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# The (Colonial) History of Sexuality: The Colonial Categorization of Sexuality in Colonized India

**Vriddhi Vinay**

**Abstract:** This is a South Asian theory-building paper on the intersection of gender and colonization critiquing western philosophical notions on a history of human sexuality that omits colonialism as a primary factor in the sociological normalization of sexual repression and sexual violence. Using staple texts and foundational authors highlighting the material implications of Post-Modernist theory in the field of gender studies, such as Michel Foucault and Veronique Mottier, this paper identifies the shortcomings of said theories. Then, the paper compares the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial material conditions of the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh grouped by mirrored cultural and geopolitical ties. Pre-colonial historical documentation showed that ancient to medieval cultures held varied but still normalized notions on sexual relations that are non-monogamous, extra-marital, and same-gender. Colonial case studies identified how racialization, Victorian Puritanism, and masculinity identified repressive and sexually violent British administration. Post-colonial analysis on contemporary material conditions showed how colonization was the turning point in Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi sexual attitudes and the concrete implications this research has stigmatized genders and sexual practices in South Asia. This research theorizes the origins of contemporary sexual attitudes as originating from methods of colonization and their greater modern-day connections.

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## Introduction

In many orientalized depictions of modern South Asian cultures, especially from immediate 1947 independence to now, dualistic imagery fails to capture the complexity and richness of South Asian sexual history. In the same way, the works of sexual philosophers like Michel Foucault and Mottier have done to depict the history of sexuality and sexual repression. Both philosophers contributed to the field of western sexology, the former theorizing about the paradigm of sexual openness and fluidity in human history and the latter using Foucault's methodology to analyze the points in history where sexual repression intersected with societal norms. Many western philosophers, not limited to Foucault and Mottier, point to Victorian puritanism and evolving sects of Christianity as the basis of sexual repression from a once sexually progressive "human history". This hypothesis about "human history" centered around Europe then suggests the lack of "humanness" in colonized nations, like South Asia, by disregarding the impact of colonization on changing sexual practices in a society. This paper examines the

effects of colonialism as the cause of sexual repression in South Asia, specifically narrowed down to and referred to mean as the modern-day countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh that were a single colony and overlapping region of many culturally diverse communities in an ethnic mosaic. While Victorian Puritanism informed the sexual status quo enacted into colonial law, it was colonization that categorized different sexual practices and examples of fluidity that repressed colonized South Asians. Victorian Puritanized colonization by the British categorized British colonial subjects as de-sexualized or hyper-sexualized compared to normalized pre-colonial attitudes towards sexuality.

### **Methods and Definitions**

Due to the exact cultural and historical boundaries of this topic, definitions of terminology and theoretical methods are essential to understanding this concept. Because the modern-day geographical borders of modern-day South Asia depend on the partition by the British former colonial masters of on historically-unified nation in 1947 after independence and 1971 after the Bangladesh Liberation War, South Asia can also be referred to as “India” or “British India” pre-1947 in historical records. In this paper, the former states once belonging to the Indian Subcontinent which is now India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh will be referred to as “colonized Indians” or “Indians of the Subcontinent”. This is a key distinction to separate evidence of colonial governance towards states across the British Indian colony where modern-day Pakistan, Bangladesh, or India did not exist yet compared to using the term “Indian” just to refer to inhabitants of the contemporary Republic of India.

Gender theorist and academic Maria Lugones researched and described the relationship between colonized or formerly-colonized peoples and gender as the “coloniality of gender”, or “ordering of gender relations around the axis of the coloniality of power” (Lugones). This philosophy of postcolonial feminist theory is applicable to understanding sexuality because of the unique nature that western colonialism pushed binary gendered notions towards indigenous societies that provide sexual and gendered archetypes for colonized subjects to follow.

Western retellings of the invention of sexual repression fail to account for the colonization of sexuality. Foucault and Mottier hypothesized and wrote comprehensively about these concepts as staple topics in post-modern philosophy and contemporary gender and sexuality history, so their contributions to the field provide a thorough background on the scope of western sexual history. Michel Foucault in his 1976 four-volume collection published while France still had Francophonic colonies in continental Africa called *The History of Sexuality* describes western society before the introduction of Christianity to be sexually more open before being repressed and restricted to the Victorian Puritanism movement.

The Victorian Puritanism movement was a religiously-influenced notion of thought restricting sexual behavior, and it originated according to Foucault during the start of the British Queen Victoria’s reign to morally adhere closer to The Bible and to maintain workers’ focuses on Capitalist production.

This movement spread through western European moral thought and started just decades before Queen Victoria was officially deemed the Empress of India. In his book, he states “The historical accident would consist rather of the reticences of ‘Victorian puritanism’; at any rate, they were a digression, a refinement, a tactical diversion in the great process of transforming sex into discourse” (Foucault). Here, he called for the questioning of societal norms and power dynamics based upon history. Foucault introduced his Repressive Hypothesis where sex and sexuality were repressed and deemed unnatural in human nature, even though sex historically is a natural relationship in life, outside of a monogamous heterosexual marriage in missionary positions to procreate. Foucault theorized that societies used to exist with relative sexual freedom and acceptance. However, due to “Victorian Puritanism”, sexuality was repressed or parts of sexuality were legalized and criminalized.

Veronique Mottier’s work is an extent of Foucault’s philosophy, exploring the historical side and extents of western human sexuality by pinpointing historical legislation and categorization that shaped western sexual norms. Mottier suggested that sexuality can be used to differentiate and discipline people based on how their sexuality also intersects with other social needs. While Mottier applies contemporary sexual repression to a product of repression in many different institutions and sectors, the extent of this analysis is on the formation of gender binaries of “male” versus “female” power through “poststructuralist, postcolonial and postmodern theories of gender” (Mottier). Both academics fail to encompass the human history of a substantial portion of the global population not influenced solely by Victorian Puritan standards but how this philosophy informs control and perception via colonial standards, thus failing to theorize the diverse reality of “human” sexuality.

As Victorian Puritanism characterizes the moral rationale for British colonialism and is a popular theory in European thought for gender without mentioning how this movement was influenced by colonialism, this paper works to apply the colonial dimension to this school of thought. Therefore, this research works to track and analyze this theory as a factor of colonialism through its impact on colonized Indian sexuality. Victorian Puritanism cannot exist without upholding imperialist masculinity and gendered dynamics of power for control. Through understanding the coloniality of gender in Lugones’s relevant school of thought plus a pre-colonial comparative history, analysis of example colonial regulations starting from 1850, and post-colonial comparison, primary materials better illustrate how this colonial relationship exists.

### **Pre-Colonial South Asian Kingdoms and Relevant History**

In academic literature concerning pre-colonial sexuality, scholars like Leslie Orr Donors, a researcher into gender studies and the specific historical struggles of historic South Indian temple girls, points to studying erotic poetry at the time to understand sexual norms. For example, pre-colonial Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prakrit ancient poetry describe devotional dancers and prostitutes as “celestial and

human, offering worship in temples” (Donors). In ancient periods before the Indian medieval period researchers distinguish starting in 500 AD, Sanskrit and Prakrit were the primary formal written language covering the northern part of the Indian Subcontinent and Tamil dominated Southern texts, both languages just official linguistic forms of documentation surrounded by thousands of other distinct languages and dialects. Therefore, this academic conclusion by this author covers the span of pre-colonial India. The Rajatarangini, a lyrical history by historian Kalhana about kings in the Kashmir region of the Indian subcontinent written in the 12th century, is an early history and primary source material covering from the pre-medieval period up until its century of publication. Based in the Kashmiri region now in the modern-day disputed territory between India and Pakistan, it mentions the existence because of prostitutes existing in Indian society. While these women were not the most graciously mentioned in their connotation to non-sexual careers, their occupations still represented a normal part of legal society. For example, in a short chapter, Kalhana writes “Victory entices men with false hopes, even like a prostitute, but avoids them when they follow her. Fate lures with false hopes and then adds to the misery of the victim (Kalhana). While prostitutes are not described in the same honest way, their career is not an unknown occupation or one to not be common enough to appeal normally in a religious Hindu writer’s text.

However, pre-colonial India did experience an era with increased restrictions on women’s social freedoms called the Vedic period. Leslie Orr Donors wrote, “the suppression of women’s rights and freedoms is usually depicted as occurring earlier, beginning, according to some accounts, in the late Vedic period, in tandem with the rise of elaborate ritualism, priestly specialization, and increasingly rigid social hierarchy” (Donors). Here, Donors explains how the Vedic period was characterized by and included these restrictions through the introduction of caste-based hierarchies and subsequent norms of purity to maintain this stratification. The late Vedic period was from 1000BC to 600BC, much earlier than the history Kalhana depicts, so even before colonial fortification of sexually repressive ideas, sexualized practices still existed overtly in society even during a period notable for some casteist and oppressive restrictions on women’s rights.

Original poeticized histories in South Asia’s robust field of storytelling and literary history-keeping, complete with experts in their field like Kalhana, Bilhana, and Kalidasa as valid as valued western historic scientists and thinkers like Aristotle and Da Vinci, are useful markers and original primary sources for understanding societal norms and policies in their medieval contemporary period or earlier since it is an early form of documentation. Other historical texts point to references of sex as a natural part of society’s functions. Sexual historian Kaushav Chakraborty in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* mentions ancient early Hindu texts like “Vatsyayana’s classic work “Kamasutra” (Aphorisms of love) written somewhere between the 1st and 6th centuries... The main theme here appears to be the

expression of Indian attitude toward sex as a central and natural component of Indian psyche and life” (Kaushav). This religious text often accompanies intricately engraved depictions of complex sexual acts on the roof of Hindu temples in the Southern part of India. Even pre-Vedic shrines in Southern India included pottery or structural engravings of nudity or intimate non-monogamous lovers into its Vedic phase, like in the Ajanta Cave in Southern India depicting these acts after the pre-colonial Vedic introduction.

Sexuality in the medieval period included colonization by the Mughals, an invasion from Central Asia that spanned three-fourths of the northern region in the Indian subcontinent, stretching from modern-day Northeastern Pakistan to parts of modern Bangladesh to the northern-most part of Southern India, had fluidity in its sexual and gender practices. People of the Mughal empire born of any gender could shift based on masculine and feminine roles based on sexual history and honor. For example, sexual respectability was determined on occupation where some noblemen were barred from too much sexual temptation but in the same religious court, third-gender people who did not fit any binary gender label that existed in Western European gender colloquialisms were highly respected and sat alongside courtesans (Chatterjee). Since sexual practices deviant to Victorian philosophy were not completely taboo through a more restrictive religious period and the influence of another religious kingdom up until the colonial period, pre-colonial sexual practices were more socially progressive until the introduction of colonial ideas.

### **Colonial India and Understanding Colonial Masculinity**

The onslaught of British colonists was the turning point of this sexual history, described through the case studies of the theoretical implications of British masculinity, legislation of cultural sexual practices, and levels of categorization. The British legally colonized South Asia during the Victorian age under Queen Victoria after two centuries of prior economic subjugation of the region through the East India Company (Metcalf and Metcalf), and it was when the British had the legal power to enact laws could they regulate Victorian Puritanism into Indian society. Scholars, like Liam Liburd who is an expert on gender and the British empire, describe British masculinity as “to secure imperial greatness using the values of colonial masculinity to transform the metropole... Old imperial, racist stereotypes became a means for the BUF to simultaneously deny people of colour in India and Africa the right to self-determination and to support their foreign fascist comrades.” (Liburd). Here, Liburd describes how masculinity was equally racialized as it was gendered. Joseph Conrad, a historical author, documents the mindset of imperialists in his anthologized essay “An Outpost of Progress” by emphasizing how imperialists referenced their colonial subjects as “brutes” without describing any humanlike terms much like philosophers emphasize a significant component of human history only applying to western people (Conrad). The lens that British colonists observed its colonized population through was one asserting

white, western masculinity above primitive subjects, as Liburd and Conrad suggest, as the proper behavior for masculinized and racialized Indian colonized people with savage, inhuman practices.

Mrinalini Sinha is a researcher established in the field of postcolonialism for writing about how the white British masculine gaze perceived Indian colonial subjects. Sinha, who examines the same research through the perspective of colonized Indians wrote in her book *Gender and Empire* that “the protection of ‘Oriental’ women was an important component of white British masculinity in the colonies. The real or imagined threat to white women from native men provided, perhaps, the most dramatic demonstrations of white imperial masculinity in the colonial domain” (Sinha 195). Here, Sinha describes the sociological impact of British colonial policies against Indian colonized subjects. It is also important for reference to note that these colonial policies that the British used are in tandem with categorizing ethnicities in the Indian Subcontinent through the “Martial Races” based on phrenology and masculine versus feminine physical presentation, thus categorization was already an established component of the British empire’s conquest for subjugation (Rand). Through the understanding, the product of Liburd’s and Sinha’s analyses, and Conrad’s perspective, the British’s Victorian Puritan lens was also about forming gender roles, racial groupings, and its religious Puritanism roots.

### **Colonial India and Relevant Case Studies**

One of the first parts of South Asian culture that British colonists sexualized then legislated was the Devadasi system. Devadasi is a term devised for women in Hindu temples who were classically trained dancers and were devotees for mysticism and entertainment during religious festivals, but they often belonged to communities with courtesans and other feminine workers near temples. Devadasis typically committed their lives to the art of classical dances, adopted by an established mentor in exchange for a residence and becoming a master of their craft. The colonial courts saw girls of a religious establishment engaging in dancing in front of men, engaging with prostitutes, or being generally sexually available non-monogamously with no constraints but not committing to a romantic relationship outside of the one with God and labeled it against the values of the British empire. The British established Section 372 and 373 of their Penal Code to outlaw “selling minors for the purpose of prostitution” and “buying minors for the purpose of prostitution” respectively (“Section 373 in The Indian Penal Code”). Here, the British sexualized the art of classical dance as uncivilized body movements and enforced a taboo by criminalizing normalized sexual practices.

The irony of this practice was that the British themselves engaged with Brothels that they helped build for colonial soldiers. Historian Philippa Levine pointed out in her study of documents about prostitution in the British empire that “European women working in Indian brothels, for example, were classified first class, as were brothels staffed by indigenous women but reserved for British soldiers stationed in India. Third-class brothels, conversely, were those both staffed and frequented by locals”

(Levine). Here, Levine describes how some European settler women engaged in prostitution too for survival, but they still did not have their societal respect stripped from them. The British soldiers also participated in sexual crimes against Indian women staffed for domestic labor in their residences arguably hypocritically. Durba Ghosh, a historian on sexual violence in colonial Bengal transcribed and analyzed documents of trials of accusing colonized Indian men of sexual violence in modern-day West Bengal and Bangladesh, but this crime was acceptable for British soldiers (Ghosh). Sexuality, once a safe exploration for colonized Indian women, was corrupted by condoning sexual violence against colonized Indian women while naming colonized Indian women as responsible for their own assaults.

European women, who did not have the additional weight of racialization and colonization placed on them could still be considered “first-class” citizens only worthy of high British soldiers. Sex between two colonial subjects, especially in a monetary exchange, was considered worthy of the least respect. The formation of this hierarchy marks a change in how colonized Indian women were treated as pre-colonial citizens versus colonial subjects by introducing a racialized and gendered hierarchy. In the British Puritan and white lens of femininity and sexuality for how colonized Indian subjects are categorized, colonized Indian feminine people went from fluid sexual freedom to having their sexual practices policed or organized on the bottom of a metaphorical pyramid. Through their legislation, the British successfully subjected open, respectful cultural behavior also.

Historically, South Asian cultures and kingdoms had fluidity in sexual practices and identity with high respect in society and documentation without needing specific indicators to distinguish people practicing same-gender sex with labels due to their normalization. Colonial categorization introduced these stigmas into society by legislating and regulating labels that pushed this distinctive population to the margins. The immediate impacts of colonialism occurred during the colonial period. Devadasis, after being labeled as prostitutes, engaged in sexual relationships with high-caste men for survival, as researcher Mytheli Sreenivas points out in her study of caste-based reform of the Devadasi system (Sreenivas). Since this practice was frequented by low-income women who gained expertise in an art form with a stable livelihood, high caste men with documented alliances in colonized Indian history (Metcalf and Metcalf) with British soldiers in exchange for privileges as well as British soldiers could abuse this shift in sexual power by engaging in sexual practices now deemed disrespectful and deviant from the norm underground.

### **Post-Colonial South Asia and Further Implications of the Research**

Post-colonial sexual practices are greatly influenced by also upholding British colonial laws as the legal scaffolding as well as British ideas. Philippa Levine concluded her paper on the nature of prostitution in the British empire by saying “colonial authorities made shrewd use of this link between corruption and sex. India could be condemned as sexually lax, the men as ignoble, and the women as

promiscuous. It was a pattern repeated across the empire, a convenient means by which the British could maintain the institution of prostitution while locating blame for its allegedly deleterious effects safely away from Britain and British values” (Levine). In this quotation here, Levine concludes by explaining the British’s reasoning for maintaining a loophole in their condemnation of indigenous sexual practices for regulated, stratified sexual practices British soldiers had the most sexual power in. Contemporary sexual legacies exist as taboo within the societies of South Asian countries outside of the historical insight of power, divide and rule, and philosophy behind colonization. Sexuality is expected to be confined to the nuclear family system introduced through monogamous, heterosexual ideas through Victorian Puritanism. This comparison is essential and not trivial nor vulgar due to how this colonial legacy places a detriment on the safety of South Asian women facing gendered oppression. Sexual violence is also interconnected to the concept of “honor”, a term once attached to high-caste widows in pre-colonial India through the Vedic period’s non-sexual purity practices extended to all South Asian women at a sexually mature age; a 2018 study by the United Nations concluded that 50,000 women in the nation of India alone are killed for “dishonoring” their family for participating in sexual expression or being assaulted (Cole). This statistic stands in stark contrast to reported pre-colonial associations with sexuality, worship, and respect.

Sexuality is also a societal concept that informs contemporary Indian politics towards women and marginalized third genders through colonial influence. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the Republic of India’s majority party with open fascist views for an absolute state with few social liberties through its policies since gaining political power in 2013 and presidential power in 2014 that mirror many colonial policies introduced by the British: like discrimination against historically-significant third gendered people, capitalist industrialization, caste-based discrimination, religious divide-and-rule pogroms, and restrictive reproductive policies towards women’s reproduction. In a 2013 report during the BJP’s rise to power by the openDemocracy, analysts collected from state governments in India that gang rapes against women were widely not prosecuted, including in a case that involved fourteen gang members, on the grounds that “women are seen not as individuals with rights but as bearers of their community’s honour, to be protected or raped, depending who they are” (India United Against Fascism).

Contemporary scholarship on women in Pakistan follows rejecting sexual repression tactics through U.S.-backed military dictatorships, like Muhammed Zia-ul-Haq or Yahya Khan responsible for orchestrating wars in neighboring Bangladesh marked by sexual violence and up to a 3,000,000 death toll with subsequent policies against the rights of women (Batabyal). In research by scholars like Amina Jamal, her work is particularly relevant to this topic due to her use of Foucauldian theory to define cultural flows of the sexual world, sexual repression, and political restrictions against women framed sexuality, not as a part of religious guidelines but power and authority. Jamal highlights this by analyzing the gendered repression of Pakistani Islamic scholar and politician Abul A'la Maududi as “not interested



in providing feminist explanations for what their practitioners see as religious activities” (Jamal). Here, Pakistani modern feminist scholarship continues to frame sexual repression and political control of women’s practices as outside the norms of scriptural Islamic values and rather as a part of building a pious nation of Pakistan for its leaders. Coupled with the fact that pre-colonial Pakistan, in the Mughal empire shared with India, was structured around the spread of Islam and Islamic revival, modern-day Pakistani values deviate from pre-colonial norms of sexuality and mirror colonial methods of power.

In a public health report on the modern-day livelihoods of women in the scope of another South Asian country, Bangladesh, that was once part of the Subcontinent affected by the same colonial policies, Bangladeshi women and children in brothels face high levels of poverty, stigmatization, and rates of HIV/AIDS transmission while attempting to financially survive in the modern-day capitalist and gendered system. Ahsan Ullah himself, a head university Research Coordinator in Bangladesh and conductor of this research on Bangladeshi brothels, appoints the start of this exploitative sexual transaction by saying “the history of prostitution goes back to British colonial rule, which lasted in Bangladesh for more than two hundred years” (Ullah). Compared to pre-colonial sexual practices of the status of prostitution in indigenous societies across South Asia, British loopholes categorizing and criminalizing ancient sexual practices into a “British colonial rule and the Market-oriented economy has turned it as trade or profession” as Bengali economist Parimal Kumar Roy explains sex work as a survival tactic for women and third gender people in a nation plundered by and economically destabilized by its colonial power. Daulatdia, for example, is the largest brothel in Bangladesh that was started during British colonization and regulated by British officers as it was next to a police station; Daulatdia now officially employs from 1300 to 2000 women, including children as young as 10 working to survive (Karim). These material conditions that the women partaking in the Bangladeshi sexual marketplace face begin with cultural shifts and legislation under colonial governance compared to pre-colonial cultural norms in place up until western colonial presence.

These varied issues in the three modern states concerning the intersection of sexuality with politics or the post-independence economy have similar patterns of historical origins as diverse as examples of sexualization and sexual exploitation across borders are. These are political ideals platformed and systems reinforced through British Victorian masculine ideals due to how starkly different South Asian political ideas were up until the historical introduction of colonists. Due to how British Victorian philosophy publicly claimed to push sanctity on colonial subjects they found uncivil but ended up partaking in or enacting sexual exploits within the British Indian colony anyways, this philosophical insincerity involved using sexuality for power and using the sexual practices of colonized Indians as an additional method of racial control. Most importantly, this historical chain of events juxtaposed with pre-

colonial realities created a sexually-repressive society not just because of the attitudes of Victorian Puritanism but deep interconnectedness with power, whiteness, and colonial tactics of categorization.

### **Conclusion and Possible Explorations**

Pre-colonial sexual attitudes included not just openness and open discussion as well as participation in advanced sexual acts up until the colonial period but also important sexual roles within society. Colonialism abolished these practices and encouraged sexual repression within South Asian societies, going against the theories by western philosophers that the history of human sexuality would be where it is today without the brute power that was colonialism. This topic is worth exploring further as a continued research question, as a result, on the intersection of racialization against South Asian women specifically as a racialized grouping and sexual repression versus the treatment of powerful sexual archetypes and European-descendent women whose histories do not depend on survival under colonialism. Since the exploration of the history of sex is considered taboo and bordering on perverse even in contemporary western societies, the existing implications of power and legacies of colonial sexual impositions harm South Asian women politically and in sexualized economic practices. Thus, an exploration on the further impositions of racialized, sexualized colonial administration that formed brothels, registries, and the material conditions today would continue to expand on the scope of understanding how the theory and impact of colonization and gender this paper covers affects other South Asian cultural, economic, and political phenomena.

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