o'clock, it was common knowledge that he would clean his equipment far more carefully than was normal for parade and with his buttons all shining, his white belt gleaming, his glengarry cap at a rakish angle, [and] with a swagger stick in his hand...he would jauntily march out of the barrack room and down the hillside toward the native brothel.<sup>71</sup>

Humphries appears to offer this up as a cautionary tale about a soldier who put himself at risk but took the requisite precautions that prevented contraction of VD. However, other things stand out from this story, notably the soldier's elaborate regime of self-grooming, as well as the fact that he was visiting a brothel accustomed to receiving Indian, not British men. This isn't surprising, because the boundaries between military and civilian prostitution had long been porous, as British soldiers ventured into out of bounds red-light areas, and Indian men even occasionally snuck into cantonment brothels. Historian Philippa Levine has nonetheless argued that while "imposing segregation seldom worked...its persistence suggests how important [it] was to maintain the *appearance* of racial quarantining."<sup>72</sup> Maintaining appearances, while recognizing the futility of imposing rules, also appears to have been the order of the day when it came to official attempts to influence and guide soldiers on the matter of sex.

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<sup>71</sup> Humphries, interview by Allen, transcript, SSC/OA1/36/T.

<sup>72</sup> Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 55-56. Emphasis mine.

### *Informal Prostitution within Barracks*

Visits by British soldiers to brothels in the city also brought about skirmishes. In March 1920, J. P. Swindlehurst recorded in his diary an incident in Lahore from the previous night that had his colleagues ‘agog.’ “It appears from the regimental police report,” Swindlehurst wrote, that two soldiers travelled to the city of Lahore “to have a night out,” and “visited one of the numerous brothels... [, but] refused to pay for what they had received.”<sup>73</sup> He wrote that while they were trying to get away, they were beaten and admitted to hospital with a lacerated head and a serious face wound. It is most likely that the soldiers had been confronted by Indian men, possibly brothel-keepers or intermediaries for prostitutes. Swindlehurst did not agree with the decision to visit brothels, and blamed the sexual bragging of older men as influencing younger soldiers to associate with prostitutes. In a similar vein to the story told by Humphries, he said that “it isn’t long before they become patrons on pay nights along with a lot more.”<sup>74</sup>

A similar story was relayed by T. A. Pyne who, while on guard duty at a camp in Madh Island near Bombay in 1942, was called to attend to an incident where two British soldiers had crossed into Indian workers’ lines.<sup>75</sup> The soldiers were apparently searching for ‘freebie’ girls, which most likely meant that they were looking to buy sex on the very cheap, only they were stopped by Indian workers, which created the ruckus that Pyne was called to. Pyne suggested that rather than go looking for trouble, the soldiers could have been accommodated within the camp, where the practice was that if a British soldier’s wife was pregnant, she might, with the permission of her husband, provide a “comfort service” to the troops in return for money.<sup>76</sup> Such practices are corroborated by other soldiers, though far from Pyne’s description on the act being

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<sup>73</sup> Swindlehurst, Diary, March 12, 1920, IWM/Documents/10415.

<sup>74</sup> Swindlehurst, Diary, March 12, 1920, IWM/Documents/10415.

<sup>75</sup> Pyne, *No Hero Here*, p. 39, IWM/Documents/17390.

<sup>76</sup> Pyne, *No Hero Here*, p. 39, IWM/Documents/17390.

inconsequential, the decision of wives to sell sex to other soldiers or officers within the barracks was one borne of severe economic strain.

The tragedy befalling one family that undertook this practice was told by James Henry Bellows—a young serviceman of 17 years when he first left Britain—who was posted to India as a private between 1934 and 1940. Bellows spoke in a weighted and solemn tone at age 75 to IWM interviewer Conrad Wood.<sup>77</sup> He recalled a story from 1937 when he was in hospital for in-patient care in Kamptee in central India, when a commotion took place regarding another British NCO, who was admitted for mental health problems, and who hospital staff accused of theft. The memory of this incident opened a window for Bellows to narrate a complicated tale about how that NCO ended up in hospital, which involved his wife turning to prostitution in the barracks under conditions of constraint.

Tracing the story back some years before 1937 during his posting in Rawalpindi, Bellows narrated that the soldier in hospital had been a member of his battalion, and that his wife and six children resided with him in the barracks. They also had an Indian domestic helper, which was customary for British families. Bellows recalled that the family could not make ends meet on the private's pay, so the "wife had to sell her body...which she did," to other members of the battalion. Bellows tapped into critical details regarding an informal economy of sexual commerce, stating that when soldiers could not pay the woman for sex, they would instead barter a new pair of boots. The private's wife would then send her domestic helper to surrounding neighborhoods to sell those boots for money. Wood was curious to know more, and asked if "she was doing it with the consent of her husband," to which Bellows responded that even though "she worshipped her husband," she had little choice in the matter considering that two of her

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<sup>77</sup> James Henry Bellows, interview by Conrad Wood, November 25, 1992, recording, IWM/SC/12913.

children had already passed away from malnutrition—indicating the intense economic pressure the family were under.<sup>78</sup>

Bellows stated that when the battalion authorities found out about her informal arrangements within the cantonment, they ordered her and her remaining children back to Britain in disgrace. He recalled that he was one of the men who was responsible for packing her belongings when she was unwilling to leave her husband voluntarily.<sup>79</sup> It was this experience of financial ruin and the departure of his family that drove the private “mad” in Bellows’s description, which resulted in his admission to hospital in Kamptee, and ultimately led him to return to Britain as well. “God knows what ever happened to him,” Bellows lamented.<sup>80</sup>

Bellows’s narration of this striking but tragic story offers us a meaningful way of connecting informal prostitution with the economy of everyday life, as well as engaging the category of ‘barrack wives’ within this economy. Bellows’s testimony takes us far away from Henry John Smith’s descriptions of banter between NCOs and their wives about brothels, and shows that financial pressure could just as easily collapse the boundaries between wife and prostitute within the cantonment. That soldiers chose to barter their boots should not necessarily be taken to mean that their value was comparable to the value of sex as a commodity-exchange, but may instead reveal the asymmetry of bargaining power within the situation. The acceptance of this arrangement by the private’s wife, which in fact made it more cumbersome for her to obtain money, indicates her desperation to feed her children. Her story, as narrated by Bellows, is indicative of how families could be intimately connected to informal economies of sex, and

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<sup>78</sup> Bellows, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/12913.

<sup>79</sup> The removal of British women from India who entered brothels or engaged in prostitution was particularly an affront to the “national prestige of administrators” (Tambe, 2009; 56). Tambe shows that British women who were found to be residing in brothels often faced deportation to Britain, though responses to British women participating in less visible arrangements of prostitution is not as clear. The private’s wife in this instance was notably not exchanging sex for income and commodities with non-European men.

<sup>80</sup> Bellows, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/12913.

that European women could inhabit social spaces where their race privilege jostled with their status as women. The fact that Bellows retained a vivid memory of this episode from over fifty years ago illustrates the impact the incident left on him, but may also be read as an indication that he did not lack as much agency as he intimated in his role of removing his former colleague's wife from the cantonment. Far from the image of jaunty soldiers who participated in temperance associations, played sports, and engaged in sing-alongs with their peers in the barracks—aspects of soldiers' lives that the military was very keen to encourage in the twentieth century—what Bellows recalled suggested a grimmer life in the cantonment, not least for the wives and women who were attached to soldiers.<sup>81</sup>

### *Soldiers Patrolling the Brothel*

If any European soldiers were caught in an out of bounds brothel in the city—whether in Bombay, Calcutta, or Lahore—military police would generally blow their whistles and the men would be caught. Or rather, this is what they were told in order to dissuade them from going in the first place, according to Ed Brown, who was posted to Nowshera in the Northwest Frontier after disembarking at Bombay in 1919.<sup>82</sup> Toco Moses Stevens, however, spent his final year as a Sergeant-Major in India patrolling brothels in Rawalpindi, and admitted that “you couldn't stop them all,” even if there was police presence around brothels in places such as Lahore's Walled City and Bombay's Grant Road.<sup>83</sup>

One of the responsibilities Stevens had with regard to his work with the military police was questioning soldiers infected with VD so that he could trace the disease to specific brothels.

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<sup>81</sup> In the late nineteenth century, questionnaires were sent to cantonments to ask what opportunities for leisure existed in the cantonment as part of efforts to improve the everyday lives of soldiers. These efforts are outlined in a collection of correspondence from 1893 to 1899 compiled in IOR/L/MIL/7/13877.

<sup>82</sup> Ed Brown, interview by Charles Allen, 1974, recording, BL/Sound/C1510/09.

<sup>83</sup> Toco Moses Steven, interview by Conrad Wood, June 14, 1976, IWM/SC/776.

Stevens told Conrad Wood “I had one case [in Rawalpindi], I won’t any mention names...[,but] the man was in hospital...[and] I went to him and said you must tell me where you picked this up.”<sup>84</sup> Once he got the information, Stevens went to the building, which was an officer’s quarters that had been occupied, though it is unclear by who. Stevens remembered that his arrived just in time to catch a ‘bloke,’ whom he also described as a ‘punter,’ who was approaching the building with a woman. He noted that there were two members from a Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders who were apparently standing by for this woman’s arrival. On the outset, this appears to be a situation where a pimp and prostitute are meeting prospective customers, though Stevens does not specify this to be the case. He does, however, say that he arrested only the man and the woman, who were both Indian, proudly saying “I got him, I had the *tonga*, and I had the woman, and I handed them all over to the Commissioner of Police.”<sup>85</sup>

Despite the ‘success’ story conveyed by Stevens, patrolling brothels was a difficult task and those who were assigned the job, found it hard to be targeted by different groups. Swindlehurst wrote in his diary that in November 1920, his friends had “clicked for rotten jobs, picketing the brothels against our men,” and were receiving “a lot of abuse from the inmates...[and] prospective customers, ...[while] the women are making themselves extremely objectionable out of spite.”<sup>86</sup> Such a sight puts into direct conflict a coalition of individuals, with British soldiers and Indian prostitutes both opposing the act of picketing a brothel by military police. Swindlehurst remarked that an unusual measure such as this was in due to high incidences of VD in Lahore, and that the men in his brigade were told that they would be relocated to the frontier town of Kohat if the rate did not abate. However, the idea that the

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<sup>84</sup> Steven, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/776.

<sup>85</sup> Steven, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/776. A tonga is a kind of horse carriage.

<sup>86</sup> Swindlehurst, Diary, November 26, 1920, IWM/Documents/10415.

frontier town took men “out of any means of temptation” is belied by the testimony of men who were stationed there.

Soldiers understood and engaged with the everyday worlds of prostitution around them in varied ways, ranging from visiting cantonment brothels and city brothels, shaping informal arrangements within the barracks, and soliciting laboring Indian women in public spaces. Within the barracks, financial hardship also played a key role in shaping the informal economies of sex work. By the late colonial period, the military was perfectly comfortable with vaguely appearing to place limits on soldiers and their sexual solicitations while admitting in private that any such intervention was futile. The policy of allowing official brothels went unabated. Soldiers also caught onto the futility of civil opposition to military brothels, with H. T. Wickham joking that protest of chaplains and missionaries did not reach his cantonment. The fact that the suppressionist legislation of the 1920s and 1930s received no mention in the testimonies of any of the soldiers, which suggests that the military continued to view itself as distinctly entitled to set its own policies on prostitution, irrespective of discourses around it.<sup>87</sup> But as far as British soldiers went, any orders from above on the matter of sex lives were only in letter as far as they were concerned.

The following section closely examines the testimonies of three NCOs, and returns to the oral history of Henry John Smith, with whom this chapter began. The interviews included here include the most descriptive and illuminating recollections concerning prostitution. The variation in perspective among the three men also allows for a closer investigation of how they negotiated their positionality between observer/witness and participant—and of course, how this negotiation may have been mediated by feelings of shame or discomfort at the circumstances they recalled.

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<sup>87</sup> I argue in chapter 1 that this was not case when it came to the CDA and Cantonment legislation, of which there was a popular understanding among soldiers and prostitutes.



The India Office had been eager in refuting soldiers' claims as without foundation, but the three men in the following pages had different ideas.

### **Uneven Terrains: Memory and Empire**

David Lloyd Griffiths arrived in India in 1938 as an NCO and was initially stationed in the frontier outpost of Landi Kotal (Figure 4.5). For Griffiths, memories of Landi Kotal included it being surrounded by barbed wire, and there being only one tavern or 'pitcher house' for the soldiers to attend. There was no regimental brothel and the soldiers instead looked to associate with Indian *bibis* who worked in the cantonment. "The climate does get to you, as does nature, and so you just go with them to take a chance," Griffiths said.<sup>88</sup> This was an unusual admission because Griffiths was squarely placing himself as someone who personally bought sex—something that every other soldier was careful not to do. Conrad Wood was also intrigued and asked him where the men had intercourse with the women given the absence of a brothel. "Perhaps the toilets," Griffiths responded. "In the *army* toilets?" Wood responded, slightly alarmed.<sup>89</sup> Griffiths explained the women were allowed to be in there because they cleaned the barrack rooms, worked as bearers, and also had jobs such as selling silk in the general bazar in the outpost. The toilets where Griffiths had sexual encounters could have even been ones with VD circulars posted on the walls, which would indicate a telling level of disregard for official messaging.<sup>90</sup>

Griffith's testimony demonstrates that informal arrangements took hold in the absence of regimental brothels. Contrary to the perceptions of some officials, frontier towns and outposts were by no means places where sexual contact between British men and Indian women was

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<sup>88</sup> David Lloyd Griffiths, interview by Conrad Wood, April 13, 1977, recording, IWM/SC/910.

<sup>89</sup> Griffiths, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/910. Emphasis in recording.

<sup>90</sup> See Figure 4.5 above.

absent. Much in line with Wickham's remarks about Peshawar, soldiers who wanted to have sex with women would find ways to do so. Griffiths was nonetheless cautious and appears to have taken medical guidance seriously. He visited a medical officer when he suspected he might have an infection, despite the risk of his pay being cut. "VD was so common in the regiment," Griffiths said, "I was very fortunate [to not get infected]."<sup>91</sup>



**Figure 4.5** Landi Kotal Fort and Encampment, dated 1919. Source: © IWM HU-74435. Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

Where stories told by Swindlehurst and Pyne touch on the tensions between Indian and British men when it came to British soldiers soliciting Indian women, Griffiths provides a more visceral manifestation of this tension by relaying an experience he had after visiting a brothel in Kanpur. He said: "I remember one instance. I was coming from a brothel and I was coming in a tonga...and I was sitting in the back, and I'd had a few glasses of beer. Before I knew it, he [the

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<sup>91</sup> Griffiths, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/910.

driver] was whipping me. And they try to loot you of your money.”<sup>92</sup> When Wood asked Griffiths if he believed he was whipped because the driver objected to him going to the ‘native’ brothel, Griffiths emphatically agreed that that was the reason. “I just got off and ran like hell,” he said. This would not be the only time Griffiths got into trouble for visiting a brothel. While posted in Lucknow, Griffiths had some drinks and made a trip to the regimental brothel after curfew when he was caught by a Sergeant-Major who ordered him back to barracks. Griffiths pleaded “I first want my sex, and then I’ll go home,” before he was “frog-marched out from the brothel and was put into regimental jail.”<sup>93</sup>

There is quite a lot to contend with in terms of Griffith’s testimony. First, his open admission of being a frequent visitor of brothels is especially unique. Further, the stories he relays about tussles with both Indian men and senior ranked officers over his connections with Indian prostitutes paints a sharp image of contestations around sex that other soldiers were unwilling to speak to. His testimony also reveals a degree of entitlement to sex, notably in the incident where his own colleagues had to march him out of the regimental brothel after hours because he refused to leave before having sex. Moreover, his mentioning the occupations of the Indian women he associated with in Landi Kotal illustrates the porous boundaries between different income-generating opportunities for those women. Griffith’s testimony in this regard not only builds on this chapter’s previous analysis of engagements with informal sexual arrangements and organized prostitution, but puts forward the perspective of a participant, as opposed to an observer, in a clear-cut way.

Roy Morrison Milner also spoke about *bibis* as a class of available Indian women, and much like Griffiths, Milner also seemed quite comfortable speaking about sex and was willing to

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<sup>92</sup> Griffiths, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/910.

<sup>93</sup> Griffiths, interview by Wood, recording, IWM/SC/910.

divulge more information than was common. Margaret Brooks asked Milner about operation of official brothels for the soldiers, and gave the example of medical examination of prostitutes in Ranikhet. Milner responded that such provisions existed across several cantonments, but said that he was also familiar with a system of contact tracing in that would be utilized by cantonment authorities in order to find the source of venereal disease when soldiers were infected. This system required soldiers to notices of their contacts with registered prostitutes, including the time and place of their encounter, in a designated postbox. Yet, as Milner explained, when soldiers became infected due to buying sex in out-of-bound areas, they almost always tried to lay the blame on a registered woman, when in his words, they had “paid a rupee or something [and] had some old bag from the bazar.”<sup>94</sup> The practice among soldiers of implicating the wrong woman to avoid admitting to having visited an out-of-bound brothel can be traced back to the period of the CDA in the nineteenth century, where it was a routine occurrence.

Milner further described a system of soliciting Indian women for sex through middle-men who worked in the barracks. In places like Lucknow and Ranikhet, he stated that soldiers could leave items on their *charpais* or beds when leaving the barrack rooms, and when they returned at night, a woman would be waiting on their bed. They would later on pay the person who arranged for her to be there. Milner stated that it was very easy to make requests such as “I want a *bibi* in my bed tonight” to Indian cantonment workers and have them follow through. Unlike most of the interviewees, Milner intriguingly addressed the fact that he did not place himself in the sexual situations he seemed to intimately know. He admitted that he was not ‘whitewashing’ himself from the narrative, but that he had been so terrified of contracting venereal disease that he

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<sup>94</sup> Milner, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/865.

preferred to focus his energies on sports and athletics. Unlike Griffiths, Milner maintained his position as an observer or witness in the scenes he described.

This brings us back to the subject of this chapter's opening anecdote: Henry John Smith. After an initial bout of reluctance, Smith began to describe his memories of Indian prostitutes. He began with a description of a 'Sakalajee Street' in the heart of Bombay's brothel area during his posting there in 1934. Noting that this was a long street with houses on either side, Smith remarked that "if you started at number one, you got the best of the girls...but by the time you got to twenty-five or so, they were getting lower down the scale."<sup>95</sup> He likened the rooms in which the women resided to 'cages' because the windows were lined with iron bars, and recalled the area as a 'dreadful' place where Indian prostitutes would "expose themselves in the most indecent ways" to draw in customers whom they ultimately charged the equivalent of 'pence.'<sup>96</sup> When prodded about whether the area was regulated, Smith mentioned that there was no centralized control and that the municipality did not interfere. This is despite the fact that the period Smith is referring to followed the passing of the Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act in 1923. Making his contempt for the prostitutes evident, Smith concluded "a lot of people went there for the experience of seeing the dregs of degradation that humanity could sink to."<sup>97</sup>

Smith was referring to the present-day Shukhlaji Street in Bombay's Kamathipura District, which is today widely known as the city's historic red-light area (Figure 4.6). What stands out in this exchange is that while Smith was initially reticent to share his memories of brothels and prostitution, when he did, he almost immediately resorted to pitying or even contemptuously describing the women residing in urban brothels. When describing the women in

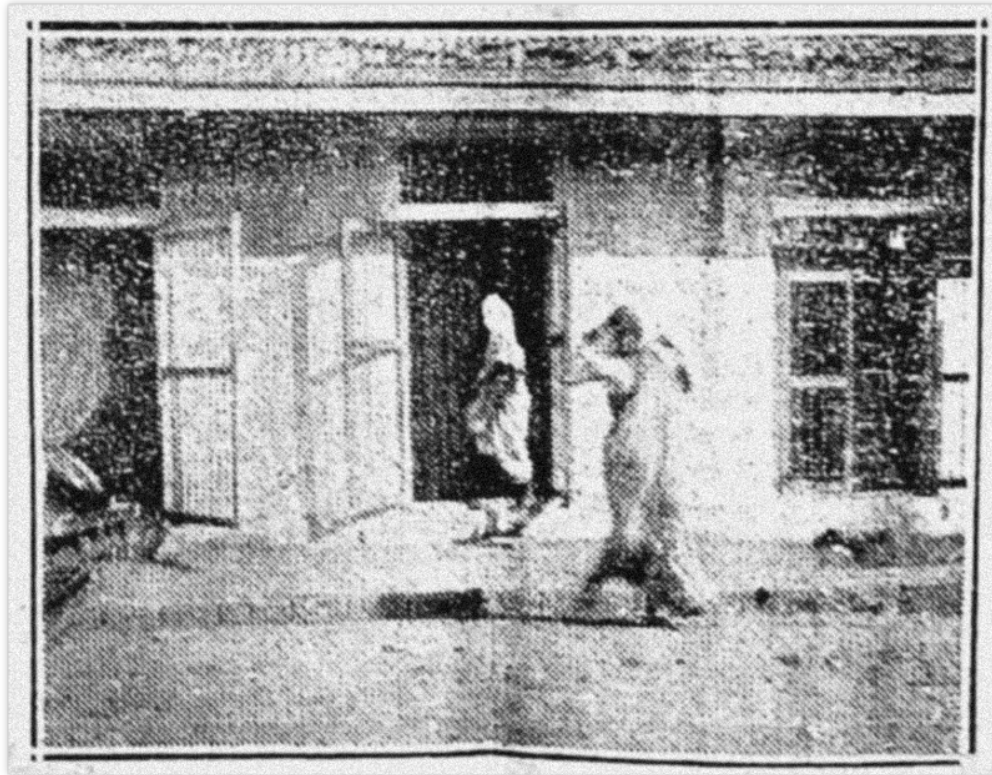
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<sup>95</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836.

<sup>96</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836. Descriptions of the Bombay brothel area as 'Cages' was shared by other interviewees, notably Ed Davies, as well as Spike Milligan.

<sup>97</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836.

Shuklaji Street in terms of a scale or hierarchy, Smith heavily emphasized his own view about these women and their attempts to attract male clients at any cost. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, Smith's explanation for the street being frequented by his British colleagues had nothing to do with them desiring to buy sex, but was framed in terms of them wishing to see the so-called lowliness of desperate Indian women on display.



**Figure 4.6** A photograph of Shuklaji Street in Bombay in an article in the Glasgow-based newspaper *Forward* from January 30, 1926. Source: AMSH/C/07/02. Courtesy of the Women's Library.

It is worth noting that Smith's descriptions aligned considerably with contemporaneous newspaper coverage of Shuklaji Street. Abolitionist writers and observers referred to the rooms as 'cages.' But there are a number of reasons iron bars could have lined the windows. They might have existed to protect the women from being maltreated by onlookers. They could have been in place for necessary ventilation inside the rooms. And it is also possible that they could have been installed to guard against women escaping, which was the purpose iron bars had served

when they lined the windows of former lock and cantonment hospitals. Smith was also correct about the price of sex, which would have been four annas or the equivalent of fourpence. He oddly did not mention that an electric tramcar that ran through the street, which invariably brought ease of access to the area.

Like many interviewees, Smith speaks through his silences and pauses as much as he does through his words. Smith's vacillation from being taciturn to talkative to reflective in reconstructing his memory and experience of Bombay's brothel area reveals a great deal: it shows us his experience of seeing and being within a sex marketplace, and it tells us where he is careful to place himself and on what terms. Based on his descriptions, it is evident that Smith must have walked through the street, though his language does not indicate for what purpose he would have been there. His memories are squarely placed on the figure of the Indian prostitute, whom he describes with a mix of paternalism and racism. His testimony reveals an intimate closeness but he keeps himself at a distance from that which he describes. When taken alongside the testimonies of other soldiers cited in this chapter, Smith's memory of prostitution is once again no outlier in terms of what it lays bare.

With his stories now flowing with ease and comfort, Smith remembered the excitement around the establishment of an official regimental brothel in Lucknow, and began to describe an eye-catching scene that took place about a mile from his barracks on the outskirts of the city. He saw that an enormous queue had formed outside the newly opened brothel as his fellow troops waited their turn to visit a registered prostitute. On this particular occasion, he noted, demand among the soldiers far outstripped the number of customers the Indian women were willing to receive, and Smith recalled that most of the men did not make it inside the brothel, which remained open for just two hours that evening. In the coming weeks, however, queues of soldiers

dwindled to what was deemed ‘manageable proportions.’ Smith described the highly procedural aspect of visiting the brothel with perfunctory precision:

The orderly who was detailed to override all this, he would sit at the table at night, and the soldier would appear, pay his rupee...and choose a girl from small snapshot photographs on the wall, girls numbered from one to seven. He would say number three perhaps, pay his rupee, and be given a ticket bearing number three. And then he would go sit on a bench outside number three cubicle, where they may be two, three, or four people already waiting in front of him. And he would wait his turn, he would make his number with number three, and then disappear.<sup>98</sup>

Smith’s commentary on the episode at Lucknow stands in stark contrast to his recollections of Shuklaji Street. He spoke of the former in terms of its organization, its discipline, and its necessity, whereas he spoke of the latter in terms of its depravity. That one sex marketplace primarily served Indian civilian men and the other exclusively served British NCOs is a significant factor not to be overlooked. Where Indians engaged in sexual commerce, colonial authorities as well as their foot soldiers were keen to treat this activity as a timeless cultural characteristic, while for British men it was a necessity to quell their difficult circumstances. Smith also spoke in a positive tone about the fact that everyone who worked at or visited that brothel was routinely inspected for venereal disease by a medical team, and chalked the eventual closing of the brothel a mere few months later to “missionaries [and] bad publicity.”

Yet, what ties together Smith’s testimony as a whole—and by extension the testimony of Griffiths, Milner, and soldiers speaking about prostitution in general—is the fact that his descriptions of prostitution go well beyond what military and municipal authorities were willing to admit to. The anecdote regarding Lucknow is especially pertinent as authorities in the 1930s protected against such information from becoming known publicly. Cross-checking this information against the missionary records of the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene—an active abolitionist organization operating across India—tells us that in 1937 several military

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<sup>98</sup> Smith, interview by Brooks, recording, IWM/SC/836.



brothels were opened and closed, but that the details of the case of Lucknow were not widely known, making Smith's revelation all the more significant. Like Milner, in Smith we encounter a former soldier relaying memory at a distance from the activity in the memory. Indeed, whether or not Smith himself bought sex remains an open question and while his intimate knowledge invites some degree of speculation, though nothing can be said with certainty.

Griffiths's stories about being a soldier who frequently bought sex included fascinating tales showing that brothels were not only spaces of contestation between NCOs and their superiors, but between Britons and Indians altogether. Milner similarly offered intriguing tidbits of official contact tracing for VD via brothel visitation cards dropped in letterboxes, and using cantonment workers as intermediaries in procuring women. But unlike Griffiths, Milner never placed himself at the scene of the brothel or at the bed of any *bibi*, Smith, on the other hand, gave the most detailed and elaborate testimony on prostitution of any of the soldiers interviewed. From talk in the barrack halls, to Shuklaji Street in Bombay, and to the short-lived regimental brothel in Lucknow, Smith's testimony guides us through places with no brothels, out-of-bounds brothels, and regimental brothels. Ultimately, what these sets of testimonies represent is the chasm between what military authorities wanted to show at the level of appearance, and the on-ground reality of how soldiers would inevitably find ways to solicit prostitutes and laboring women through 'official' or unofficial means. And while remembering this history decades later, hardly any were willing to identify themselves as men who frequented brothels, despite an elaborate knowledge of the marketplaces of sex.

### **Prostitution at the End of Empire**

This chapter began with an instance of blanket colonial denial that military authorities operated brothels for British soldiers. This was not a denial without precedent, of course, considering that

after the abolition of India's largest experiment with the regulation of prostitution in the late nineteenth century—all in the name of protecting the health of British troops—military authorities had to routinely find legal backchannels to continue official arrangements for medical exams and brothels. However, this chapter has explored how these arrangements might have looked from the perspective of the beneficiaries, i.e., the soldiers, and moreover, what their oral histories from below do to the official narrative of empire from above.

This chapter has considered how literature, lectures, and medical guidance on sexual health were received and understood by NCOs embarking for India. I have argued that this messaging was largely ineffective in altering soldiers' strategies towards procuring sex, but that information about minimizing health risks at the site of the brothel was likelier to be taken seriously, as told by David Lloyd Griffiths. Second, I have used oral histories supplemented by memoirs and diaries to explore how soldiers remembered prostitution as an aspect of everyday life in India. This included memories of regimental brothels, informal arrangements of selling sex within barracks, out-of-bounds sex marketplaces in the city, and soldiers consorting with Indian women in open fields. Finally, I have shown how these personal histories show us the multitude of ways in which the spaces of sexual commerce, whether urban, regimental, or informal, were negotiated from below rather than being determined by law and policy from above. Indeed, even acts of patrolling brothels by military police were subject to appropriation by ordinary men and women.

Beyond helping us to shed light on the varied economies of sex work in the late colonial period, soldiers' memories of prostitution in India also reveal a glaring absence: the absence of questioning the sites, scenes, and incidents described. We are left with a collection of oral histories that, like colonial sources, must also be read against their grain. James Henry Bellow

made some effort to humanize the plight of his former colleague's wife by centering the role that financial precarity played in shaping her choices. Yet, given his role in removing that woman from the barracks, a sense of guilt also overlays the story he tells. Several other interviewees, however, took a different tone when they expressed views on the sexual accessibility of women. These views revealed a staggering entitlement and are the strongest indication that the men who gave testimony in the 1970s and onward were not too different in their perceptions of Indian women engaged in prostitution compared to the soldiers who had defied CDA regulations a century ago.

Military authorities became increasingly reticent about leaking details regarding any continuing official arrangements for prostitution. Instead, they maintained that there was little concern with the matter and called into question the veracity of claims brought forward by returning soldiers to Britain. But it would not take long after the end of empire for precisely those men to reveal what the colonial state had tried to conceal. Individuals such as Reverend Courtney and the British public could now hear about regulated prostitution from the men for whom it was regulated—that is, if the question still mattered.

## CONCLUSION

### TOWARD TROUBLED HISTORIES

In October 2020, an article on the history of the colonial regulation of sexuality in the late nineteenth century was published on the BBC News website under the headline “Forced to undergo genital exams in colonial India.”<sup>1</sup> The article was an effort to make recent research on prostitution and gender minorities in colonial India more accessible to a wider readership.<sup>2</sup> In the article, the author mentioned Sukhmani Raur and her successful resistance to her legal categorization as a prostitute—a case referenced in chapter 1 of this dissertation.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Raur’s case was the only mention of the numerous challenges facing the project of colonial regulation. The article discussed figures of arrests, women ‘fleeing,’ the implementation of forced registration, and authorities rejecting petitions. The governmental mandate of the colonial state was at the center of the story once more. Indian women were mere subjects to this mandate that forced them to undergo genital exams.

There were of course many women who were forced or did not fully consent to being examined by medical officers for venereal diseases. But the notion that this, along with a series of other legal interventions, went without challenge, or that challenge was the exception to acquiescence, does not do justice to the dynamic history of Indian women’s resistance and disruption. The question of how women like Sukhmani Raur were a threat to the colonial state in India is indeed an important one, but it is also a question that has yielded a disproportional

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<sup>1</sup> Soutik Biswas, “Forced to undergo genital exams in colonial India,” October 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54528868>.

<sup>2</sup> Biswas primarily foregrounded the recent publications of Durba Mitra (2020) and Jessica Hinchy (2019).

<sup>3</sup> The article is among the first results when searching for ‘Sukhimonee Raur’ (the Anglicized spelling from the text of the court case).

emphasis on how the state preserved itself against this perceived threat.<sup>4</sup> This dissertation has instead addressed the less examined question of how ordinary women such as Sukhmani Raur *troubled* colonial projects of regulating gender and sexuality at their multiple scales. Reframing the question as such shifts us from the familiar territory of colonial mandates and governmental power to reading the ground of empire—a ground that was uneven, scattered, and above all, troubled.

My effort in this dissertation has been to recuperate the diverse, creative, and everyday practices of confronting legislative and regulatory interventions into prostitution to show them as routine sites of trouble in colonial India. In doing so, I have demonstrated how ordinary women and men were key agents of trouble. Indian women engaged in prostitution—women who were targeted as criminals, compelled to attend illegal medical exams, and ordered to relocate from their homes—developed knowledge of laws, skillfully used technologies of mobility, petitioned against violations of their rights, and weaponized legal ambiguities to speak back to imperial, state, and municipal authority. French women were uniquely primed to undermine border policing in India through their access to French jurisdiction, and similarly made use of knowledge and technology, while also exploiting haphazard imperial communications to enter British jurisdiction to engage in sex work. As white women, they also took advantage of their race privilege to engage in informal negotiations at ports of entry. British soldiers—who, unlike Indian and French women, did not have a gendered relationship with imperial power—circumvented laws by purposefully not following regulations governing their engagement with prostitution. But more pertinently, their testimonies on the official and informal worlds of

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<sup>4</sup> See Kate Imy, review of *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900*, by Jessica Hinchy, and *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, by Durba Mitra, *American Historical Review* 126(2021): 1206-1211.

military sexual commerce troubled the silencing of this matter in the colonial record. The ‘trouble with empire’ as evoked by Burton, cannot be understood simply as law at its limits, as colonial historians have tended to do, but rather, it must be understood in terms of the everyday practices of *making law limited* at the intersection of colonialism, gender, and race.

This dissertation has also underscored the role of technology and environments in the history of law and prostitution. Different types of transport technologies emerge across the chapters, namely, railways, bicycles, steamships, and airplanes. Indian women made elaborate use of rail transport in the late nineteenth century to change jurisdictions to evade the CDA. British soldiers used their widespread access to bicycles in the early twentieth century to navigate between cantonment and municipality to visit out-of-bounds urban brothels. And French women travelled to India via steamships and airplanes during the interwar and late colonial period—in their case, the choice of transport technology could also determine the form of border policing at the port of entry. With regard to the environment, I have shown that spatial knowledge of geographies such as rivers, ravines, and forests facilitated acts of circumventing surveillance among both Indian women and British soldiers: river-crossings could become jurisdictional crossings, while ravines and forests could serve as geographies of concealment. Making technology and environment visible in this history shows that laws governing prostitution provoked far-reaching everyday practices well beyond the space of the courtroom that has been the traditional site of much legal history.

Charting the arc of trouble, this dissertation first placed disruption in the lead of the widely studied period of regulation to tell this history anew *against* the instruments of regulation. When understood this way, the standardizing prostitute’s ticket becomes a tool of impersonation and the point of arrest becomes a moment of confrontation, showing that the colonial project of

regulating sexuality was only ever one step from the disruption of its intended targets, predominantly women and gender minorities. The stealth and illegal systems of medical regulation in cantonments that followed the CDA are read here in terms of how the ‘right to refusal’ was known and transmitted among the impacted Indian women when the circulation of legal information was less forthcoming. In this regard, cases of walkouts and non-attendance of women at station hospitals emerge as indications that they had acquired knowledge of their rights and acted on them. But as Indian women were increasingly pushed out of or left the harsh jurisdiction of the cantonment for cities and towns, the municipality became the new legal frontier of governing prostitution in the twentieth century.

This shift from cantonments to the scatter of municipalities—which also marked the gradual disappearance of Indian women engaged in prostitution from military records and their appearance in municipal records—took place in conjunction with the emergence of border policing as a mode of controlling foreign women engaged in prostitution. But municipal resolutions to remove brothels and relocate the women who worked in them appear far less certain when one focuses on the obstacles to the procedure of removal, namely the right to alternative accommodation—a right that the affected women knew of and collectively used to their advantage. Similarly, legal regimes that attempted to police the entry of French women suspected of being prostitutes emerge not as stringent border bureaucracies but as inconsistent and chaotic systems of border policing when viewed in terms of acts that bypassed them. The final episode in this dissertation highlighted how the colonial government may have parted India with its denials of official brothels, but that former servicemen in Britain—always keen disruptors of any regulation of their sex lives—continued to trouble imperial accounts decades after the end of empire.

It is helpful to ask once more why we need troubled accounts of law and prostitution in imperial settings. Firstly, because law was never something that simply ‘happened’ to the wide-ranging groups of women engaged in prostitution. The procedure of law and its translation into practice was subject to consistent disruption from colonial subjects—arguing with police officers, articulating one’s case in front of a magistrate, hiding from surveillance, negotiating with border agents, suing the municipality, and refusing expulsion. The troubled life of law and regulation also did not escape the corridors of governance and the lives of non-colonial subjects—police accepted bribes, officials communicated inefficiently, magistrates interpreted laws differently, and soldiers concealed key information from their superiors. To not recognize the elaborate encounters between empire, prostitution, and law as a troubled history is to not see this history in its fullness whereby legislation rarely reached its targets without provoking challenge. Recuperating this challenge, primarily encountered in this dissertation through the acts of subaltern Indian women, helps us understand what empire was when seen from the ground of trouble. And by doing so, to recall Lata Mani’s perceptive words, we may “remain vigilant about the positioning of women in colonial discourse without conceding to colonial discourse what it did not, in fact, achieve—the erasure of women.”<sup>5</sup>



To end, I turn to another case of removing women from municipal limits. The story begins in 1947 and the site on this occasion was GB Road in Delhi—the area to which sex workers had been relocated with great difficulty in 1940. But circumstances were now different. In a city confronted with an unprecedented demand for housing after hundreds of thousands of refugees arrived here in the aftermath of the Indian Partition, many refugees were housed in buildings on

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<sup>5</sup> Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 190.



GB Road, some of which had portions sealed off by the Custodian of Evacuee Property.<sup>6</sup> But in December 1947, one Ram Pyari broke open this seal and began to occupy a portion of the Light Building, causing concern among refugee residents who alleged that she was a prostitute operating a brothel and gambling den out of her portion.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, Ram Pyari was charged for crimes related to gambling, but was not removed from the building premises. The frustrated residents now petitioned the Deputy Commissioner to evict her. But as a city official pointed out, a familiar obstacle emerged: “Ram Pyari cannot be evicted unless an alternative accommodation is provided to her.”<sup>8</sup>

The Deputy Commissioner noted that it was not worth tackling her case as an individual and recommended to “take up the question of the removal of all the prostitutes,” as the clash between refugees and prostitutes on GB Road went beyond Ram Pyari and the Light Building residents.<sup>9</sup> In 1952, the Delhi Municipal Committee did take up the question, but in a different way. They proposed to segregate the prostitutes from the refugees on GB Road by moving both groups to opposite ends of the road—the prostitutes to the Ajmeri Gate side and the refugees to the Lahori Gate site. However, the buildings that housed the women engaged in prostitution were scattered around GB Road. The Deputy Commissioner noted “unless they are brought in one line the proposition of segregating them cannot be solved.”<sup>10</sup> Beyond the obvious practical complications, other problems arose too: the refugee tenants were unhappy to relocate to make way for prostitutes; the landlords leasing to prostitutes wanted to keep them on as tenants due to collecting higher rents from them; the abolitionists who wanted to eliminate ‘commercialized

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<sup>6</sup> See Rotem Geva, “The Scramble for Houses: Violence, a Factionalized State, and Informal Economy in Post-Partition Delhi,” *Modern Asian Studies* 51(2017): 769–824.

<sup>7</sup> B. N. Mullick, Secy. to Committee of Displaced Persons of Light Building to Deputy Commissioner, Delhi, November 6, 1949, DSA/Deputy Commissioner (DC)/1950/97.

<sup>8</sup> Secy. to Chief Commissioner, Delhi to Deputy Commissioner, Delhi, May 6, 1950, DSA/DC/195/97.

<sup>9</sup> Deputy Commissioner, draft reply, May 10, 1950, DSA/DC/1950/97.

<sup>10</sup> Memorandum by Deputy Commissioner, Delhi, January 31, 1953, DSA/CC/1953/22/2.

vice' were alarmed that the municipality was zoning sex workers; and the committee itself feared litigation from all concerned parties, including the prostitutes.

Several years after Ram Pyari first broke the seal to the Light Building, the President of the DMC accepted defeat, writing that “the case of segregation of prostitutes in GB Road...may be dropped.”<sup>11</sup> A decade on from when Delhi's sex workers were first relocated to Garstin Bastion Road despite the efforts of those women to resist through legal challenge and protest, the question of what to do with the prostitutes continued to trouble the municipality.

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<sup>11</sup> President, DMC to Deputy Commissioner Delhi, August 13, 1954, DSA/CC/1953/22/2.

**APPENDIX A: DEPORTATION CASES CONNECTED TO TRAFFICKING IN INDIA, 1922-1932**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Deported from</b>	<b>Deported to</b>	<b>Nationality/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Description</b>
1922	Bombay	Hejaz	Arab	LON COTWC 1922 Report	“One Arab prostitute was deported on the ground of numerous complaints received against her. She came to Bombay about nine years ago from Hedjaz with her daughter, now about twelve years old.”
1922	Calcutta	Russia	Russian	LON COTWC 1922 Report	“A Russian woman who has been in Calcutta for fifteen years as a prostitute was deported for being implicated in the opium traffic. The circumstances in which she came to India are unknown. She has since returned after marrying a British subject and is living in Chandernagore in French territory.”
1922	Rangoon	China	Chinese	LON COTWC 1922 Report	“In Burma, 83 Chinese prostitutes were persuaded by the Chinese Advisory Board to give up prostitution. Some of these married and settled down in Burma; others returned to China and the Straits Settlements.”
1922	Rangoon	Straits Settlements	Chinese	LON COTWC 1922 Report	“In Burma, 83 Chinese prostitutes were persuaded by the Chinese Advisory Board to give Uup prostitution. Some of these married and settled down in Burma; others returned to China and the Straits Settlements.”
1923	Bombay	Poland	Polish	LON COTWC 1923 Report	“A Polish woman was convicted of soliciting and deported to Poland via Port Said in April 1923. She had been practicing prostitution in Penang and Singapore in 1922 and came to Bombay via Madras in March

					1923. She described herself as a theatrical artiste and lived in one of the hotels.”
1923	Bombay	China	Russian	LON COTWC 1923 Report	“A Russian prostitute from Hong-Kong arrived in Bombay via Colombo in September 1923. She admitted that she had been carrying on prostitution in Shanghai, Hong-Kong and Japan since 1918. Her passport was not in order for residence in India and she was ordered to leave. She sailed for China in November 1923 of her own accord.”
1924	Bombay	Saigon	French	LON COTWC 1924 Report	“French national, who stated that he was a photographer, two days after his arrival put his wife into a brothel. The authorities proposed to expel him but, on the intervention of the French Consul, he was allowed to leave with his wife for Saigon.”
1925	Karachi	Baghdad	Iraqi	LON COTWC 1925 Report	“An Arab (Iraqi subject) aged 45...was convicted and sentence to 3 months rigorous imprisonment and fined Rs. 500/- for purchasing a young Arab girl while on a trip to his native place, Baghdad, bringing her to Karachi as his daughter-in-law and then attempting to put her to prostitution with a view to live on her earnings. He is a regular pimp...He was deported under the Foreigners Act III of 1864.”
1926	Bombay	Iraq	Iraqi	LON COTWC 1926 Report	“...a Kurdi woman, an Iraq subject, who had obtained a passport under false pretenses but who took to prostitution, has been deported.”
1926	Bombay	Italy	Italian	LON COTWC 1926 Report	“An Italian, who arrived in Bombay from Cairo and was found to be an international souteneur, was also deported.”

1927	Unknown	Iran	Iranian	LON COTWC 1927 Report	“Four Persians were deported to Persia during the year. These Persians were reported to be pimps and were living by extorting money from prostitutes.”
1927	Calcutta	Bangkok	Italian & French	LON COTWC 1927 Report	“On 23rd April 1927, A, an Italian subject, arrived in Calcutta from Bombay. He was followed by B and four French girls who arrived in Calcutta from Karachi on 25th April 1927...A and B were arrested by the Calcutta police and sent up for trial under section 8 of the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act. They were however acquitted by the Chief Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta. A and B were deported from British India under the Provisions of the Foreigners Act by the Government of Bengal and left Calcutta for Bangkok with the four women on 3rd June 1927.”
1928	Karachi	Goa	Goan	LON COTWC 1928 Report	“The victim of a case reported at Serial No. 12, a native of Goa, 18 years old. Was deported by the Commissioner of Sind under the Foreigners’ Act...The accused belonged to Karachi and procured customers for immoral purposes for the victim and lived on her earnings.”
1928	Bombay	Kashmir	Kashmiri	LON COTWC 1928 Report	“A native of the Kashmir State was deported to Kashmir under Section 3 of Act 3, of 1864. He was reported to be living on the earnings of prostitutes, for which he was convicted and sentenced to two months’ rigorous imprisonment on March 5th, 1928. After his release from prison, he started a laundry below a brothel, ostensibly to

					cover his real business of procuring women for the purpose of prostitution. Several complaints were received by the State Police that he had enticed women away from Bombay for prostitution. He was, therefore, deported as an undesirable foreigner.”
1928	Bombay	Iran	Iranian	LON COTWC 1928 Report	“One of the Persians deported last year, and referred to in last year's report, returned to British India in 1928 and was remanded in custody by order of the Commissioner of Police, Bombay. He was discharged from custody on condition that he removed from British India. He left for Persia.”
1931	Bombay	France	French	LON COTWC 1931 Report	“Miss Angele Coves, a French prostitute, who was refused permission by the Secretary of State to return to India, managed to arrive in Bombay via Hongkong in June 1931. She had been in India before and as she was considered to be an undesirable, she was, at the suggestion of the Government of India, deported under the Foreigners Act, III of 1864.”
1931	Bombay	Baghdad	Iraqi	LON COTWC 1931 Report	“During the year under report orders under Section 3 of the Foreigners Act, III of 1864 were issued against one Abbas, son of Ibrahim, a native of Baghdad, who was reported to be a notorious bully and pimp, but before the orders could be served on him, he disappeared and has not yet been traced.”
1931	Calcutta	France	French	LON COTWC 1931 Report	“The Government of Bengal were moved to issue orders under Section 3 of the Foreigners Act (Act III of 1864) in directing Jeanne Ballard alias

					Yvonne, Leone Pajot alias Jacqueline, Jeanne Ancausse, to remove themselves from British India. Government orders were issued and served on them and they left India.”
1932	Bombay	Basra	Iraqi	LON COTWC 1932-33 Report	“A native of Basra was deported under Section 3 of the Foreigners Act, III of 1864 as he was found to be living on the earnings of a prostitute.”

Source: League of Nations Committee on Traffic in Women and Children Annual Reports (1922-1932), UN Archives at Geneva.

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Asia and Africa Photo Collection  
Sound Recordings

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    Political  
    Police  
    Jails  
Foreign Department  
Defense Records

#### **Delhi State Archives (Digital Access)**

Residency Records  
Lock Hospital Files  
Chief Commissioner's Files  
    Education  
    Local-Self Government

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Agent to the Governor-General Essential Records  
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