



Anuja Agrawal

## Chaste Wives & Prostitute Sisters Patriarchy and Prostitution among the Bedias of India

Routledge, 2008

ISBN-13: 978-0415430777, 251 pp.

reviewed by [Usha Rana](#)

1. It is an historical fact that prostitution has been considered a profession in stratified societies. Both men and women are involved in this profession but most of the discussion is women-focused. Women who get money in exchange for sexual favours for men are prostitutes. Numerous literature reviews have found that religious ethics, poverty, family disorders and some traditional practices have been responsible factors in leading women into prostitution. As illustrations, religious practices of Devadasi, and social practices of city brides and courtesans can be mentioned.
2. Anuja Agrawal's *Chaste Wives & Prostitute Sisters: Patriarchy and Prostitution among the Bedias of India*, is based on an anthropological study of traditional practices of prostitution among the Bedia community of Northern India. Agrawal chose the 'Nagla' helmet of Bharatpur, a district of Rajasthan, in which to conduct field surveys, because unmarried women of this community do not need to migrate to sex markets as they can work from their parents' house. Historically, Bedia is known as a nomadic group or denotified tribe who were involved in criminal activities. But, during the colonial intervention and changes to the laws they adopted the 'Rai' folk dance, as entertainment under feudal patronage. With the passage of time, they converted it into structured brothel prostitution so that they could maintain a sustainable livelihood and rescue the Bedia male from criminal activities.
3. Agrawal mentioned that there is a 'gap of understanding' between usual patriarchal societies and the Bedia community. The social institutions of Bedia have a status and role for women according to tradition. However, there are two types of women in the same family. The first holds to the traditional patriarchal norms of morality and is involved in domestic responsibilities (as the wife of Bedia male). The second (the sisters and daughters of traditional 'wives') is as a prostitute, an earner used as a commodity under the same patriarchal system.
4. In the first chapter, Agrawal discussed the genealogical evidence for the Bedia way of life. This evidence justified, through oral history and practical experience, that prostitution was a traditional culture, but colonial documents do not support this claim. The second chapter represents the structural and functional approach of the Bedia community to prostitution. Bedia women are socialised to be prostitutes. A girl aged between 14 and 16 years is introduced by her family to this

profession with a ritual known as 'Nath Utari'; the adolescent girl is deflowered by a wealthy patron who pays a substantial amount of money for the honour. Hence, the choice of these girls is controlled by the individual and family responsibilities that they learnt within the social order. In a chapter entitled, 'Bedia women and love marriages,' Agrawal explains that the Bedia apply restrictions to adolescent girls. It is impossible for them to think of having a traditional marriage. Relationships are prohibited between Bedia females and males, both within and outside the community. If a Bedia family lost its family earner (their daughter and sister) then the girl's family has the right to take compensation for such harm from the male family with whom the girl becomes involved. Many times, within the Bedia community, the prostitute and client retain a long term relationship. However, if, during such a relationship, the client is unable to pay the agreed amount to the prostitute, then the family of the prostitute will not permit her to continue her relationship with him. Social structures control both the female body and her emotions to sustain the family's livelihood.

5. In chapter four, the 'Family economy depends on prostitution' Agrawal describes how a girl child is held in preference within the Bedia community. Being parents of several girls is considered to be very fortunate. Such preferencing of female over male children provides an illustration of the functional aspect their livelihood. Although their economy depends on prostitution, so having a girl child is a privilege, which runs opposite to usual patriarchal societal practices. Their 'feminist' perspective raises questions about the set rules of patriarchy. In her next chapter, 'Prostitution and the Indolence of Bedia Men,' Agrawal discussed the ways that Bedia males have not been socially conditioned to provide, moral and financial liable for the family. They are lethargic, illiterate, unskilled and prefer a life of luxury that includes alcoholism, gambling and the must-have motorcycle; their role os almost like that of a bloodsucker. Financially they are totally dependent on their women. But they do provide protection to prostitutes who are experiencing difficulties. Marriage remains important for Bedia males and wives must be highly valued; but they cannot marry within the Bedia community. They marry from another locations and pay a heavy bride price; the earning prostitute sister made all of the arrangements for paying the bride price. She is morally responsible to do this.
6. Agrawal lighted on two essential points: 1. being an earner, the Bedia woman could not change male domination of society; 2. even though they are using women in prostitution, the indolent Bedia male demands chastity from his wife, which is an underlying phenomenon of all patriarchal systems. Hence, women are subordinated in a way that favours male domination.
7. In chapter seven, entitled 'The morality of the Bedia economy,' Agrawal highlights that while their economy is based on prostitution, not all women are engaged in prostitution. Such continuous social condensations maintain morality among Bedia. Once a woman is married she cannot be involved in prostitution, and a prostitute cannot marry. The prostitute retains an 'adopted' status forever. This shows the way that the dominant discourse (patriarchy) preserves cultural traditions by fixing roles and responsibilities within the society. However, morality and economy are handled separately, if someone tries to break down such traditions and there is a loss of prestige among the community according to customary law. Bedia has layers of standards which narrate different practices in same culture. Community norms uphold supremacy on the whole of the life cycle. They invoke authority through social discourse in respect of their ideologies and practices involving a prostitute and a chaste wife. They justify prostitution as their normal regular occupation. This book is an inside view of subjectivity in a social system. The historicity of Bedia cultural practices gives them authority or power to create discourses that favour their practices.
8. In this study, Agrawal used qualitative methods, unstructured interviews, observations, group discussions and secondary sources of data. She retains a strong methodology in interrogating such a sensitive issue. The author mentioned the challenges and difficulties she encountered when

attempting to ascertain the 'correct' facts. There are detailed footnotes in every chapter which support readers' understanding. In my opinion, the best part of the book is that the author first created curiosity about the subject and then provided answers with the support of primary data. There narration of field view in book view is a difficult task, done in well way. Besides the strong methodological part of the book, there is a lack of a theoretical paradigm. There is also an absence of data about women's physical and mental health and their emotional struggles in being part of this traditional profession. There is no inside information about any contemporary changes in the community that have been brought about with the help of governmental and nongovernmental organisations although Agrawal wrote this book with her own limitation of resources. Otherwise, it is a worthy read for those interested in gender studies, sex work, women studies, sociology and social anthropology.

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Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

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Last modified: 02 July 2019 1109