Research Article

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAYAL ON THE DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL PROSTITUTION OF KOLKATA

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**ABSTRACT**

The leading objective of this study is to make an outline and understand how the escort service gradually occupies and how brothels sustain in the local market of prostitution in an urban milieu. The study also tries to explore the relationship between prostitution and its customers who belong to different socio-economic class and having their own preferences of choosing partners. Besides, this article tries to explore how escort service is perceived by common people and the factors which help this phenomenon to survive in a metropolitan city (Kolkata).

**INTRODUCTION**

Prostitution is an occupation in which generally a woman sells sex in a promiscuous and emotionally indifferent manner (Armstrong, 2010). Prostitution in Kolkata mainly operates through two medium i.e., brothel and escort service. Brothel is generally a place where prostitutes are engaged for hire. But the escort service is a bit different from prostitution of a brothel. When a company or an agency provide their customers with companions for a fee, is known as escort service. Though in most cases, these two phenomena are considered similarly.

Probably there are few adults in today’s world, who are not introduced with the word Escort Service. In the developing country like India, the word Escort Service is not so popularized term in the lower economic group. Rather the people, who belong to the lower economic group, generally prefer the local red light areas.

Now-a-days it is observed that escort service gradually gaining its popularity and the situation of local brothels differs than the former in Kolkata (a metropolitan city and the capital of West Bengal). In this context, the present research tries to understand why a number of people shift their preferences from brothel to escort service and how these two phenomena (brothel and escort service) hold their position in a metropolitan city.

**The Objectives**

1. To understand the factors which play an important role for the rise of escort service.
2. How brothel survive in the local market of prostitution in an urban setting.
3. To explore the major differences between brothel and escort service in Kolkata.

**METHODOLOGY**

The area of the study is the different parts of Kolkata is been purposively selected. The data have been collected through semi-structured interviews, in-depth case studies, observation and chatting in social networking sites. Convenience sampling was the sampling method of the study. The data was collected from the individuals who are engaged as a sex worker either in local red light areas or in different escort agencies.

**The Findings**

To begin with the findings from the collected data, it is essential to say that, sex workers of local red light areas and escort agencies work separately and these two groups have their own customers. In this aspect, I am to describe the socially contested reality, response of the sex workers and their customers, and some other significant dimensions of the
studied area. To describe the findings, I would like to present the scenario of one of the illicit things of our society.

**Escort Service and Its Mode of Operation**

Actually an escort is not paid to have sex. They are paid for their time. Now in that time they do their business which could in fact be sex. In Kolkata, this kind of service is served almost all over the year. There are certain strategies or phases through which different escort agencies operate this kind of business.

**Phase-1: Selection of Area**

First of all, the agencies hired or fixed a place where the service will be given. Generally the place is residential flats or any well-known hotels and lodges or some very renowned ‘BAR’ which are located in different areas of the city. The agencies select the areas like Dunn Dum, Girish Park, New Town, Park Street, Garia, Jadavpur, Behala, places close to Kolkata Airport, Tollygunj and so on which are so crowded, busiest and more developed than the other parts of city. Naturally this kind of location increases the chances of getting more customers.

**Phase-2: Women Are Brought**

After that, the agencies bring glamorous women, aged between 18-45 years. These women apart from this work belong to different background like some of them are working women, some of them are home makers, some of them are college students, some of them are models and so on. These women are contacted mainly through social networking sites. Interested candidates are asked to join as soon as possible. Some of them do it as a part time work and the rest take it as profession.

**Phase-3: Dealing With Customers**

After completing above two phases successfully, they enter into the third phase. In this phase, the agencies build up a medium of communication. Most of the agencies create their own website or use social networking sites through which they can communicate with their customers. Mainly the customers establish the communication and they respond accordingly. After getting proper response, the customer reaches to the proper place. Soon after reaching there, the customer chooses his partner and paid accordingly. Actually the charge of the service is fixed based on the age and glamour of the service provider. Then the customer has to meet with a person who will guide the customer to the women who give him the service. Here something is needed to be mentioned. It is found that, the chronology of Phase-1 and Phase-2 sometime shuffle. In few occasion, it is also found that instead of an agency, the whole business is operated by a single individual and instead of a number of women, there is a single women who provide the whole service. In these cases, generally the customers are communicated through the social networking sites.

**Brothel and its Mode of Operation**

According to Collins English dictionary, a brothel is building where men can go to pay to have sex with prostitutes. In Kolkata, brothel is something beyond that definition. Brothel has a different culture, brothel itself a different society in a society. It is very older occupation compare to escort service. Brothel is generally a very congested place. Similar to escort service, brothel also have some strategies or phases through which the sex workers able to endure their existence.

**Phase-1: Hiring a Room**

In the first phase, they (female sex workers) have to select and hired a room in the area where the brothel is located. They have to pay the room rent in every month. Many of them live in the surrounding areas of that place. So it is easy and comfortable to continue the work for them compare to those workers who come from distant places. The hired room is the place where the customer will be served.

**Phase-2: Dealing With Customers**

Many female sex workers stand in front of road and wait for the call of their customers. Otherwise, like escort service, now-a-days a number of sex workers communicate with their customers through social networking sites. The communication is mainly maintained by a broker. Generally, broker is a person who is educated or socially active compare to the female sex workers. Many of them (sex worker) have a broker who establishes communication between customers and sex workers.

Every broker has a fixed building or house and some specific sex workers. The sex workers rely upon the broker for customers and the earned money will be distributed in a specific ratio between the broker and sex worker. One more important thing is, sometimes customers are cheated by them. Because, according to them, those customers have cheap mentality, not well mannered and expect something (physically) more than he paid. These kinds of incidents are rare. Many times the sex workers have to adjust with it due to earning money.

**DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FINDINGS**

From the above mentioned findings, it is quite clear that there are certain difference lies between a brothel and escort service. Besides, there are some other associated phenomena which create differences among these two. The present author through his analytical findings is going to depict the dissimilarity for the better understanding of these two phenomena.

**Major Differences**

Escort Service is a westernized mode or form of prostitution which emerged lately compare to brothel. On the other hand, brothel is a traditional form of prostitution. It is emerged (in India) mainly in the colonial period of India.

Escort agencies served its customers with great comfort, hygiene, different modern facilities and strictly maintain the privacy and there is no specific relationship between customer and the service provider. In brothel, the facilities, hygiene and comfort is missing and failed to maintain the privacy in many cases. Sometimes it is found that, there is a relationship between customer and the sex worker. This is known as ‘Babu Culture’. In this case, generally the sex worker and the customer are fixed for each other, i.e., whenever that particular customer comes, that sex worker will provide the service. Sometime the customer takes some social responsibilities of the particular sex worker.

The number of customers is most important for both brothel and escort service. It is found that a large number of customers who belong to the lower economic class or lower middle class come to brothel because the charge of sex workers of brothel is
much cheaper than the escort service. So they can afford it. On the contrary, the charge of the service providers of escort service is much higher compared to brothel. So, mainly the rich and higher middle class people can afford it.

Now-a-days, it is often found that people prefer escort service more than the brothel. The probable reasons lie in the nature of providing the service by the concerned authority. Basically, people (specially the young generation) generally expect the privacy, hygiene, comfort, no harassment and most importantly satisfaction. Besides, the sexual fantasy of common people gradually increasing. These kind of expressions is somehow quenched by escort service but brothel somehow failed to fulfill it.

Apart from the aforesaid words, something left to be mentioned. Mainly the customers of escort service have more financial surplus than the customers of brothel. It is one of the important reasons for having a good number of upper class people as their (sex workers of escort service) customers because the charge of service of escort agencies is so high compared to the service of brothels. Besides, the customers of escort service also have the surplus of time compare to the customers of brothel. For example, an unemployed young boy generally can spend more times than an employed person. In other words, the customers of escort agencies are generally spending a lot of time in the bars, pubs and other similar kind of places. That’s why an escort agency generally earns more in a weekend compare to weekdays because the customers can afford a lot of time for their leisure in the weekends.

The customers of brothel are not accustomed with this culture. One of the reasons of it is they generally belong to lower class or lower middle class. So these customers are like to entertain by the sex workers of brothel in their limited time. Here the time is limited by their lifestyles, occupations e.g. if a rickshaw puller spend a good number of time for brothel, he has to adjust the excess time from that time when he will pull the rickshaw. For this reason (for having lower class or lower middle class customers), the earnings of the sex workers of brothels are very low compare to sex workers of escort agencies and these brothels are located in the congested, less hygienic, undeveloped areas compare to other parts of the city. If they have or earn a handsome amount of money like escort agencies, then they can try to shift in the developed parts of the city.

After going through the last two paragraphs, it seems to be that there are certain categories of customers who are fixed for the particular mode of service. This may lead to some stereotypical assumptions which do not depict the actual fact. Now-a-days some people who was the customer of brothel, started to experience the service of escorts and some people who was the customer of escort agencies, experienced the service of a brothel. So, to some extent, those categories do not exist strongly as it was before.

**Few more things**

Few more things left to discuss and those things do not came under in the above mentioned differences. So, those things are presented here-

In the paragraph no. 1.3., it was mentioned that there were some women who solely provide the sexual service. They are not properly fit in any category of the sex workers of both escort service and brothel. It is emerged as a distinct category from the formers. That means, this group of people has no proper identity which they need. Thus, the author identified this particular group of people as a ‘Self-Escort’. One of the reasons for identifying with this name is the group show some characteristics of escort service like mode of communication, maintaining hygiene and so on. But they also have some similarity with the sex workers of brothel like they have to hire a room, less conscious about hygiene, some of them sometimes cheated their customers, and keep a broker in a different manner. This broker managed different kinds of payments, communication when the engaged with customers.

Another thing is, it was mentioned in paragraph no. 2.1, that female sex workers of brothel served their customers in a room which they have to hire in monthly basis. They spend most of their times in a day in that room or surrounding of that room because of high chance of getting customer over there. The space consumed a humongous amount of time from their life. The room is not only used for earning purposes, but also become part and parcel of their lives. The juxtaposition of this place is concocting the term ‘Home of Earning’ in this context.

**CONCLUSIVE OBSERVATIONS**

The present research is purposively portraying the detailed account on the different perspectives of local prostitutions and concerned respondents of the studied area. Besides, the major differences of these two phenomena help to identify them clearly. The findings of this study depicts the crisis, the dependency over others, the strategies are taken to survive, the things have to perceive for earning, the hazardous and hectic conditions to sustain the profession for a long time.

Every government probably has their own policies and planning for development of their citizens irrespective of their occupation, background and so on. The present study may depict the situation of another sphere where people need a healthy and hygienic life for the successful development of the whole city.

The present author tried to state clearly two different modes of prostitution for further intensive and detailed research purposes and some recommendations to the governmental as well as non-governmental organizations for their uplifment and to avoid some other kind of obstacles related with their identification and also about their livelihood.

**References**


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