In *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, Durba Mitra expertly analyzes how deviant female sexuality, often conglomerated in the archives as “prostitution,” became the defining method of describing Indian society from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. She uses a host of archival sources from India to show that these so-called prostitutes were defined as practically any woman who was “outside of monogamous Hindu upper-caste marriage” (p. 4). Through this definition of prostitution, Mitra makes a far-reaching argument about how Indian societal formation was formed around the sexually deviant behavior of these women in both colonial and postcolonial India.

Mitra’s work is the first monograph on the “history of sexual sciences in India” (p. 8). While she labels the text as an “intellectual history,” there is a strong interdisciplinary aspect to the text rooted in various disciplines of the social sciences, particularly sociology and anthropology. Mitra further is committed to “multilingual source reading as an essential approach to the history of sexuality in the colonial and postcolonial world” (p. 22). Indeed, throughout this book, she uses a host of multilingual sources, English and Bengali primarily, to move away from strictly colonial understandings of sexuality and Indian society. She uses colonial-era Indian medical guides and textbooks, penal codes, newspapers, and works by Charles Darwin and Rudyard Kipling to demonstrate how British colonial men and male Indian social scientists as well as criminal and medical experts used their positions to socially ostracize and oppress women who they felt did not fit into the social mold that they deemed acceptable.

*Indian Sex Life* is divided into five chapters flanked by an introduction and afterword. Chapter 1 explores how nineteenth- and twentieth-century sociologists used premodern Sanskrit texts as guides for the establishment of patriarchy, masculinity, gender roles, and sexuality in modern times. Mitra argues that it is often the European male translation and adaptations of these premodern texts that are consulted for the creation of modern societal thought—an example being Sir Richard F. Burton’s 1883 adaptation of the Kama Sutra, which is still in print today.

A notion that is repeated throughout the text is the connection between social customs, women’s behaviors and sexuality, and criminality. Mitra focuses heavily on these ideas in chapters 2 and 3, which analyze how sociological inquiry about the prostitute “defined legal interventions into Indian social life” and how forensic medicine expanded in the nineteenth century due to its focus on deviant sexual behavior through analysis of abortion as an “inevitable criminal aftereffect” (pp. 66, 102).
Beginning with the 1860 Indian Penal Code and extending through the middle of the twentieth century, women’s bodies became increasingly regulated and criminalized through such laws as the Contagious Diseases Act and exploited through graphically depicted postmortem examinations for abortion, whereas men’s bodies never received such scrutiny and treatment.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore how nineteenth- and twentieth-century college-level social science and medical textbooks, which were primarily authored by elite males, and autobiographies of “fallen women” affected the evolution of social thought and the “exploding world of print” (p. 178). These “fallen women” were primarily educated women who had committed some act of deviant female sexuality. Mitra explores how these “autobiographies” tended to follow a script and what the implications of this scripted source could be. Through the analysis of the autobiographies in chapter 5, Mitra reinforces her attention to the gender differences when she states that these autobiographies “expose hypocrisies of men” (p. 200). However, it is not until the end of the book that we get a truly female perspective from this time period.

In the book’s afterword, Mitra turns her attention to the experience of women through an analysis of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s 1905 science fiction short story, “Sultana’s Dream.” Hossain’s text features a world where women rule and men are restricted to life inside. In Hossain’s world, men are the sexual aggressors and women are not considered sexually deviant. Mitra focuses on gender when she discusses how men of Hossain’s time period had the power to shift social thought with their publications on female sexuality, but Hossain did not.

Themes of religion, gender, caste, class, and race permeate throughout Mitra’s text. Religion is one of the more apparent themes. In chapter 1, Mitra begins her text-long comparison of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian ideologies that influence the societal norms being formed in India throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Religious difference also factors into this analysis, as Mitra shows how male-centric, pro-Hindu rhetoric is present throughout the archival sources, which helps support her overarching argument of deviant female sexuality shaping society. The themes of religion and gender permeate chapters 4 and 5 with Mitra’s focus on how deviant female sexuality was used to place social judgment and stigma on sexual interactions and Muslim marriage practices.

Throughout the text, the perspective of elite males, both European and Indian, is clear. However, it is never completely clear how women and the lower class/caste may have felt about the various situations surrounding the acts of deviant female sexuality. At times, Mitra admirably endeavors to read across the archival grain to better understand the experiences of these people, though the realities of the colonial archives inhibit this examination to some degree. Mitra draws heavily on sociological and anthropological theories in her analysis of Indian society, which brings a welcome and novel interdisciplinary perspective to Indian Sex Life. At the same time, however, readers not versed in some of these methodologies may be overwhelmed by some of the more jargon-heavy portions of the book.

The minor critiques mentioned in this review do not take away from Mitra’s success in proving how deviant female sexuality not only influenced social thoughts of India in the mid-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries but also has seeped through all mediums of social thought, practice, and law today. She ends her text with a rallying cry against the “grievous mistakes” of social sciences’ treatment of deviant female sexuality (p. 207). This text, even with its strong use of social science vocabulary, is of real utility to scholars invested in the study of imperialism, colonialism, gender, religion, sexuality, or class.
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