

Historical Roots of Gendered Exploitation: Prostitution in Kashmiri Society

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ABSTRACT

Prostitution in Kashmir has deep historical roots shaped by the interaction of political authority, economic conditions, and social hierarchy across different periods. From early references in classical texts to its continuation under Islamic, Sikh, and Dogra rule, the practice persisted despite moral and legal prohibitions. Evidence from chronicles, travel accounts, and administrative records indicates that prostitution was not merely a social phenomenon but was closely regulated and, at times, actively sustained by the state. Under later regimes, particularly during Sikh and Dogra rule, it became institutionalised through taxation, licensing, and organised networks of trafficking, drawing women largely from marginalised communities. Economic distress, caste-based exclusion, and gender inequality reinforced their vulnerability. While certain cultural narratives portrayed courtesans in a refined light, the lived realities were marked by coercion, exploitation, and social stigma. Attempts at resistance remained limited and sporadic. The historical trajectory demonstrates that prostitution in Kashmir functioned within a structured system of gendered exploitation embedded in broader socio-economic and political frameworks.

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INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, prostitution has been a well-established institution in Kashmir. Ancient Kashmiri monarchs had harem full of concubines, and polygamy had become popular among the wealthy. Rajatarangni offers several proofs of this institution overtly and covertly. Ashoka's son Jaluka is said to have sexually exploited the Naga women. Even Didda the powerful queen of Kashmir was involved in relation with her cowherd layman, Tunga, till her death.¹ According to Damodargupta's Kuttanimata, prostitution was so widespread in early medieval Kashmir that some prostitutes committed sati and burned themselves when their lords passed away. In addition to being used for sensual pleasure, prostitutes and mistresses also served as spies by monitoring adversaries and advising their monarch masters. Not only did courtesans engage in immoral behavior, but Nilamatapurana attests to the fact that prostitution was widely accepted in cultures. We have references from the Devadasi institution²

The advent of Islamic rule introduced legal prohibitions against sex work, equating adultery with murder, but the practice persisted despite these strictures. Prostitution continued in urban centres like Srinagar, where brothels functioned openly, indicating a failure of enforcement and the persistence of market demand. Sultan Sikandar's temporary ban on prostitution was undone within a generation by Hasan Khan, who openly associated with nautch girls such as Ratan Mala, Dip Mala and Nirup Mala and these girls were honoured by the king before his companions and drink wine from their hands.³ Under Mughal rule, state tolerance became more pronounced. François Bernier's accounts note that Mughal nobles often took Kashmiri women as wives or concubines, motivated not only by their perceived beauty but by the belief that fair-skinned offspring could pass for Mongols.⁴ This preference reveals an imperial obsession with racial hierarchy, where Kashmiri women's bodies were manipulated to reinforce dynastic purity.

After the Afghans' distant rulers came to power in 1752–1819, the valley entered a period of protracted, gloomy despair and bad luck. Their promiscuous behaviour turned women into unique and vulnerable prey. If an Afghan governor wanted a young or attractive female to satisfy his lustful cravings, she may easily fall into the hands of him or his chaotic subordinates.⁵ The Afghan rulers dealt a devastating blow by not only humiliating, intimidating, and abusing women, but also initiating

a legitimate trafficking procedure by bringing them to Afghanistan as gifts for their friends⁶

State-Sanctioned Exploitation

In Kashmir, the immoral prostitute trade reached concerning proportions during the Sikh era. Those who made it easier for Kashmiri girls to be trafficked to clients in Punjab or British India, particularly in places like Lahore, Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, and Peshawar, received substantial compensation. Girls were mostly sourced from the "Watal" community, and Punjab, Lahore, and Ludhiana became the main locations for the trading of women.⁷

In his observed correspondence, Victor Jacquemont writes that in Kashmir at the age of eight, attractive young girls were sold and transported to India and Punjab. They were sold by their parents for between twenty and three hundred rupees. most frequently fifty or sixty.⁸ During the Sikh era, Guru-bazar and Shaheed Gunj became the two principal prostitution colonies. Cruel tyrants began routinely kidnapping, pulling, and seizing young maidens from their weeping parents in broad sight. In Kashmir, a group of women known as Ganis or Malzadis were adept prostitutes.⁹ One of the unscrupulous Sikh governors of Kashmir from 1827 to 1831, Kripa Ram, was so well-known for his love of dancing girls, music, and liquor that he was nicknamed "Shroni," a Kashmiri word that refers to the jingling sound made by women's anklets and bangles. He chose to spend the majority of his time with prostitutes, dancing girls, and women who had been kidnapped from various sections of the valley due to his intense desire for sensual pleasure.¹⁰

The Amritsar Treaty of 1846 gave Maharaja Gulab Singh and his male heirs independent ability to govern the state's internal affairs and uphold the medieval dynastic, feudal, and religious systems of governance. Maharaja Gulab Singh asserted his entire sovereignty after taking control of the state. Furthermore, he regarded the state, particularly the Kashmir Valley, as his acquired property. Both of these assertions were continued by his successors. Dogra monarchs engaged in egregious misgovernment as a result. It is important to note that Muslim women were treated like beasts of burden. In Kashmir, these Dogras made prostitution and the flesh trade lawful, particularly for Muslim women. It is odd to admit that one significant source of income for the Maharaja came from a trade that most governments try to hide because of the stigma associated with it. In the past, Srinagar had two

notorious prostitution facilities: one in Maisuma and the other in Tashwan.

According to a British source, the maharaja used to get between 15 and 25 percent of the state's revenue by taxing prostitutes, who were then granted licenses by the state. One account states that there were 18715 registered prostitutes in Kashmir in 1880. The untouchable groups, such as the bhangis (scavengers) and hanjis, made up a sizable portion of the registered prostitutes, who were from lower social levels.¹¹

According to what the records call "gratification," the prostitutes were separated into three classes or tax slabs. This takes into account the prostitutes' age, wealth, appearance, and caste. They were referred to as first, second, and third class prostitutes. First-class prostitutes were required to pay 40 rupees in taxes, second-class prostitutes 20 rupees, and third-class prostitutes 10 rupees annually. Prior to the famine of 1877–1878, total taxation amount of seventy to eighty thousand rupees from all professions, prostitute contribute a sum of rupees fourteen thousand.¹² Since everything was subject to high taxes, the people were reduced to abject poverty. It is unthinkable to impose taxes on things like the birth of a lamb or even the circumcision of a baby boy. Grave diggers, cow herds, porters, menial workers, shoe makers, boatmen, leech vendors, basket makers, butchers, bakers, carpenters, and boatmen were all subject to taxes during the Dogra regime. However, the most significant sector that turned into a government minting machine was prostitution and prostitutes.¹³ Prostitutes were readily accessible in locations such as houseboats and shikaras, the most well-known, notorious homes known for welcoming patrons.¹⁴

In addition to being a return to an oppressive custom, the resurgence of sati in Kashmir under Sikh and Dogra authority was a reflection of the larger system of control and commercialization of women. Despite being outlawed in British India in 1829, the practice—which had been outlawed during the Muslim government of Kashmir—resurfaced under the Sikhs and persisted under the Dogra. Two Kashmiri Pandit women were burned during Diwan Krippa Ram's (1826–1830) reign, demonstrating how sati was not only accepted but also promoted. Gopal Tikku, a young Kashmiri Hindu from Habba Kadal, Srinagar, died of cholera, according to Mulla Mohammad Khalil Mirjanpuri.¹⁵ On his funeral pyre, his widow, a stunningly attractive 22-year-old, was roasted alive. Two other cases of sati occurred during the same time frame after her death. These instances

took place in a setting where patriarchal and religious systems controlled women's lives and they had no agency.¹⁶ The Persian elegy *Soz-i-Godaz*'s poignant eyewitness depiction of sati Women's bodies were used as a location of ritual sacrifice (sati) and a source of income (kanjur tax on prostitution) during Sikh and Dogra rule.

The Public Prostitutes Regulations of 1921

The Public Prostitutes Rules-1921, which allowed a prostitute who wanted to engage in prostitution to do so by registering herself as a "public prostitute," were approved by the Dogra monarchs in order to legalize the industry. The following are the main provisions of the rules:

1. If the Minister-in-Charge of Municipalities declares the Rules to be effective, they are applicable across Jammu and Kashmir.
2. Any woman who made her living by providing herself for sexual service to lewdness for hire was considered a "public prostitute."¹⁷
3. Any prostitute who had begun this "business" previously had to get a certificate of registration and have her name added to the establishment's registry.
4. Each prostitute had to apply in person to the official in charge of the register in order to be register.¹⁸
5. A Minister-in-Charge of Municipalities was granted the power to forbid the establishment of a brothel or the housing of a public prostitute in any specific location. It was covered by the regulations.
6. If prostitutes are found to have violated any of these regulations or the orders issued under them, they will be subject to a fine of no more than Rs. 100 or a maximum one-month jail sentence if proven guilty before a judicial magistrate.¹⁹

Following the upheaval of 1931, there was a political awakening that led to the rise of Kashmiri Muslims in all spheres of society. A number of the state's political figures rose to prominence as a result of this awakening. However, nobody spoke out against the houses of ill-fame and immoral women's trafficking, not even religious reformists and political freedom fighters. But Muhammad Subhan Hajam, a brave barber from Maisuma (Srinagar), rebelled against the numerous notorious homes in Maisuma, Gawakadal, and Tashwan. He would preach on the streets and, at night, he would stand outside brothels with a few of his pals to keep patrons out. Subhan advocated for prostitutes to lead regular lives through his street performances. Subhan stands

in front of the brothels with his dholak, singing songs and reciting poems he has written, Due to his influence, 700 people, including many Sikhs and Kashmiri pandits, backed him and sent a message to the then-District Magistrate of Srinagar requesting a ban on prostitution. Subhan's strong public pressure led the State Assembly to approve the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act in 1934. The act-imposed penalties on anybody who operated or permitted the use of a brothel, obtained women or girls for prostitution, lived off the revenues of prostitutes, or trafficked in women and children. People who supported or aided in the sedition or prostitution of young girls in public settings were likewise punished. pleading with everyone to avoid going there in an attempt to shut them down²⁰

CONCLUSION

The history of prostitution in Kashmir reveals a system engineered through layers of political authority, social hierarchy, and economic

manipulation. Across ancient, Islamic, Sikh, and Dogra periods, the exploitation of women was not accidental or peripheral-it was structured, recorded, and legitimised. States profited from their control over women's bodies through taxation, licensing, and surveillance, treating female labour as a dependable source of revenue. Caste-based discrimination and gendered subjugation ensured that only the most vulnerable were drawn into this system, with little chance of escape. Religious silence and cultural narratives that romanticised courtesan ship obscured the coercion and deprivation that defined their lives. Prostituted women endured not just physical exploitation but institutional branding, social ostracism, and intergenerational marginalisation. They were simultaneously visible, as commodities and invisible as victims. Resistance efforts, such as those led by Mohammad Subhan Hajam, remained rare and heavily suppressed. Many local Kashmiri see him as a social reformer.

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