

Caste, Custom, and Coercion: Intergenerational Sex Work and Social Entrapment in Rajasthan's Marginalized Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of prostitution in the Indian state of Rajasthan through a socio-legal and ethnographic lens. While prostitution in India operates in a legally ambiguous space, Rajasthan presents a unique case due to the historical persistence of caste-based sex work, particularly among communities like the Bedia, Nat, and Kanjar. This paper traces the historical context, explores the socio-economic factors sustaining the practice, examines the role of law enforcement and the judiciary, and highlights the interventions by NGOs and community-led organizations. Drawing on both existing literature and publicly available data, this paper argues that criminalization, state neglect, and socio-cultural stigma have failed to address the vulnerabilities of sex workers, and that community-led harm reduction models and rights-based policies offer a more sustainable approach to reform.

KEYWORDS: Prostitution, Rajasthan, Caste, Socio-Economic factor.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rajasthan, the largest state in India by area, is widely known for its heritage, palaces, and vibrant culture. Beneath this layer of tourism-driven glamour, however, lies a less publicized reality—the continued existence of systemic and caste-based prostitution. For decades, entire communities have been socially and economically conditioned into intergenerational sex work. This paper investigates how prostitution operates in Rajasthan, focusing on structural drivers, legal challenges, and emerging community responses. Unlike cities like Mumbai or Kolkata, where sex work is primarily urban and economically driven, in Rajasthan, it is often rooted in caste hierarchies, patriarchal customs, and ritual practices. In this context, prostitution is not merely an act of individual survival or choice—it becomes a familial occupation passed from mother to daughter. Understanding this distinction is key to formulating effective legal and social interventions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of prostitution in India has long occupied a contested space within legal, feminist, and sociological scholarship. When placed in the context of Rajasthan, it reveals a unique convergence of caste, gender, poverty, and spatial marginalization. The state's predominantly rural and semi-urban sex economies are not merely personal or criminal matters—they are manifestations of deep-seated structural inequalities. This literature review synthesizes academic, policy, and ethnographic contributions that have shaped current understandings of sex work in Rajasthan and

identifies critical gaps that justify this study. Foundational texts on prostitution in India have emphasized the complex interplay between colonial morality, postcolonial legalism, and patriarchal governance. Banerjee traces the evolution of sex work from a regulated colonial industry to a stigmatized post-independence activity.ⁱ Her work underscores how legal and moral discourses moved away from recognizing sex workers' labor rights toward seeing them as vectors of disease or victims of moral decay. Similarly, Kotiswaran's *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor* provides a crucial lens through which to view sex work as labor, challenging dominant discourses of trafficking and victimhood. She argues that the Indian state's focus on criminalization and rescue undermines sex workers' autonomy, especially when interventions fail to account for structural coercion such as poverty and caste. While these national-level studies provide the theoretical backbone for sex work analysis in India, they often overlook regional specificities—particularly the caste-based and community-oriented nature of prostitution in states like Rajasthan.

In Rajasthan, sex work is frequently tied to intergenerational practices within denotified tribes (DNTs) and marginalized castes such as the Bedia, Nat, and Kanjar. These communities have long been victims of legal exclusion, particularly under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which labeled entire groups as hereditary criminals. Even after the Act was repealed, the social stigma and economic precarity associated with these communities continued to perpetuate their exclusion from mainstream opportunitiesⁱⁱ. Recent ethnographic studies—such as those by Singh have offered critical insights into how practices like nath-utarna (a symbolic ritual marking a girl's initiation into sex work) persist under cultural and economic rationality. In communities where access to education, property, or government employment is limited, prostitution becomes a normalized economic strategy.ⁱⁱⁱ However, while such ethnographies capture cultural practices and narratives well, they often lack empirical scale or policy analysis—leaving a gap for studies that bridge both.

The Indian legal framework regarding sex work is marked by contradiction. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA) criminalizes many aspects of sex work—solicitation, brothel keeping, and living off earnings—without outlawing sex work itself. Scholars such as Jha and Mehta have critiqued this legal grey zone, arguing that it offers law enforcement excessive discretion, often resulting in arbitrary raids and abuses against women engaged in sex work voluntarily.^{iv} This contradiction is acutely felt in Rajasthan, where the state's punitive machinery disproportionately targets women from marginalized castes, while ignoring the socio-economic forces driving them into sex work. Reports by Prayas and Human Rights Watch (2016) suggest that police and local authorities often use trafficking and public order laws as pretexts to harass, extort, or detain women under the guise of “rescue.” Despite widespread policy attention to trafficking, particularly through the draft Trafficking in Persons Bill (2018), sex workers' labor rights remain unaddressed in legal reform initiatives. In Rajasthan's rural context, where sex work is primarily home-based and family-mediated, legal tools fail to capture the nuance of community participation or coercion.

Another significant but underexplored factor in the literature is the role of dowry and marital economics in shaping sex work participation. In DNT communities in Rajasthan, the cost of marriage—particularly dowry—is prohibitively high. Scholars like Bhandari (2016) have observed how many families, especially those with several daughters, forgo marriage altogether.^v Instead, girls are inducted into sex work, which is seen as a cost-saving and income-generating alternative. This economic logic must be understood not only as coercive but also as strategic within the constraints of extreme poverty and systemic exclusion. Few studies, however, focus on the interplay

between dowry avoidance and intergenerational sex work in Rajasthan—leaving a rich avenue for further field research and policy exploration.

The role of civil society in addressing the harms of prostitution has been explored more in public health literature than in rights-based feminist scholarship. NGOs like Apne Aap Women Worldwide, Mukti Foundation, and Gram Niyojan Kendra have piloted harm-reduction and empowerment models in Rajasthan, including collectivization, vocational training, and legal aid. These groups enable women to collectively negotiate with local authorities, pool savings, and access healthcare—though their reach remains limited by inconsistent funding and political resistance. The literature also points to a tension between rescue-based NGO models—which may reinforce stigma—and community-ownership approaches, which emphasize empowerment over moral reform. This debate is particularly relevant in Rajasthan, where interventions must account for both cultural sensitivity and structural empowerment^{vi}.

Despite growing academic interest, there remains a significant research gap on prostitution in Rajasthan. Most existing literature focuses on urban sex work environments (e.g., Kamathipura in Mumbai or Sonagachi in Kolkata), while rural and caste-based models—like those prevalent in Rajasthan—receive far less scholarly attention. Furthermore, there is a lack of interdisciplinary studies combining legal critique, economic analysis, and ethnographic depth. Few works trace the life trajectories of women from sex work communities, their interactions with state institutions, or their experiences of stigma in education, healthcare, or housing systems. Policy recommendations often fail to integrate grassroots voices, resulting in interventions that are top-down and occasionally counterproductive. This paper seeks to fill this gap by offering a region-specific, caste-informed, and gender-sensitive exploration of prostitution in Rajasthan—grounded in structural analysis and informed by lived realities.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY PRACTICES

In the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan, prostitution is not merely a personal or economic decision—it is intricately embedded in the caste-based structure of specific communities, notably among the Bedia, Nat, and Kanjar populations. These groups are classified among India's Denotified Tribes (DNTs)—communities that were once criminalized under colonial laws and continue to face systemic discrimination. Their historical marginalization has deeply influenced the normalization and perpetuation of intergenerational sex work as both a survival mechanism and a culturally embedded practice.

The origin of this systemic oppression can be traced back to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, enacted during British colonial rule. The Act labeled certain nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes as “born criminals,” subjecting them to surveillance, restricted movement, and forced settlement^{vii}. Though the Act was repealed post-independence, the social stigma and institutional neglect that it fostered have endured. For tribes like the Bedia and Nat, this historical burden has translated into limited access to land, education, healthcare, and employment, forcing communities to rely on prostitution as an inherited occupation.

For instance, a typical Bedia settlement in Bharatpur or Dholpur district: young girls, often as early as age 12 or 13, are ceremonially initiated into sex work through rituals that mimic marriage. These rituals are not peripheral but are deeply woven into community identity, lending an air of legitimacy

and inevitability to the practice. Girls are adorned in bridal clothing, symbolizing their formal “entry” into the profession. Once initiated, their primary role becomes the economic sustenance of the family.

In stark contrast, the men in these families rarely participate in income-generating work. Instead, they assume roles as managers, brokers, or drivers, facilitating their female relatives' sex work. This division reflects a highly gendered power dynamic, wherein women's labor—emotional, physical, and sexual—is commodified and managed under male oversight. The male guardianship over women's sexuality in these communities is not a protective function but a managerial one, often reinforcing exploitative hierarchies.

One of the most tragic consequences of this system is its intergenerational continuity. Girls born into these communities have few alternatives. Most are pulled out of formal schooling by early adolescence, with some never enrolled at all. Education is often seen as an unnecessary expense since their “economic role” is predetermined. Furthermore, the absence of legal land rights and discrimination in formal labor markets exclude them from even the most basic economic mobility. Unlike in urban sex work settings where individuals may enter the trade due to isolated economic pressures, in Rajasthan's DNT communities, sex work operates as a caste-determined profession—akin to a hereditary occupation like that of barbers or blacksmiths, only far more stigmatized.

Intervention by the state is often ineffective and sometimes counterproductive. Law enforcement agencies may conduct raids under anti-trafficking laws, but these frequently lead to arbitrary detentions and disruption of community structures without offering sustainable alternatives. For example, in some cases, police have “rescued” girls against their will, only to institutionalize them in poorly maintained shelters lacking vocational training or counseling support. In doing so, these actions ignore the economic logic and social embeddedness of the practice, often leading to further trauma and eventual re-entry into sex work.^{viii}

To truly address the persistence of caste-based prostitution in Rajasthan, it is crucial to move beyond punitive and rescue-oriented models. Instead, community-led initiatives, social safety nets, education programs tailored for girls from DNTs, and legal empowerment through land and labor rights offer more promising solutions. Interventions must acknowledge the historical injustices and social complexities that underlie this form of caste-gendered labor, rather than reducing it to criminality or victimhood.

4. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION AND HOTSPOTS

While prostitution in India is often associated with metropolitan red-light districts, in Rajasthan, the practice is deeply embedded in semi-urban and rural spaces, especially within historically marginalized caste communities. Districts such as Bharatpur, Alwar, Dholpur, and Karauli have long been identified as hubs for caste-based prostitution. However, similar dynamics are increasingly visible in districts like Jaipur (rural belts), Sawai Madhopur, Ajmer, and across the Mewar region, which includes Udaipur, Chittorgarh, and Rajsamand. What distinguishes these settings is the invisibility and normalization of sex work. There are no congested red-light areas; instead, the trade is home-based, coordinated within caste networks like the Bedia, Nat, and Kanjar, where prostitution often passes from mother to daughter as a cultural obligation and economic necessity.

Jaipur's Rural Fringe: While Jaipur city presents a modern urban façade, its peri-urban fringes such as Kotputli, Bagru, and Phulera host informal sex work economies tied to migration and caste. Here, sex work often coexists with informal labor sectors, such as construction and brick kilns. Women from marginalized communities are frequently trafficked or coerced into sex work by intermediaries posing as labor contractors. One local case involved a 15-year-old girl from the Kanjar community in Bagru, trafficked from neighboring Tonk under the guise of a domestic job. She was found working from a rented room near a highway eatery, catering to truck drivers. NGOs like Prayas have documented over 200 such cases in Jaipur's outskirts between 2017 and 2021, underscoring how urban proximity does not translate to state protection^{ix}.

Sawai Madhopur: Known for Ranthambore National Park, Sawai Madhopur is a tourist hotspot that inadvertently fuels demand for sex work. Local accounts reveal that young girls from Bedia settlements in Gangapur City and nearby villages are often transported to lodges and resorts where they serve short-term tourist clientele. This region is marked by patriarchal brokering systems, where male relatives act as intermediaries. The covert nature of the trade—often facilitated by local transport providers and hotel staff—makes it difficult to detect or regulate. Interviews by the Centre for Equity Studies (2020) highlight how underage girls, some as young as 13, are often caught in this tourism-prostitution loop with no formal recourse to justice or rescue.

Ajmer: Ajmer, a city famed for the Dargah Sharif of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, also has an undercurrent of informal sex work tied to religious tourism and seasonal migration. While the city center shows little overt evidence of prostitution, red-light activity is reported in peripheral areas like Naya Basti and Kayad, where women from the Nat community live in marginalized colonies. NGO workers from Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti report that many women here are forced into transactional sex due to the absence of employment and persistent social stigma. A 2022 field report indicated that up to 70% of girls in some Nat colonies were at risk of entering sex work by age 16, usually under family pressure tied to economic need and social norms.

Mewar Region: In the Mewar belt—particularly Udaipur, Chittorgarh, and Rajsamand—caste-based sex work continues under the veneer of tradition. In places like Railmagra (Rajsamand) and Bhadesar (Chittorgarh), young girls from Bedia households are often initiated into sex work through ceremonies resembling marriage, known locally as "nath-utarna"—literally meaning "removal of the nose ring," marking readiness for sexual labor. A 2020 report by ActionAid India documented that these ceremonies are organized with the full support of extended families and community elders. The girl, often under 15, receives gifts and blessings akin to a bride, reinforcing the cultural sanctity of the practice. Once initiated, she becomes the primary earner, often supporting up to 10 family members.^x

5. REASONS FOR GROWING PROBLEM:

Socioeconomic and Caste-Driven Dimensions: The entrenchment of caste-based prostitution in Rajasthan is well documented. The Bedia, Nat, Kanjar, and even lesser-known Rajnat communities are historically linked to sex work through intergenerational inheritance, rooted in their marginalization under colonial legislation like the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.^{xi} These communities adapted to the loss of court patronage by shifting into commercial sex, often overtly, as detailed in ethnographic accounts of rural settlements near Bharatpur and Ajmer.

Economic Deprivation and Gender Coercion: Economic precarity drives early school dropout and coerced entry into sex work among girls from these communities (India Today, 2013). One insider study conducted among Rajnats in Ajmer revealed that girls beyond eighth grade are discouraged from continuing education, often redirected into bar dancing or brothel-based work from the age of 15.^{xii} The rationale is clear: sex work is seen as a more reliable source of income than schooling—especially under the oppressive weight of poverty and caste stigma.

Home-Based Prostitution and Invisibility: Unlike urban red-light areas, rural Rajasthan operates on home-based prostitution, where brokering often happens via highway networks and local intermediaries. Studies from Bharatpur and surrounding districts underscore this invisibility—families living in discreet compounds, with girls working in hidden capacities. These home-based models make regulatory oversight extremely difficult.

Intergenerational Sexual Economics & Ritual: Initiatory rituals—like the Bedia practice of “nath-utarna,” in which girls are ceremonially inducted into sex work at puberty—highlight the cultural embedding of this practice. A specific case study in Bandarsindri, Ajmer, notes the perpetuation of trauma through this ritualized normalization of prostitution within families.

Gendered Household Dynamics: Within these caste-based systems, men benefit economically, yet perform minimal physical labor. Women are designated as sexual laborers, while male counterparts manage logistics. This stark gender division mirrors broader patriarchal control, sustained by entrenched caste norms and economic incentives.

Child Trafficking and Human Rights Violations: The National Commission for Women (NCW) flagged numerous instances of forced prostitution among minors in districts like Bharatpur and Sawai Madhopur, often enabled through coercion, trafficking, or caste panchayat diktats. Notably, NCW reported families “auctioning off” daughters via stamp papers—an observation shared across official and NGO reports describing these caste-reproductive economies as deeply exploitative.

Education and Early Dropout: One of the most visible manifestations of structural inequality is the abysmal state of education among sex-working communities. Girls from Bedia or Nat families are often withdrawn from school by the age of 12 or 13, either to support domestic work or to prepare for eventual entry into sex work. A 2021 survey conducted by ActionAid India in Bharatpur and Dholpur found that less than 20% of girls from sex-working families had completed primary education, with dropout rates spiking between ages 10 to 14. This educational exclusion is driven by both economic necessity and patriarchal expectations. Families facing acute poverty often view schooling as a luxury, particularly for girls. At the same time, early socialization into the role of an earner—often through rituals such as nath-utarna (nose-ring removal)—renders formal education irrelevant in the eyes of the community. The effect is cyclical. Lack of education restricts access to alternative employment, which in turn normalizes the path into sex work. Without literacy, numeracy, or vocational training, most women remain confined to informal and exploitative labor—if not sex work, then domestic labor under equally precarious conditions.

Marriage, Dowry, and Economic Rationality: Another critical factor is the continued practice of dowry, which acts as a strong deterrent to marriage within these communities. For poor families from denotified tribes, the economic burden of marrying off a daughter—including dowry, wedding expenses, and post-marriage support—can be prohibitive. In this context, initiating girls into sex work becomes an economically rational alternative. As one elder from the Nat community in Sawai

Madhopur bluntly put it in an interview with the Centre for Equity Studies “Marrying a daughter costs lakhs. But a working daughter can support us for decades.”^{xiii} This chilling logic illustrates how economic desperation can reshape social norms, with families framing sex work not as exploitation, but as duty and survival. Over time, this economic calculus becomes internalized within community structures. The role of male family members as managers or facilitators further reinforces gender inequality. Boys are encouraged to take on logistical or protective roles, while girls are primed for emotional and sexual labor—an arrangement that consolidates patriarchal control and disincentivizes deviation from the sex work economy.

Limited Economic Alternatives for Women: Outside the sex trade, employment opportunities for women in these regions remain scarce. Due to low literacy rates, poor transportation infrastructure, and discrimination in hiring practices, women from these castes are often unable to find jobs in government or formal sectors. Even schemes like MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) are inconsistently implemented in these districts, offering little in the way of sustainable employment. Private-sector jobs, such as those in textile factories or hospitality, are either unavailable in rural belts or inaccessible due to mobility restrictions and safety concerns. In such a constrained environment, sex work becomes not only normalized but valorized, seen as the only viable livelihood that allows women to remain within the community while supporting the household.

6. LEGAL AMBIGUITY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

India’s prostitution laws are defined by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA). The Act does not criminalize sex work per se but criminalizes associated activities like brothel keeping, soliciting in public, living off the earnings of sex work, and trafficking for prostitution. This creates a paradoxical legal situation: sex work is technically legal but nearly all related activities are not, making it extremely difficult for sex workers to operate without breaking some law. In Rajasthan, the enforcement of ITPA is highly discretionary and often abusive. Sex workers report frequent harassment by police, arbitrary arrests, extortion, and in some cases, physical violence. Since many of the red-light areas are informal and based in homes, police raids often involve house demolitions, detentions without warrants, and removal of children to protective homes. There are documented instances of trafficking charges being misused to target women who voluntarily engage in sex work. Under the pretext of “rescue,” women are forcibly institutionalized in shelter homes that lack basic facilities, cut them off from income sources, and fail to provide alternative livelihoods.

7. JUDICIAL RESPONSE AND STATE ACCOUNTABILITY:

The judiciary in India has at times acknowledged the human rights of sex workers, including a 2011 Supreme Court directive calling for a national rehabilitation policy. However, implementation in Rajasthan has been slow. Court orders mandating protection, compensation, or alternative employment often remain on paper due to bureaucratic inertia. The state government has yet to adopt a comprehensive prostitution policy. While Rajasthan has a State Women’s Commission and various welfare schemes, none explicitly focus on the rights or needs of sex workers. This institutional silence contributes to the invisibility of sex workers in policy discourse. Occasionally, district magistrates or local police chiefs initiate crackdowns or raids in response to media reports,

but these are often reactionary and lack follow-up. Rescue operations without rehabilitation do little to disrupt the structural roots of prostitution and often end up retraumatizing victims.

8. CONCLUSION:

These regional case studies across Jaipur, Sawai Madhopur, Ajmer, and Mewar reveal that prostitution in Rajasthan is neither incidental nor hidden—it is structurally and spatially embedded within caste, economy, and patriarchy. The home-based nature of the trade, the involvement of male kin as brokers, and the participation of external players like tourism operators all complicate traditional policy responses. Efforts at intervention must consider these localized dynamics, rejecting a one-size-fits-all model. Effective change will require education access, community-led rehabilitation, economic alternatives, and above all, recognition of sex workers as citizens entitled to rights—not as criminals or victims alone.

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