



## Review Article

# Understanding prostitution in India: An anthropological perspective on research

Shuchi Srivastava

*Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, National Post Graduate College,  
 An Autonomous College of University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.  
 E-mail : shuchi.anthro@gmail.com*

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**Abstract** - This review explores the historical and cultural evolution of prostitution in India, tracing its development from the Vedic period to the present day. It examines the roles of *ganikas*, *nagarvadhus*, *devadasis*, and *tawaiifs*—women who once held significant cultural and social status but later faced marginalization and stigma. The study highlights the persistent challenges encountered by contemporary sex workers, including legal uncertainties, economic vulnerabilities, and social exclusion. Employing an anthropological framework, this review synthesizes insights from historical texts and ethnographic studies to analyse gender dynamics, power structures, and economic dependencies within the sex trade. It also investigates the intersections of caste, class, and globalization, examining their impact on prostitution in India. Additionally, the review addresses critical concerns such as health risks, legal constraints, and the evolving role of technology in sex work. Anthropology offers a humanistic perspective that challenges stereotypes, advocates for the rights of sex workers, and informs culturally sensitive policies. By integrating historical context with contemporary realities, this research underscores the need for inclusive legal and social reforms that prioritize protection, agency, and dignity. A nuanced anthropological approach fosters more ethical policymaking, promoting equitable interventions and advocacy for sex workers in India.

**Key words:** Prostitution, Sex workers, Cultural significance, Marginalization, Anthropological Research

## Introduction

Prostitution refers to the exchange of sexual services for money, goods, or other forms of compensation. It is a practice that has existed across cultures and societies for centuries, often shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and legal factors. Historically, prostitution has been linked to gender dynamics, with women often being the primary individuals involved, though men and transgender individuals have also participated. The stigma surrounding prostitution varies by society, with some viewing it as morally unacceptable, while others may acknowledge its historical and economic significance. In many cultures, including India, the practice has evolved with different forms and roles, such as the *ganikas*, *nagarvadhus*, *devadasis*, and *tawaifs*, who were at times integrated into social, religious, or cultural life. However, these figures often faced marginalization and were stigmatized as outcasts. In modern contexts, prostitution continues to raise debates around issues of legality, exploitation, human trafficking, and the rights of sex workers, emphasizing the need for comprehensive social, legal, and economic reforms. This review traces the evolution of prostitution in India, examining its historical roots and how it has been influenced by gender dynamics and socio-economic conditions. Additionally, it underscores the critical role of anthropological research in shedding light on these issues, advocating for a deeper understanding and improved policies for sex workers' rights and welfare.

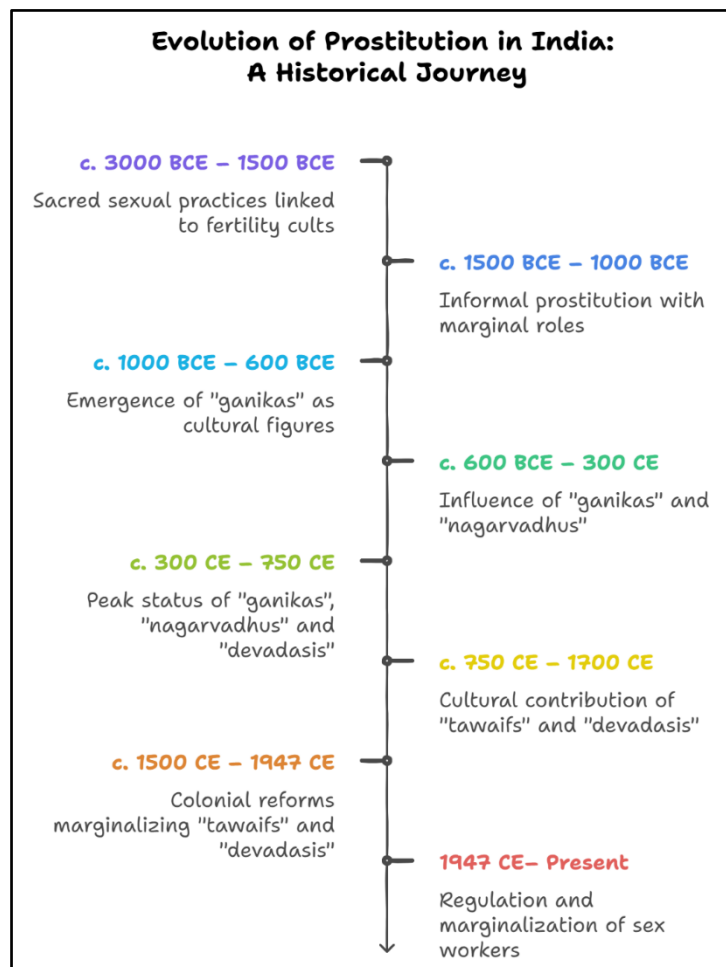
## Methodology

The methodology involves a qualitative analysis of historical texts, ethnographic studies, and existing literature on prostitution in India, so this paper is based on secondary sources of data collection. Using an anthropological framework, the study examines socio-economic structures, gender dynamics, and cultural norms shaping prostitution across different eras, synthesizing findings from diverse sources to explore the marginalization of sex workers and the challenges they face today. This approach advocates for an anthropological perspective to inform policy and advocacy.

## Historical Background of Prostitution in India

The history of prostitution in India reflects a long-standing and evolving socio-cultural framework, shaped by economic, religious, and societal influences. Its perception and

organization have varied significantly across historical periods, reflecting shifts in societal norms, economic dependencies, and cultural contributions (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1:** A Historical Overview of Prostitution in India

### Proto-Historic Period

During the Proto-Historic Period (c. 3000 BCE – 1500 BCE), the Indus Valley Civilization showcased a sophisticated urban culture with structured social roles. Artistic artifacts, such as terracotta figurines and sculptures of women, have been interpreted as symbols of fertility, reflecting societal attitudes toward sexuality and femininity (Pic. 1). While there is no direct evidence of prostitution, the prevalence of sacred or ritualistic sexual practices linked to fertility cults suggests an institutionalized approach to sexuality. These practices likely served both spiritual and communal functions, indicating that sexuality was an integral, though not explicitly documented, aspect of this ancient civilization. (Clark 2003, McIntosh 2007).



### Early Vedic Period

During the Early Vedic Period (c. 1500 BCE – 1000 BCE), society was largely nomadic and pastoral, with a patriarchal structure. Urbanization was minimal, and social roles focused on kinship and subsistence activities. The *Rigveda*, the earliest Vedic text, does not explicitly reference prostitution but alludes to women who lived outside traditional family structures. These women may have served social or ritualistic roles, reflecting the fluidity of societal norms regarding sexuality. If prostitution existed during this time, it was likely informal and unstructured, emerging organically within a community-oriented lifestyle rather than as a formal institution. Such women, living outside the accepted social framework, were likely viewed with suspicion or marginalization, even as they fulfilled necessary social or ritualistic roles. (Dube 1997, Dwivedi & Malik 2022)

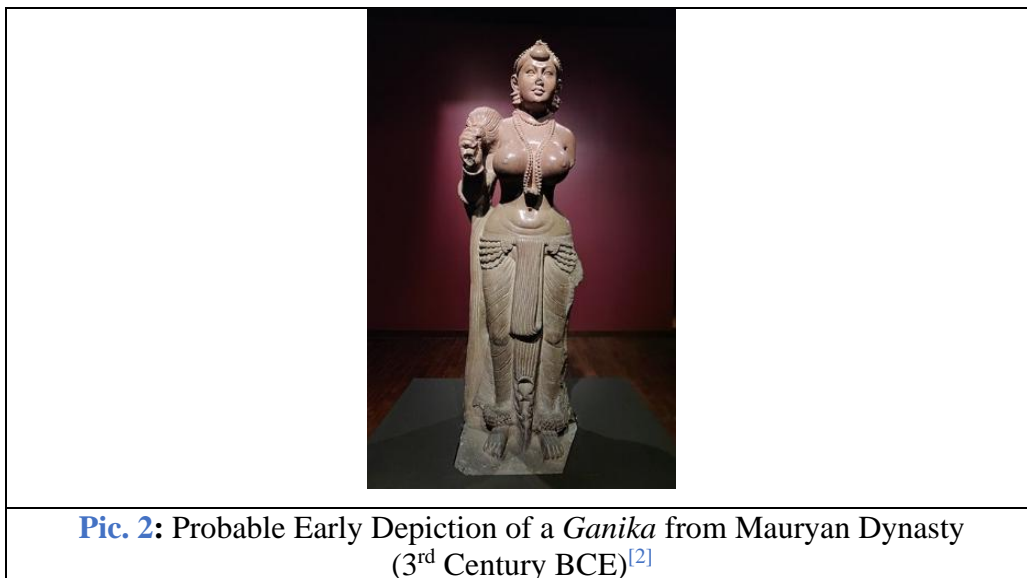
### Later Vedic Period

During the Later Vedic Period (c. 1000 BCE – 600 BCE), society transitioned from a predominantly pastoral economy to settled agrarian systems, accompanied by the rise of early urban settlements. This shift brought increased social complexity and hierarchical structures. Religious texts introduced stricter moral codes, emphasizing social order and ritual propriety. Amid these developments, references to *ganikas* (courtesans) began to appear, suggesting the early institutionalization of prostitution. Courtesans played significant roles, often aligning with ritualistic or social functions, indicating that sexuality, though more regulated, remained an integral aspect of cultural and religious life. Despite their contributions, *ganikas* were often perceived as existing outside

conventional moral boundaries, resulting in social stigma and exclusion from the mainstream familial structure. (Bhattacharji 1987, Saxena 2006)

### Epic, Puranic, and Early Historical Period

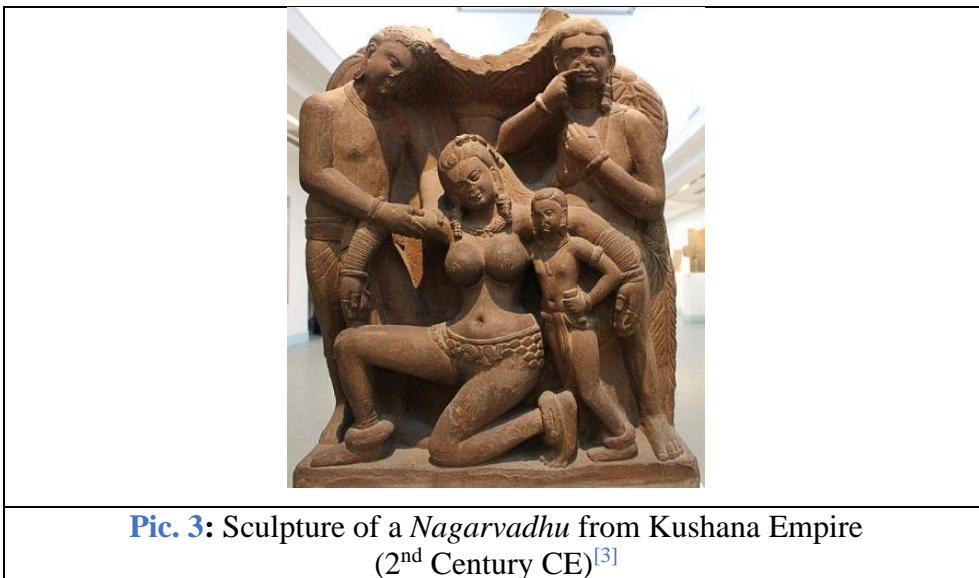
During the Epic, Puranic, and Early Historical Period (c. 600 BCE – 300 CE), prostitution became more institutionalized, particularly with the growth of urban centres and kingdoms. *Ganikas* were esteemed figures, highly skilled in arts, music, and dance, and often held significant social influence (Pic. 2). The *Arthashastra* by Chanakya provides detailed accounts of their professional training, regulation, and taxation. Epic texts like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* portray courtesans as influential individuals, sometimes involved in diplomacy and statecraft. The concept of *nagarvadhu* (city bride) emerged. Temples also began employing women for ritualistic roles, foreshadowing the later *devadasi* tradition, the practice of marrying young girls of lower castes to gods and goddesses. Despite their elevated status in certain aspects of society, courtesans and *nagarvadhus* often faced social exclusion due to their association with sexuality, a factor that kept them on the fringes of accepted social structures. (Hawley 1994, Shamasastri 2011, Chakravarti 2020)



### Classical Period – Gupta and Post-Gupta Era

The Classical Period (c. 300 CE – 750 CE), particularly during the Gupta era, was a time of cultural and artistic flourishing. *Ganikas* were esteemed as custodians of refined arts such as music, dance, and poetry. They played prominent roles in royal courts and

religious festivals, often serving as paragons of sophistication and erudition. *Nagarvadhus* were celebrated courtesans who attained fame through their beauty, intellect, and mastery of the arts (Pic. 3). Texts like the *Kamasutra* by Vatsyayana openly acknowledged prostitution as a natural aspect of urban and courtly life, emphasizing its acceptance within the societal fabric. The period also saw the emergence of the *devadasi* system, where temple women, known as *devadasis* (female slaves of God), performed sacred dances and rituals, blending spirituality with social roles. Initially, *devadasis* enjoyed social respect for their religious and artistic duties. However, over time, they were coerced into serving the sexual needs of temple priests and other high-caste men under the guise of religion. Despite their recognized contributions, *ganikas*, *nagarvadhus*, and *devadasis* often faced societal stigmatization and exclusion, particularly from more conservative segments of society. (Ghosh 1951, Sharma 1983, Burton & Indrajit 2023, Anand 2024)



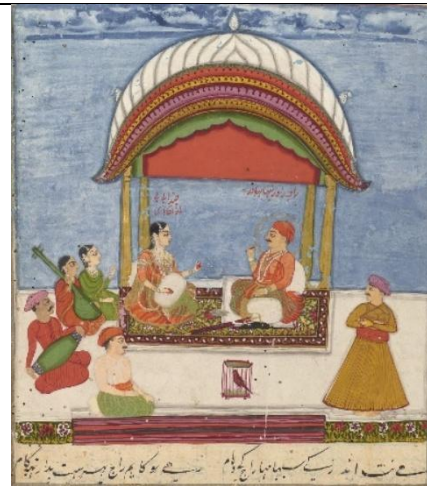
### Medieval Period

During the Early Medieval Period (c. 750 CE – 1200 CE), the *devadasi* system became more entrenched, particularly in South India (Pic. 4). Courtesans and *devadasis* continued to serve as entertainers and religious figures, attached to temples and royal courts. Regional kingdoms patronized courtesans, viewing them as integral to cultural expression. In the Late Medieval Period (c. 1200 CE – 1700 CE), with the advent of Islamic rule, societal attitudes toward prostitution began to shift. While *tawaiifs*

(courtesans) continued to exist, their roles became more confined to entertainment at Mughal *mehfils* (royal courts). In some cases, *tawaiifs* achieved considerable influence (Pic. 5). The *devadasi* system persisted but began to decline under changing religious and political dynamics. Nonetheless, both *tawaiifs* and *devadasis* faced growing marginalization and societal stigma, their roles increasingly relegated to the fringes of mainstream society. (Srinivas 1962, Zaidi 2023, Anand 2024)



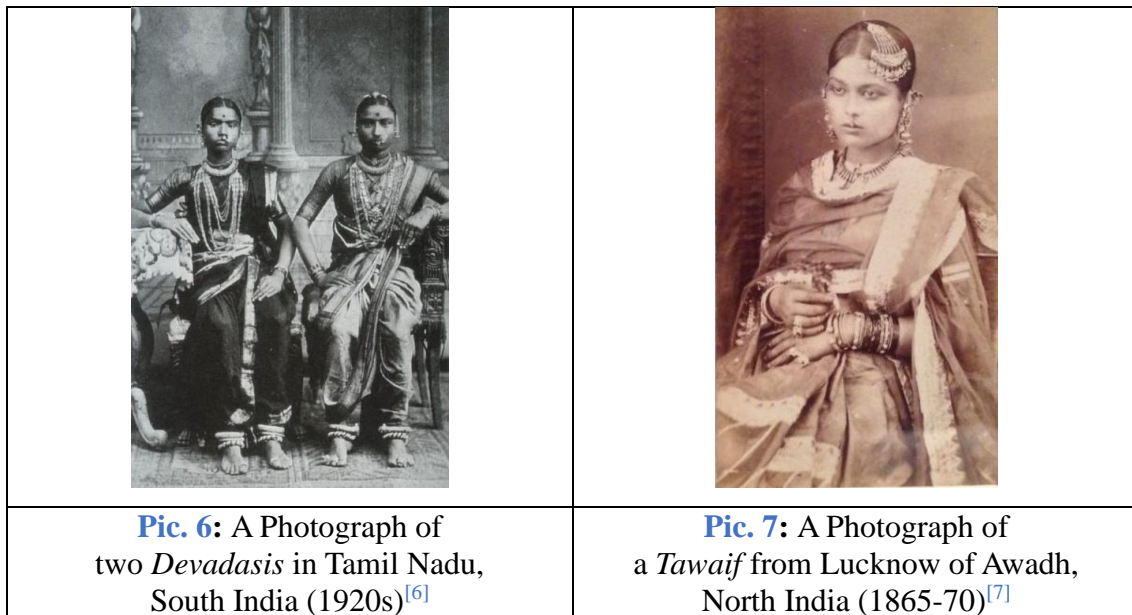
**Pic. 4:** Representation of *Devadasis* in Konark Temple of Odisha (13<sup>th</sup> Century CE)<sup>[4]</sup>



**Pic. 5:** Portrayal of *Tawaiif* in a Miniature Painting (1799 CE)<sup>[5]</sup>

### Colonial Period

During the Early Colonial Period (c. 1500 CE – 1757 CE), European traders introduced new cultural dynamics, including brothels catering to foreign merchants and soldiers. The *devadasi* system remained active, but its association with religious practices began to erode. In the British Colonial Period (c. 1757 CE – 1947 CE), British policies led to the stigmatization of prostitution and the decline of traditional institutions like the *devadasi* system, which were labelled as immoral (Pic. 6,7). Prostitution became more commercialized, with urban red-light districts emerging in colonial cities like Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. *Tawaiifs*, once central to Mughal courts, became marginalized entertainers in colonial urban centres, their roles diminished by British moral reforms. Anti-prostitution campaigns and reformist movements further entrenched societal stigma, isolating sex workers from mainstream society. (Sreenivas 2008, Bhandari 2010, Tripathi 2024).



### Post-Independence Period

In the Post-Independence Period (1947 CE– Present), prostitution remains legal in India but is heavily regulated, with activities like brothels and pimping criminalized under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956. Despite the abolition of the *devadasi* system, it persists in some rural areas due to poverty and social inequities. Red-light areas like GB Road in Delhi, Sonagachi in Kolkata and Kamathipura in Mumbai highlight the ongoing reliance on prostitution as a livelihood (Pic. 8,9,10). NGOs and government initiatives focus on combating trafficking, reducing HIV/AIDS, and supporting sex workers. However, societal stigma and marginalization remain widespread, denying sex workers access to healthcare, legal protection, and social acceptance. Advocacy continues to call for decriminalization and recognition of their rights. (George *et al.* 2010, Sahni & Shankar 2011, Gadekar 2015, Singh & Singh 2023, Baruah & Pathak 2024).





## The Present Scenario of Prostitution in India

Sex work in India is influenced by a complex interplay of economic necessity, social stigma, and differing degrees of organization. A 2004 study titled *Girls and Women in Prostitution*, sponsored by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, estimated that the country had approximately 2.8 million sex workers, with children accounting for 36% of this population (PIB, 2014). The study also provided state and union territory-wise estimates of the number of girls and women engaged in prostitution, offering a detailed regional perspective on the issue (Table. 1).

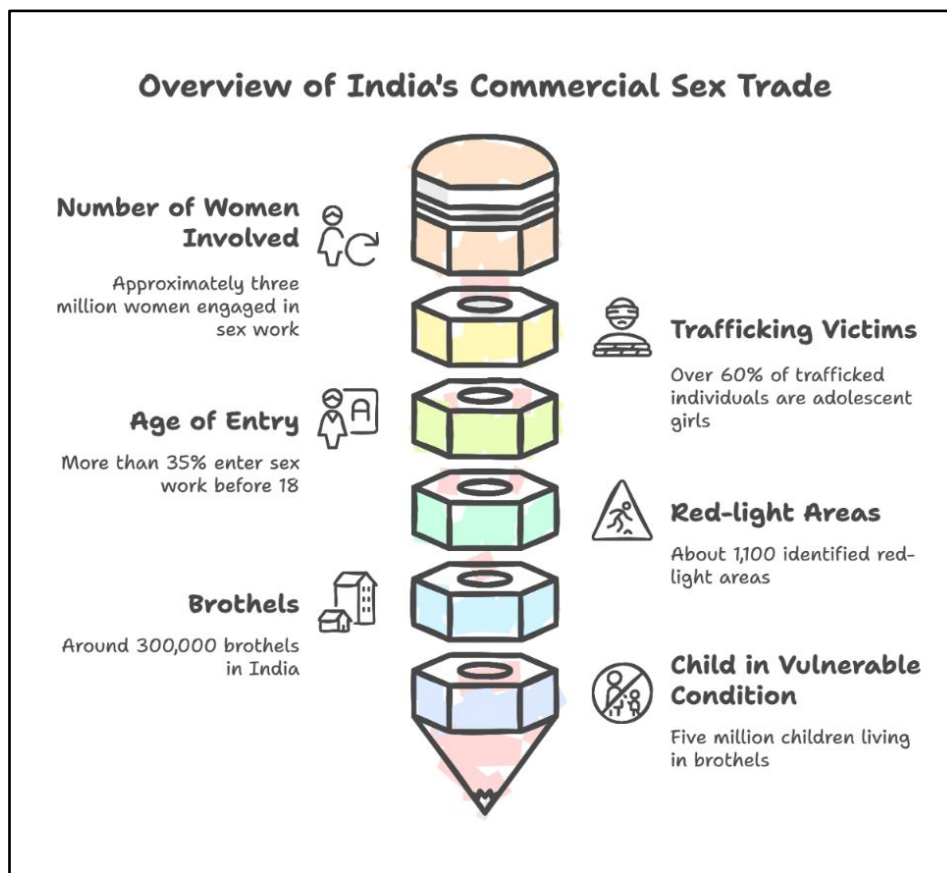
**Table 1:** Number of Girls/Women in Prostitution in India <sup>[11]</sup>

Sl. No.	State/Union Territory	Number of Girls/Women in Prostitution
1	Andhra Pradesh	320024
2	Arunachal Pradesh	2750
3	Assam	52625
4	Bihar	161321
5	Chhattisgarh	12500
6	Goa	5375
7	Gujarat	146950
8	Haryana	15500
9	Himachal Pradesh	5375
10	Jammu & Kashmir	15500
11	Jharkhand	20000
12	Karnataka	200701
13	Kerala	68750
14	Madhya Pradesh	144338
15	Maharashtra	401300
16	Manipur	4875
17	Meghalaya	4250
18	Nagaland	6000

<b>19</b>	Orissa	45066
<b>20</b>	Punjab	45000
<b>21</b>	Rajasthan	167305
<b>22</b>	Sikkim	425
<b>23</b>	Tamil Nadu	303750
<b>24</b>	Tripura	1375
<b>25</b>	Uttar Pradesh	271868
<b>26</b>	Uttarakhand	8125
<b>27</b>	West Bengal	367058
<b>28</b>	Chandigarh	10750
<b>29</b>	Daman & Diu	493
<b>30</b>	Delhi UT	16785
<b>31</b>	Pudducherry	1400
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2827534</b>

According to a report of [India TV News \(2013\)](#), approximately three million women are engaged in commercial sex activity across the country. A significant proportion of these individuals are victims of trafficking, with over 60% of those trafficked being adolescent girls aged between 12 and 16 years. Additionally, more than 35% of girls in India enter commercial sex activity before they turn 18, underscoring the severity of child exploitation in this industry. The commercial sex trade in India operates within an extensive network of red-light districts. There are approximately 1,100 identified red-light areas housing around 300,000 brothels. These establishments not only serve as centres of commercial sex work but also accommodate nearly five million children, many of whom live in deplorable conditions and remain vulnerable to exploitation and abuse ([Fig. 2](#)).

The reported figures on female sex workers in India are based on outdated data, and the actual number today may differ. Accurate statistics are hard to obtain due to the hidden nature of the profession and inconsistencies in data collection methods across studies. The absence of recent comprehensive research makes precise estimates even more challenging. However, existing data highlights the widespread prevalence of prostitution. Understanding its distribution is essential for addressing the socio-economic factors driving it and for developing effective interventions.



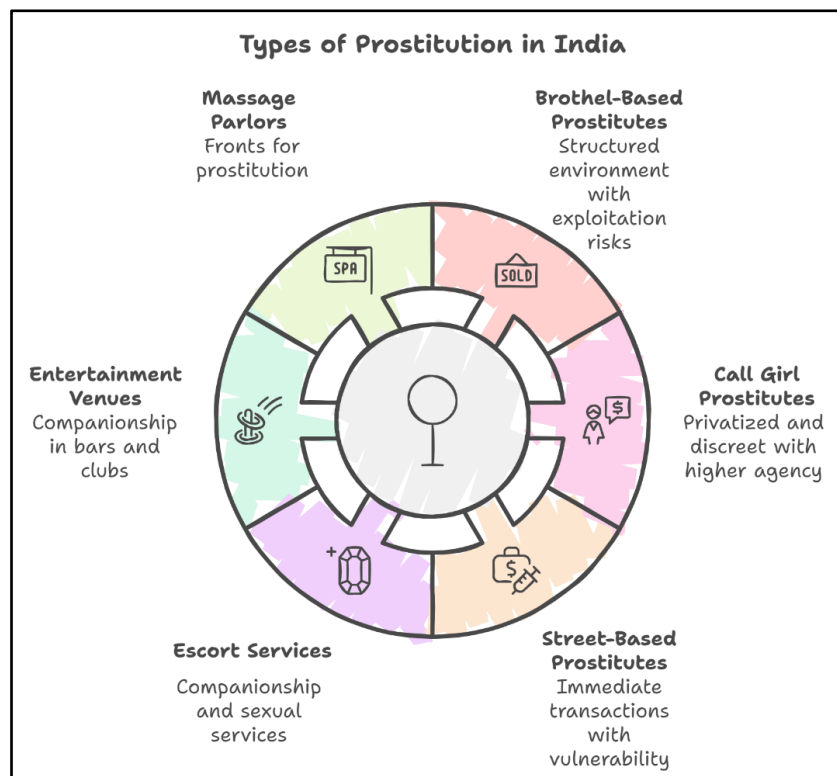
**Fig. 2:** An Overview of Commercial Sex Trade in India

### Recent Forms of Prostitution

Presently, prostitution in India includes a variety of systems, such as street-based sex work, brothel-based arrangements, and forms of sex work that may involve trafficking or coercion. (Sharma 2021, Sharma 2022) These distinctions are important for understanding the complexities of the industry (Fig. 3).

#### *Brothel-Based Prostitutes*

Brothels are among the most traditional forms of organized prostitution in India. These establishments are often managed by former sex workers who transition into managerial or ownership roles. Active sex workers within these brothels typically operate under a commission-based system, with earnings divided between themselves and the brothel owners. Such setups are often located within specific red-light districts and serve as a critical livelihood source for many women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Brothel-based prostitution is structured, with defined hierarchies and operational norms, but workers often face exploitation and limited autonomy.



**Fig. 3: New Forms of Prostitution in India in Present Scenario**

### *Call Girl Prostitutes*

Call girls represent a more privatized and discreet form of prostitution. These individuals rely on telecommunication methods such as phone calls, messaging apps, or dedicated contact cards to arrange appointments. Meetings usually occur in private spaces, such as the call girl's residence, hotels, or other mutually agreed-upon locations. This type of prostitution is generally more lucrative and involves a higher degree of agency for the worker. It caters to clients who seek anonymity and a tailored experience, often negotiated in advance.

### *Street-Based Prostitutes*

Street-based prostitution, or 'window work', involves sex workers soliciting clients in public areas like streets, marketplaces, or thoroughfares. Transactions are typically immediate, and services are carried out in nearby locations. This form of prostitution often involves precarious working conditions, heightened vulnerability to abuse, and minimal security, reflecting the struggles of those at the lower socio-economic strata.

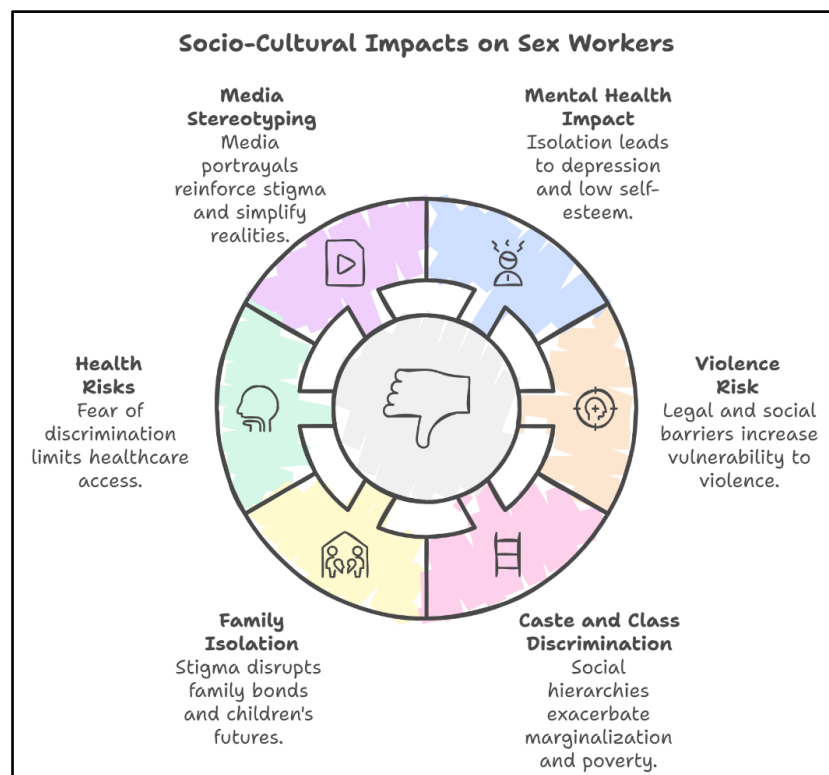
### *Other Categories*

Prostitution extends beyond the primary categories, encompassing workers in diverse environments such as: Escort Services (Employees of agencies offering companionship

alongside sexual services); Entertainment Venues (Workers in bars, clubs, or casinos who provide companionship or transactional sex); Massage Parlors and Amusement Centres (These establishments sometimes serve as fronts for prostitution).

### Socio-Cultural Dimensions

In India, the stigma surrounding sex work is deeply ingrained in cultural views on morality, often leading to the ostracization of sex workers. This societal rejection restricts their access to healthcare, housing, and education. Furthermore, entrenched inequalities related to caste, gender, and class amplify their marginalization, making it difficult for them to secure social inclusion and improve their living conditions (Fig. 4). (George *et al.* 2010, Sahni & Shankar 2011, Venkatesan 2011, Sagade & Forster 2018, Ravi Kumar 2019, Sharma 2021, Jain 2022, Singh & Singh 2023)



**Fig. 4:** Present Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Prostitution in India

### Social Stigma and Marginalization

Prostitution in India is still heavily stigmatized, resulting in significant marginalization of sex workers. The perception of sex work as immoral or unethical leads to severe social ostracization. Sex workers are often shunned by society, including their own families, and

are forced to live in segregated communities. The stigma attached to prostitution deeply impacts the self-esteem and identity of sex workers, who are often viewed as ‘fallen women’ or ‘immoral’. This societal rejection affects their mental health, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation.

### *Violence and Exploitation*

Sex workers are highly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, often perpetrated by clients, pimps, brothel owners, and even law enforcement officials. The threat of violence is a constant reality, with many sex workers facing rape, assault, and coercion. Due to the illegal nature of many aspects of their work and the stigma they face, sex workers are often unable to seek legal protection. The fear of arrest, harassment, or further victimization prevents them from reporting crimes, leaving them with little recourse against abuse.

### *Intersection with Caste and Class*

In India, many sex workers come from marginalized caste backgrounds and economically disadvantaged communities. The intersection of caste, class, and gender discrimination exacerbates their social marginalization. Women from lower castes often enter sex work due to lack of alternative economic opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exploitation. Sex workers from lower castes and poor backgrounds are often rendered invisible in mainstream society. Their experiences and challenges are rarely acknowledged in public discourse, further entrenching their marginalization.

### *Family and Community Impact*

Many sex workers are mothers and primary breadwinners for their families. The need to provide for their children often drives them into or keeps them in sex work. Despite their economic contribution, they are often disowned or kept at a distance by their families due to the stigma associated with their profession. The children of sex workers often face discrimination and exclusion in schools and communities. The stigma attached to their mother's work can affect their education, socialization, and future prospects, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization.

### *Health and Wellbeing*

The stigma and illegality surrounding prostitution make it difficult for sex workers to access healthcare services. Many are reluctant to seek medical help due to fear of discrimination or being reported to authorities. This leads to poor health outcomes, especially in relation to sexual and reproductive health. Sex workers are at higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Despite various

intervention programs, the lack of consistent healthcare access and social support exacerbates their vulnerability to these health risks.

### *Media Representation*

Media portrayal of sex workers often reinforces negative stereotypes, depicting them as either victims or immoral figures. This one-dimensional representation fails to capture the complex realities of their lives, contributing to the perpetuation of stigma. The mainstream narrative often denies sex workers agency, portraying them as passive subjects of exploitation rather than individuals making choices within a constrained set of options.

### *Challenges Faced by Sex Workers*

Sex workers in India encounter significant challenges, including intense societal stigma, legal barriers, and exploitation. Despite legal protections, they face isolation, poor mental health, and limited access to essential services. Law enforcement often targets them, neglecting the root causes like trafficking. Additionally, systemic issues like caste, gender discrimination, and poverty heighten their vulnerability and restrict opportunities for safer work conditions (**Fig. 5**). (Mishra *et al.* 2000, Joffres *et al.* 2008, George *et al.* 2010, Sahni & Shankar 2011, Venkatesan 2011, Bhatta 2017, Sagade & Forster 2018, Ravi Kumar 2019, Sharma 2021, Jain 2022, Islam 2023, Singh & Singh 2023)

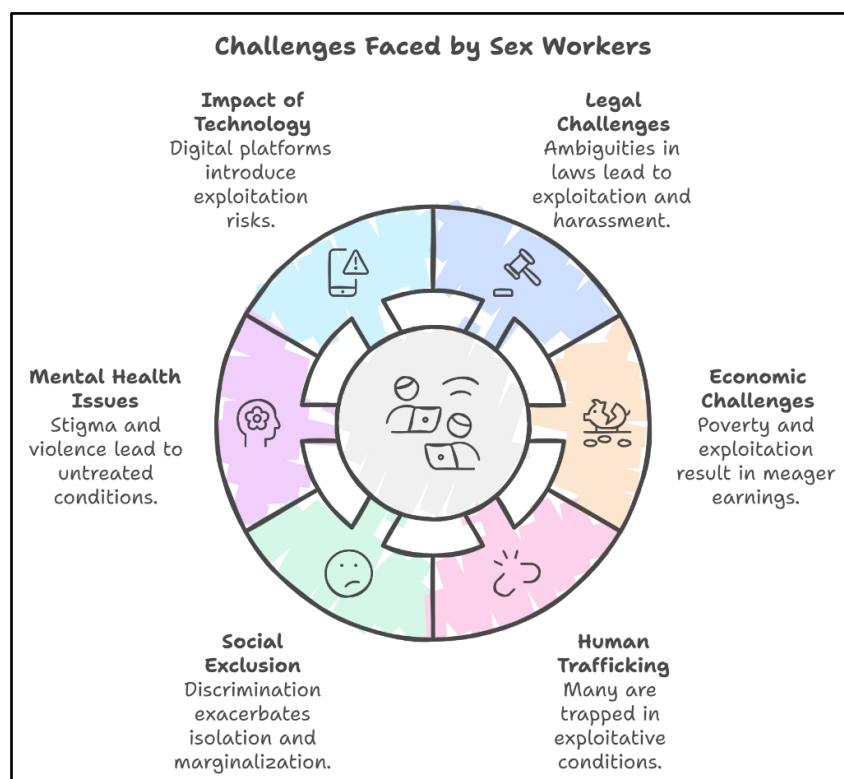
### *Legal Challenges*

While prostitution itself is not illegal in India, related activities such as running a brothel, soliciting in public places, and living off the earnings of sex work are criminalized under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA). This legal ambiguity creates a precarious environment where sex workers are vulnerable to exploitation and harassment by law enforcement. Law enforcement officials often exploit the ambiguities in the law to harass and extort sex workers. Arbitrary arrests are common, and many sex workers report being subjected to violence and bribery demands by police.

### *Economic Challenges*

Many sex workers enter the profession due to a lack of viable economic alternatives. Poverty, lack of education, and the absence of other employment opportunities compel many women, especially from marginalized communities, to take up sex work as a means of survival. Pimps, brothel owners, and other intermediaries often exploit sex workers economically. The earnings of sex workers are frequently siphoned off by these

middlemen, leaving the workers themselves with meagre incomes despite the dangers and hardships they endure.



**Fig. 5:** Challenge Faced by Sex Workers in Present Scenario in India

### *Human Trafficking*

Human trafficking remains a significant challenge in India, with many women and children being trafficked into sex work. Trafficked individuals are often kept in conditions of slavery, with little chance of escape or rehabilitation. Trafficked sex workers face immense legal and social barriers to escaping their situation. The lack of effective law enforcement, corruption, and the stigma attached to their work make it difficult for them to seek help and reintegrate into society.

### *Social Exclusion and Discrimination*

Sex workers often face discrimination when accessing public services such as healthcare, education, and housing. This discrimination exacerbates their social exclusion and limits their opportunities for social mobility. The social stigma attached to prostitution leads to a lack of support networks for sex workers. They often find themselves isolated, with few allies or advocates who can help them navigate the challenges they face.



### *Mental Health Issues*

The constant exposure to stigma, violence, and social exclusion takes a severe toll on the mental health of sex workers. Many suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There is a severe lack of mental health services tailored to the needs of sex workers. The stigma associated with their profession often deters them from seeking help, leading to untreated mental health issues.

### *Impact of Technology*

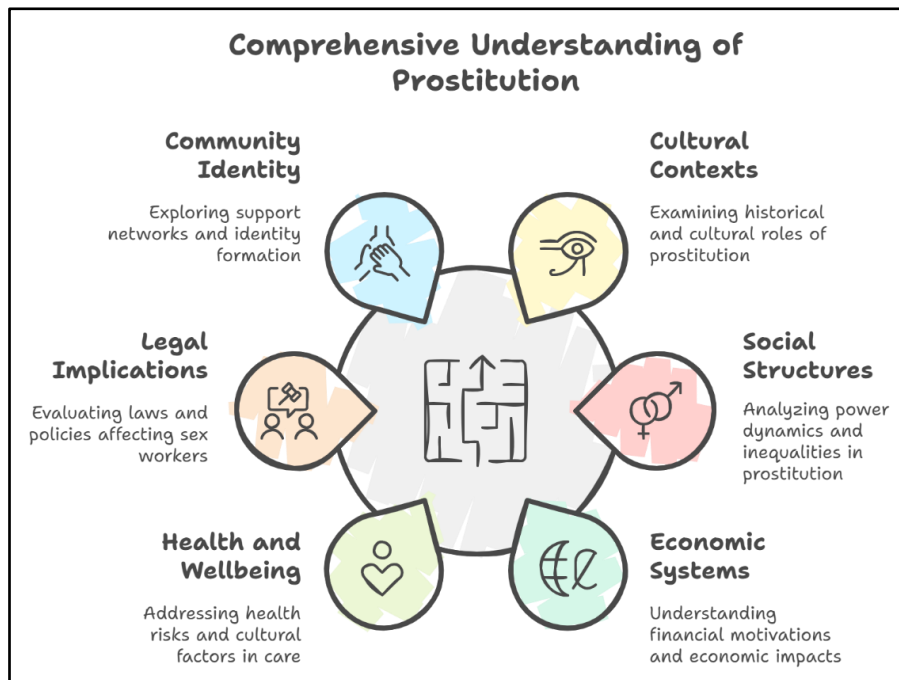
The rise of digital platforms has brought new challenges for sex workers, including cyber exploitation, blackmail, and unauthorized sharing of personal information. These technologies have increased the avenues for exploitation while also exposing sex workers to new forms of abuse. Many sex workers lack access to digital literacy and technology, which could help them navigate safer work practices or access legal and social services. The digital divide further marginalizes them in an increasingly digital world.

## **Anthropological Perspective on Prostitution**

The study of prostitution within anthropology offers a rich scope to explore its cultural, historical, social, and economic dimensions. It examines how societal norms, gender dynamics, and power hierarchies influence the lives of sex workers and their representation. Anthropological research highlights the historical roles of sex workers, while addressing modern challenges like stigma, exploitation, and health risks. This research is significant in humanizing sex workers, informing evidence-based policies, and advocating for their rights and dignity. By emphasizing cultural sensitivity and global-local dynamics, anthropology provides a holistic understanding of prostitution's complexities.

### **Scope of Anthropological Research in the Area of Prostitution**

Anthropological research on prostitution explores its connections to human behaviour, social hierarchies, cultural values, healthcare facilities and economic systems. It examines the historical and cultural roles of sex work and the societal norms shaping its perception. The field investigates power dynamics, such as gender and class, and their impact on sex workers' lives. It also studies prostitution's integration into local and global economies, highlighting labour conditions and migration patterns. (**Fig. 6**)



**Fig. 6:** Multifaceted Anthropological Research in the Area of Prostitution

### *Cultural and Historical Contexts*

Anthropological research can trace the historical development of prostitution across different cultures and time periods, examining how societal attitudes towards sex work have evolved. This includes studying the roles of *ganikas*, *nagarvadhu*, *devadasis*, and *tawaiifs* in Indian history, as well as the shifting legal and moral frameworks that have influenced their status. The cultural significance of prostitution varies across societies. Anthropology can explore how different cultures define and regulate prostitution, how sex work is integrated into or excluded from societal norms, and how cultural beliefs shape the lives of sex workers.

### *Social Structures and Power Dynamics*

Anthropologists can investigate how prostitution reflects and reinforces gendered power dynamics, examining the roles of patriarchy, gender inequality, and economic dependency in driving women into sex work. This includes studying how sex workers navigate these power structures and the strategies they employ to gain autonomy. In societies like India, where caste and class play crucial roles, anthropology can explore how these social hierarchies intersect with prostitution. Research can focus on how marginalized communities are disproportionately represented in sex work and how these social categories influence their experiences and treatment.

### *Economic Systems and Labor*

Anthropologists can study prostitution as a form of labour, exploring how it fits within broader economic systems. This includes examining the economic motivations for entering sex work, the financial dynamics within the industry, and the impact of economic policies on sex workers' livelihoods. The impact of globalization on prostitution, including the cross-border trafficking of individuals and the migration of sex workers, is another area of study. Anthropology can explore how global economic forces and migration patterns shape the experiences of sex workers and the nature of the sex industry.

### *Health and Wellbeing*

Anthropological research can investigate the health risks associated with prostitution, including the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), mental health challenges, and barriers to accessing healthcare. Research can also examine how cultural beliefs and stigma affect health-seeking behaviours among sex workers. Anthropology plays a significant role in evaluating the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs targeted at sex workers. Researchers can explore the social and cultural factors that influence the success of these interventions.

### *Legal and Policy Implications*

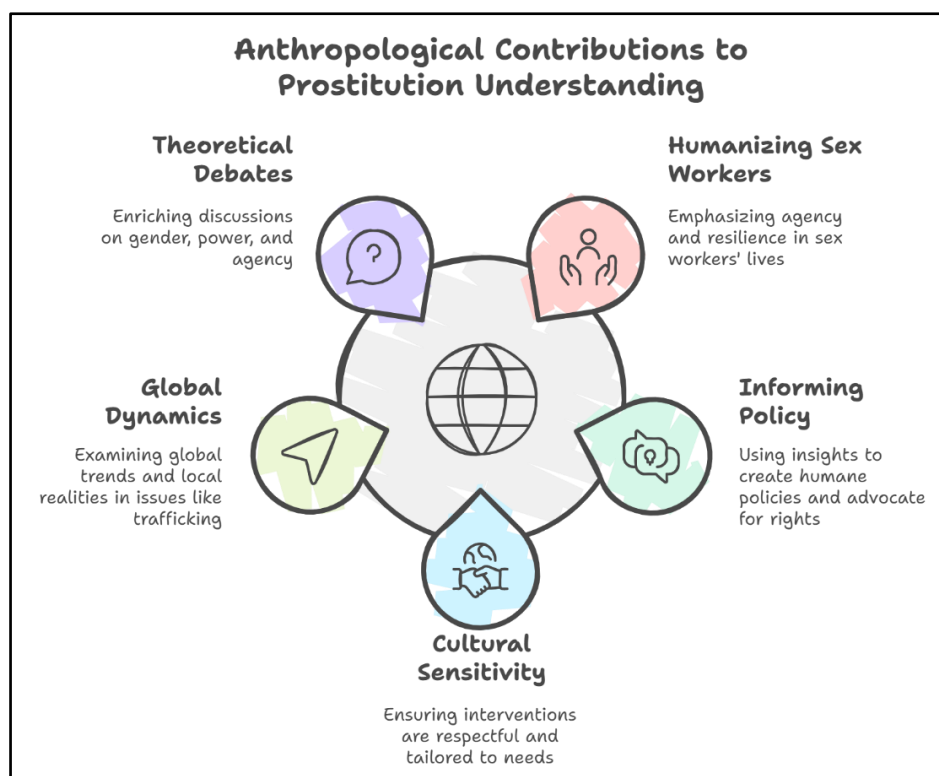
Anthropologists can analyse the impact of legal systems on prostitution, including how laws are enforced, how sex workers navigate legal challenges, and the broader implications of criminalization or legalization of sex work. This research can inform policy debates and advocacy efforts aimed at improving the rights and protections for sex workers. The study of prostitution through a human rights lens is crucial in anthropology. Research can focus on the rights of sex workers, issues of consent, autonomy, and the impact of trafficking and exploitation on human dignity.

### *Community and Identity*

Anthropological research can explore the social networks and communities that sex workers form, examining how these networks provide support, solidarity, and a sense of identity. Research can also investigate the role of community-based organizations in advocating for sex workers' rights and wellbeing. Anthropology can delve into how sex workers perceive their own identities and how they assert agency within a stigmatized profession. This includes understanding how they negotiate their personal and professional lives and how they challenge societal norms and stereotypes.

## Significance of Anthropological Research in the Area of Prostitution

Anthropological research on prostitution provides critical insights into the social, cultural, and economic factors shaping sex work. It humanizes sex workers by challenging stereotypes and highlighting their agency and resilience. This research plays a vital role in informing policies, advocating for rights, and designing culturally sensitive interventions. By addressing global and local dynamics, anthropology contributes to understanding and tackling complex issues like trafficking, migration, and social marginalization. (Fig. 7)



**Fig. 7:** Contribution of Anthropological Research in Prostitution Understanding

### *Humanizing Sex Workers*

Anthropological research helps to humanize sex workers by moving beyond stereotypes and providing nuanced, in-depth accounts of their lives. This research challenges the reductionist views that often portray sex workers merely as victims or immoral individuals, highlighting their agency, resilience, and complexity. Anthropologists often work closely with marginalized communities, including sex workers, to amplify their voices. This participatory approach ensures that the perspectives of sex workers are included in discussions about their rights, policies, and programs that affect them.

### *Informing Policy and Advocacy*

Anthropological research provides evidence-based insights that can inform policies related to prostitution. By understanding the lived experiences of sex workers, policymakers can develop more effective and humane approaches that address the root causes of sex work, protect the rights of sex workers, and reduce harm. Advocacy groups often rely on anthropological research to support their efforts in promoting the rights and wellbeing of sex workers. Research findings can be used to challenge harmful laws, advocate for decriminalization, and push for better access to healthcare and social services.

### *Cultural Sensitivity in Interventions*

Anthropological research emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity in designing interventions for sex workers. Understanding the cultural context in which sex work occurs allows for the development of programs that are respectful of local beliefs and practices, increasing their effectiveness and acceptance within the community. By identifying the specific challenges and risks faced by sex workers in different cultural contexts, anthropology can contribute to harm reduction strategies that are tailored to the needs of sex workers, thereby improving their safety and wellbeing.

### *Addressing Global and Local Dynamics*

Anthropological research examines how global economic and social trends impact local prostitution markets, providing insights into the complex interplay between global forces and local realities. This understanding is crucial in addressing issues such as trafficking, migration, and the effects of international policies on sex workers. Anthropologists often conduct comparative studies across different societies, contributing to a broader understanding of how prostitution is shaped by varying cultural, economic, and legal factors. This comparative approach helps identify best practices and lessons that can be applied across different contexts.

### *Contributing to Theoretical Debates*

Anthropological research on prostitution contributes to broader theoretical debates on gender, power, and agency. By examining how sex work intersects with issues of gender inequality, economic exploitation, and social marginalization, anthropology enriches our understanding of these critical concepts. The study of prostitution challenges existing moral and ethical frameworks, prompting scholars and policymakers to rethink assumptions about sexuality, consent, and exploitation. Anthropology's focus on lived experiences and cultural relativism offers a unique perspective on these debates.

## Conclusion

Prostitution in India has long been intertwined with the country's socio-cultural, economic, and legal frameworks. Historically, the roles and perceptions of women engaged in sex work have mirrored broader societal structures, reflecting changes in power dynamics, cultural values, and economic conditions. Despite their societal contributions, sex workers have consistently faced marginalization, exploitation, and stigma. Understanding prostitution through an anthropological lens is crucial for informing humane and effective policies that protect the rights and dignity of sex workers. This approach demands consideration of historical contexts, cultural sensitivities, and the voices of those most affected. Anthropological research on prostitution covers a broad spectrum, including cultural, social, economic, legal, and health-related aspects. The significance of this research lies in its capacity to humanize sex workers, inform policy with cultural sensitivity, address both global and local dynamics, and contribute to theoretical debates. Anthropology thus plays a key role in fostering a more nuanced, empathetic, and effective understanding of prostitution and the lives of those involved.

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Dr. Shuchi Srivastava is working as a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology, National Post Graduate College, Lucknow, India. She is the author of four books (*Business Anthropology: Observing Business through an Anthropologist's Eye*, *Megaliths: The Monumental Past*, *Ageing: Life at the Edge*, *Car Nicobar: A Medico-Anthropological Study*) and has published about forty research papers in various international and national journals and presented many research papers in different seminars and conferences. She also virtually published art exhibit of Megaliths' sketches in two volumes (*Megalithic Monuments*, *Indian Megaliths*). Her major areas of interest are Social-Cultural Anthropology, Visual Anthropology, Business Anthropology, Medical Anthropology, Social Gerontology and Archaeological Anthropology.