

Civil Society And Social Reform In Colonial Punjab: Ambivalence And Abandonment

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Abstract

Nineteenth century Victorian imaginings of the desexualised 'chaste' housewife and the 'indecent' sexual harlot trickled from the metropole into colonial India, where the symbol of the 'pativrata' wife was mobilised to indicate high caste status and to exercise control over women's sexuality. Consequently, the 'woman question' in India became embroiled with the larger issue of exerting Indian cultural superiority. The desire to strengthen the 'private' sphere, the joint-family system and caste identities arose concomitantly with a changing socio-economic and cultural landscape under colonialism. The pegging of caste status and family stature to the sexual behaviour of women was a pervasive phenomenon, especially amongst the elite and literate high caste Punjabis of Colonial Punjab. This paper argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the burgeoning Indian National Movement maintained a dispassionate distance from the 'prostitute', choosing instead to focus on other social evils concerning 'respectable' women belonging to the Indian 'domestic' realm. This study scrutinizes the conceptualisation of a nationalist body politic, as apparent in the speeches and philosophies of nationalist leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gandhi, in the agendas of feminist organisations such as the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the disjointed mission of Gandhian feminists like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. It will be argued that while the feminisation of the National Movement placed more agency and freedom in the hands of Indian women, the desire to broker their own place within the envisioned body politic, prevented women nationalists from taking up an issue which enjoyed little support amongst the upper echelons of nationalist leadership. Women of the Movement participated actively in the Civil Disobedience Movement against British imperialism. They picketed shops selling foreign cloth, advocated the abolition of untouchability, campaigned against the Devadasi system in South India, and showcased their determination by assiduously arguing for the importance of women's participation in the salt satyagraha. Yet, these resolute women

looked to western feminists to lead the reclamation of their 'fallen sisters'. Even as women nationalists set about joining international agencies such as the League of Nations and accepting its directives on protective legislation for working women, the status of women practicing sex work and their position in society, remained steeped in ambivalence. The failure to reconcile the imaginings of the 'pure' and 'self-sacrificing' woman with the figure of the 'unclean' and 'fallen' prostitute acted as a major shortcoming of the Indian National Movement in general and the Indian feminist movement in particular, exhibiting that the Movement was not an all encompassing phenomenon. Its idolisation of certain types of cultural codes hinged on women's sexuality led to the systematic exclusion of certain marginalised groups such as the prostitutes. While women's organisations in India did propose rescue homes and vocational training for a 'dignified' living, they perpetuated her image as a hapless victim of seduction and abduction who needed to be rescued. These constructs raise interesting questions regarding the perceived agency of prostitutes, or the lack thereof. They also call for a reassessment of the rhetoric of Indian womanhood and nationalist aspirations.

Keywords: *Indian National Movement, Colonial Punjab, Women's sexuality, Women's Movement, Gender, Nationalism, Gandhi, Feminism.*

Introduction

In nineteenth century India, the ideal woman was viewed as one whose reproductive potential was easily harnessed and who contributed to the strengthening of a firm 'Aryan' race by bearing healthy children¹. Consequently, the 'woman question' became embroiled with the larger issue of exerting Indian cultural superiority. The impulse for the strengthening of the domestic sphere, the joint family system and caste identities, had its roots in the changing socio-economic and cultural landscape under colonialism. The pegging of caste status and family stature to the sexual behaviour of women was a pervasive phenomenon especially amongst the elite and literate high caste *Punjabis* of Colonial Punjab.

Inverting Notions of Maleness and Femaleness

Gandhi inverted notions of maleness and femaleness by emphasising the strength of the feminine. But prostitutes were excluded from the narrative of feminine strength and grace. Their immorality was a given, which effectively disqualified them from a place within any narratives that were aimed at new constructions of an empowered Indian womanhood,

capable of being a sister-in-arms, instrumental in achieving a nation and national culture. A lack of sympathy for the prostitute stands out in contrast to Gandhi's broader formulation of society as a set of interdependencies held together by the philosophy of service (*seva*), inclusiveness and brotherhood, rather than as a sphere of competing interests. Gandhi furthered the revolutionary nature of the Indian National Movement by pulling the masses, especially the women out of their passivity. While women in India such as Sarladevi Chaudharani, Kamaladevi Chattopahdyay, Aruna Asaf Ali and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur to name a few, had already spearheaded the womens' movement by agitating around the question of female education and *purdah*, Gandhi gave them a new weapon called '*satyagraha*'. Many scholars have credited Gandhi and his *satyagraha*- the philosophy of validation by truth, with the spread of the "daily experience of democracy" amongst the grassrootsⁱⁱ. Women were able to join the movement as an integral part. While Gandhi questioned the masculine character of the anti-imperialist struggle, the feminisation of the movement, which was reposed in the use of the spinning wheel or *charkha* as well as the avowed adherence to non-violence, was in fact dependent on its "simultaneous desexualisation"ⁱⁱⁱ.

Gandhi and the Conceptualisation of a Nationalist Body Politic

Ashwini Tambe problematizes Gandhi's otherwise all embracing politics founding on the ethos of "neighbourliness", by accounting for the systematic exclusion of prostitutes^{iv}. Meliscent Shephard, a representative of the British social purity organisation named Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) in India wrote to Gandhi exhorting him to intervene in the matter^v. While Gandhi participated on the issues of child remarriage and widow remarriage, his voice on the issue of prostitution is conspicuous by its absence. When he did break his silence it was to betray a cavalier approach to the matter. To him, the issue of prostitution was "not one that man could tackle" and that it was best handled by "experts"^{vi}. In Gandhi's view, the cause of 'redeeming' the "unfortunate" and "fallen" women could only be accomplished by a woman; that only "a woman of exceptional purity and strength of character" could redeem "this part of humanity"^{vii}. A woman must "rise in revolt against evil and burn the wicked in others with the fire of her own purity," in Gandhi's view.^{viii}

Muslim Womens' Reform Activity In Punjab

The Muhammadan Educational Conference was founded by Muslim reformers in the late 19th century. Aligarh, India, is the birthplace of this system, which was developed by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in 1886. By the late 1890s, there was a rising desire among western-educated Muslims to find educated brides. Therefore, a conference was held to promote the education of Muslim women. Shaikh Abdullah served as the branch's secretary. Displays of women's crafts were set up throughout the sessions of the Annual Muhammadan Educational Conference to raise funds for women's education and show that Muslim women could do necessary and meaningful work. The All India Muslim Ladies Conference (also called as Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam) was founded on March 1, 1914 at the Aligarh Girls' School. The new Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam building in Aligarh, was inaugurated by prominent women from all across India. One of the delegates was a woman named *Begum* Mian Muhammad Shafi from Lahore, Punjab. Her spouse attained the position of Education and Law Minister of India after becoming a significant figure in the Muslim League. The sister of a judge in the Punjab High Court, Begum Shah Din, followed Begum Shafi.^{ix} There were a number of editors there, including Lahore's Tahzib-e-Waheed Niswan's *Begum*^xYaqub and Sharif Bibi's Fatima *Begum*.^{xi}

The main aims of the *Anjuman* were:

- that all Indian women must strive for harmony;
- helping those who are battling for women's access to education;
- to make sure that there was a balanced among theoretical and practical learning;
- For the sake of developing the craft of homemaking as a whole.
- For it should be resolved that no Muslim girl must be married before the age of sixteen.^{xii}

The 1920s saw the establishment of Anjuman chapters in several towns like Lahore, Delhi, Meerut, Jalandhar, Dehradun, and a few more. They were the first to create elementary schools just for girls in these areas. In 1918, Begum Shafi, Begum Shah-Din, as well as their daughters Begum Shah Nawaz but also Begum Muhammad Rafi called for the local anjumans to meet in Punjab for their annual meeting. The All India Muslim Ladies Conference was organised as a direct consequence from this on March 3-5, 1918, at Faridkot House in Lahore. The attendance of almost 500 ladies much beyond that of any prior gathering.^{xiii}

Jahanara Shahnawaz was significantly responsible for the All India Muslim Women's Conference declaration against polygamy in 1918. In 1935, she created the Punjab Provincial Women's Muslim League, and in 1930, she and another woman pushed unsuccessfully at the Round Table Conference for a 5 percent quota for women in the legislatures.

Begum Shahnawaz was chosen Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Medical Relief, as well as Public Health soon afterwards her election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1937. This was her first year serving in this capacity. In 1942, the Muslim League voiced opposition to the Indian government's decision to nominate her to serve on the National Defense Council and demanded that its members step down from the positions they had on the Defense Council..^{xiv}

When the All India Ladies' Association was being established, Begum Jahanara was selected to represent the ladies of Punjab. This occurred about the same period. After the All India Women's Conference was established, she was appointed to serve as a member of the Central Standing Committee, Vice President of the Conference, and President of the Provincial Branch of the organisation. In addition, she was chosen to be a member of the Central Standing Committee.

Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz was a participant at the meeting of the League of Nations Advisory Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Youth that took place in 1935. This was done by her in her capacity as the committee's representative of the Indian community. The conference was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1935, between the dates of April 25 and May 9, during the year 1935. During the whole of the meeting, the Committee on the Welfare of Children and the Committee on Trafficking of Women and Children each conducted their own separate sessions. During the fourteenth session of the Committee on Trafficking in Women and Children, numerous proposals for future work on the topic of prostitute rehabilitation were offered. These ideas were submitted in order to combat the issue of trafficking in women and children.

The AIWC And Women's Reform In Punjab

Between 1927 and 1947, twenty sessions of the All India Womens' Conference were held in India. The only session to be held in Punjab was organised in 1931, with Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur of Kapurthala as Chairperson and Mrs. Muthulakshmi Reddi as its President.

The 1928 and 1938 sessions were held in Delhi. The educated women of Punjab participated in these sessions quite actively and expressed their views on various issues pertaining to women. They also presided over various AIWC sessions held around India. For instance, Lady Abdul Qadir of Lahore presided over the eighth session of Calcutta in 1933. Lady Abdul Qadir of Lahore. The twelfth session at Nagpur in December 1937 was presided by Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur^{xv}.

The resolutions adopted by the women addressed several issues^{xvi}. At the fifth session held in Lahore, presided by Lady Abdul Qadir, the issue of *purdah* and its retarding effects on the growth and education of women, were discussed at length^{xvii}. Mrs. Kamla Kaul put forward a resolution calling for at least one woman magistrate to be put in charge of cases involving children. One of the other resolutions was to clean up cities, towns, and villages. The Pachmarhi plan to open the Central Institute of Home Science in Delhi was also talked about.^{xviii}

Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur was chosen as the representative of the womens' movement at the seventh session of 1933 at Lucknow, to propose the Right to Vote for women in India^{xix}. Lady Abdul Qadir became the president of the eighth session of AIWC in December, 1933 at Calcutta^{xx}. She had done the great service of founding an Industrial School for women in Lahore^{xxi}. The other distinguished attendees at the session were Mrs. Brijlal Nehru of Lahore and Sardarni Pritam Kaur of Lahore^{xxii}. The session also witnessed the passing of a resolution against untouchability^{xxiii}.

On January 27, 1940, at the Senate Hall of Allahabad University, under the guidance of Begum Hamid Ali¹¹³, Brij Lal Nehru, Shah Nawaz, and Amrit Kaur met to examine the possibility of instituting a minimum wage for all women workers in India. On the first day of the fifteenth session of the All India Women's Conference, held on December 27, 1940 in Bangalore, Mrs. Vidya Puri (Punjab) and Amrit Kaur backed a resolution expressing confidence in nonviolence submitted by Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan of Madras. This resolution was proposed by Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan of Madras. The change was seen in many different ways. The AIWC switched its goals from social change to encouraging women to join the independence movement.

Feminists of Lahore

In Punjab, several early feminists entered the reformist and political fray to remedy issues of social and political consequence. The Zutshis of Lahore were an illustrious family of Kashmiri origin. The household had three daughters, Shyama, Manmmohini and Janak, who were led by their mother Lado Rani Zutshi, to perform social service. They were modern, educated and fashionable, daughters of a prominent barrister. The four women joined the National Movement during the Civil Disobedience Movement. The chief of Congress volunteers in Lahore, Sardar Mangal Singh, carved out a 'Women's Brigade' in the city, which was joined by all four women. Lado Rani went on to join the *Kumari Sabha* in Lahore, which acted as a platform to discuss various social and political issues. In July 1930, the Zutshis, along with various other volunteers from Ambala and Shimla, picketed the gates of the Assembly. They actively protested the arrest of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev^{xxiv}.

Parvati Devi, the daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai delivered speeches to enlist support of women in Punjab. 300 women enlisted themselves as volunteers in Multan alone^{xxv}. They courted arrest and started temperance campaigns^{xxvi}. Sarla Devi Chaudharani encouraged women to take up spinning and boycott in Lahore. She referred to the *charkha* or the spinning wheel, as the "machine gun" in the "war against Government"^{xxvii}. Kumari Lajjavati took on the role of principal at the Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya in Jalandhar. She was also a member of the Punjab Provincial Congress and campaigned for *khadi* and *boycott*. She organised picketing and recruited volunteers, mobilising the masses at a large scale in Punjab. The women of Punjab organised demonstrations against the Sedition Meetings Act and courted arrest in large numbers^{xxviii}. Abida Bano *Begum* campaigned amongst women to discard *pardah* and wear *khadi*^{xxix}. Manmohini Sehgal ensured that women were organised into *Kumai Sabhas* and even when the police came to arrest protesting women at public meetings, the women refused to budge^{xxx}. In this rich account of women's participation in the National Movement, an active engagement with the question of rehabilitating 'prostitutes', and attempts to recruit them into the Movement, are absent.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: A Disjointed Mission

In 1887, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was born into the royal family of the well-known princely state of Kapurthala in colonial Punjab. At the time of her birth, she was a member of the

royal family. Her father, Sir Harnam Singh Ahluwalia, was embroiled in a dispute about the succession to the throne. In the end, he converted to Christianity, giving up both the throne and the Sikh faith in the process. She was vehemently opposed to the practise of purdah as well as child marriage, and she worked to abolish the devadasi system that was prevalent in India. In 1927, Kaur was one of the people who contributed to the launch of the All India Women's Conference. In 1930, she was named secretary, and in 1933, she was named president.

In many of her speeches at AIWC meetings, she highlighted the need for uplifting women who were “forced” to take up prostitution on account of their circumstances. She echoed the views of other feminists such as Meliscent Shephard, by arguing for identical moral codes for men and women. She argued that, “as guilty as prostitutes, are the men who go to them”^{xxxii}. This aspect of ‘guilt’ appears in many of her speeches, but the ‘guilt’ is never problematised by highlighting the multifarious reasons which resulted in women taking to prostitution. No rescue homes or institutions of rehabilitation were ever set up for them under her patronage. This stands out especially in the light of the plethora of measures taken by her to empower women. For instance, she inaugurated creches and working women’s hostels as well as cooperatives to help women gain self-sufficiency^{xxxiii}.

While the condition of labouring women was often discussed and several resolutions adopted to this effect at AIWC meetings, covering issues pertaining to equal pay as well as working conditions. Sex workers were not included in such debates and discussions. This raises questions about constricted perceptions of women’s informal labour in India and the failure to perceive her as a complex subject by civil society and feminists alike.

On the question of *Harijans*, Amrit Kaur said that, “I would like to see *Harijan* girls trained by the score as nurses and midwives and where possible as doctors and teachers. Prejudice against them as a class will then ipso facto disappear”^{xxxiii}. It is worth noting, that no such program for educating and training for ‘prostitutes’ or their children was ever proposed by her.

Prostitution was treated as a question of “moral stamina”. The rehabilitation of ‘fallen’ women and the provision of other means of livelihood for them was attached to the proviso that they “convert to our way of thinking”. She admitted that “so far it has been thought beneath our dignity or unwise to be seen talking to such women. Any woman seen with a

prostitute is herself branded as one^{xxxiv}. It is noteworthy that despite the active work being done by Meliscent Shephard for achieving the closure of regulated brothels in Punjab, the women social reformers did not seem to collaborate with her. While the western feminists launched social purity and moral hygiene campaigns in the region and the rest of India, Indian feminists looked to western feminists to lead the reclamation of 'fallen' women. Amrit Kaur betrays the reticence amongst Indian women reformers to engage with women of 'vice' in one of her essays:

“Just as we need thousands of Florence nightingales, so do we need thousands of Josphine Butlers to espouse the cause of these hapless members of society^{xxxv}. During the preparation of the Punjab SITA Bill which was intended to close tolerated brothels in Punjab as well as Delhi, the Indian feminists merely “gave splendid support and formed a joint committee in support of the Bill attached to the Punjab AMSH^{xxxvi}”.

In 1940, the Lahore Rescue Home had been established. It came to be known as *Shanti Kunj* and was started by the Lahore Rescue Home Society in 1936 “to give shelter and protection to women in distress^{xxxvii}. Ruing the lack of financial assistance from the Punjab government, in its annual report for 1939-40, the Lahore Rescue home admitted that “important social problems are left to be tackled by private agencies that have to depend on voluntary help and honorary service^{xxxviii}”.

The All Asian Women's Conference at Lahore (1931): Attempt to Forge a Pan- Asian Feminist Collective

In January of 1931, 36 women from from a variety of Asian nations got together in Lahore to discuss social and political issues that were of significance to them all. The All-Asian Women's conference (AAWC) was the first meeting of its type and was an effort to establish regular contact amongst Asian women and to build a pan-Asian feminist organisation. The conference was organised by a group of prominent Indian women under the direction of an Irish feminist named Margaret Cousins. These ladies were the primary architects of the project.

At its meeting, the AAWC passed a number of resolutions relating to social and political equality. The first resolution was concerned with maintaining “the high spiritual consciousness that has been the fundamental characteristic of the people of Asia

throughout the millennia^{xxxix}. The Conference commenced with Cousins praising the female delegates for the “high spiritual tone” of their speeches^{xl}. Other resolutions addressed free and compulsory primary education, citing Japan as an example; the abolition of child brides; investment in health schemes; prohibition schemes; rescue of adults and children from vice; regulation of labour conditions; as well as equal status for men and women through equal franchise.

Begum Hamid Ali in her speech, mentioned the establishment of a rescue home in Bombay and industrial schools to “equip rescued girls with necessary training to start a new life”. The Indian delegates prepared a list of necessities to facilitate the project of rescue :

- Spread of mass education
- Suitable legislation to suppress traffic
- Liberal financial support from government to support educative propaganda
- Training and employment of women probation officers and women police to investigate brothels
- Children's courts and women honorary magistrates and women juries to deal with such cases.

At the Lahore conference, Meliscent Shephard underscored the need for equal moral standards for men and women along with the need to establish rescue homes for trafficked women. It is noteworthy that “rescue” was used with regards to women who were seen as ‘victims’ of trafficking. The rehabilitation aspect which could have wider connotation and include the resettlement of ‘prostitutes’ living in brothels rarely appears in the speeches of the feminists.

The AAWC proceedings demonstrate the convergences (on the question of trafficking in women and children) and divergences (on the question of Empire's role in exacerbating women's subjugation to patriarchal culture) between Indian and international feminists. However, Indian women nationalists chose not to frame Indian patriarchal customs as “oppressive”. They chose instead to lend a counter hegemonic character to their campaign. Even when framing colonial rule as an oppressive yoke, Indian feminists did not call out the State on certain practices such as regulated prostitution.

Conclusion

During the first half of the twentieth century, two campaigns were simultaneously underway. One, for the segregation of prostitutes into separate enclaves within bounds of municipal governance. The other, for their complete prohibition and abolition. From a perusal of measures undertaken by State on the one hand, and the various legal measures as well as the defective and patchy campaigns of civil society and feminist reformers on the other, it is clear that the two ideological stands were sparring with each other, resulting in ambivalent positions on the issue. While the pressure from international organisations goaded the Government of India out of its inactivity regarding regulated brothels and trafficking, the fear of Indian backlash compounded its ambivalent position. While civil society and voluntary associations entered vibrant dialogue on the issue of rescue homes in the 1920s and 1930s, the lack of favourable public opinion towards the issue of shutting down brothels and coming to light of instances of exploitation and abuse in the homes, weakened the case for rescue homes. The onset of the Second World War resulted in drying up of both funding and receptivity for the issue of “rescuing” trafficked women.

The burgeoning Indian National Movement maintained a dispassionate distance from the ‘prostitute’, choosing instead to focus on other social evils concerning ‘respectable’ women belonging to the ‘domestic’ realm. While the ‘feminisation’ of the Movement placed more agency and freedom in the hands of Indian women, the desire to broker their own place within the envisioned body politic, prevented women nationalists from taking up an issue which enjoyed little support. The failure to reconcile the imaginings of the ‘chaste’ and ‘pure’ ‘self-sacrificing’ woman with the figure of the ‘unclean’ and ‘fallen’ prostitute acted as a major lacuna of the Indian National Movement in general, and the Indian feminist movement in particular, resulting in a systematic exclusion and abandonment of the prostitutes in colonial Punjab.

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