

# PROSTITUTION AND VIOLENCE: A TALE OF MURDER OF AKOOTAI

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## **ABSTRACT**

*A few years ago the question was 'Is there a women's History'. Traditional historiography has excluded women not only inadvertently but sometimes programmatically from 'universal' or 'general' history. During the past twenty years the field of women's studies has expanded so rapidly that women now no longer remain invisible in history. Prostitution has always been debated as a moral issue, an economic issue, a health hazard, and as a phenomenon defining gender relations. Most of the opinions remain ambivalent which fails to reject either the idea of male sexual need or the moral structures that dictates "proper" sexual contact. The ideal of womanhood is an historical product emerging out of patriarchy's necessity to subordinate women through social and ideological control of sexuality considerable work has been done by now on women in the national movement. Most of the studies of prostitution, however, rarely addressed to specific forms of services demanded of women or the nature of the prostitute's encounters with male clients, or how women try in this apparently intimate sexual incidents to retain their autonomy whilst segmenting and selling parts of their body as commodities.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Exploitation, Inhuman, Slaves, Sexuality, Torture*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The word prostitution means 'the offering of the body to indiscriminate lewdness for hire.' The term prostitution can be distinguished from other sexual activities in so far as a woman is involved in it not for sexual pleasure, but mainly for material rewards or benefits, in cash or in kind. Though the word 'prostitute' may denote a male or a female, the word is normally used for a female. Sexuality is the construction of a human experience in which knowledge, standards and social subjectivities are fused. That way, sexuality does not occur naturally in society; it is a construction that occurs in the real symbolic and imaginary order of the various social groups that make up our society. Cultural form of constructing, living and thinking about sexuality, together with history of each particular individual, constitutes what each person is, sexually speaking. The new scholarship about sexual behaviour gives sex a history and constructs an alternative to sexual essentialism by arguing that sexuality is constituted in society and history and that it is not biologically determined. From the middle of the nineteenth century onward, Bombay became a national industrial powerhouse with an expanding number of textile mills. Its population rose by over 65 percent between 1901 and 1921 as migrant workers flocked to the city to work in its mills. Many of these mills, and the apartment buildings housing mill workers,

were built in central parts of the island, such as Nagpada and Kumbharwada. Kamathipura, the heart of the city's sex trade, was contiguous with (and one might say a part of) these very areas where mill workers came to live. Its brothels thus serviced the city's growing ranks of male migrant workers, many of whom moved on a seasonal basis between the city and neighboring rural areas. The scale of prostitution in Bombay, and the city's increasing national prominence in the late nineteenth century, meant that the laws passed on prostitution in this setting also set trends that influenced other parts of the subcontinent.

In the early twentieth century, Kamathipura became home to a large numbers of Indian women in Prostitution. When I tried to look at the condition of Indian prostitutes in Bombay i found that the voices of prostitutes remained undocumented and they rarely emerged as an individuals who has voices, aspirations, problems. Their ability to represent themselves was restrained. In my paper I will try to explore about the condition of Brothels in Bombay and how the murder of a prostitute reflects the high degree of control of brothel keepers who used violence as a process of discipline for the prostitutes. The 1917 High Court trial of a brothel keeper for the murder of a brothel worker helps us in finding the complexities in the profession of prostitution. This case reflects the dynamics of the life of a prostitute and what was its relationship with the state structures, details about how long they worked in the day, how much they were earning, what were their relationships with each other. How a murder became an example of discipline for other prostitutes. The extent of unchecked extreme power exercised by the brothel keepers were responsible for creating the miserable living conditions for prostitutes.

### 1.1 THE DUNCAN ROAD MURDER TRIAL

The 1917 High Court murder case, Emperor v. Syed Mirza.<sup>1</sup> This was one of the dreadful case that has ever come up for a trial in any court of justice. The Syed Khan Mirza was the keeper of the brothel in Duncan road, with two women Gangabai and Gombibai were charged with the murder of one of the prostitute named Akootai. This case highlighted the terrible conditions of the prostitutes where they were forced to live like slaves of the brothel keepers. In the Inquiry report of local government and administrations there was a report on the condition of brothels in Bombay which tried to look after whether evils similar to those disclosed in Bombay exist in their respective provinces. In this report they highlighted the fact that '*The Pathan keeper of a brothel in Duncan Road with two women who passed as his wife and daughter were charged with the murder of one of the inmates of the house in circumstances of revolting brutality; at the close of the trial the man and the elder woman were condemned to death, the younger to transportation for life. What distinguished this case above others of this class, disgusting as they all are, the absolute helplessness of the women of the house, and, the appalling barbarity of the keepers of the house*'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1917a, Home Department, *High Court of Judicature*, Bombay 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917, case no. 13. Police-A, December, 128-30. New Delhi: National Archives of India.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

It was stated in the evidence of the report that they were sold for a few rupees; having been purchased they were condemned to hopeless slavery of the most dreadful character. They toiled from early too late; they were given just sufficient food to keep them alive; they were kept absolutely destitute; and they had no hope of escape.

It was the story of a young women, who was brutally murdered when she tried to come out of the clutches of exploitation in brothel. Her death was a perfect example of incredible horrors of barbarism in prostitution. The terrible feature in this case is the awful hopelessness of the women who became enmeshed by this brute and his female accomplices; they were his slaves, and the worst of slaves; rears were no possibility of escape saves in death.<sup>3</sup>

This case highlights about the fact that how different chain of reactions laid the basis for the cruel death of Akootai. The proceedings in the Bombay high court disclose the fact that in this brothel an inhuman form of slavery was practiced and possibly something of the same sort is going on elsewhere.

## 1.2 HORRORS OF ENFORCED PROSTITUTION IN INDIA

A petition to check the horrors of enforced prostitution was filed by Mr. Labhshankar Laxmidas dated on 7th April 1917 which was addressed to Sir Frederick John Napier Tessier Baron Chelmsford , Viceroy and Governor General of India was directed from the Secretary to the Government of Bombay to the Secretary to the Government of India. In this petition he draws the attention to a most revolting case of murder (King-Emperor versus Mirza Syed khan and others) in the Bombay High Court. In this case a Pathan and his two female abettors brutally murdered a helpless prostitute. Justice Macleod, addressing the first accused, said that 'he had been convicted by a unanimous verdict of the jury for murder, a verdict with which His Lordship entirely agreed.<sup>4</sup> He referred to the "Bombay Chronicle," April 6, 1917, contains a long editorial comment on the above mentioned case, headed " The Slave Market of Bombay " from which he quoted the following extracts:-*"It was the story of a young woman, a prostitute, who came into the clutches of utterly merciless and the dominating instinct to gain by the exploitation of her shame, who attempted to rebel in her feeble way, even tried to escape, and was punished by every sort of fearful torture that reflects cruelty and filthy ingenuity which ended the incredible horror of her existence."*<sup>5</sup> This was only "one wretched woman among hundreds who are leading a similar existence and many others, for all one knows, who may even have met with such an end as hers."<sup>6</sup>

According to Justice Macleod the state of slavery in which the women were living in the house kept by the man, Syed khan was a system not common to this man alone. It was practiced by a number and *slavery* is a right word that described it. He stated that they remained in bondage, or were passed from one unscrupulous

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<sup>3</sup> Semi-official letter from the Hon'ble Sir James Du Bolay to E. Robertson., Esq. no. 140-Police.

<sup>4</sup> It seemed that nothing that his Lordship could say could make him (the accused) feel the hideous enormity of the crime which he had committed. It was impossible to conceive of greater barbarity, more revolting and more devilish, than the way in which he had treated his victim."—" Bombay Chronicle," April 6, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Bombay Chronicle, April 6, 1917.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

exploiter of their misery to another who buys them with their debts. Every one of these unfortunate women had no liberty and were in the clutches of the man who owned the house. They were subjected to an illegal detention and under a state of perpetual intimidation and ill-treatment.<sup>7</sup>

Thus they appointed a special commission, to enquire 'as to what extent poor women were subjected to similar horrors in the whole of India with a view of taking such steps which were necessary thus a commission was set up to look after the protection of poor, luckless women from the horrors of enforced prostitution from the clutches of human fiends like Syed Khan and his abettors in Bombay.<sup>8</sup>

I looked at the proceedings of this case in order to bring out the tension of the court room so that we can understand the minute details of the case and see how cruelty became the characteristic of this case.

### 1.3 THE CASE<sup>9</sup>

King Emperor versus 1. MIRZA SYEDKHAN alias MIR AFZALKHAN SYEDKHAN

2 GANGABAI alias MARIAMBAI 3. GOMTIBAI alias SAKINABAI, No. 308 P OF 1917

Charge - (Sections 221 222, '223, Civil Procedure Code)

Magistrate of Bombay thus charged Mirza Syed Khan alias Afzal Khan Syed Khan, Gangabai alias Mariambai and Gomtibai alias Sakinabai as follows —that on the 20th day February 1917 at Bombay did commit murder by causing the death of one Taibai alias Akootai and did aid and abet one another in the commission of the said offence which was committed in their presence and in consequence of such abetment and thereby committed offences punishable under Sections 302-114 of the Indian Penal Code and within the cognizance of the High Court.

Thus Chunilal H. Setalvad Acting Chief Presidency Magistrate Bombay on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1917 Charged Syed Khan, Gangabai, Gomtibai under the sections 221, 222, 223 of civil procedure code and found out That they helped each other in the commitment of offences which are punishable under sections 302-114 of the Indian Penal Code.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>8</sup> Labhishankar Laxmidas, The Bombay Humanitarian Fund, 309, Shroff Bazar, Bombay, 7th April 1917

<sup>9</sup> In the High Court Of Judicature At Bombay, 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, Case No. 13 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917

<sup>10</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

Akootai was continuously assaulted for not submitting to the customers she was forced to drink the urine by Syed Mirza. On 19 February 1917 at about 8 p.m. a customer came to Akootai but she refused to have any intercourse with him. For a number of days prior to her death, Akootai had been stricken with venereal sores. Akootai had swelling and burning sensation in her genitals that prevents her from sleeping at night and caused her to doze during the day.<sup>11</sup> The pain and exhaustion made it difficult for her to accept customers. For some four or five days she had refused several customers. Akootai's refusal annoyed her supervisors Mirza, Ganga, Gomtibai and they repeatedly assaulted Akootai for turning men down. They assaulted her by beating her with a stick made of a branch of a tree and also with a big iron nail on her knees. It was this beating that motivated Akootai to escape from this cruel life. When Gomtibai next went to the toilet, Akootai attempted to run away from the brothel. She told the women holding the key to her compartment, Tarabai, that she had a customer waiting outside<sup>12</sup>. When she was let out, she ran down to the dark lane. Some people who were outside raised an alarm and Syed and other two male neighbours named Sullemaan and Walji ran after her. They caught her before she got very far.

That night Mirza, Ganga, Gomti tortured Akootai as a punishment for her attempted escape and to teach a lesson to other prostitutes'. They assaulted her with kicks and with a metal yard and curry stone. They made her bathe in scalding water. They removed her clothes and pulled her hair. Everybody heard her cries for mercy where she shouted '*don't beat me, do not beat me*'. By the next morning, her ribs were broken, she couldn't walk properly and she was breathing heavily thus failed to talk properly. Late into the afternoon she was denied food, Gangabai and Gomtibai continued to beat Akootai, forced her to eat onion skins<sup>13</sup>. When Akootai complained that she felt burning sensation in her stomach and she wanted soda water to drink. Gangabai handed her a glass of urine instead. After this Akootai was unconscious, Gangabai tried to force feed her liquor to revive her but she could not swallow it and Akootai soon after this died. When Mirza appeared on the scene he immediately began to arrange for her burial. He ordered material for wrapping her corpse and hired men to come into carry her corpse to the morgue<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Labhishankar Laxmidas, The Bombay Humanitarian Fund, 309, Shroff Bazar, Bombay, 7th April 1917

<sup>12</sup> In the High Court Of Judicature At Bombay, 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, Case No. 13 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917

<sup>13</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>14</sup> There were stains of lunar caustic on the fingers of accused Nos. 1 and 2 whom I examined. When I held a post-mortem I found strong smell of onions or garlic in the contents of the stomach of the deceased. (Shown a yard measure) The weal marks that saw on the body could have been 'inflicted by this yard measure. 'The bruises on the body could have been caused by this curry stone and a good hard kick could have caused the fractures of the ribs I did not find any portion of the body burned by a match I found burns of caustic, as mentioned above.

He was just leaving the brothel behind the men carrying out Akootai's corpse when Vithoo Jagoji, a police *hawaldar* noticed them and became suspicious. At this point they stopped to question the man and told the corpse bearers to take the dead body back to the brothel for further investigation. The police inspector sent the dead body for post-mortem.

#### 1.4 DEPOSITION OF THE POLICE SURGEON- ARTHUR POWELL<sup>15</sup>

He examined the dead body of a woman named Tai at the Morgue on the 21<sup>st</sup> Day of February last. He found 18 large weal's which were caused by blow of a cane on the body. There were several large bruises on the legs thighs, arms back, head and body .The fifth and sixth right ribs and the left rib were broken Death was due to these injuries. He stated that '*The legs buttocks and private parts were blackened by lunar caustic. Strong lunar caustic had been injected into the vagina and caused much swelling*<sup>16</sup>. *There were stains of lunar caustic or the fingers of accused Nos. 1 and 2 whom I examined.*<sup>17</sup>

It is important to highlight what the witnesses of this case has to say about the murder of Akootai. So that through their voices the truth behind the cages of the brothel life could be revealed out in the court room. Thus the witnesses report in this case helped in opening up the picture of the Court room in handling of this barbaric case.

**1.5 CO PROSTITUTES AS WITNESS** Deposition of Phooli, a Prostitute<sup>18</sup>. Witness No .III for the Crown, Father's name Jhina, Religion—Hindoo; Caste—Rajput, Age about 30, Occupation—Prostitute, Residence —Hajam Gully Two Tanks, District

Phooli was a prostitute. She knew all the accused No. 1 is the husband of 'accused No. 2. Accused Nos. 1 and 2 keep a brothel house in Hajam Lane. Accused No. 3 is the daughter of No. 2. No. 3 did not earn in any of the brothels. She earns in the brothel of Nos. 1 and 2 in the brothel there are three separate sets of rooms. There is only one floor in this brothel. The first floor is occupied by Ghatis and prostitutes Accused Nos. 1, 2 and 3 live in the house opposite to the one in which there is the brothel, that house has two floors and a ground floor. Accused No. 1 used to buy ornaments for us as there was nobody else who could buy them for us. At night we

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<sup>15</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city.

<sup>16</sup> There were stains of lunar caustic or the fingers of accused Nos. 1 and 2 whom I examined. When I held a post-mortem I found strong smell of onions or garlic in the contents of the stomach of the deceased. (Shown a yard measure) The weal marks that saw on the body could have been 'inflicted by this yard measure. 'The bruises on the body could have been caused by this curry stone and a good hard kick could have caused the fractures of the ribs I did not find any portion of the body burned by a match I found burns of caustic, as mentioned above.

<sup>17</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

all would sleep on the first floor in the house occupied by the three accused<sup>19</sup>. Formerly she used to earn as a prostitute at Duncan Road. She had borrowed Rupees 20 from accused No 1 for 5 days and use to pay a rupee to accused No 1 every day Accused No. 1 then kept her in his house and told her to earn in his brothel and pay off his money. This was seven months ago. Accused No. 1 assaulted her and by force took her thumb on a blank paper and for seven months she earned in accused No. 1 and No. 2's brothel, and they took all her earnings. All the time they were locked up. When they finished earning at night they were locked up in Accused no. 1's room and No 1 used to keep the key of that room.<sup>20</sup>

She knew the deceased Akootai. She had seen Akootai being assaulted for not submitting to customers as she was there for a long time. if we did not submit to customers accused No. 1 used to urinate and Nos. 2 and 3 urinated to forcibly make us drink the urine. She remembers the day on which Akootai died it was last Shivratri day it was Tuesday (20th February, 1917). She remember the day before that on the day before Shivratri day (i.e., 19th February, 1917) they went into the brothel house from No.1's house at 6 P.M. They were taken by No. 3. Akootai was with them. At about 8 p.m. a customer came to Akootai but she refused to have any intercourse with him, Accused No 2. Asked that customer to have intercourse with Akootai by force against the order of nature<sup>21</sup>. Akootai got afraid. The customer did not do anything and he said he did not care to take his money back and left. That customer had given 4 annas to No 3 to have intercourse with Akootai. After the customer left No 3 assaulted Akootai with a stick made of a branch of a tree which was used for cleaning teeth and also with a big iron nail on her knees then No 3 went into Akootai's room to urinate in the Mori behind the curtain before going in No 3 had given the keys to the woman Tarabai (Tarabai alias Alima called and identified) Tarabai was a cook md she cooks for them. Akootai demanded the keys from Tarabai by saying that a customer had come and Tarabai gave her the keys and Akootai opened the door and ran into a dark lane which is called Khoja Street. Some people who were outside raised an alarm and accused No. 3 came out and shouted out that Akootai had run away. Then accused No. 1 came down from upstairs running and Sulleman and Walji who were on the Road together with accused no. 1 chased Akootai and brought her back. When she was brought back accused no. 1, was holding her. Accused no. 1 took Akootai upstairs to his rooms. They heard Akootai shouting, do not beat me, and do 'not beat me.' At 12 midnight she, accused no. 3, Pari and Moti went upstairs to no. 1's rooms. When we went upstairs we saw accused nos. 1 and 2 assaulting Akootai with the Curry stone in his hand and he was assaulting Akootai who was seated on the floor in the middle room. She had no clothes on except a skirt. At that time she did not see Akootai bleeding but she had weal marks on her body and there were bruises on the body. Accused no. 2 was assaulting Akootai with kicks and with a metal yard

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<sup>19</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>20</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>21</sup> Accused no. 1 used to threaten to beat us with a curry stone if the earnings were less and being afraid of him I had to take customers even for 2 annas. All our earnings were taken by no. 3 and given to no. 1. Accused no. 1 fed, clothed and housed us and gave us ornaments.

measure.<sup>22</sup> We were told by the accused no. 1 and 2 that if we ran away we would be treated in the same fashion. Accused no. 1 and 2 continued the assault on Akootai for about half an hour at short intervals. Accused no. 3 pulled Akootai's hair. Then all the accused, Akootai, Moti and Pari slept in the Diwankhana, accused no. 1 and 2 slept on one cot while the rest of us slept on the floor. The door was locked from inside. Every day the door used to be locked from inside. There are two doors to the Diwankhana in which we slept and both were locked, Accused no. 1 kept the key of the one while accused no. 3 kept the key of the other. She got up at 6 A.M. in the morning. Accused no. 1 woke us up by kicking her. Akootai woke up but she was not able to walk so she went scrawling to the fire to foment herself and Pari, Moti were doing household work on the same floor. Owing to the assault Akootai was not able to walk. She saw Akootai seated on the floor leaning on both arms; she was exhausted and was not able to sit properly. She was breathing hard. At that time she had the skirt and a choli on her body. Then they took their food but Akootai was not given any food. Accused no. 2 said let her die and that no food would be given to her. After we took our food accused no. 1 locked the door from outside and went downstairs. Then accused no. 3 held Akootai by the hair and no. 2 assaulted her with fists and kicks. This was at about 3 or 4 P.M. at the time of the assault she, Moti and Pari were present, accused nos. 2 and 3 gave onion skins to Akootai to eat. Accused no. 2 and 3 assaulted her and forced her to eat onion skins, Akootai complained that she felt burning sensation in her stomach and she wanted soda water to drink. Accused no. 3 urinated in an aluminium tumbler, accused no. 1 and accused no. 2 forced Akootai to drink their urine. At this time Akootai became unconscious and she was breathless and lied on the floor; accused no. 2 sent one Lingabai to fetch liquor worth 6 annas. Accused no. 3 opened the door which was locked from inside. Linga came at a later stage after Akootai was made to drink the urine. Lingabai is an acquaintance of accused. She used to come, to see accused no. 2 whom she used to call mother. Linga brought some liquor. Accused no. 2 poured the liquor in Akootai's mouth but she could not swallow it and it came out. At this stage accused no. 1 returned from outside. Accused no. 2 told no. 1 that Akootai had gone downstairs to the brothel and that a customer had treated her to liquor. Accused no. 2 told no. 1 that Akootai was pretending to be unconscious. Then accused no. 2 shouted to a boy in a hotel opposite to bring soda and he brought a bottle of soda. At this time accused no. 3 was also present. Accused no. 1 poured soda water into Akootai's mouth but she could not swallow it<sup>23</sup>. Then accused no. 2 covered Akootai with a Sari. The accused no. 3 took her, Moti and Pari to the brothel. This was at 6 p.m. at about 7 p.m. she saw accused no. 1 coming from a lane with four corpse-bearers, a piece of white cloth and bamboos and matting for carrying a dead body. Accused no. 1 took the men and the things up to his rooms. Shortly afterwards she saw a dead body being brought down on a bier. It was carried by the four corpse-bearers. No. 1 helped them to carry the corpse downstairs. At that time she did not see whose corpse it was. Then they took the corpse to a dark lane. Shortly afterwards two policemen brought back the corpse to the landing of no. 1's house: Then European Police Officers came. At this time they came to know that it was Akootai's dead

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<sup>22</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>23</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.



body. Accused nos. 1 and 2 were taken to the Police chowkey. Then at midnight accused no. 3, Moti, Pari and herself were taken by the Police to the Mharbavdi Police Station. She was questioned. The following morning she went to the Morgue and there she saw the dead body of Akootai. There were marks of violence on her person. On the 1st day of assault at about 12 midnight when accused no. 3, Moti, Pari and herself went upstairs to sleep they had seen caustic on a piece of paper. The next morning at 6 A.M. when they woke up they saw Akootai's skirt stained with caustic. Accused No. 2 had asked Sulleman to bring caustic worth 10 annas at 6 P.M. on the 1st day of the assault. During the night she had not heard any cries. She did not see caustic, being applied to Akootai that night. Three or four days prior to this assault accused Nos. 1 and 2 applied morthuthu (Blue Vitriol) into Akootai's private parts at about 12 midnight in no. 1's room. Accused no. 1 tied her legs while no. 2 put the blue vitriol into her vagina. Akootai. The following day Akootai's earnings were less than usual. Accused nos. 1 and 2 asked Akootai why her earnings were less. Accused no. 1 held Akootai and tied her hand and feet by her yellow to the cot and no. 2 branded her with caustic on her private parts. Accused No. 3 was holding Akootai's hair with one hand and lamp with the other while no. 2 was putting her hand in Akootai's private parts and putting caustic there<sup>24</sup>. This was at 12 midnight after our return from the brothel. At this time besides the three accused and Akootai and she herself, Pari and Moti were also present. Accused no. 2's hands were stained while applying the caustic. The night on which Akootai was chased and brought back she had 6 silver bangles, i.e., 3 on each hand, one gold nose button and a gold neck ornament round her neck and silver anklets.

This case highlighted the fact how violence was used to control a woman. It shows the strong patriarchal hold of Mirza over the bodies of the prostitutes. The torturous circumstances of brothel where women were forced to live like slaves where their own will and life had no importance per say. The impotency of police officials who failed to gain control over these brothel mafiyas. The inefficiency of colonial policies to curb such barbaric cases where women was murdered just because she revolted and tried to escape these clutches of cruelty. The details of this murder case were related to the unchecked power of brothel keepers and the prevailing circumstances of indebtedness, illness, poverty, illness.

This case highlighted the worst living circumstances in brothels where women were locked up in the rooms and were never permitted to move out of their rooms in the brothel. The circumstances of her death provided a ground for thinking about the possibilities and limitations of such a life.

This case highlights about the reinforced structures of obligation and domination in the brothel which lays ground for a complex master and a slave relationship which was found on the basis of a regime of a debt culture. It is evident from the statement of Lingabai how these women were bonded in the debt with the Syed Mirza.

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<sup>24</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

Phooli in her statement referred that Syed assaulted her also and by force he took her thumb mark on a blank paper and for seven months she is earning for him. He takes all her earnings. If we did not earn enough or if we did not submit to customers Syed along with Gangabai and Gontibai assaults her<sup>25</sup>. The constant fear for being beaten up with the curry stone forced her to accept even low paying customers. In fact when all the brothel keepers were assaulting Akootai they brought all the other inmates up to the room in order give them a lesson that similar treatment would be given to them if they also tried to escape the brothel<sup>26</sup>. When Moti after watching Akootai's severe beating with a stick by brothel keepers started crying at that time Mirza even started hitting Moti also and removed all her gold ornaments. He told them that it was the only way to prevent her from running away. Thus this episode was a part of a string of violent events aimed at keeping the brothel workers afraid of their supervisors.

There are also reference of how these brothel workers shared a sibling like relations. The point that the kind of a sympathetic descriptions of Akootai's torture given by her inmates reflects the fact that they were clearly very close to Akootai as she had been working at the brothel longer than any of them , for two years. Indeed the name "Akootai" combines the word for "Older Sister" in two languages Akka (from Kannada) and Tai (from Marathi). Thus we find a strong family – like bond between the brothel inmates which created a mode of accountability among them where when one of their inmate was brutally murdered the other inmates decided to raise their voices against the torture and tried to give true statements which showed how Akootai was brutally murdered in order to punish the culprit that is Syed Mirza in other words from their statement they reflected a collective front to this barbaric life<sup>27</sup> thus now they were ready to be disobedient to their masters because it was not just Akootai with whom such methods of assault were followed infact the same kind of methods of discipline were used by the brothel keepers on other brothel inmates also. In a way they protested against their own treatment. They justified the act of escaping of Akootai therefore now they also dared to speak up the truth for their elder sister Akootai so that necessary punishment could be given to her murderers and justice can be done to her soul.

Akootai's story also presented a remarkable example of resistance to this tough brothel discipline life. She despite the presence of a constant violence on her dared to run away from the brothel .This act of denial to the obedience of horrors of brothel life displayed an exceptional quality of her spirit.

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<sup>25</sup> Accused No. 1 took her upstairs to his room where they lived they heard Akootai shouting out from upstairs For God's sake do not beat me. "I heard these cries for about an hour.

<sup>26</sup> Once while no. 1 was assaulting me my right elbow was dislocated and I was taken by accused no. to a bone-setter at Pydhoni and it was set right. I told the bone-setter that I fell from the stair case as accused no. 1 told me to say so. Every 2nd or 3rd day accused nos. 1 and 2 used to assault the deceased Akootai because her earnings were less.

<sup>27</sup> Akootai could not stand. She held the wall for support and she bent down and went to the fire and she was fomenting her body. I saw marks of violence on the person of Akootai. She had bruises on her back and weal marks on her arms as well as her back.

It is important to notice that how the British surveillance created different autonomous networks of social communicators to secure all kinds of social information. This case reflects how the communication and the movement of knowledge helped to maintain this strict surveillance on the people. The idea of surveillance of the Empire gave the police constables full authority to go and enquire without any prior information to the senior police officials. They themselves directly took the charge and took Syed Mirza into their custody just on the basis of doubt they themselves went ahead and enquired about the dead body and this became the irony that with just the matter of the doubt they now get hold of a full-fledged death mystery of a prostitute Akootai. This unchecked authority helped these police constables in unlayering of the brutal death of Akootai by the brothel keepers<sup>28</sup>. Therefore this information order acts as a tool for investigation of the horrors of the prostitution.

The statements of the police constables showed how they took up the hold of this inquiry and found out extremely sad contents in this death case of Akootai<sup>29</sup>.

Akootai's murder case was reported extensively in the Newspapers where Newspaper used phrases such as "reproach to civilization" (Bombay Chronicle, April 6, 1917) and "shameful blot on civilization" (Indian Social Reformer, April 22, 1917). The Bombay Chronicle highlighted the fact that it had not reported on the "unprintable horrors" of the case because "it would be impossible in a public report to give an adequate account of entirely unmitigated enormity" (April, 6, 1917). The massive reportage on this Akootai case created a panic against the Pathan, the ethnic group to which Mirza belonged<sup>30</sup>. It is interesting to note that how this case developed a wave of public opinion where Akootai's cruel death generated public apathy towards the world of brothels thus laying grounds for the abolitionist phase in Bombay's law of prostitution. Where women emerged as an objects of rescue where they need to be protected and the notion of cleanliness of their character has emerged. This case proved to be a focal point in developing the reformist zeal amongst the Nationalist reformers which in turn uphold the ideological construction of Indian womanhood as honour and prestige of India. Nationalist reformers used this case to highlight about the incompetence of police authority and urged for a requirement of new laws for controlling prostitution. Newspaper such as the Bombay Chronicle noted that

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<sup>28</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>29</sup> 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, no. 8372-25, the 11 August 1917

<sup>30</sup> 1917a, Home Department, *High Court of Judicature*, Bombay 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917, case no. 13. Police-A, December, 128-30. New Delhi: National Archives of India.

Akootai “was only one wretched woman among hundreds... many others. May even have met with such an end as hers” (6, April, 1917).

## II. CONCLUSION

It is very remarkable to notice that her death have produced many unexpected effects. The cruelty of her murder laid ground for abolitionist energies therefore the Duncan Road Case became a standard referent point in calls for legal reforms. Akootai’s death act as an incentive for those who wanted to outlaw prostitution. Newspaper like the Times of India, Bombay Chronicle, and the Indian Social reformers called for setting up of an inquiry to look after the conditions in brothels in Bombay. The committee therefore proposed for new legislations which emerged as the Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act. The trial thus gathered the strength of Nationalism whose ideological construction of Indian womanhood laid grounds for contesting the existing colonial policies on prostitution. The case of Akootai a migrant prostitute in the city of Bombay who brutally murdered in 1917 by her brothel keepers. This particular incident led to the demand for abolition of prostitution all together. Till 1917 colonial state was reluctant to ban the profession of prostitution completely in Bombay. Across the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the colonial government formulated laws that were enormously repetitive: activities such as procuring women and girls for prostitution, pimping, and soliciting men for prostitution elicited nearly identical legal measures in multiple eras. Whereas the process of law-making responded to a variety of public panics, the governing practices of police constables and inspectors, army medical examiners, magistrates, and municipal official enacted administrative logics of separate, more limited ambitions. In addition to Indian remedial reforms to eradicate sexual practises, purification required preventive reforms designed to promote social development: female education, anti-infant marriage, the right of widows to remarry, intermarriage between castes, among others. Briefly, improving the human condition required the reconstruction of Indian society. In Bombay the Akootai murder case created a collective consciousness for the enslaved prostitutes. The first reform legislation affecting prostitutes was the 1923 Prostitution Act which made it illegal for a male, but not female, to manage a brothel. Concerned with public health and morality, combined with an international interest in the traffic in women and girls led to further amendments of this Act, in 1926 and 1927.

## REFERENCES

- [1] 1917a, Home Department, *High Court of Judicature*, Bombay 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917, case no. 13. Police-A, December, 128-30. New Delhi: National Archives of India.
- [2] 1917a, Home Department, *High Court of Judicature*, Bombay 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917, case no. 13. Police-A, December, 130-34. New Delhi: National Archives of India.
- [3] Semi-official letter from the Hon’ble Sir James Du Bolay to E. Robertson., Esq. no. 140-Police.
- [4] It seemed that nothing that his Lordship could say could make him (the accused) feel the hideous enormity of the crime which he had committed. It was impossible to conceive of greater barbarity, more revolting and more devilish, than the way in which he had treated his victim.”—” Bombay Chronicle,” April 6, 1917.
- [5] Bombay Chronicle,” April 6, 1917.

- [6] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- [7] Labhishankar Laxmidas, The Bombay Humanitarian Fund, 309, Shroff Bazar, Bombay, 7th April 1917.
- [8] In the High Court Of Judicature At Bombay, 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, Case No. 13 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917.
- [9] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
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- [12] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- [13] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city.
- [14] There were stains of lunar caustic on the fingers of accused Nos. 1 and 2 whom I examined. When I held a post-mortem I found strong smell of onions or garlic in the contents of the stomach of the deceased. (Shown a yard measure) The weal marks that saw on the body could have been 'inflicted by this yard measure. 'The bruises on the body could have been caused by this curry stone and a good hard kick could have caused the fractures of the ribs I did not find any portion of the body burned by a match I found burns of caustic, as mentioned above.
- [15] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- [16] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- [17] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- [18] Accused no. 1 used to threaten to beat us with a curry stone if the earnings were less and being afraid of him I had to take customers even for 2 annas. All our earnings were taken by no. 3 and given to no. 1. Accused no. 1 fed, clothed and housed us and gave us ornaments.
- [19] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- [20] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- [21] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

- [22] Accused No. 1 took her upstairs to his room where they lived they heard Akootai shouting out from upstairs For God's sake do not beat me. "I heard these cries for about an hour.
- [23] Once while no. 1 was assaulting me my right elbow was dislocated and I was taken by accused no. to a bone-setter at Pydhoni and it was set right. I told the bone-setter that I fell from the stair case as accused no. 1 told me to say so. Every 2nd or 3rd day accused nos. 1 and 2 used to assault the deceased Akootai because her earnings were less. Akootai could not stand. She held the wall for support and she bent down and went to the fire and she was fomenting her body. I saw marks of violence on the person of Akootai. She had bruises on her back and weal marks on her arms as well as her back.
- [24] 1917, Home Department, Police-A, Proceedings, No. 128-130, Report on the conditions of brothels in Bombay and of the murder of a prostitute in that city, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
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- [26] 1917a, Home Department, *High Court of Judicature*, Bombay 2<sup>nd</sup> Sessions, 1917, case no. 13. Police-A, December, 128-30. New Delhi: National Archives of India.