Empowering Change: Addressing the Roots of intergenerational Prostitution in India

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational caste-based prostitution remains a critical social and public health issue in India. Marginalized communities continue to face systemic exploitation due to socio-economic deprivation, caste-based discrimination, and entrenched cultural practices. **Aims & Objectives:** The objective of this review is to examine the historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors sustaining intergenerational prostitution in India, to explore its impact on marginalized communities, and to identify potential solutions and public health interventions for meaningful social transformation. **Methodology:** A narrative review was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, government reports, NGO publications, and policy documents. Literature addressing caste-linked prostitution, socio-economic drivers, and rehabilitation strategies was included. Data were thematically synthesized under categories such as historical marginalization, policy gaps, and intervention strategies. **Results:** Findings highlight that communities like the Bedia, Perna, Nat, and Banchhada remain trapped in prostitution due to historical oppression, poverty, and lack of education. Colonial-era laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act and practices like the Devadasi system reinforced the cycle. Stigma, health risks, and gender inequality exacerbate vulnerability. **Conclusion:** Breaking the intergenerational cycle requires a multi-level approach involving legal reforms, access to education, economic empowerment, and community-based interventions to restore dignity and reduce exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

The Bhagavad Gita, a timeless philosophical scripture, offers profound insights into the human psyche. It explains how sensory attractions lead to intense desires and ownership cravings. As individuals seek fulfilment, they encounter emotions like uncontrolled desire and rage. The Gita identifies Tamsic traits such as lust (Kama), greed, insatiable attachment, and baseless self-glorification, revealing darker aspects of human nature (1).

Ancient Indian Puranas classified women based on their number of partners—from Kulata (two lovers) to Mahaveshya (more than five). While virginity-based morality was emphasized during the Vedic period, the Rig Veda acknowledges the presence of both prostitution and alcohol. The Kamasutra references girls like Pumschali and Mahanangi, often forced into prostitution due to lack of male protection. In the Mahabharata era, courtesans were admired by elites, adorned in red garments and gold jewelry (2).

During the Mughal period, prostitution was institutionalized—Emperor Akbar's seraglio and the Tawaifs exemplify this. Colonialism diminished their status, forcing many into full-time sex work.

Similarly, in ancient Babylon, Greece, and Japan, prostitution existed across classes—from temple workers to elite courtesans (2).

The Devadasi system once involved girls "married" to deities. Though once respected, colonial policies impoverished them, pushing many into prostitution for survival (3).

MATERIAL & METHODS

Study Type & Study Design: This study was conducted as a review, synthesizing evidence from published literature, government reports, and NGO publications to examine the socio-economic, historical, and cultural determinants of intergenerational prostitution in India.

Study Setting: The review was limited to the Indian context, with particular focus on communities historically or currently involved in caste-based and intergenerational prostitution.

Study Duration: The review was completed over a period of one month.

Search Strategy: A comprehensive literature search was conducted using databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar to gather relevant academic literature. Additionally, government reports, NGO publications, policy documents, and credible news sources were reviewed to capture a holistic view of the issue. Key search terms included: intergenerational prostitution, Perna caste, criminal tribes, Devadasi system, denotified tribes, marginalized communities, sex work in India, and gender-based exploitation. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine the search, and filters were applied to include only English-language.

Selection Criteria: The inclusion criteria for this review encompassed studies and reports that specifically focused on intergenerational or caste-based prostitution in India. Literature examining the legal, social, historical, and economic dimensions of this issue was also considered. Additionally, articles addressing health, education, or rehabilitation efforts for sex workers were included to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges and interventions related to the topic.

Data Extraction: Relevant information was extracted and thematically categorized based on recurring concepts, including historical marginalization, gendered violence, policy and legal gaps, and intervention strategies. Each selected source was analysed for its contribution to understanding the factors sustaining the cycle of exploitation and the potential measures for empowerment and rehabilitation. The synthesized data formed the basis for analysis and recommendations in this review.

RESULTS

Prostitution as a profession in the modern world

Prostitution, often labelled the world's oldest profession, reflects the commodification of female sexuality in capitalist societies. Though legal in some nations, it remains deeply stigmatized, with sex workers facing discrimination, societal judgment, and marginalization. Many women enter the trade due to financial crises, linking prostitution to broader socioeconomic injustices.

In India, certain communities are historically engaged in sex work, where children are often pulled into the trade. This intergenerational cycle reflects entrenched social issues, demanding targeted interventions. Women from these backgrounds face compounded discrimination, poverty, and limited access to rights, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

Multiple factors contribute to prostitution. Childhood maltreatment—abuse, neglect, and lack of emotional support—can lower self-esteem and lead individuals toward sex work. Negative peer influence further exacerbates vulnerability. In some cases, familial involvement sustains the cycle, where prostitution becomes normalized within families, pushing individuals into the trade due to deep-rooted generational practices.

Table 1 Location based areas involved in Prostitution

NAME OF THE AREAS	LOCATION
Sonagachi	Red light district in Kolkata
Kamathipura	Mumbai
Budhwar Peth	Pune
Itwari	Nagpur
Ganga Jamuna	Nagpur
Meergunj	Allahabad
Shivdaspur	Varanasi
Chaturbhujsthan	Muzaffarpur
GB Road	Delhi
Reshampura	Gwalior

Source- (4,5)

Red-light districts in India's cities are hubs for the sex trade. Sonagachi in Kolkata, home to over 11,000 sex workers in 700+ brothels, gained global attention through the documentary Born into Brothels. Other major centers include Kamathipura (Mumbai), Budhwar Peth (Pune), GB Road (Delhi), and Itwari (Nagpur). While synonymous with sex work, these areas also face stigma due to criminal activities and illegal practices.

The existence of red-light districts is closely tied to migrant influxes and poverty, with many sex workers coming from low-income backgrounds and

entering the trade due to financial hardships and lack of support systems. In many cases, the absence of social safety nets perpetuates their exploitation. While some initiatives advocate for sex workers' rights, many still face systemic denial of basic rights and protection (6).

Association of caste with intergenerational prostitution

Intergenerational prostitution involves daughters being coerced into sex work, following their mothers or female relatives. Driven by poverty, cultural norms, and lack of education, it persists in marginalized communities. Limited support and few alternatives trap women in this cycle, reinforcing prostitution as a survival strategy across generations (7,8).

Intergenerational prostitution is common among lower-caste groups like the Banchhada, Bedias, Perna, and Nat. Once nomadic performers, they were labeled "criminal tribes" in 1871, losing traditional livelihoods. Despite denotification in 1952, they remain marginalized, with many communities still dependent on prostitution for survival due to social exclusion and economic hardship (9,10).

In Madhya Pradesh, Banchhada families expect at least one daughter to become a prostitute instead of marrying. Girls enter the trade between ages 10-12, with younger girls fetching higher rates. In the Perna caste, women are pushed into prostitution after puberty and may face violence if they resist. These girls witness sex work from a young age, normalizing the practice and reinforcing the cycle. The younger the girl, the higher the fee, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

The Criminal Tribes Act played a major role in pushing entire communities into sex work. Enacted after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, it targeted nomadic and tribal groups that were perceived as threats to British rule. Stripped of their traditional means of income, these communities faced systemic oppression, further embedding prostitution as their primary means of survival (10).

Women in these communities bear the brunt of survival, often forced into prostitution to provide for their families. However, society continues to scrutinize and blame women while ignoring the role of men in perpetuating this cycle. Gender bias and caste discrimination keep women trapped in a cycle of judgment, exploitation, and oppression.

It is time to dismantle these oppressive structures and provide women with dignity, independence, and safety. Ensuring access to education, vocational training, and economic opportunities can help break the cycle of intergenerational prostitution and create a just and empowered society for all.

Geographical distribution of communities involved in intergenerational prostitution in India

Name Of The Community	Total Population	State Of Residence	Status Of Classification
		Bihar	Nomadic (Muslim)
		Chandigarh	Nomadic
		Chhattisgarh	Nomadic (kalbela)
		Delhi	De-notified (Nat, Rana), Nomadic(Nat, Bazigar)
		Gujarat	Nomadic
		Haryana	De-notified
Nat community	592,000	Himachal Pradesh	De-notified
		Jharkhand	De-notified
		Karnataka	De-notified
		Madhya Pradesh	De-notified
		Maharashtra	De-notified
		Punjab	De-notified, Nomadic, criminal tribe
		Rajasthan	Nomadic, Criminal tribe
		Tripura	De-notified
		Uttarakhand	De-notified
		West Bengal	Nomadic
		Uttar Pradesh	Criminal tribe
		Assam	Nomadic
		Bihar	Nomadic
		Chhattisgarh	De-notified
		Jharkhand	De-notified
Bedia Community	663,000	Madhya Pradesh	De-notified (scheduled caste)
		Odisha	De-notified

Name Of The Community	Total Population	State Of Residence	Status Of Classification
		Rajasthan	De-notified
		UP	De-notified
		West Bengal	Nomadic, Criminal tribe
Perna	4600	NCT Of Delhi	Nomadic
Banchhada	23000	Madhya Pradesh	Criminal tribe
Wadia village	575	Gujarat	Nomadic
		Karnataka	Nomadic
		Maharashtra	Nomadic
Devadasis	48,358	Andhra Pradesh	Nomadic
		Tamil Nadu	Nomadic

Source- [10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17]

Distribution of various intergenerational prostitution communities across India.

Source- Created by the authors based on published studies.

Various intergenerational prostitution communities and their socioeconomic struggles-
Intergenerational prostitution remains a harsh reality in India, affecting marginalized communities across various regions. While each group has a unique history, common themes such as poverty, cultural traditions, and systemic discrimination have entrenched this practice. Examining the historical and economic factors behind these communities provides insight into the deep-rooted nature of intergenerational prostitution.

The Bedia group in central India, once renowned for their rai folk performances, saw their livelihoods diminish with the collapse of monarchies and the onset of colonial rule. Historically, Bedia artists entertained kings, zamindars, Mughal soldiers, and British officials through dance and music. However, following the 1857 rebellion, British authorities restricted their movements, cutting off vital income sources and leading to the decline of their artistic traditions. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British colonial administration labeled them a "criminal tribe," further pushing them into poverty and marginalization. Despite later being classified as Scheduled Castes under the Indian Constitution, the Bedia people continue to struggle with poverty, exclusion, and reliance on prostitution for survival.

Their involvement in girl trafficking and the commercial sex industry has further damaged their social standing and acceptance (18).

The Perna community, largely based in Najafgarh, Delhi, continues to suffer from the stigma imposed during British colonial rule. Despite the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952, this denotified tribe (DNT) still faces discrimination, poverty, and limited access to education and employment opportunities (19,20). In Perna culture, prostitution is normalized as a family duty, often enforced by in-laws. Girls grow up believing it's customary to be prostituted by their husbands, earning the label "husband's prostitutes" (22). Women solicit clients at bus stops and auto stands, frequently subjected to police exploitation and harassment. Their earnings range from ₹100–300 per session, occasionally reaching ₹1,000 (19). After working through the night, they return home to manage domestic responsibilities. While some mothers are striving to educate their daughters and break this cycle, many remain unaware of their rights, underscoring the urgent need for government action and targeted social welfare initiatives.

The Nat community, found across multiple Indian states, has historically been associated with acrobatics and dance. The Sanskrit word nata,

meaning "dancer," highlights their ancestral link to gymnastics and performance arts. While most Nats follow Hindu traditions, some converted to Islam over time. Sadly, a small but significant portion of the Nat population has been involved in commercial sex work for generations, further deepening their social marginalization and economic vulnerability (10).

The Banchhada community that was also included in the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 largely live in the Madhya Pradesh districts of Ratlam, Mandsaur, and Neemuch, primarily around NH 79. The Banchhada community depends on commercial sex work for a living. Interestingly, they regard the birth of a girl child as auspicious because she is viewed as a potential earning member of the family, shedding light on their distinct cultural ideas (10).

The Sarania community of Gujarat were historically excellent at shining and sharpening swords, and their responsibility was to keep troops' weapons in good condition. Sarania women also accompanied the soldiers, entertaining them with singing and dancing in their spare time. However, when India's independence, the zamindari system was abolished, and their customary profession diminished. As a result, some Sarania families turned to commercial sex work for a living (10).

Wadia Village in North Gujarat is well-known for being a prostitution hub. In this community, the birth of a girl is celebrated since it means the family now has another breadwinner. Tragically, girls in Wadia are groomed to be prostitutes from an early age, with some starting as young as 12 years old. Meanwhile, local lads are being educated to become pimps. Customers come from all around the country, including Ahmedabad, Pakistan, Rajasthan, and Mumbai. Sex can be purchased for anywhere between INR 500 and 10,000. This sad condition underlines the village's prevalence of sexual exploitation, in which young girls are coerced into a life that deprives them of their dignity and basic human rights (3).

Social practices and cultural norms contribute to prostitution, as stigma and prejudice can push individuals into sex work for survival or acceptance. The inability to arrange marriages may lead to despair, prompting some to turn to prostitution for financial support or companionship. Misconceptions about sexuality, lack of education, and exposure to harmful media portrayals may also contribute to this decision. Trauma from experiences like incest or rape leaves lasting psychological scars, increasing vulnerability to exploitation. Early marriage and abandonment may force individuals into prostitution. In some communities, the absence of leisure options and widespread acceptance of prostitution normalize

the practice. Economic hardship further limits choices, having sex work a means of survival (5).

Therefore, it is important to throw light on intergenerational prostitution in marginalised populations all across the states of India. Multiple layers of prejudice, economic hardship, and social shame exist in many areas, creating a cycle of exploitation and limiting access to basic rights and opportunities (23).

Impact of Prostitution on individual's lives and their families

Marginalized communities face severe challenges, with women often turning to prostitution for survival due to limited economic opportunities. Historical stigmatization such as criminal tribes and gender-based violence further exacerbate their struggles. A lack of awareness about legal rights and restricted access to welfare programs perpetuate the cycle of exploitation, requiring urgent reforms (24).

Child prostitution is a significant issue, with many entering the trade before 18. Vulnerable adolescents are exploited, and while laws like the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act target facilitators, they often fail to protect or assist sex workers themselves.

Sex workers face severe health risks, including HIV, STDs, cervical cancer, and psychological disorders. Unprotected sex contributes to AIDS transmission, while social stigma restricts access to healthcare. Rehabilitation requires education, vocational training, and counselling, but societal biases and limited resources hinder progress. Targeted interventions are crucial for protection and long-term recovery (5).

Traditional sex work communities face significant challenges, including social isolation and limited interaction with mainstream society, which reinforces their marginalization. Children in these communities often lack parental support for education and face discrimination, abuse, and neglect. Despite these hardships, with proper support like education and social inclusion programs, they can break the cycle of marginalization and succeed. Providing opportunities for personal development can uplift these communities and create a path toward a better future for their children (10).

The legal status of prostitution in India-

The legalization of prostitution in India remains a highly debated issue. Supporters argue that it can safeguard sex workers, while opponents raise concerns about societal consequences such as exploitation and moral decline (5).

Arguments against legalizing prostitution in India: Critics of legalizing prostitution in India argue it

violates societal values and may signal acceptance of immorality. Concerns include increased objectification of women, trafficking under legal cover, and altered family dynamics. While regulation may address health issues, sexually transmitted diseases could persist due to non-compliance, and exploitation might worsen with increased demand.

Arguments for legalizing prostitution in India: Legalization could protect sex workers from exploitation and abuse. Granting them legal rights, healthcare access, and safety measures can improve their conditions. The government could regulate the sector by enforcing health screenings, condom use, and measures to control the spread of sexually transmitted infections. Legalization would also allow authorities to focus on combating human trafficking and forced prostitution. Proper regulations can help identify trafficking victims while generating tax revenue. Furthermore, legalization may help reduce stigma, offering sex workers social acceptance and dignity (25,26).

Prostitution laws in India are complex. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1956 (ITPA) criminalizes activities like brothel-keeping, solicitation, trafficking, and pimping but does not explicitly outlaw prostitution. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) also penalizes child prostitution, targeting those who buy, sell, or exploit minors.

Sex workers have fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the right to life. The Supreme Court, in Budhadev Karmaskar vs. State of West Bengal, affirmed their right to dignity and vocational training. Article 23 prohibits trafficking and forced labor, making violations punishable by law.

The debate on legalizing prostitution in India remains complex, involving human rights, public health, and social norms. A balanced approach is needed to protect sex workers' rights while addressing societal concerns, ensuring both legal safeguards and rehabilitation opportunities.

Breaking the cycle

To break the cycle of prostitution, a coordinated effort is necessary to address root causes and provide support to those affected. A multilevel and multisectoral approach is essential to end intergenerational prostitution.

Government Level: A comprehensive strategy is essential to combat intergenerational prostitution. Government efforts should focus on providing accessible formal education for children and non-formal education like Anganwadis for adults. Collaborating with NGOs to offer vocational training and trauma counselling is vital for rehabilitation. Enhanced monitoring at railway stations and law enforcement training can help detect human trafficking. Strengthening Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and coordinating with authorities like Childline, CWC, and police is crucial to combat child labour and trafficking. Additionally, reinforcing cybercrime cells and encouraging community policing in low-income areas will improve the safety of vulnerable women and children. A joint effort from the state, civil society, and multiple ministries is necessary for effective intervention (27).

National Level: Raising awareness and improving legal literacy is essential for empowering victims and sex workers. Workshops, campaigns, and media coverage can highlight the exploitative nature of prostitution and available support. Promoting helplines for immediate assistance and addressing culturally sanctioned practices like the devadasi system through collaboration among religious leaders, communities, and policymakers is vital for creating a more inclusive, equitable society (5).

Subnational Level: Recognizing the needs of denotified tribes and communities involved in intergenerational prostitution is crucial. Targeted policies like school scholarships and vocational training can offer economic independence. Collaboration with the Ministry of Skill Development can ensure job placements. Establishing residential educational institutions, aftercare programs, and monitoring mechanisms will protect children from exploitation and provide them with healthcare, skills, and support during transitions.

Societal Level: A supportive and compassionate environment is necessary for those affected by intergenerational prostitution. Public awareness campaigns on gender equality, violence against women, and exploitation can drive cultural change. Strengthening cybercrime units and community policing can enhance crime reporting and create safer spaces for vulnerable women and children.

Local Level: Community-based organizations like Apne Aap play a key role in addressing vulnerabilities and providing alternative livelihoods. Collaborating with municipal governments, NGOs, and civil society can improve intervention effectiveness (28).

Medical Interventions: Medical interventions are vital for promoting the health of sex workers and vulnerable groups. Offering female condoms, organizing sexual health screening camps, and implementing family health insurance can reduce financial barriers and ensure equitable access to care. Tailored healthcare claims will enhance accessibility. Integrating these measures with government and societal efforts can help break the cycle of intergenerational prostitution.

DISCUSSION

This review demonstrates that intergenerational caste-based prostitution in India persists due to entrenched socio-cultural norms, caste discrimination, and economic deprivation. Recent studies have confirmed this pattern, noting that Bedia women remain engaged in sex work because of limited livelihood alternatives, while Perna women are often coerced into prostitution by husbands and in-laws (18,24). Similarly, the Banchhada community continues to view daughters as potential earners through prostitution, reflecting the normalization of exploitation within their cultural framework (15). The consequences are severe, as many children of sex workers face systemic exclusion from education, while adolescents entering prostitution are at heightened risk of HIV infection, reproductive health problems, and psychological trauma (9, 10, 23). Intervention efforts, though present, have achieved only partial success. Community based organizations such as Apne Aap have helped improve access to vocational training and healthcare. However, persistent legal ambiguity under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act continues to expose women to harassment and exploitation (25, 28).

Overall, the evidence underscores the urgent need for comprehensive legal reforms, equitable access to education, and economic empowerment initiatives as essential strategies to dismantle structural exploitation and break the cycle of intergenerational prostitution.

CONCLUSION

This review concludes that intergenerational prostitution among marginalized caste groups in India is sustained by a complex interplay of history, poverty, caste discrimination, and entrenched cultural practices. The persistence of this practice among Bedia, Perna, Nat, and Banchhada communities illustrates the depth of systemic neglect and the normalization of exploitation. Breaking this cycle requires a multi-level strategy that combines legal reforms, access to education, vocational training, healthcare, and community empowerment. Such interventions can not only restore dignity and rights to affected communities but also protect future generations from being coerced into prostitution.

RECOMMENDATION

Intergenerational prostitution poses a major public health challenge, with affected communities facing high risks of HIV, STDs, cervical cancer, mental health disorders, and child exploitation compounded by stigma and lack of healthcare access. Addressing this requires a multi-sectoral approach that strengthens sexual and reproductive health services, ensures inclusion of sex workers in government health programs, expands child protection and education initiatives, and integrates vocational training with medical and psychological support. Framing prostitution as both a public health and human rights issue is crucial to break the cycle of exploitation, safeguard vulnerable populations, and promote community empowerment.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This review is limited by reliance on secondary data, focus on a few specific communities, scarcity of recent empirical studies, and underreporting due to stigma and legal constraints.

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to existing knowledge by consolidating and synthesizing recent evidence on intergenerational caste-based prostitution in India. Unlike earlier historical accounts, it emphasizes contemporary research on health, legal, and socio-economic dimensions. By aligning evidence with actionable interventions, it underscores the urgent need for policy convergence and community-based strategies to dismantle entrenched exploitation. It therefore provides policymakers, researchers, and civil society with a current, evidence-based framework for addressing one of India's most neglected social and public health challenges.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

AM was responsible for the design, comprehensive literature review, data extraction, analysis, drafting, and overall preparation of the manuscript. RR provided conception and overall supervision, guidance in epidemiological framing, and critical review for intellectual content. SV & BK reviewed the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, provided suggestions for refinement, and approved the final version for submission. All authors agree to be accountable for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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