

Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought. Durba Mitra. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020. vii + 290 pp. \$35. Paperback ISBN: 9780691196350.

In *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, Durba Mitra successfully merges a multitude of primary source materials into a well-informed framework that argues for the primary role that women's sexuality played in informing and constructing social life in colonial India. Mitra singles out women's "deviant" sexual behavior, which is used by both colonial and indigenous authorities, to diagnose various societal "ills." Mitra is not attempting to recuperate the designation of the prostitute (or deviant female behavior) as it was understood in colonial India, rather she is exposing their true impact and structure amidst their extremely broad usage in the colonial archives. By foregrounding women's sexuality, Mitra makes the space it occupies in the various epistemes readily visible, and better able to be understood for what it really was: an essentially boundless resource utilized to explain and regulate nearly every aspect of behavior, even seemingly unrelated issues.

The chapters are arranged thematically, with each covering and explaining a component of Mitra's argument. The five well-directed chapters offer multiple structural arguments and analyses that further critical understanding of the utilization of sexuality in colonial India. The chapters themselves each contain a very welcome preamble and closing statement, provided to lay out the groundwork for each chapter and then neatly zip up and reiterate the many analyses and sources within. Chapter One serves as a bridge between colonial thinkers and the contemporary sociologists of the colonial time period with historical Sanskrit texts. Philology during this period was often considered the "king of the sciences," and Mitra methodically steps through the prodigious impact that the exegesis of Sanskrit texts had upon the scientific understandings of the period. Sanskrit works from the *Kamasutra* to the *Ramayana* all left an indelible mark on not just the colonized people of India, but on the colonizers as well. Throughout Chapter One, these Sanskrit texts were utilized by pundits and colonial sociologists as guides for "masculinity and patriarchal power" (22). Mitra deftly analyzes the influences of these Sanskrit texts on important figures of the time, such as Richard Burton and William Jones, and puts them into conversation with each other in order to tease out the relevant impact. These figures and their analyses of historical Sanskrit texts continually produced strikingly similar results: that social ills are a function of women's sexual deviance and that the control of such is paramount.

Chapter Two focuses on legal questionnaires and law codes, such as the Contagious Disease Acts, to show and explain the newer methods of sociological inquiry utilized in colonial India. Through extensive repetition in the source material of these new sociological "facts," women's sexual deviancy became its own episteme. Through the continual colonial mentioning of prostitution and abortion, the repetition in the sources is then driven home as these new forms of sociological inquiry are applied to other adjacent areas, such as marriage, and results in what Mitra chillingly terms a "new environment of intimate surveillance" (90), the lasting results of which link women's sexual deviance to criminality. Chapter Three then builds on this and analyzes the very broad and speculative contemporary sociological conclusions that are used to form judicial

epistemes. One in particular stands out for its potency: medico-legal narratives that informed the contemporary reader as to the legal understanding of anatomical parts of the body via autopsies. The continued repetition in the sources as to the deviance of women were then “*read back* onto parts of women’s bodies” (101) postmortem. This chapter is a convincing piece of Mitra’s argument, showing the drastic expansion and utilization of women’s deviant sexuality, as a means of understanding and control, into unexpected spaces.

Chapter Four, aptly titled “Evolution,” further expands upon the utilization of women’s sexuality as a demarcation of evolutionary progress (as it was understood at the time). Contemporary sociologists and ethnographers held that, in terms of human development and civilizational progress, sexual practices are a defining component of whatever stage a civilization may be in. Women’s sexual deviancy, therefore, can be taken to have stood for an indication of both social and moral progress. This temporal evolution then became a foundational aspect of contemporary social sciences in colonial India. Critically, Mitra merges the vast array of contemporaneous influencers and shows that the nineteenth-century epistemes concerning civilizational and sociological evolution and advancement are predicated on the idea of control of female sexuality and the resultant patriarchy.

Chapter Five, while brief, is the most critical chapter in the book. In it, Mitra shows the previous ideas and influences approaching modernity through “autobiographies.” These autobiographies claimed to be accurate firsthand accounts; however, while the veracity of such claims can be doubted, the use of such “autobiographies” as a font for extolling certain wanted virtues and aspects whilst condemning sexually deviant women as a form of pollution was foundational towards accounting for and critiquing social life. Performing deft and critical analysis of the variety of source documents, Mitra shows then the ultimate conclusion: that not only was women’s sexual transgression a vital window through which to view society, but that those transgressions were a critical foundational component for patriarchal authority to “protect” women from their own deviant sexuality. These “autobiographies” and the central idea of women’s sexual deviance served to promote the most conservative ideals of what should constitute a modern society. The popular texts analyzed in this final chapter show the episteme of sexually deviant women as ubiquitous in both its prevalence and near limitless application.

Mitra’s writing, while being academic, is not so convoluted as to be purposefully difficult. Intended for academic audiences, Mitra has hit the sweet spot in terms of rigorous terminology while still being approachable and digestible for more lay historians. The capacious notes Mitra has supplied, forty pages’ worth, further help any reader to insert themselves more easily into this specific timeframe, argument, and the prevalent thought patterns, and make this book an easy recommendation for a broad audience. Mitra wisely invokes Anjali Arondekar and her specific modes of thought found in *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (2009) and has created viable analysis that is “unmoored” from the powerful idea that is the archives. Mitra succeeds in setting her focus in shaping an argument that is convincing not only due to its deft usage of a breadth of archival and source materials, but also the resultant extrapolation as the book’s time frame approaches modernity. *Indian Sex Life* is a welcome addition and great starting

point for any academically minded or historically curious reader to absorb just how critical sexual control was for colonial India and beyond.

Durba Mitra's book is a great step in the proper understanding and decoding of colonial knowledge structures and as to how and why women's perceived sexual deviancy functioned as a primary engine for change. The colonial absorption of the "sexually deviant" woman altered the sociological framework and epistemological analysis of the colonized, which was then carried forward in a temporal sense. The resultant knowledge dissemination served as a foundational pillar for the reinterpretation and restructuring of society in an attempt to become civilizationally more modern. Mitra deftly utilizes a prodigious amount of source material, putting writers and thinkers into conversation with each other in a highly digestible way. Mitra leaves little doubt that the extirpation of the broad category of "deviant" women's sexuality was not just a side effect of colonial ideas imprinting upon the subcontinent, but that the control and regulation of such sexuality was a foundational pillar from which other laws and contemporary sociological regulations could thus be derived.

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