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Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities

Philippa Levine

Abstract

In what Arjun Appadurai has dubbed the 'colonial imaginary' issues of femininity, and who possessed it, were of prime importance. An orientalizing sociology sought to distinguish, and indeed to fix, differences between metropolitan and indigenous women as a rhetoric of hierarchy which secured proper and western femininity to white women. One critical route which colonial commentators and authorities took to produce that knowledge was to measure women's proximity to the practice of prostitution, a means which permitted discussion and judgement of racialized sexualities as well as of proper models of feminine behaviour. This article will explore the ways in which the new sociology of the Victorian period, wielded in a colonial context, served to separate women through race-based ideas of sexual behaviour and sexual order. It will deal with British India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords

Race; sexuality; classification; taxonomy; political arithmetic

By the dawn of the twentieth century, British government policy was deeply reliant on, and confident about, its use of what quickly became known as 'blue book sociology'. Named for its blue cloth covers, this official social science provided government committees with mountains of information and documentation about its citizenry. Figures detailing mortality and marriage, judgements of economic health, statistics of disease and of consumption, witness statements, 'expert' evidence all came to play a more and more central role in determining and shaping government policy. Equally potent was the growing use of classificatory schemes within police, educational, medical and other institutions, the use of anthropometry and craniology, of finger-printing and the case history. This new sociology, though it would not find an academic home until much later, was nonetheless of unparalleled importance, marking the epistemological triumph of empiricism as it moved from philosophy to contemporary social issues.

This urge to count and to detail as a powerful form of knowledge – what Foucault calls an ‘archaeology of knowledge’ – was not a project confined to island Britain by any means. Bernard Cohn, Arjun Appadurai and Ronald Inden in particular, have explored the significance of counting in British India, arguing that the gathering of data was a far from benign exercise (Cohn, 1987; Inden, 1990; Appadurai, 1993). Colonial officials throughout the British Empire sought to estimate population and to itemize the characteristics and habits of subject populations using methods similar to those employed in Britain. David Ludden has noted that ‘empirical data and factualized statements about India entered European intellectual life through Parliamentary debates’ (Ludden, 1993: 264–5) among other vehicles, and Gauri Viswanathan makes the important point that throughout the period of colonial rule, and well before 1857, ‘the state had a vital interest in the production of knowledge about those whom it ruled’ as well as ‘a role in actively processing and then selectively delivering that knowledge . . . in the guise of “objective knowledge”’ (Viswanathan, 1989: 29). David Omissi, who links this scrutiny of detail to Britain’s military needs in India, too, makes the point that ‘no regime could long survive if it treated its subject population as a single undifferentiated mass’ (Omissi, 1994: 32).

This strategy of containment focused most closely in and after the nineteenth century on the act of counting, reaching its pinnacle in the establishment of the census, both in Britain and in India. Counting, and the particular kinds of sociological knowledge to which colonial officials turned their attention, invited – indeed was dependent upon – a notion of differentiation: how else were the Hindu and the ‘Mussulman’ to be distinguished? The military northerners from the effete Bengalis? The respectable women of the *zenana* from those of the streets? Arjun Appadurai and Mrinalini Sinha both point out that while in Britain sociological inquiry tended to confine itself largely to those who inhabited the social margins, its equally disciplinary focus in India was on the population in general (Appadurai, 1993: 318; Sinha, 1995: 102).

It is, though, the differentiation, between the respectable and the unrespectable woman, with which I am here concerned. Closely tied to the growing hunger for a knowledge of ‘native’ life was a thorough-going if not always effective codification of the law in India, a process which relied substantially upon this empirically derived knowledge in its understanding of the possible and the desirable in law. But whether in domestic or colonial settings one arena in which legal thinkers were spectacularly unsuccessful was in deriving a satisfactory definition of what was meant by, and what could be defined under the rubric of prostitution. Lawyers, politicians and commentators in Britain as in India simply could not agree on

a consensual definition of exactly what constituted prostitution legally.¹ The secretary to the government of Bengal made clear the problems this entailed in prosecuting women on prostitution-related charges:

Officers engaged in working the Act [the Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1868: Act XIV] do constantly feel themselves unable to say whether a woman is or is not a common prostitute within the meaning of the Act. They may be morally certain that she is; but if she denies it, proof is difficult and she escapes . . . the law gives us no definition of the term 'common prostitute' for the guidance of Magistrates.

(OIOC, 1878)

One might, of course, dismiss the importance of this disjunction between law and knowledge on the grounds that prostitution is almost everywhere considered a minor offence, and though it has often been thought of as a grave social problem, no serious attempts to prohibit it have ever lasted very long. However, I want to suggest that, on the contrary, prostitution must be seen as a crucial artefact of colonial authority in India, and that this unresolved tension is therefore of significance for our understanding of the operations of that colonial authority. The greater part of inter-racial sexual connection between colonizer and colonized was heterosexual prostitution where white men purchased the sexual services of native women. So widespread was the industry of prostitution in areas of British influence that both the government of India and the home imperial government at Westminster actively legislated on the issue well into the twentieth century. That, of course, is a series of stories in itself, stories that have been told elsewhere.² My intent is rather to interrogate my own proposition – that prostitution was a central prop of a masculinized colonial rule – by musing on how we might fruitfully read the contradiction between the ease with which commentators delineated the body and the character of the prostitute even while acknowledging that no proper legal definition had ever been constituted. This conundrum of the acknowledged difficulties in defining an act but not one of its named participants suggests a linguistic colonization with far-reaching ramifications for those so colonized.

Drawing on similar sources, ideas and indeed stereotypes about the Indian body (and indeed the Indian body politic) as did fact-grubbers intent upon demographic knowledge, or crop failure, or the incidence of *suttee*, this was an 'orientalist sociology'. And its studied use was constitutive in the making and the creation of the sexualities which defined and labelled the colonized.³ 'Knowledge' of sexual habits, preferences and boundaries was all part of the way in which British colonialism constituted the need for certain kinds of authority in the colonial setting. Moreover, the level of detail by which those engaged in prostitution in India became identifiable

in this period erected a hierarchy built on intense minutiae, principally though not solely actualized along racial lines. It is this racially charged taxonomic care, this endless fine-tuning of the delineation of the prostitute: her race, class, caste, religion and clientele, all drawn against the backdrop of legal imprecision that interests me here. Sudipta Sen has identified what he sees as 'distinctively racial hierarchies . . . fashioned out of the old great chain of being', as part of a wider Enlightenment enterprise (Sen, 1994: 378). The changes in colonial governance after 1857 did little to unseat the centrality of these racial hierarchies or of the orientalist presuppositions which fuelled them. Drawing a link between orientalist forms of knowledge and colonial coercion, I want to look here at how, by the early twentieth century, an imperial or orientalist sociology specifically used careful definitions of, and political arithmetic about, race and sex in its attempts to manage the sexualities it had, by that same knowledge, effectively invented.

The complex racial demarcation of prostitution is one of the most noticeable ways in which the anthropology of sexual commerce was cast; the fine lines drawn between women of different nationalities sustain the challenge scholars such as Lisa Lowe and Billie Melman have offered to a homogenized reading of the 'Orient' (Lowe, 1991; Melman, 1992: 3, 1996). These intensely racial classifications suggest that for British colonialism the world was divided not simply into 'Us' and 'Them' but rather into 'Us' and many 'Thems'. While the idea of race as a marker of civilization may have been unitary, its application was anything but.

By British estimates, India was something of a melting-pot of sexual commerce, and, indeed, one of the motives driving this taxonomic urge to uncover the nationality of prostitute women was the fear of inter-racial sexual connection where the vendor and not the client was white. Though the numbers of white prostitutes working in India remained small throughout the period, never numbering more than perhaps 200 women, their presence was nonetheless a constant source of anxiety (OIOC, 1913c). It was a symbolic more than a numeric importance which was invested in their presence.

In an internal memorandum on the matter, Rangoon Police Superintendent E.C.S. Shuttleworth, detailed to investigate the sex trade in the major cities of the Indian presidencies, noted that in Bombay, 'although lists are kept up of all European and other foreign prostitutes, no attempt has been made to arrive at an estimate of the number of indigenous prostitutes'. He found similar policy in Calcutta where, though the police ignored the activities of indigenous women, 'a considerable deal [of attention] is paid to solicitation by Eurasian prostitutes' (OIOC, 1921). While this might

superficially suggest that local women engaged in prostitution were free from colonial control, this was by no means the case. The racial sliding scale which this separate surveillance represents affected all women reliant on prostitution for their living. Moreover, Shuttleworth's observations echo a common European complaint about the promiscuous indigenous masses: there were simply too many of them to count.

European women engaged in prostitution in India were said to be largely of either eastern European or Mediterranean rather than of Anglo-Saxon or northern European origin. Italians, Greeks, Romanians and Russians were the bulk of this population, though an Austrian and German presence was also acknowledged. Many of these women were also Jews, a fact which officials made much of as compelling evidence of the *racial* distance between prostitutes and respectable women. Jewish women were almost always counted as a separate category. Persian – or as they were commonly dubbed, Asiatic – Jewesses were commonly regarded as even less refined than their sisters of European ancestry, although one senior official in the Burmese civil service told the government of India that the Russian contingent was 'probably almost Oriental' thus securing for them, too, a critical demotion on the socio-sexual ladder (OIOC, 1913b).

Sandwiched between the small European contingent, Jewish and otherwise, and the local population were non-Europeans, a motley group which included Chinese and Japanese women, Mauritians and what contemporary commentators termed 'Negresses' and 'Arabs' (OIOC, 1913a). Each of these groups was carefully ranked in a hierarchy of respectability. S.M. Edwardes, Bombay Police Commissioner, classified the brothels in his jurisdiction principally by nationality. The European houses were at the pinnacle, but the police divided even these informally on the basis of the race and nationality of the occupants and of their clientele. Japanese brothels ranked 'with the third class European houses' (OIOC, 1913a). This startling echo of the twentieth-century South African ploy of rendering the Japanese honorary Europeans or near-Europeans was common. Both government servants and social purity activists in Asia frequently referred to the allegedly superior status of Japanese women, and while this approval often focused on their hygiene, it also alluded to their greater malleability, their guise of apparent respectability. The demeanour of Japanese women came closer to the European ideal of womanhood, as did their skin colour and, indeed, officials commonly regarded Japanese women as a strategic substitute for Europeans. The Commissioner of one Burmese divisional territory argued that:

although . . . European women should not be brought to India for purposes of prostitution, I have no such feelings as regards Japanese women. On the contrary I consider . . . that Japanese women are far more preferable as prostitutes

because they are more cleanly and by taking care of their bodies they do not spread disease through the country in the same way that Burmese women do.
(OIOC, 1913b)

And while Japanese women could thus be acceptable substitutes for Europeans, the presence of Europeans likewise was, however problematic, still preferable to the possibility of British prostitute women. The Commissioner of London's Metropolitan Police expressed the fears which made European prostitution the less threatening alternative. 'As there must always be prostitutes it is perhaps less demoralising to have foreigners than English women, and if you get rid of the former their places will be taken by English women' (PRO, 1905).

At the bottom of the pile, and most significant in number, were the local women, Indian and Burmese – whose rates for service and whose alleged standards were significantly lower than those of their foreign competitors. The commentaries about their lives suggest that they were also regarded as less amenable to European control: descriptions of chaotic colourful loudness, of unembarrassed displays of flesh, of squalid cots open to the street were the common language used to depict the conditions and lives of indigenous women who engaged in prostitution. Their trade was a mirror for the bazaars of India where less contentious commercial enterprises were carried on; their living conditions reflected those of India in general. As specific as commentators were about the lives of non-Indian women, they were guilty of vast over-generalizations about Indian women, as well as conflating conditions in British India and its neighbour, British Burma.⁴

Nonetheless, and even in this context, definition was of considerable importance and complex if inaccurate distinctions gave colonial authorities a sense of control even while the gloomy reports of both civil and military medical officers described an uphill struggle against curbing venereal disease and bringing prostitute women to heel. In both the cities and cantonments under colonial rule, a system of differentiation was crucial – but only that which the British themselves named. Brothels occupied by local women were either first class and reserved exclusively for a European clientele, or second class, serving indigenous men.⁵ Though keen on this game of taxonomy, the Indian distinction between a regionally specific and long-standing *devadasi* tradition which equipped women with considerable skills in poetry, music, dancing and polite conversation and a commercialized prostitution was consistently repudiated by the British in what Jenny Sharpe calls a 'selective definition of Indian culture' (Sharpe, 1993: 50). As Sharpe points out this winnowing process, which allowed colonial authorities a monolithic view of Indian culture, meant that they could represent India through what were seen as its typically barbaric traditions

(1993: 51). Thus when Indian women protested their licensing as common prostitutes, officials dismissed their protests as dishonest, as sophistry, arguing that there was no distinction in reality between the indigenous courtesan tradition and the British reading of commercial prostitution, that the Indian reality was one of degradation, and that the acceptance of a prostitute 'caste' was proof positive of Indian cultural and moral inferiority.⁶ The British acknowledged a long-standing tradition of temple prostitution, but saw it as an excuse for 'immorality' rather than as an occupation separate from less elaborate and less lucrative forms of sexual commerce. British officials stuck by the belief that, 'the regulation of courtezans in the public interest offends no native susceptibility'.⁷

I do not intend to suggest that the British were able to discount entirely indigenous ideas about, or classifications of, the sex trade. Equally, it would be absurd to suggest that commercial sex was brought to India by the British, or came into being to service colonial needs. There was no idyllic pre-colonial condition; as Kalpana Ram points out, the changes effected on Indian women by colonialism were palpable. She sees 'the internal and external contradictions of an exploitative caste-divided agrarian society, being reshaped for the worse by contact with colonialism' (Ram, 1981: 4). The colonial presence shaped and moulded the contours of the sex industry in economic and social terms as palpably as it shaped patterns of land-owning or of agriculture. (See Oldenburg, 1991, for women's own assessments of the effects of colonial rule on older courtesan traditions.)

Colonial definitions of sexuality served to map a geography of racial borders through a complex taxonomy of racial and ethnic distinction, in which these categories were always more than innocently descriptive. It was in the interests of the authorities to represent these classifications as fundamentally descriptive and empiricist, a mere catalogue of actualities. In such a guise, nature and morality could be conflated, rather than seen as judgements which themselves produced categories of rule through racial distinction. Race, then, was that which the colonial state used in support of its rule, but which it sought to make transparent as a merely informational category.

These classificatory schemes clearly stripped indigenous women of the ability to name their occupation on their own terms, even while their daily lives challenged colonial definition. But this was an important aim of classification, its insistence on objective knowledge rendering the object of scrutiny passive. Prostitution always complicated that formula, as critics veered uneasily between wanting to see women as victims of abuse or as amoral profiteers. That tension was crystallized in the early twentieth-century panic over the 'white slave trade' which posited a profound divide

between hapless and properly passive white women sold into sexual slavery and non-white women for whom such a loss of status was of little consequence, a divide resting squarely on a racially marked binary of passive/active. The vision of sexual slavery was a vision of coercion, of women given no choices but lured, or drugged or forced into selling sex. But in India, that fundamentally European division would not and did not work, for such total passivity was the province not of 'civilized' white women but of ignorant Indian women, blindly immolating themselves and accepting other 'barbarous' encroachments on their liberty.⁸ 'Females are disposed of, one way or another, long before [the age of sixteen]' (NAI, 1873). The white slave trade as reported in the European and American press spoke of innocent women whisked off to a sinister Orient (or a degraded Europe) to meet their fate.⁹ Meanwhile, the picture painted in India was of a far different reality. Here European prostitute women were deemed to exercise far greater choice and agency than Indian prostitute women. While Jews and other Europeans were represented as careless, ignorant and illiterate (Wilson, 1916; Edwardes, 1924: 94), and even coerced by insurmountable debt (OIOC, 1913a), there was widespread agreement among government officials, rescue workers and the whole panoply of European observers that these women arrived in India by their own volition and with a precise knowledge of how they intended to earn their living. Police Commissioner Edwardes was emphatic on that point: *'she is not inveigled here under false pretences or brought out by force'* (OIOC, 1913a, emphasis in original). Sir Henry Harrison, administering the Calcutta police almost thirty years earlier, shared Edwardes' opinion. Following an investigation of allegations of abduction in the case of a French brothel worker, he concluded that she had 'commenced to lead an immoral life in her own country . . . and it is only reasonable to suppose that when she went on board she knew what the course she was taking would lead to' (NAI, 1888).

Conversely officials insisted upon the passive ignorance of Indian women born into prostitution, raised in expectation of it and thus unable to escape its fetters. The divisional commissioner of Kumuo in the North West Provinces expressed a widespread opinion when he informed his local administrator that 'the class of women who in India resort to prostitution . . . is mainly composed of persons of the caste of "Paturya" or prostitute. This professional caste is not regarded by the natives of the East as dishonourable' (OIOC, 1894). Indian women, in this vision, were bound hand and foot by caste expectations, a notion which implied a split between an apparently good passivity and a bad one. Proper passivity was that of women too innocent to escape or to realize the depths of their 'white slave' plight until it was too late, or the agreeable quiescence of the

Japanese. Indian women's prostitution, conversely, was bad passivity, symptomatic of a degraded society where husbands ruled tyrannically and without due respect for feminine sensibilities. Either way, this indirect means of placing prostitution differentially in the Indian and the European contexts was a means of measuring the two cultures against one another in order to find the colonized wanting in civil procedures as in moral considerations. And at the same time, this comparison was further developed by the alleged existence of a class of women, largely Jewish, sufficiently Europeanized to decide their own fate but doomed, by their racial as well as spatial proximity to the oriental, to ignominy.

This, then, was the racial geography and orientalist epistemology which mapped the complex boundaries of sexual commerce in British India, the naming and bounding of non-British women marginalized not merely by their livelihood but by their relative and carefully gradated distance from the centrally definitional and definitionally respectable English woman,¹⁰ 'the yardstick', as Chandra Mohanty would have it, 'by which to encode and represent cultural Others' (Mohanty, 1991: 55).

For the maintenance of proper colonial rule and the stemming of both literal and metaphorical contagion, that hierarchy was crucial. However much a tainted European sex trade in India was deplored, such women were always represented as of a higher class than their indigenous counterparts, as much by those who challenged the pro-regulationist policies of the Government as by government and military officials themselves. (See, for example, B. Leppington's letter in OIOC, 1907.)

'The great bulk of natives are unable to differentiate between English women and Continental. For them any white female is a *Mem Saheb*' (Verax, 1895: 16). Even a white prostitute. And here was the nub of the problem: the indigenous population lacked the powers of precision, differentiation and taxonomizing which marked out and distinguished the more analytical and critical colonizing mind. If local men could buy the services of European women, then surely they could think in sexual terms of any white woman. It is this, as much as concerns over military efficiency, that prompted the division of brothels into first-class and second-class establishments. Though there was widespread acknowledgement that Indian women servicing the white clientele of the former ran the risk of community ostracism, that possibility was a far less urgent concern than the risk of contamination of white privilege (see, for example, OIOC, 1866). The insistence on reading European brothels as superior, as rightly charging higher rates, was intended to deter local men from frequenting them. Superintendent Shuttleworth explained why European and Japanese prostitutes working in Rangoon were obliged to shield themselves from

the gaze of onlookers behind swing doors while their Indian and Burmese counterparts could display themselves more openly. It was, he urged, done:

more from a political than a moral point of view . . . the white races are at the present time the dominant and governing races of the world and anything that would lower them in the sight of the subject races should, I think be carefully guarded against, and I do not think that there can be any doubt that the sight of European women prostituting themselves is most damaging to the prestige of the white races.

(OIOC, 1917)

Shuttleworth's comments complicate the picture and serve as a useful reminder of why commentators were so keen to paint European prostitution as a largely Jewish phenomenon, a ruse which allowed for an additional element of foreignness to put distance between the ruling English and their subjects. S.M. Edwardes told the government of India in 1913 of the informal arrangement which distinguished the policing of these groups, a policy which helps put into perspective my earlier observation that far more careful data were kept on the tiny number of foreign women suspected of prostitution than were kept on local women in the sex trade.

As regards the English prostitute, it has for years been an unwritten law to draw a distinction between her and her European sister. The latter is accepted as an ugly but necessary fact, the former, if found, is 'induced' to leave India. This unwritten law is known far and wide . . . but actually it is based on no law or regulation.

(OIOC, 1913a)

Again, the informal distinction proved more useful than any legal mode. Edwardes' distinction between the English and the European woman was one observed also in the metropole. The Chief Constable of the Criminal Investigation Division at the Metropolitan Police also separated British from European women. Reporting at a conference on the white slave trade, he boasted: 'It is most satisfactory from a national point of view, to be able to say that scarcely any cases have come to light in which English girls have been concerned' (PRO, 1906).

This process of detailed classification contrasts, as I have noted, with the problems colonial authorities encountered in determining a satisfactory legal definition. Prostitution was a 'problem' which would not go away, and as long as judicial policy makers shied from precisely defining the standard legal term 'common prostitute' in British and colonial law (a problem which still wracks contemporary Britain) it would continue to prove contentious. Police officers and civil servants complained that magistrates balked at convicting on the basis of presumption. In Bengal, 'the Magistrates show great unwillingness to convict and throw out all cases which

are not proved by an impossible amount of evidence' (OIOC, 1871). And, indeed, evidence was the hinge upon which these legal troubles turned, for in cases of prostitution, evidence was seldom of a direct nature. The distinction between the moral certainty of the police and the demands of magistrates for empirical proof brought out the difficulties faced in applying to Indian society a legal system developed in the British context. A Madras Health Officer who saw these difficulties early in the history of colonial prostitution regulation recognized the inutility of western definition in the Indian context:

Even residence in a brothel is not considered a test of prostitution . . . a brothel is not a brothel as in Europe, where girls live as one family, but in this country prostitution is considered of so little importance that chaste women and prostitutes reside in separate rooms adjoining each other in the same houses and are even on intimate terms.

(OIOC, 1872)

Of course, in this version it was a decadent India which was stubbornly unassimilable to British definition, just as it was the unyielding Englishness of magistrates in their application of the law which made efficient policing allegedly so impossible a task. The scenario is a familiar one, of a police hampered on the one hand by a sly and slippery population, and on the other by a magistracy out of touch with real life and insisting on textbook proofs in their courtrooms, proofs which many regarded as unrealizable. This tension between the willingness to define the body so minutely and the unwillingness to force a more careful courtroom definition strikes me as a slippage worth our attention. The very difficulties perceived to arise in the legal context served as an encouragement to ever tighter definitions of a less formalized kind; and given the representation of the legal difficulties as a racial issue (the non-responsiveness of a fiction named India to British legal forms) we should not be surprised to find the informal taxonomy so focused on racial distinction. We have seen how women's racial identification secured their place in the hierarchy of the brothels.

The absence of a satisfactory legal definition had proved a constant source of frustration, especially in the era of regulated prostitution which comprised the better part of the late nineteenth century. Government, military and medical officials complained endlessly about the existence of unregistered women unamenable to the certification and examination which lay at the heart of the system.

In every Indian cantonment after dusk the vicinity of the European lines is haunted by women of the lowest and poorest class who, though not prostitutes by profession, are willing to prostitute themselves for an even smaller sum than is claimed by the regular courtesan.

(OIOC, 1893)

'Clandestines', as they were known, were women outside the registration system, who eluded the complex of rules by which the licensed prostitutes were bound. Officials constantly sought to mark them, one medical officer asserting that:

There are of prostitute women two distinct classes – the *bona fide* order, who live in a recognized quarter, and sit at their doors with painted faces, lanterns, and looking-glasses inviting all comers; and the secret set . . . who do not publicly confess prostitution, but are available when called upon.

(OIOC, 1873: 13)

This is a fascinating report, and I should stress that it is an absolutely representative example of the sentiments expressed by medical authorities, police officials and others involved in the system. In this vision of prostitution, and in marked contrast to prevailing domestic British sentiment, the author constructs what is, in effect, a class of authenticated prostitutes, discernible not only via their bending to the yoke of registration but by appearance and domicile. *Real* prostitutes are identifiable; they dress and behave in certain ways. They yield both to a clientele and to registration. Secrecy, avoidance of authentication, rejection of the rules connoted trouble; a trouble located in women engaging in an occupation to which they had, effectively, no right and thus rendering ineffectual a regulatory system crucially dependent for its running on prostitutes' acceptance of the definitions which bound them.

In all of these classificatory exercises, there is an assessment of which of these outcast groups was the worst or the least offensive. Though prostitution disturbed the moral universe of the Victorian and Edwardian establishment, it was still considered necessary; though prostitution by white women in a colonial setting was destabilizing, such women were nonetheless and fixedly regarded as superior to their Indian counterparts. Catherine Hall has argued that otherness was an 'ever-shifting map', where at any given moment there were 'others' who were less and 'others' who were more dangerous (Hall, 1993: 216). I take Hall to be cautioning us wisely against any overly unitary reading of race, ethnicity, gender or other marks of difference. In the case of prostitution, what we glean both from the failure of the legal system to offer a workable definition, and the concomitant of informal but nonetheless powerful definitions, is a reading in which racial privilege and the critical place of gender stratification stand out as critical markers of colonial authority. The definitional shifts which allegedly distinguished British, European and 'native' values, practices and understandings are powerful indices of the ways in which the taxonomy of language served the needs of colonization and its deep commitment to a racialized vision of the world. 'Knowledge' about India was, in effect, a self-serving proposition, a colonial tool which gave political India's

masters their *raison d'être*, a means of discerning difference between white women and local women working in the sex trade. Tom Metcalf makes the point that the liberal enterprise so strongly associated with this game of delineation and detail had 'the effect of disseminating more widely than ever before notions of Indian difference' and thus keeping persistent 'images of Indian exoticism' (Metcalf, 1994: 41). In turn, of course, since statistics and sociology were so closely tied to the making of imperial policy, this persistent enumeration of colonial sexualities had substantial effects on the way women (whether involved in prostitution or not) could live their lives.

Mary Poovey has argued that definition necessarily precedes enumeration, asserting that 'one cannot count prostitutes until one defines (describes) prostitution' (Poovey, 1993: 18). In the colonial context outlined here, the problem was side-stepped. Prostitution was *never* satisfactorily or fully defined, as Poovey concedes, but it was vital that the colonial state nonetheless enumerate it. And in so doing, it could claim to know what prostitution looked like, quite literally, even while definition remained an elusive category. Ultimately the meaning of prostitution as a gendered activity cannot be separated from its meaning as a racialized activity, a weapon wielded in the colonial context as if it were proof of the need for the civilizing mission. It was an orientalist sociology, creating and consolidating colonial and colonized sexualities easily distinguishable from a British 'norm', that provided the bedrock for this exercise in epistemology as political control.

Notes

Philippa Levine teaches history at the University of Southern California, USA. She is author of two books on Victorian British feminism and is completing a study of venereal disease and prostitution in the British Empire.

- 1 There is one consistent legal definition: that the prostitute is a woman. See Philippa Levine (1993) 'Public and private paradox: prostitution and the state' *Arena Journal* n.s. 1.
- 2 A partial list might include Kenneth Ballhatchet (1980) *Race, Sex and Class Under the British Raj. Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson; Sumanta Banerjee (1993) 'The "Beshya" and the "Babu". Prostitute and her clientele in nineteenth-century Bengal' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28; Ratnabali Chatterjee (1992) 'The Indian prostitute as a colonial subject, Bengal 1864–1883' *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 13; Biswanath Joardar (1984) *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspectives*, New Delhi: Inter-India Publications and (1985) *Prostitution in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Calcutta*, New

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- 3 Joseph Alter, Rosalind O'Hanlon and Mrinalini Sinha all remind us, too, that this making of sexualities was aimed at men as well as women. See Alter (1994) 'Celibacy, sexuality and the transformation of gender into nationalism in North India' *Journal of Asian Studies* 53; O'Hanlon (1997) 'Issues of masculinity in North Indian history: the Bangash Nawabs of Farrukhabad' *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 4; and Sinha (1995) *Colonial Masculinity*.
 - 4 Some, at least, of this conflation arose because annexed Burma was administered as a colony through the government of India.
 - 5 Information on officer practices in British India is hard to come by. What little information there is suggests that officers (at least, those without wives in residence) did not frequent the brothels but rather sent for women to come to their accommodation privately. No formal distinction was ever instituted between officer and rank-and-file brothels.
 - 6 On *devadasi*, see Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj (1987) *Women and Society in India*, Delhi: Ajanta Publishers, especially p. 268; Promilla Kapur (1978) *The Life and World of Call-Girls in India. A Socio-Psychological Study of the Aristocratic Prostitute*, New Delhi: Vikas; A.S. Mathur and B.L. Gupta (1965) *Prostitutes and Prostitution*, Agra: Ram Prasad & Sons; Maria Mies (1980) *Indian Women and Patriarchy. Conflicts and Dilemmas of Students and Working Women*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing; B.R. Patil (1975) 'The devadasis' *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 35; S.D. Punekar and Kamala Rao (1962) *A Study of Prostitution in Bombay*, Bombay: Allied Publishers; Amrit Srinivasan (1985) 'Reform and revival: the devadasi and her dance' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 and (1988) 'Reform or conformity? Temple "prostitution" and the community in the Madras presidency' in Bina Agarwal (1988) editor *Structures of Patriarchy. State, Community and Household in Modernising Asia*, New Delhi: Kali for Women/London: Zed Books.
 - 7 OIOC (1888). There were critics among the British who objected to 'lumping together' the courtesan and 'the commonest strumpet', but most thought the division little more than a smokescreen (National Archives of India (NAI), New

Delhi. Home Department, Public. Consultation A. Proceedings 1870. W.C. Plowden, Officiating Magistrate, Meerut to M.H. Court, Commissioner, Meerut Division, 18 July 1870).

- 8 See Sharpe's discussion of Lata Mani's important work on *suttee* and female subjectivity in *Allegories of Empire* (1993: 50–1).
- 9 In the 1880s, social purity activists were most concerned with tracking the movement of British women to the tolerated brothels of France and Belgium. Publisher and publicist Alfred Dyer, who would later turn his attention to prostitution in India, published an exposé in 1880 entitled *The European Slave Trade in English Girls. A Narrative of Facts*, London: Dyer Brothers.
- 10 I am drawing here particularly on the work of Ruth Frankenberg (1993) *White Women, Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, especially pp. 191–4; Trinh T. Minh-ha (1986–7) 'Difference: a special third world women issue' *Discourse*, 8; Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989) 'Recasting women: an introduction' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989) editors, *Recasting Women. Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

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