

# SPECULATIVE SOCIETIES: An Untouched India

Jessica Michelle Rithika Anand



Sex workers have been holding a demonstration in support of their demand for voting rights, employment opportunities, and the right to a dignified life.

Image by Ashok Bhaumik for the Press Trust of India.



"Group of Courtesans", Northern India  
ca. 19th Century



Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay  
Mary Ellen Mark  
2005 reprint, Steidl, Gottingen, Germany

## ABSTRACT

Ancient and pre-colonial India is a history that is charged with both strengths and shortcomings. Within this, the history of sex work is rich and abundant. It had its own set of hierarchies, tensions, and structures of power within a rich culture and value system that, given the opportunity, would have flourished into its own vibrant and volatile society. British influence however, changed the course of this history into what is now modern-day India. **This project speculates on the past in order to imagine an alternative present (and future) without this external influence.** It focuses specifically on the sex industry and red-light districts, as these are spaces which are highly affected by the influence of British legislation. Pre-colonial India had a higher degree of respect for sex-workers with its own share of problems and therefore, **the red-light district as a typology of space as envisioned in this project, is one that will clearly depict the difference between the current, modern, post-colonial India, and the imagined, modern India.** The project relies on research both through literature and film, 'formal' articles and journals as well as an on-site visit to gain a better understanding of the various nuances in order to create an alternative modern culture. **This alternative culture, shown through an imagined space, will highlight both the possible merits and its inevitable frictions.** The project bases its roots in historical, rather than modern, reality to recreate spaces that are fraught with a 'new' set of traditions, values, ideas and conflicts. **The project intendse to spark conversation and add to a discourse that is heavily subdued and often hidden from both Indian societies as well as the Western world.**



Image by Author

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## TERMINOLOGY

### Literature:

Kamasutra	An ancient Indian[1][2] Sanskrit text on sexuality, eroticism and emotional fulfillment in life.
Mahabharata	One of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India in Hinduism. It contains philosophical and devotional material.
Manusmriti	One of the many legal texts and constitution among the many Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism. Various manuscripts of Manusmriti are inconsistent with each other, and within themselves, raising concerns of its authenticity, insertions and interpolations made into the text.
Ramayana	One of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India in Hinduism, and the largest ancient epic in world literature. It belongs to the genre of Itihasa, narratives of past events, interspersed with teachings on the goals of human life.
Vastushastra	A traditional Indian system of architecture based on ancient texts discussing principles of design, layout, measurements, ground preparation, space arrangement, and spatial geometry.]It integrates architecture with nature and ancient beliefs utilising geometric patterns (yantra), symmetry, and directional alignments.
Vedas	A body of religious texts composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. There are four Vedas in total: the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda and the Atharvaveda.

### Architecture:

Dravida	An architectural style in Hindu temple architecture that emerged from South India, reaching its final form by the sixteenth century. It is one of three styles of temple building in the ancient book Vastushastra.
Nagara	An architectural style in Hindu temple architecture that was formed and based in North India and is the second style in the Vastushastra.
Vesara	The third architectural style of temple building in the ancient book Vastushastra. It combines elements of the Dravidian and Nagara styles.

### Types of sex-workers:

Devadasi	A female artist who was dedicated to the worship and service of a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. She conducted religious rituals and practised classical Indian artistic traditions.
Ganika	Ganikas, in Buddhist and Jain literature, were trained in the fine arts to entertain kings, princes and wealthy patrons on both religious and social occasions.
Kasbi	A woman belonging to family which practices hereditary sex trade.
Nagarvadhu	Directly translates to 'bride of the city'. A type of courtesan in the southern sub-continent that was held in very high esteem. Women competed to hold the title and only the most beautiful and talented in the arts was chosen. Their prices were extremely high, and only the royalty and height of nobility (Thakurs) could afford them.

Nautch Literally translating to “dance”, the nautch was a popular court dance performed by girls referred to as “nautch girls”. The nautch girls performed nautches for the pleasure of men, and over time became common place across India regardless of socio-political status.

Randi A first generation prostitute.

Tawaif Largely a North-Indian culture, the tawaif was a highly successful entertainer who catered to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent, especially during the Mughal era. The tawaifs were skilled in music, dance (mujra), theatre, and the Urdu literary tradition. They were also considered an authority on etiquette.

Kanjari Lower class, ‘uncultured’ Tawaif

**Other:**

Aadhar Card A 12 digit individual identification number issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India on behalf of the Government of India. The number serves as a proof of identity and address, anywhere in India.

Apsara A type of female spirit of the clouds and waters in Hinduism and Buddhist culture. They are youthful and elegant, and superb in the art of dancing.

Bharatnatyam A major form of Indian classical dance originating from Devadasi culture in Tamil Nadu. It is one of the eight widely recognized Indian classical dance forms, and expresses South Indian religious themes and spiritual ideas, particularly of Shaivism and in general of Hinduism.

Chaklas A brothel set up by British soldiers for military prostitution. One chakla held twelve - fifteen Indian women for the ‘use’ of each regiment of a thousand men.

Kama Translates to ‘desire, wish or longing’. It is often used to connote sensual pleasure and sexual desire but the concept more broadly refers to any desire, wish, passion, longing, pleasure of the senses, aesthetic enjoyment of life, affection, or love. It is one of the four goals of human life according to Hindu tradition.

Mujra Translates to dance.

Yakshi A class of female nature spirits in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious mythologies. Often found in art and architecture, the figure shows a veneration for the female form.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Contagious Diseases Act	CDA
East India Company	EIC
Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act	ITPA
Indian Penal Code	IPC
Ladies National Association	LNA
Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act	SITA
Supreme Court of India	SCoI

## LOCATIONS

G.B Road, New Delhi, Delhi
Kamathipura, Mumbai, Maharashtra
Sonagachi, Mumbai, Maharashtra
Falkland Road, Mumbai, Maharashtra
Budhwar Peth, Pune, Maharashtra
Majestic, Bangalore, Karnataka
Ballari, Karnataka
Raichur, Karnataka
Gadag, Karnataka
Reshampura, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

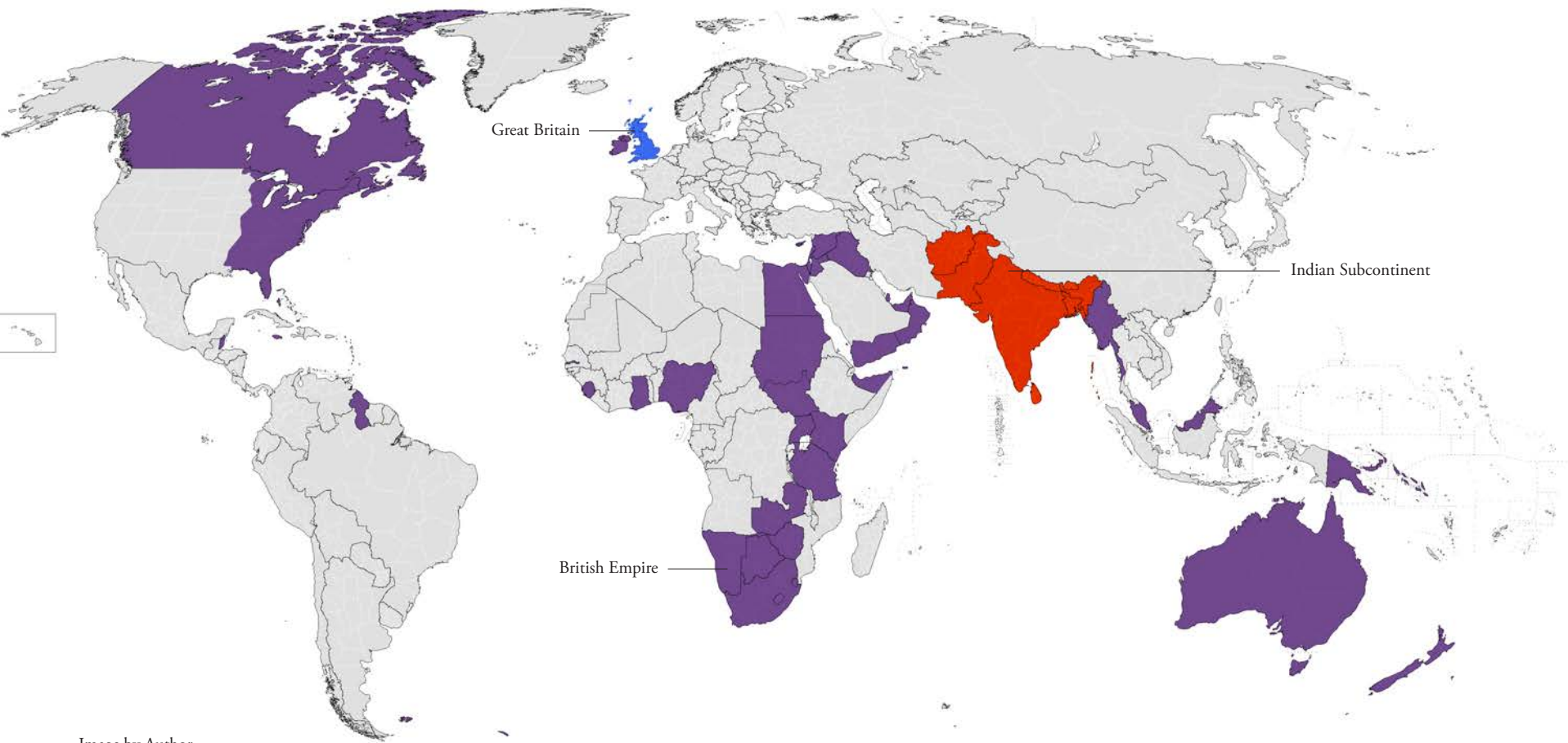


Image by Author

**GLOBAL**  
Rule of the British Empire

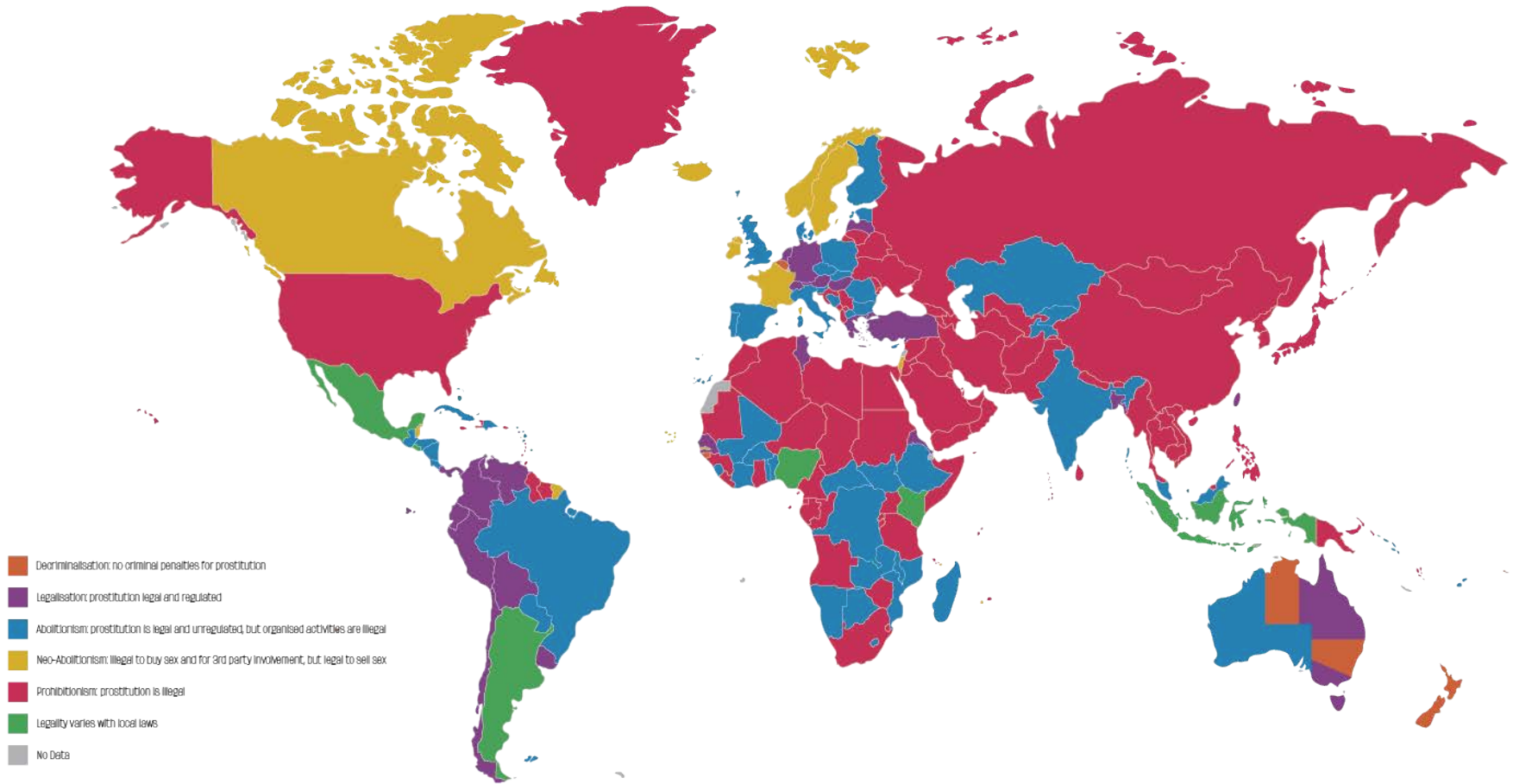


Image by Author

Mapping Legality of Prostitution



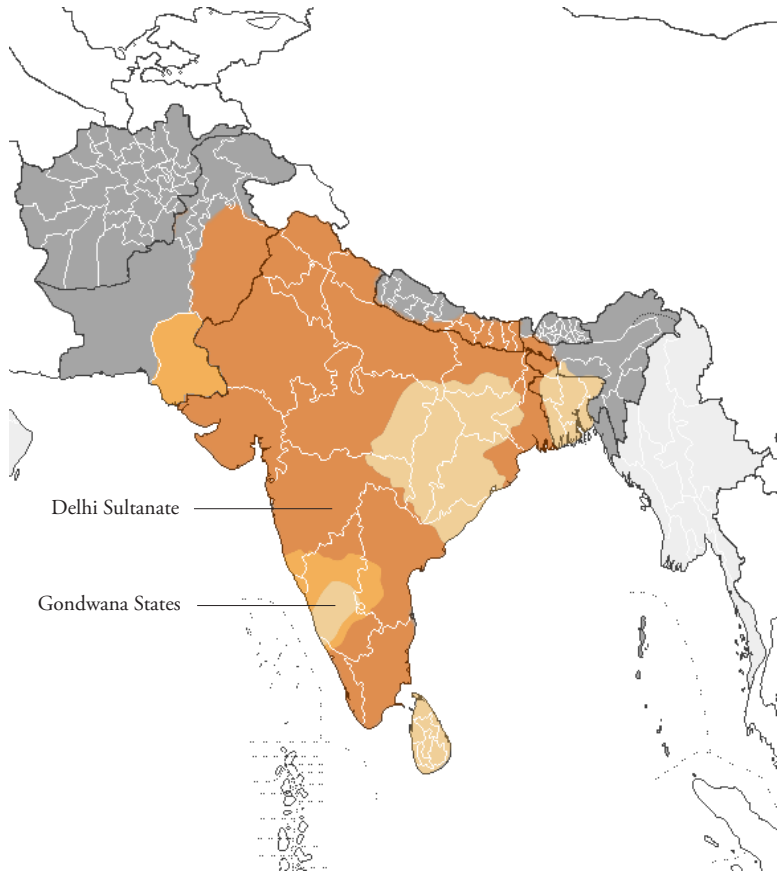


Image by Author

**1331**  
Delhi Sultanate

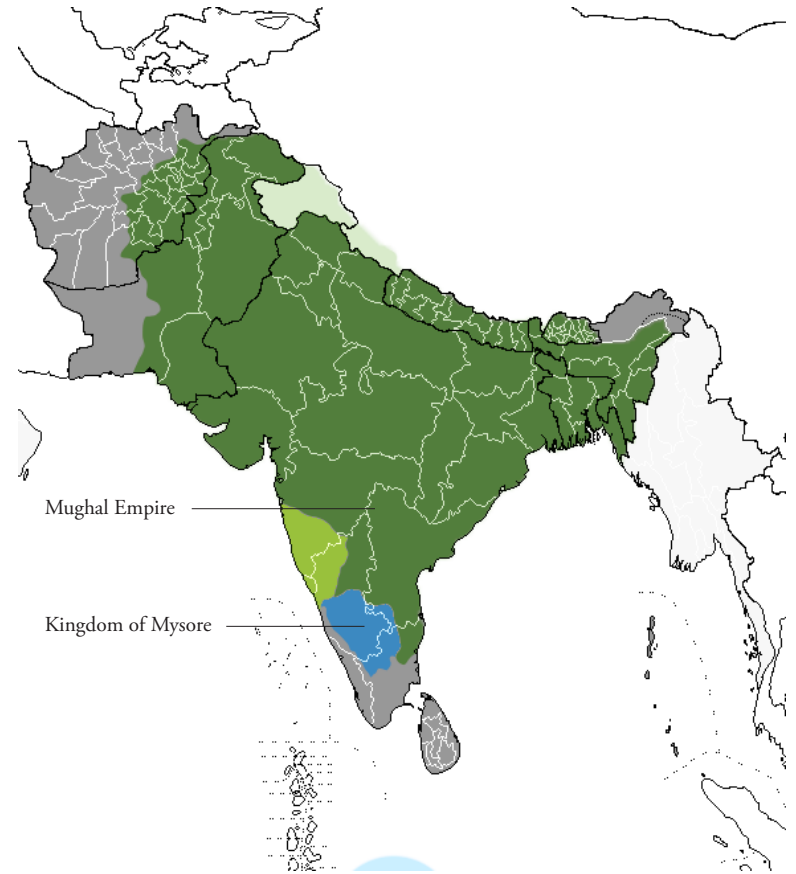


Image by Author

**1704**  
Mughal Empire

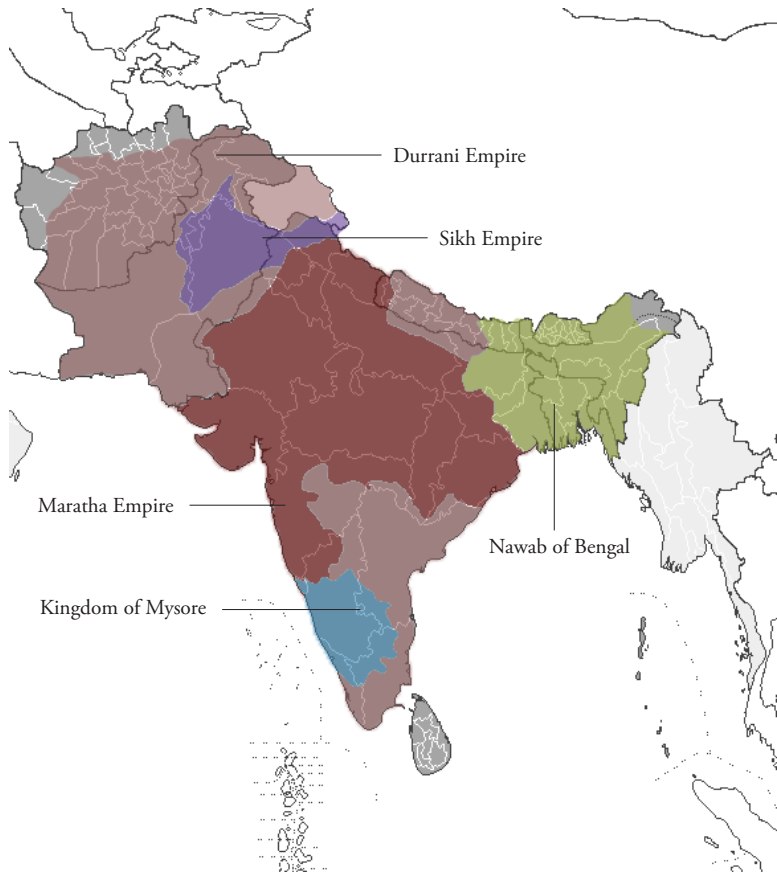


Image by Author

1754  
Maratha Empire

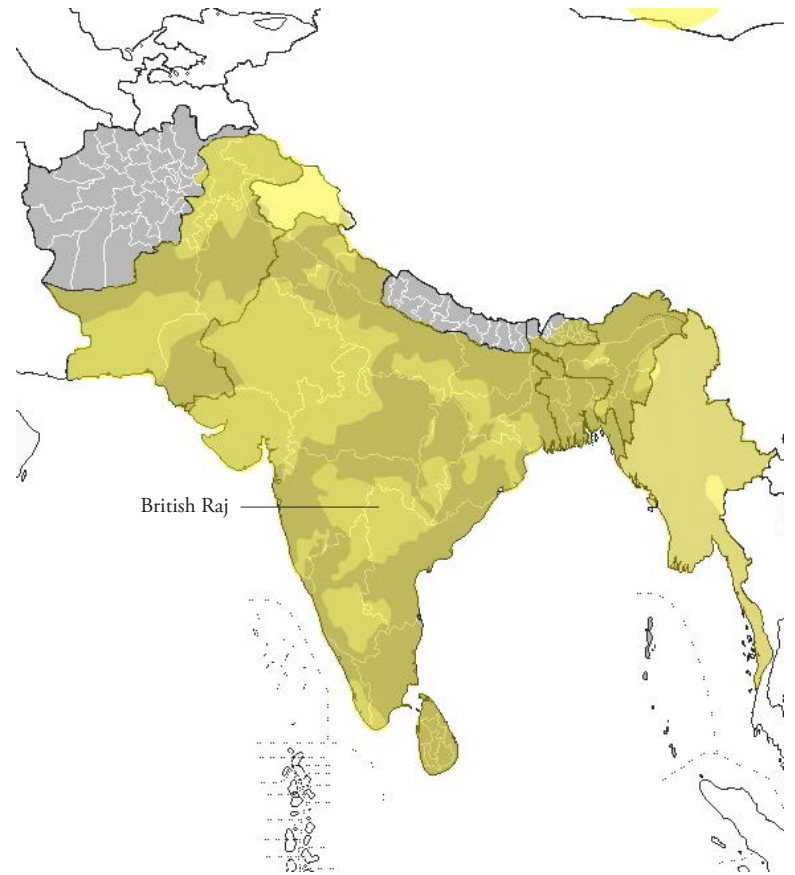


Image by Author

1914  
British Raj

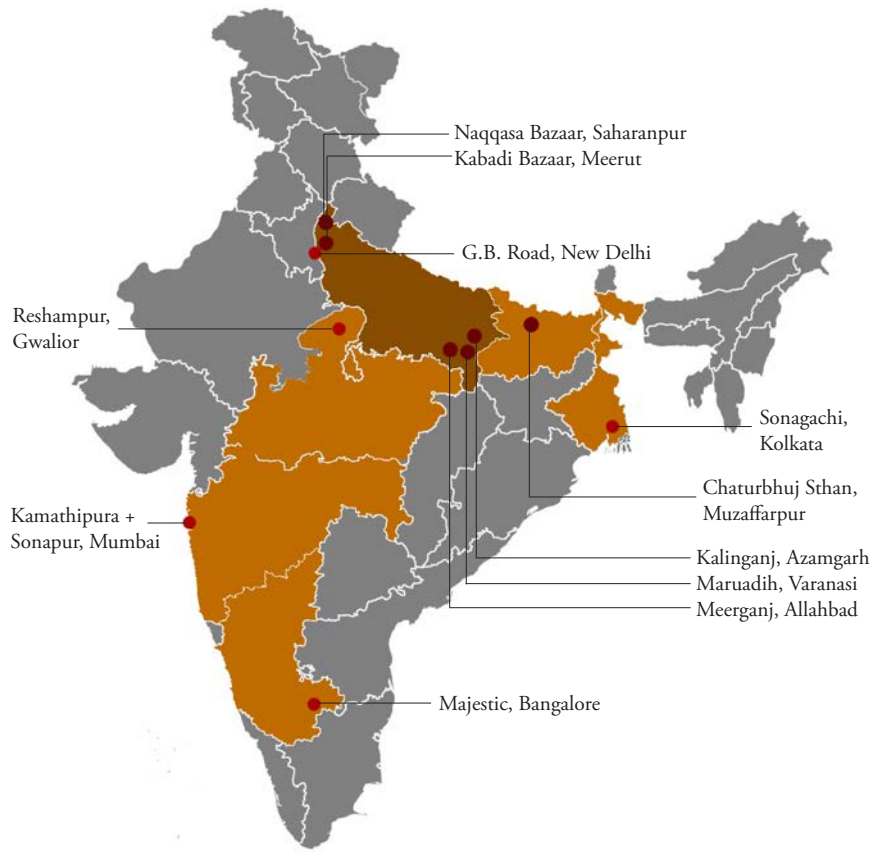


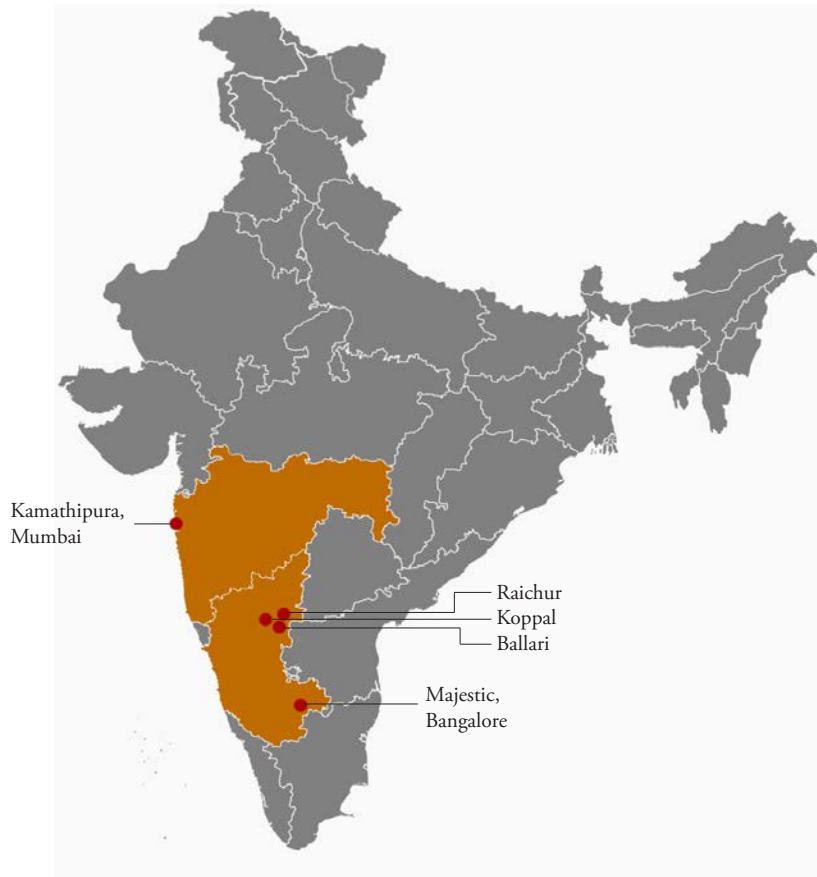
Image by Author

**Areas of Prostitution: Post-Colonial India**  
Past



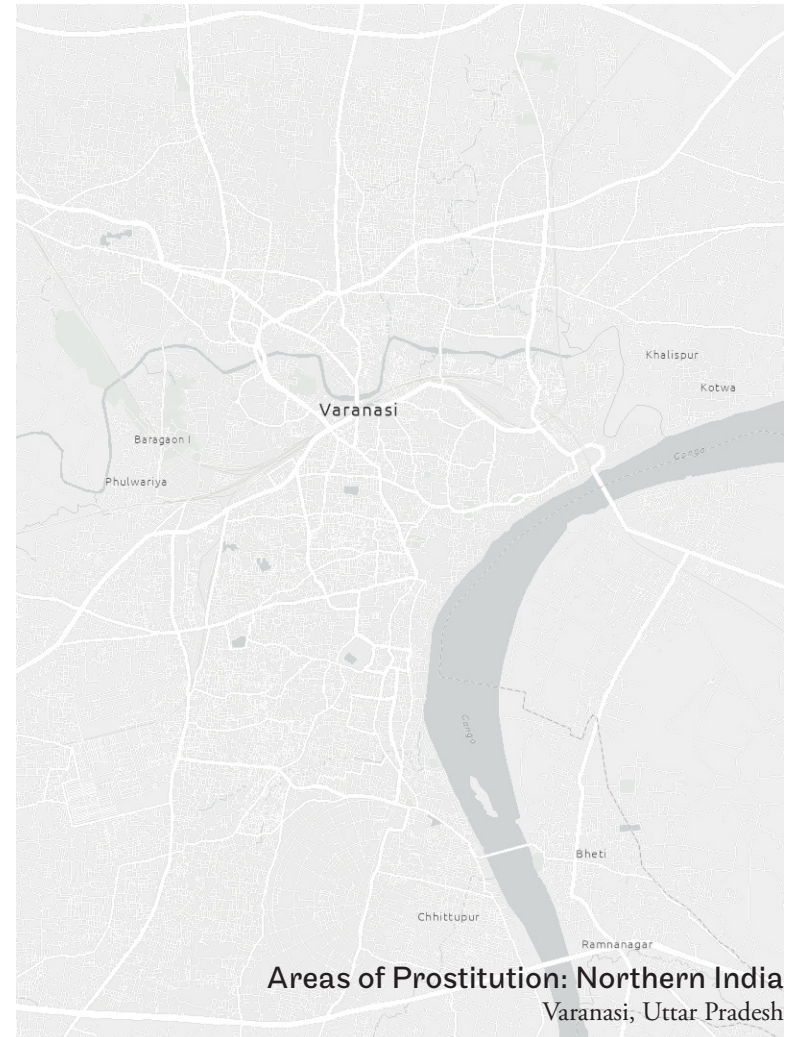
Image by Author

**Areas of Prostitution: Post-Colonial India**  
Present



**Areas of Prostitution: Post-Colonial India**  
Project Site Focus

Image by Author



**Areas of Prostitution: Northern India**  
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

Image by Author

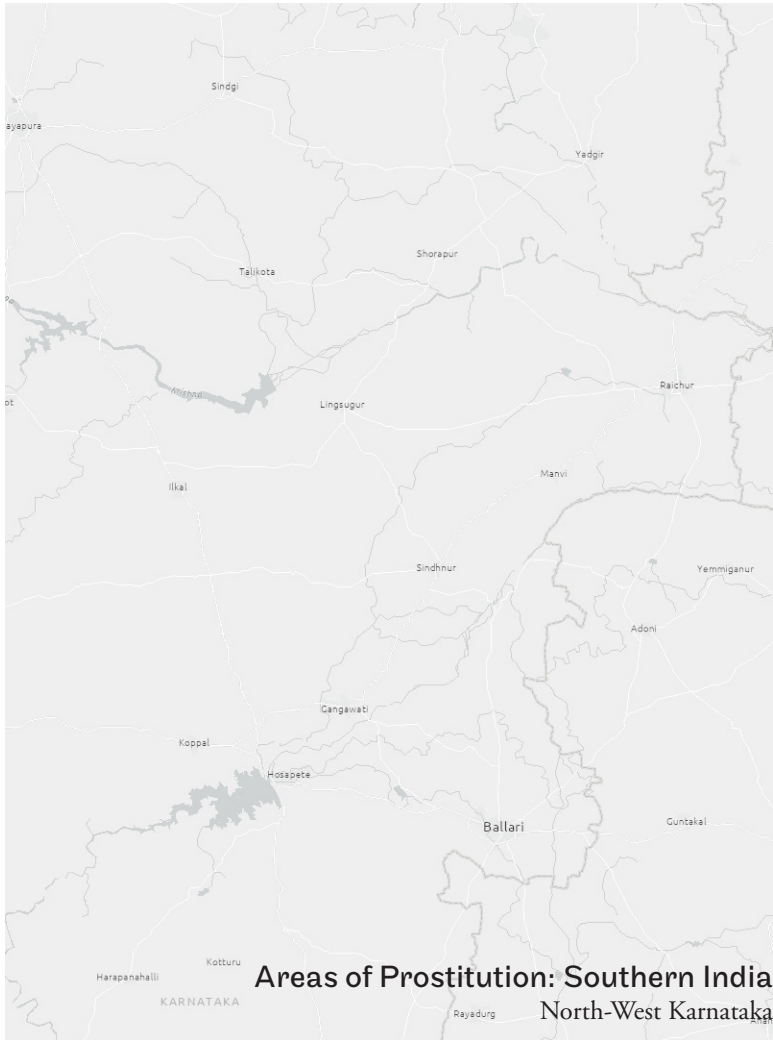


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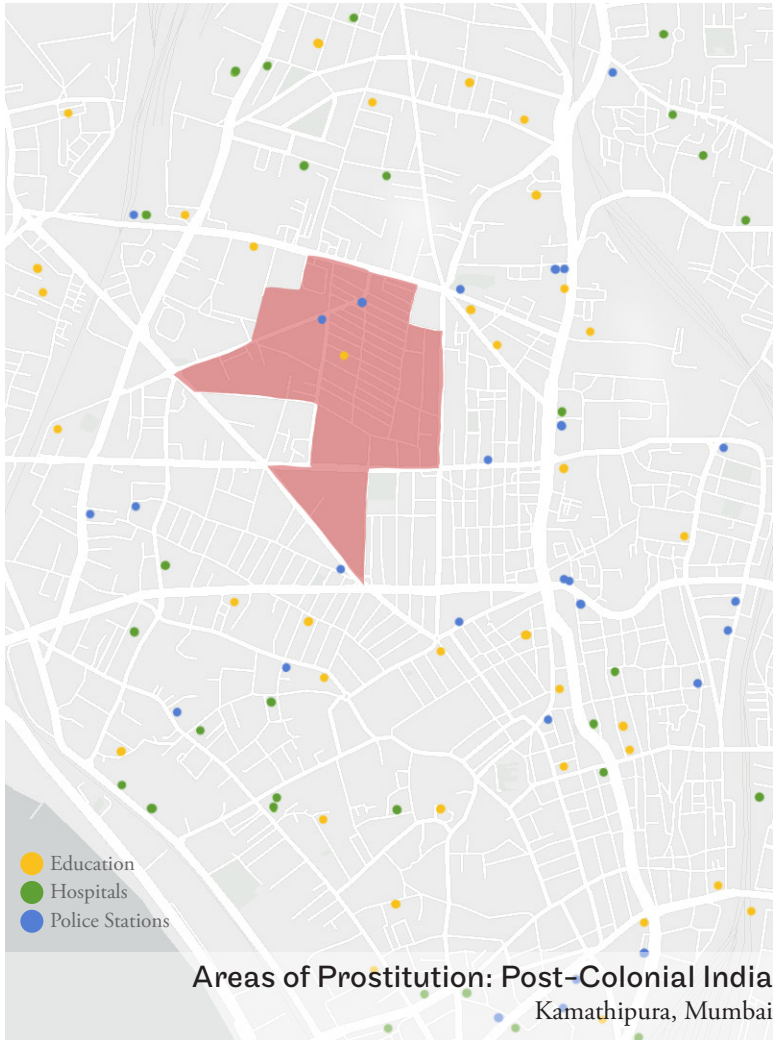


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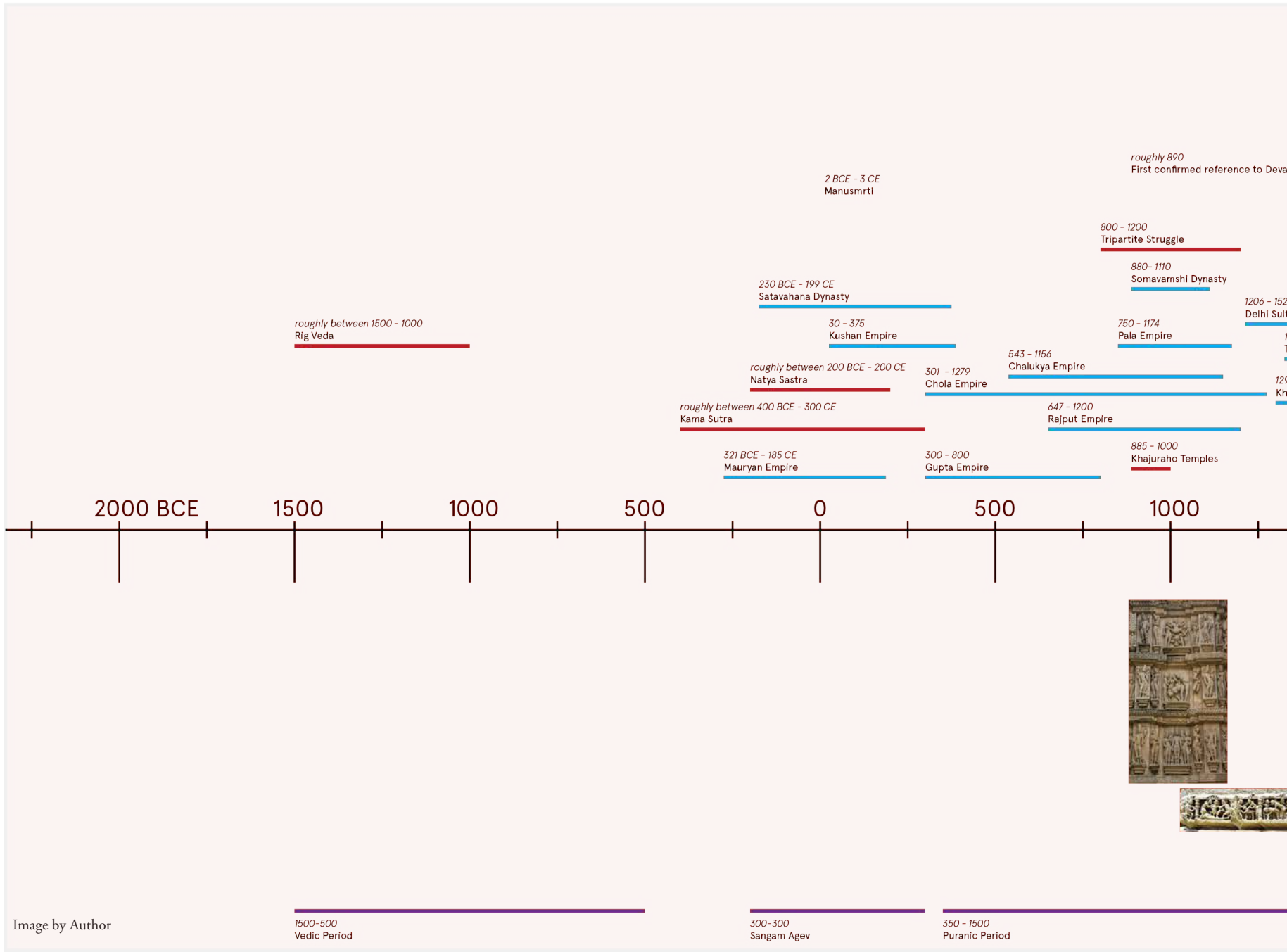


Image by Author

dasi

anate

320 - 1414  
ughliq Dynasty

10 - 1320  
ilji Empire

1336 - 1660  
Vijayanagara Empire

1526 - 1858  
Mughal Empire

1674 - 1820  
Maratha Empire

1600 - 1757  
East India Company in India

1721 - 1949  
Princely Stat

1613  
Trading port at Surat established

1615  
EIC acquires first territory in Bombay and gains right to build a factory in Surat

1611  
EIC establishes trade relations with rulers in Masulipatam on the East Coast

31 Dec 1600  
East India Company (EIC) is formed

1640  
EIC gains permission from Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan to trade with Bengal

1640  
EIC establishes factory at Hoogly

1640  
Madras becomes a presidency town (Fort St. George)

1639  
EIC rents small trading outpost in Madras

1661  
Bombay granted to EIC; held in trust for the Crown

1684  
Bombay becomes a presidency town

1687  
EIC headquarters move from Surat to Bombay

1690  
Calcutta becomes the presidency town (Fort William) of the Bengal Presidency

1717  
Mughal Emperor ex...  
paying standard cust...

1500

1600

1620

1640

1660

1680

1700

1720



empt the EIC from  
oms and duties

1744 - 1763  
Anglo-French War in India

1756  
Black Hole of Calcutta  
1757  
The Battle of Plassey

1773  
Regulating Act

1776  
Translation of Manusmrti into English  
by British philologist, Sir W. Jones

1784  
India Act

1792  
EIC defeats the Marathas and  
Tippu Sultan of Mysore

10 July 1806  
Mutiny at Vellore

1812  
Title 6, Police Regulation

1827  
Title 14, Police Regulation

1857  
Mutiny at Barrackpore

1858  
End of Mogul Empire -  
territories ceded to the  
British Government

1860  
Indian Penal Code

1860  
Bombay Police  
Reform, Section 14

1862  
Committee  
established to inquire  
into venereal diseases

1864  
Cantonment Act

1864  
Foreigners' Act

1867  
Assoc. for Promoting the  
Extension of the CDA

1869  
Ladies National Assc. for t

1864 - 1869  
Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA) cr

1857 - 1858  
Rebellion of the Indian Army

1873 - 1893  
Fall of the Rupee

1740

1760

1780

1800

1820

1840

1860

1880



1757-1858  
Company Rule in India

1797-1813  
British Rule in Portuguese India

1858-1947  
British Raj



Dividend

1885 Formation of the Indian National Congress

1895 Cantonment Act

1902 Bombay City Police Act, Section 20, 28, 120

1909 Morley-Minto Reforms

1914 - 1918 World War One

1915 Defence of India Act

1917 Montague's promise of self-rule in India

1919 Amritsar Massacre

1919 Government of India Act

1920 Bombay City Police (Amendment) Act, Section 126A

1923 Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act (XI)

1924 Cantonment Act

1927 Simon Commission

1930 - 1932 Round Table Conferences

1934 Bombay Devadasi Protection Act

1935 Government of India Act

1939 - 1945 World War Two

1942 "Quit India" Movement

1946 Cabinet mission to India

18 July 1947 Indian Independence Act

15 August 1947 Independence

15 August 1947 Indo-Pak Partition

1947 Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act

1956 Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (SITA)

1986 Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA)

1988 Devadasi system formally outlawed in all of India

19 May 2022 Interim Order on dignity of sex workers

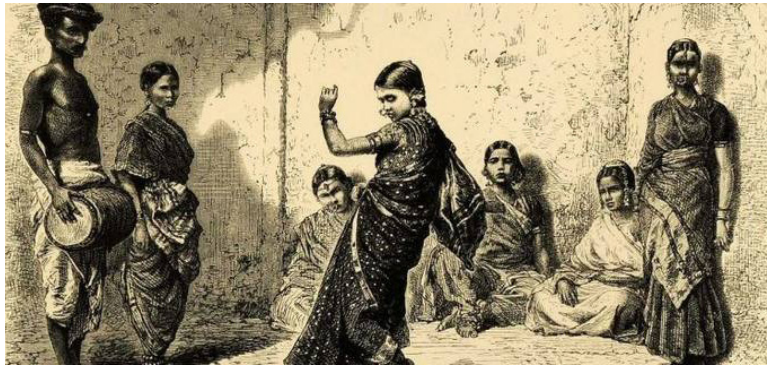
0 1900 1920 1940 1960 1980 2000 2020 CE



SPECULATIVE REALITY

*...the Indian prostitute, with her ability to evade and even actually refuse approaches, offered the colonial state a challenge. In the struggle that followed between the colonial authorities and the subject population, **the women's body itself became a battle site.***

(Chatterji, 2018)



"Nautch girls, Bombay," from The Graphic, 1875



"Birth of a prince", Rajasthan, 1725

## DEVADASI, COURTESAN, PROSTITUTE

*Sex work in pre-colonial India, and its shift to prostitution as it is understood today.*

Sex work in pre-colonial India was performed, perceived and treated very differently than it is today. Sex workers were treated with the same respect as was given to their clientele unlike today, where they are viewed as lesser. The only hierarchy maintained was that of the caste system and no shame or maltreatment was placed on them as a result of their profession. Sex workers across all castes, were also purveyors of the arts, learning dance, music, art and song. Many of these were a significant part of their duties, where they performed a variety of rituals for their clientele. Within the profession, there were various forms of identity that arose across the various empires. Of these, the Courtesan (for which there are many names) and the Devadasi, were perhaps the most respected.

The Devadasi, were temple dancers who were dedicated to a deity and commonly associated with South Indian cultures. They performed rituals, danced at festivals, performed for the royalty and took care of the temple they were dedicated to. While there were differences between Devadasi based on the caste they originated from, there was little difference in the duties that they performed. The Devadasi, having dedicated their bodies and lives to the deity, a reflection of marriage, were considered auspicious and were treated with the same respect as a goddess. Not only this, but patrons of the Devadasi were considered to have a higher status due to their financial sponsorship of a Devadasi.



“Nautch dancers in India”, ca. 1860-1870

The Courtesan, while prominent in the Northern Indian sub-continent, was also found in the south as Empires grew and expanded. Similar, to the additional status afforded to patrons of the Devadasi, the employment of Courtesans were a symbol of wealth and prosperity for the various Indian Empires. The Courtesan went by many names over the years: Ganikas, in Buddhist and Jain literature, were trained in the fine arts to entertain kings, princes and wealthy patrons on both religious and social occasions. Tawaifs, during the Mughal Empire, who were highly successful entertainers catering to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent, and was later referred to as Nautch. A Nagarvadhu (translated to ‘bride of the city’), in the southern sub-continent, was a specific type of courtesan that was held in very high esteem. Women competed to hold the title and only the most beautiful and talented in the arts (specifically song and dance) was chosen. A Nagarvadhu’s prices were extremely high, even for a single night and as a result only the royalty and height of nobility (Thakurs) could afford them.

In contrast, sex work was viewed extremely differently in British culture, with much less respect and requiring no skills in the arts. This view of sex work (with its only requirement being sex) was introduced into India when the British soldiers, under the EIC were stationed in various parts of India. They began to slowly transform the perception of sex work, to align with their own. The military set up brothels, often bringing women from low castes who are unable to fend for themselves to service the British soldiers. This became so widespread, that “military prostitution was

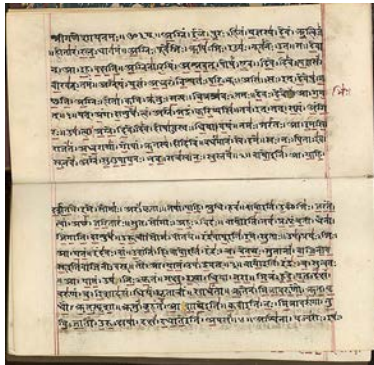
1. Levine, P. Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire. Taylor & Francis, 2013.

*“...there are explicit steps taken by state institutions to protect the male customers without undermining their perceptions as sexualised men.” In other words, prostitution was a necessary and a convenient provision to bolster masculinity, and **if it was necessary to shape it to privilege the client overtly, that was a political necessity.***

(Levine, 2003)

regarded as inevitable wherever British soldiers gathered”<sup>2</sup>. Over time, as colonial rule became more prominent, policy makers who could not see the rich cultural background of sex workers in India, created laws and policies that relegated many women in this profession to the bottom of society. Many courtesans objected to these policies as their professions necessitated “so much training of voice and muscle and [ensured] so large an income that she [felt] far above the position of the degraded woman consorting with the British soldier.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, while this opposition was entertained in parts of India, it quickly dissipated as further policies were continually being introduced. Over time, the rich history of the Devadasi and the Courtesan was erased from the collective Indian memory, leaving only the ‘new prostitute’ in its place.

2. Andrew, Elizabeth Wheeler, and Katharine Caroline Bushnell. *The Queen's daughters in India*. Morgan and Scott, 1898.



Rig Veda  
c. 1500 - 1000 BCE



Natyasastra  
Bharata Muni  
c. 200 BCE - 200 CE



Illustration from the Kamasutra  
Vatsyayana  
c. 400 BCE

## TEXTS + MYTHOLOGIES

*Different texts that are key parts of Indian culture - Rig Veda, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Kama Sutra, Manusmriti, etc.,*

Sex and sex work has been a part of Indian History for centuries. In fact, the first written instance of sex work is noted in the Rig Veda, which is an ancient set of Sanskrit hymns and are sacred canonical hindu texts, holding an important space within Indian culture. Written during the early Vedic period, at around 1500 to 1000 BCE, the Rig Veda, is one of the oldest pieces of literature, making sex work, one of the oldest recorded professions in the Indian sub-continent. The Rig Veda speaks to [expand].

Other sacred canonical texts include the Mahabharata (700BCE) and the Ramayana (400BCE), the two major Sanskrit epics from Ancient India, which celebrate the female figure as a divine gift. The Mahabharata in particular, speaks about the Apsaras, “who were employed in enticing the hearts of persons practising rigid austerities [...] possessing slim waists and fair large hips, they [performed] various evolutions, shaking their deep bosoms, and casting their glances around, and exhibiting other attractive attitudes capable of stealing the hearts and resolutions and minds of the spectators”. The Apsaras had full control over who would they would or would not entertain, and many of their rituals are comparable to the writings of Vatsyayana’s Kamasutra. The Kamasutra, written in 400 BCE, around the same time as the Ramayana, is a Sanskrit text on sexuality, eroticism and emotional fulfillment. The Kamasutra, was translated into English through a collaborative effort of Bhagavanlal Indrajit and Shivaram

1. Mahabharata, Book III: Vana Parva, Section 43.

स्वभाव एव नरिणां पुरुषाणाग्निहृदुषणम् । (II, 213)

Woman by nature makes man go astray. "प्रवृत्तादुत्पन्नं मेतु अत्रम्" (II, 214). She makes man deviate from his path; she can mislead him. They are after man ignoring his looks, age etc.

So they are man-baiters, fickle-minded and merciless.

नेतास्वपं परीक्षन्ते नासां वयसि संस्थितिः ।

पुरुषं वा विरुषं वा पुमानित्येव भुञ्जते ॥

पौरवत्याख्यसंविताद्य नेनेहारव स्वभावतः ॥ (IX, 14-15)

Women by nature are full of lust, ill-tempered, crafty and wily :

सद्यसात्मलङ्कारं कामं क्रोधमनाजंभम् ।

द्रोहमात्रं कुपयति च स्त्रीभ्यो मनुकल्पयत् ॥ (IX, 17)

By so generalising woman's nature, Manu does not consider her fit for freedom. Woman is unfit for freedom. "न मजेत् स्त्रीस्वतन्त्रताम्" (V, 147-148). Women are fit to be in bondage - अस्वतन्त्रा स्त्रियाः कर्माः (IX, 2). No woman deserves freedom - न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति (IX, 3). Her life is limited to bearing children and managing the household (IX, 27). These days, women are competing with man in every sphere and proving themselves efficient. Under such circumstances Manu's generalisations or narrow outlook about woman are not worth considering.

Woman is created only to be impregnated 'प्रजनाय स्त्रियाः सृष्टाः' - (IX, 96). So saying, Manu deprives her of initiation by holy chantings अग्निजा तु कारयेत् (II, 66 and IX, 18). He wants their names to end with long syllables (II, 33). These days with names like Kajol, Chanchal, Koyal, Kiran, ending in short syllables being popular, Manu's dictum loses its import.

Observe Manu's saying regarding a girl fit for marriage. 'A girl not handicapped, with a pleasing name,

during his lifetime and also after his death. She shall not behave wantonly. Husband-wife relationship is meritorious and meaningful in a frame of self-restraint. This restraint is like penance (Tapas) and purifies their relationship. Patience is tapas. Patience leads to blissful life. Granting that a husband goes astray, the wife has to make every effort to bring him back to the fold.

निर्मितः कर्मकृते वा पुत्र्यां संविर्जिताः ।

उपवर्ष्यः स्त्रिय सख्या सततं देवकल्पिताः ॥ (V, 154)

If by chance or misfortune husband falls into bad ways, the wife has to make an allant effort to set him right by love and affection only. Manu does not approve of divorce caused on flimsy grounds or in haste. There is no justification of the institution of sacred marriage if divorce is sought for silly reasons.

When a husband dies, his young wife has to observe stricter self-restraint. She should not be frivolous or fond of much make-up. Manu feels that this may tempt men and social morality may be affected.

Relationship based on marriage should not be spoiled. Manu's warning in this respect is relevant even these days.

'A woman intimate with many men acquires sin, fatal diseases, contempt and sorrow in this world. She is born as a fox in her next birth :

व्यनिवारतु भर्तुः स्त्री लोके प्रभ्रोति नियताम् ।

सृगालयोनिं प्रभ्रोति वापरोगेव पीड्यते ॥ (V, 164)

Manu further adds that wife's sexual indulgences cause in and is painful for the husband too. Husband-wife relationship has cumulative responsibility. A husband should not create opportunity for a wife to become a prostitute.

Parashuram. This translation was then revised by Richard Burton and Forster Arbuthnot in 1883, in order to suit the sensibilities of 19th Century Victorian England. While this revision was radically unfaithful to the original text, it quickly became one of the most popularly reproduced books in the English language.

Another important text to the Hindu culture, is the Nātyaśāstra, an encyclopedic Sanskrit text on the performing arts. It was completed roughly between 200 BCE and 200 CE, and discusses the courtesan, their performances and rituals, as well as their clientele during the Gupta dynasty in particular.

During this time, a second text, the Manusmriti, also called the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra, was also written. While it was one of the many constituents of Hinduism, it was not as commonly followed. The Manusmriti as we know it today, is deeply misogynistic, and critical of the female capabilities. However, it is believed that the text has been altered from the original as not only are varying manuscripts inconsistent with each other, several points in the text also appear to contradict one another. The Manusmriti however, despite these inconsistencies and marked difference with a majority of other ancient texts as well as its lack of use, became the basis and justification of of the construction of 'Anglo-Hindu' laws that would be put into effect by the East India Company during British colonial rule.

## CASTE

*Social stratification system used in India throughout ancient to modern history.*

The caste system has existed and been in practise in India for at least 3,000 years. It is a social hierarchy that is passed down from generation to generation, and can dictate the professions a person can work in as well as aspects of their social lives, including whom they can or cannot marry. The caste system was originally intended solely for Hindus, although today, almost everyone in India identifies with a caste, regardless of their faith background.

Caste hierarchies is in part also based on economic hierarchy, based in initial professions which continues today to some extent. But financial hardship isn't strongly correlated with caste identification in today's society.

Generally, people belonging to lower castes share the view that there isn't widespread caste discrimination in India. However, parts of India, specifically in the Northeast still experience extreme caste-based discrimination. Additionally, even if caste-based discrimination is not prominent in modern society, it still tends to dictate much of society and class rules.

As mentioned earlier, caste was also the hierarchy used to differentiate between different levels of sex workers in pre-colonial India. Clients would generally only visit sex workers from within their caste. It is important to note that the caste of the sex worker was not defined by their profession, but that they existed on all levels of the caste system.

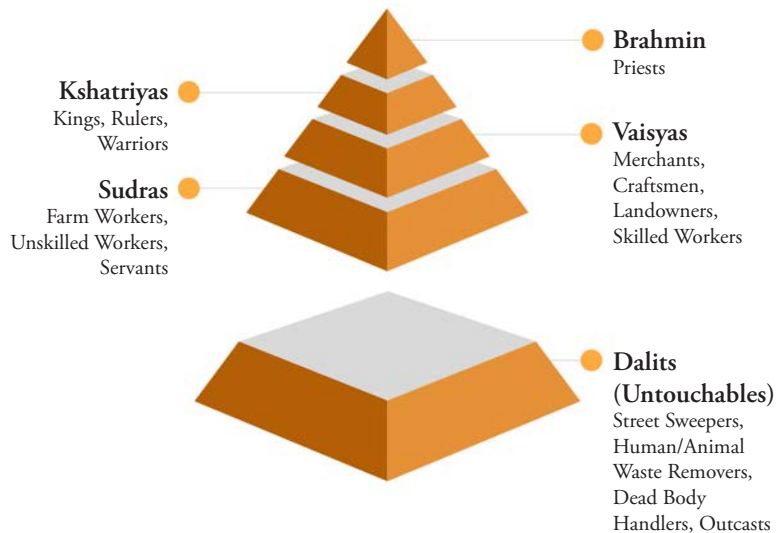


Image by Author



“where white men visited and settled, brothels and grogshops followed”

(Levine, 2003)

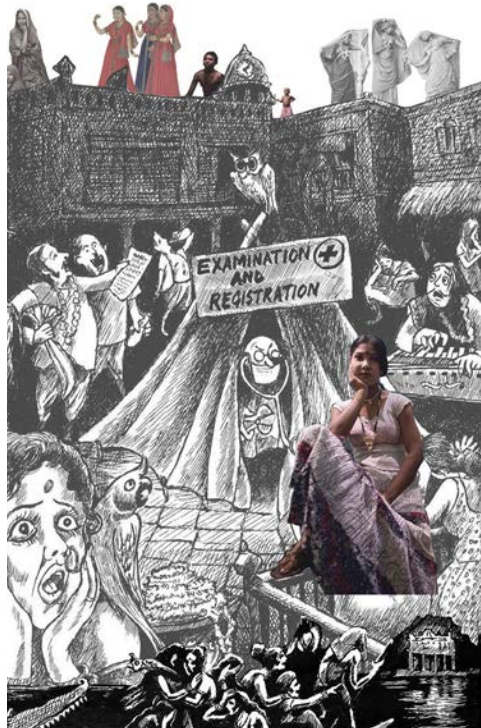


Image by Author

## POLICY

*Hindu law, introduction of British policy, post-colonial legacies, and current legislature based on a rise of information.*

Among some of the first few texts translated from Sanskrit to English during the colonisation of India by the British and the EIC, the Manusmriti was one that was heavily relied on for many of the policies put into effect in order to maintain the image of supporting Indian values and beliefs. The use of the Manusmriti is an interesting one considering it was not a popular text in most Indian cultures; it was however remarkably similar to the book of Leviticus in the Christian bible. The nature of the Manusmriti is one that is extremely patriarchal, and derogatory towards women. Not only was the text very oppressive on the freedoms and rights of women, but it has also been mistranslated and revised multiple times resulting in manuscripts that are contradictory both to each other and also within itself. As a result, it is unclear as to how much of the Manusmriti, as used by the British, was accurate to the original.

When the rise of sexually transmitted diseases began to spread within the British regiments, across the globe, the British passed the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, across both Great Britain, and all of its colonies. However, nowhere was the consequences of the CDA as harsh as they were in the British Raj on the Indian Subcontinent. As there were more British living in India than any of the other colonies, the spread of diseases appeared to be particularly problematic as British soldiers were falling ill and were, as a result, a burden on British expenses. The CDA, which was a policy



Woodcut from *Sammelband von 7 Kleinschriften zu gynakologischen Spezialthemen*, 1858-1901

directed to control women and not the men, was heavily imposed in India with its initial impact falling on the *chaklas* founded by the British regiments, and then spreading to all fields of sex work.

The CDA dictated that all female prostitutes were required to undergo harsh and painful examinations which would determine whether they were infected and 'diseased'. If found to be diseased, the women were then sent to hospitals that were meant to monitor and care for their conditions. Instead, these hospitals were structured to be more like prisons. Many chose to flee to avoid being registered and forced into examination. Many of the *nautch* women rebelled against the CDA stating that their profession was vastly superior to the prostitute created in the *chaklas*. While the British at first acknowledged this difference between *nautch* and prostitute and permitted their freedom, this was quickly stopped. Dissent was viewed as a threat to the colonial rule, and so consequences became even harsher and easily doled out. As a result, the tradition of the *nautch* as seen in Indian history was quickly wiped out and replaced by the image of the prostitute as introduced by the British military, resulting in what we see today.

At some point, Christian missionaries, recognised a growing rise of European women who were shipped to *chaklas* in India catering to the new field of prostitution. Witnessing their harsh treatment, a group of female missionaries, led by Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Josephine Butler in 1869, formed the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. As the CDA

allowed for the legalisation of prostitution and also placed the women under harsh police and medical control, the LNA argued that the CDA made 'sin' (the act of prostitution) a legal and official act in addition to mistreating the women involved. In 1870, a year after its formation, the LNA published an article in the *Daily News*, titled 'Women's Protest'. The article argued their reasons for working against the CDA stating that "as far as women are concerned, they remove every guarantee of personal security which the law has established and held sacred, and put their reputation, their freedom, and their persons absolutely in the power of the police"<sup>1</sup>. They also argued the double standard based on gender stating that "it is unjust to punish the sex who are the victims of a vice, and leave unpunished the sex who are the main cause, both of the vice and its dreaded consequences"<sup>1</sup>.

Of course, they did face opposition from many who thought it was vulgar for women to be speaking so openly on matters of sex and police brutality. One such opponent wrote that "a very large majority of our sex [men]... can only characterize it as the height of indecency to say the least... women are ignorant of the subject – but not Mrs. Josephine Butler and company – they know nothing about it... No men, whoever they may be, admire women who openly show that they know as much on disgusting subjects as they do themselves, much less so those who are so indelicate to discuss them in public."<sup>2</sup> However, the LNA succeeded and in 1883, the CDA was suspended and later repealed in 1886. While this stopped the harsh medical examination and confinement of sex workers, it also ended legalised prostitution,

1. Butler, Josephine Elizabeth Grey (1896). *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*. p.18. London: Horace Marshall & Son

2. Sigsworth, E. M.; Wyke, T.J (2013). "A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease". In Vicinus, Martha (ed.). *Suffer and Be Still Women in the Victorian Age*. Routledge.

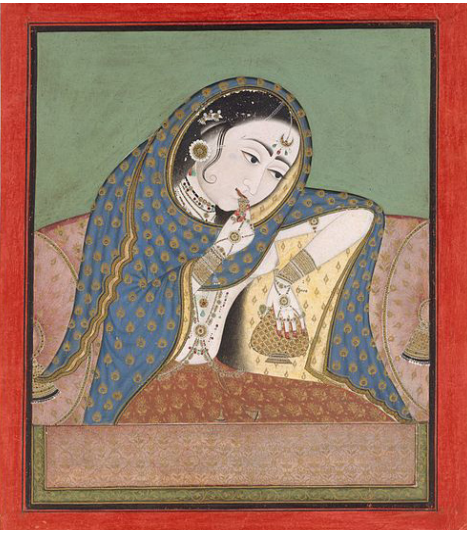


Sex workers at Sonagachi, country's biggest collective of sex workers in North Kolkata celebrate the recent observations of the Supreme Court on sex work.

Debasish Bhaduri, May 2022

setting back India's societal reacceptance of sex work.

Today, prostitution is legal in India, however organised sex work such as brothels are illegal. This however is not regulated on an official basis, with police in the areas with brothels allowing for their existence on the condition of regular bribes fostering a secretive system which allows for the formation and maintenance of sex trafficking systems. While some laws have been passed in the recent years, post colonialism, the state in which the field of sex work is in today is not a safe or healthy one. A recent interim order, was passed (but not yet approved) on the 19th of May 2022. The contents of this order, while a huge step in the right direction, brought into stark light, the state of the profession for these amendments to have to be stated so clearly. The Order called for sex workers to have the right to live with dignity, and an end to police brutality and raids. It allowed for children not suspected of sex trafficking to remain with their mothers (when previously they were taken solely for their mother's profession). More importantly, it allowed sex workers access to an Aadhar card which was previously restricted due to a lack of address. This is extremely important as the Aadhar is intricately tied to one's life in India. It is a requirement to create a bank account, getting a phone number, insurance and many others aspects of life in India. Without the Aadhar, one is legally 'invisible', forcing an entire community to remain out of sight from 'normal' society.



Melancholy Courtesan, Rajasthan/Bindi/Kota, ca. 1750



Krishna and Radha in a Pavilion, ca. 1760

## ART + ARCHITECTURE

*An analysis of sex work as depicted in art and architecture over time.*

Not only were sex workers in pre-colonial India at the forefront of the artistic fields, they were also represented within art and architecture throughout history. The sex worker as depicted in art was well taken care of, in terms of shelter, food, clothing and jewels. They are often in elaborate traditional Indian wear, loaded with gold as maang tikkas, jhumars, jaadanagam, jhumkas, nose rings, necklaces, bangles, kamarbandh, payals, rings and toe rings (all forms of Indian jewellery). They are depicted in grand rooms, or on terraces, and baths, connected to nature. This emphasises that not only were they were credited for their work as any other profession, they were also respected within society. They were also depicted several times with the gods and goddesses in spaces of ordinary, preformative, ritualistic and sexual life, emphasising their close connection with ritualistic, spiritual and literary connections to the divine.

The female form itself, which is viewed as highly promiscuous in today's culture was once venerated. The yakshi figure, an exaggerated figure of female divinity, was a symbol of abundance and good fortune and was a respected aspect of art and architecture. In contrast, the yakshi figure in the sculpture by Kunhiraman in Kerala (further explained in section titled 'Yakshi') sparked huge controversies citing vulgar and crude imagery.



Krishna Watches the Gopis in the Garden Pool Bijapur, Deccan School, c. 1650

Depictions of the nude female body, with connections to nature, and an emphasis on the close relation between the sex worker and the divine.



Dancing Girl, Tilly Kettle, 1772

A Nautch woman painted by a British artist, shows their presence still heavily exalted with the woman depicted standing within palatial architecture, wearing a grand sari and loaded with gold, wearing ghungroos for her dance performances (likely one of the eight classical Indian dance forms: Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali, Sattriya, Manipuri and Mohiniyattam), and smoking from a Hookah. The architecture suggests that she is a part of the Mughal Empire, which used Islamic motifs.



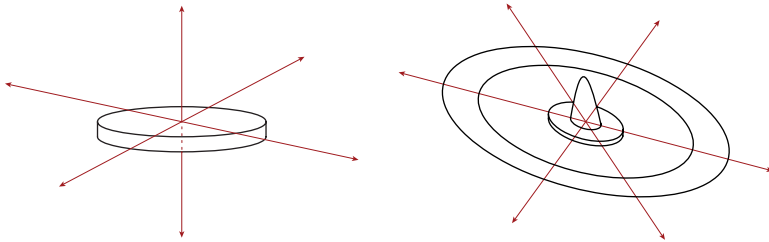
Tanjore Balasaraswati, Studio Portraits, Madras, 1934

## Bharatnatyam

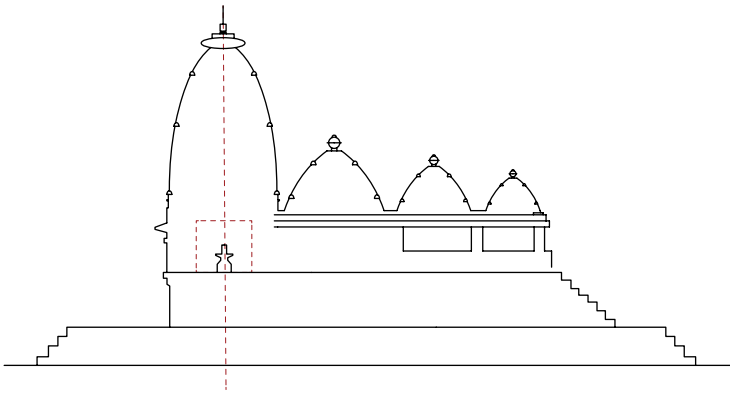
The word Bharatanatyam comes from the words “bhavam” which means expression, “ragam” which means music, “talam”, which means rhythm, and “natyam”, which means dance. It was at one point, called Sadir Natyam which refers to ‘dancing in the royal courts’ which was the original use of the dance form. Initially, Bharatnatya, was a form of entertainment for rulers in India in which Devadasis, would dance for the kings. Many of the mudras (hand gestures) are direct replicas of the ritual and performative dances put on by devadasi.

Once the British Raj was in place, there was no longer any patronage for Devadasi, as the once powerful were now subservient to the British. Although some Devadasi attempted to make a living on their own, through Bharatnatyam, it did not last long. Over time, Indian society began to be more critical about the physical features of a Devadasi. This meant that the moment a Devadasi’s physical beauty began to fade (she grew older), she could be shunned from ever dancing again. As a result, the Devadasi, were reduced to a state of poverty and eventually, Bharatnatyam itself began to lose its initial identity.

Today, Bharatnatyam is one of the most respected dance forms in modern and ancient Indian history, however, when learning about the dance form today, its roots in the Devadasi culture have been completely erased from the history of the dance.



### Nagara Architecture



### Dravidian Architecture

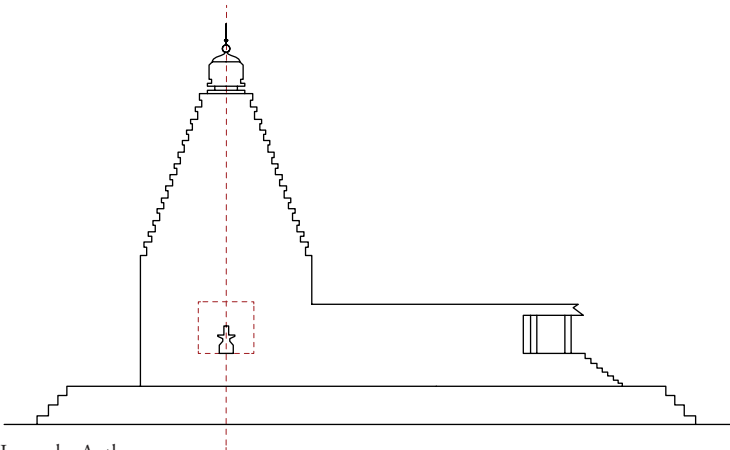


Image by Author

## Hindu Temple Architecture

Hindu temple architecture relies on the ideals of dharma, values and the way of life followed under Hinduism. The temple is a place meant for Tirtha (which translates to pilgrimage). The temple reflects the cosmos and the divine that create and celebrates life, with depictions and symbolism for the elements (earth, fire, water and air), deities, feminine and masculine, and many more. The temple itself acts as a connection between the earth and the divine. The temple architecture itself represents the Mountain Neru, believed to be at the centre of the earth, with the rest of the universe expanding from it. This representation can be seen in the Shikara, which holds the garbhagriha (the resting place of the idol of the deity) at its centre. Though this general outline remains, the intricacies of the architecture changes throughout the subcontinent. However, it can generally be classes into three categories. Nagara architecture, which is the architecture found in Northern India, and Dravida Architecture which is found in the South. The third category, Vesara, is a style that combines various elements of the Nagara and the Dravida.

## Ratha Development of Temple Plan

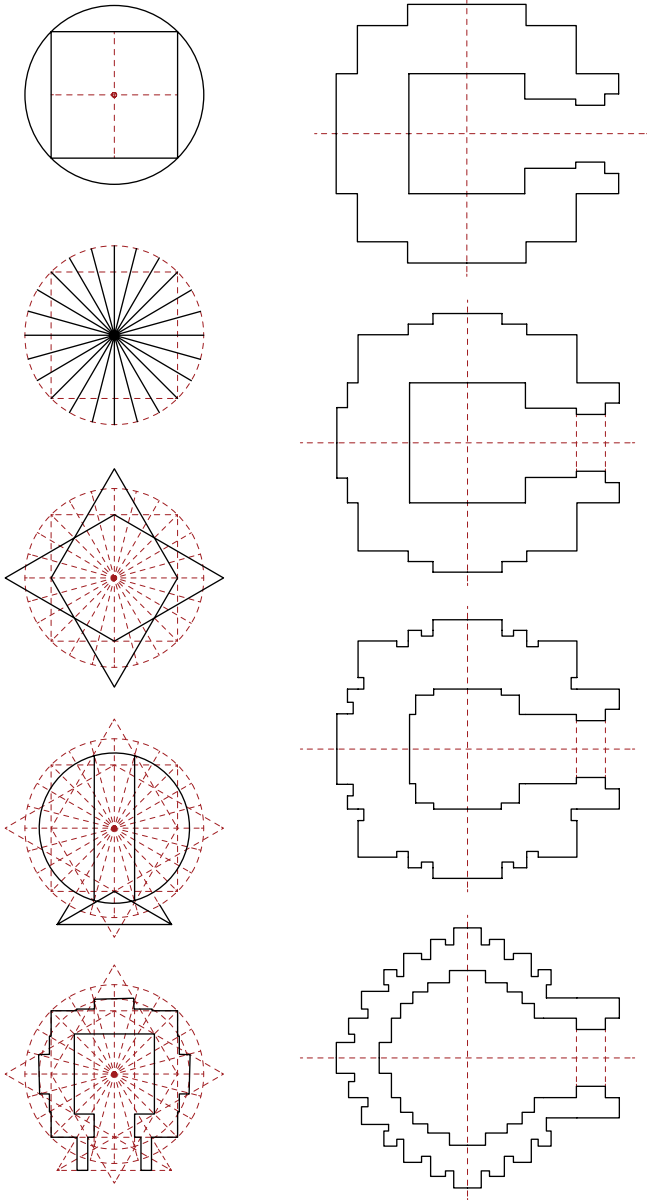
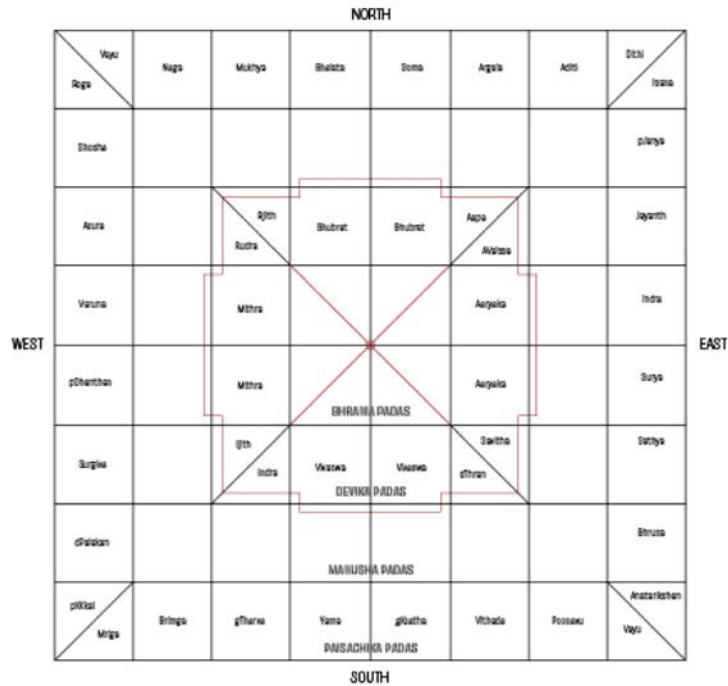


Image by Author

Throughout temple architecture, there is a huge importance of geometries, focused around the circle - as the symbol of the universe. The temples almost always face east, in the direction of the sunrise.

There is also a heavy reliance on the use of **Vastu** - a traditional Indian system of architecture based on ancient texts discussing principles of design, layout, measurements, ground preparation, space arrangement, and spatial geometry. It integrates architecture with nature and ancient beliefs utilising geometric patterns (yantra), symmetry, and directional alignments.





## Manduka Mandala

Brahma padas - typically where the main and/or largest idol of the temple resides.

Devika (Devaika) padas - the zone where gods (devas) reside.

Manusha padas - the zone where human beings live and symbolically make choice between good and evil, Devas (gods) and Paisachikas (demons), as they walk / journey towards the core of the temple for a darsana (darshan, vision).

Paisachikas padas - the zone of demons, fears, doubts, suffering. On the east edge are always Surya (Sun) and Indra present, who rythmically bring light and hope everyday.

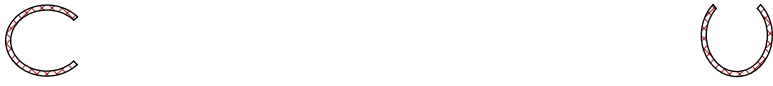
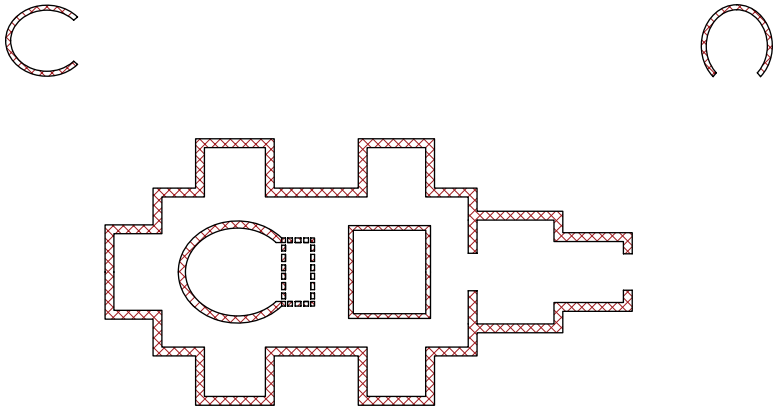


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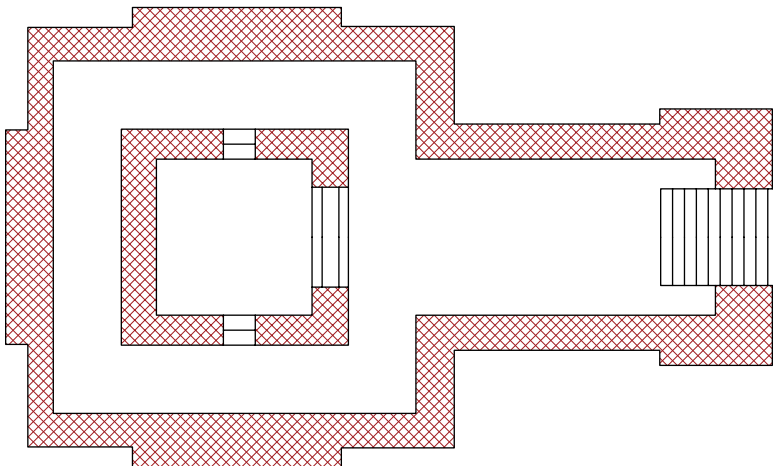


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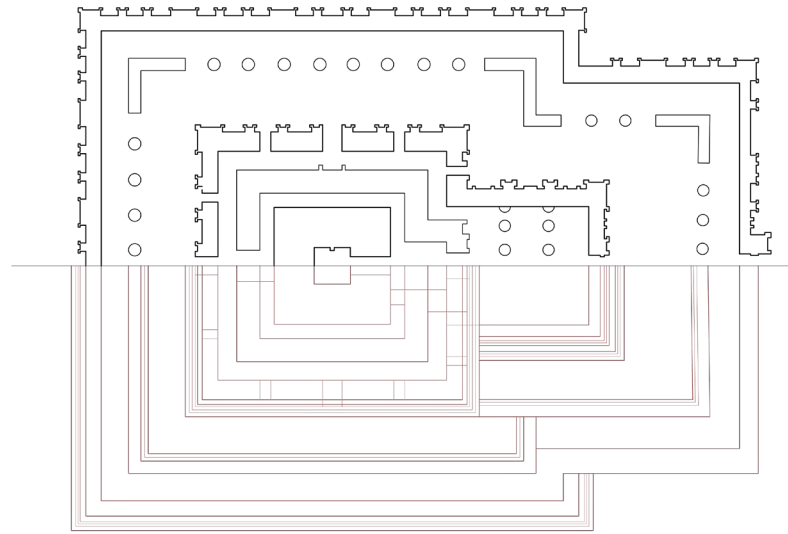
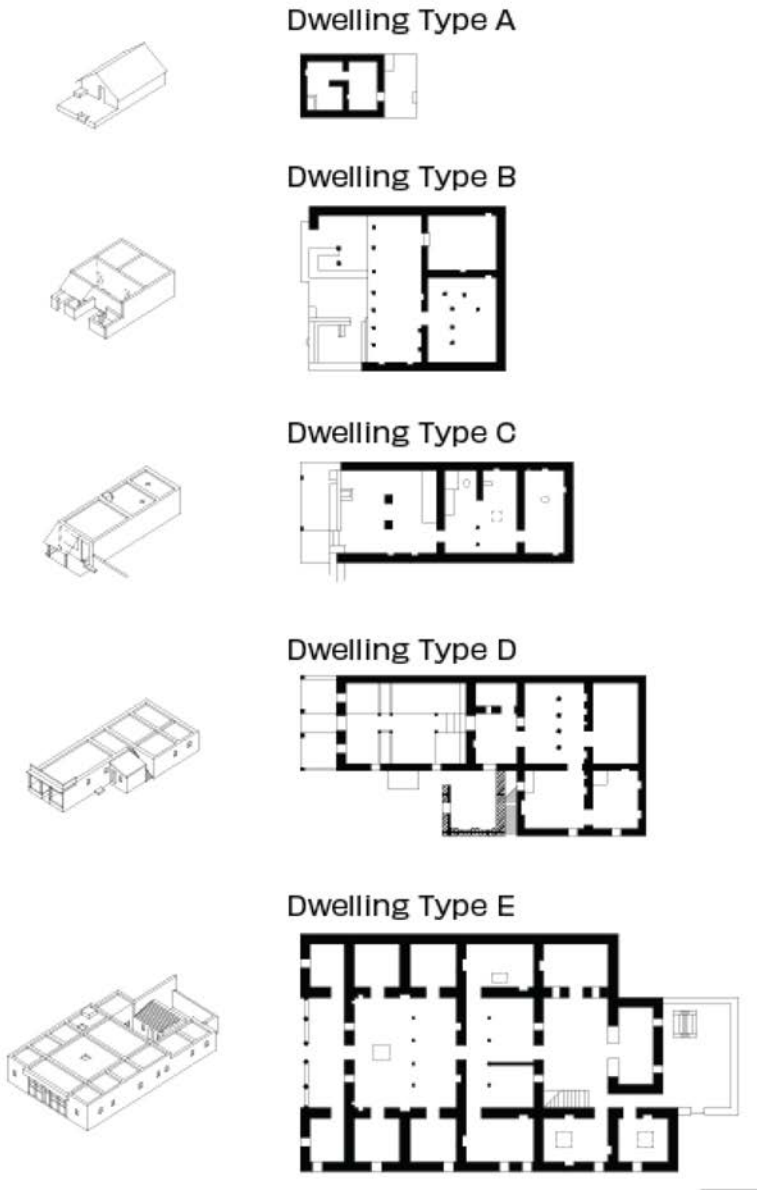


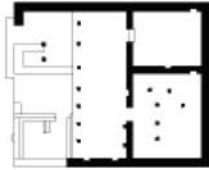
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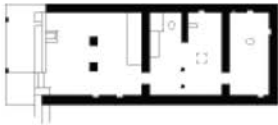
Dwelling Type A



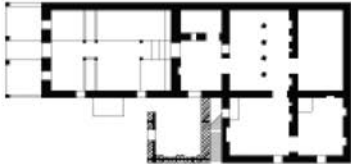
Dwelling Type B



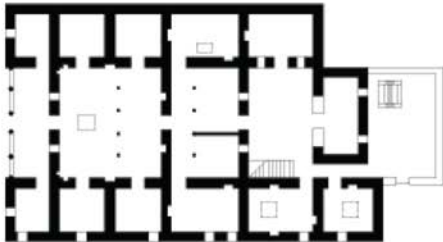
Dwelling Type C



Dwelling Type D



Dwelling Type E



## Simple Residential Architecture

### Dwelling Types A + B

Ephemeral materials, constructed at the periphery of a settlement.

Occupied by those with similar social and economic statuses as farm labourers, house builders, market vendors. Occasionally (type B) occupied by government clerks, administration workers or married siblings.

### Dwelling Types C, D + E

Stone-built found within the core settlement  
More urban in character, typical of a built-up environment.

Type C: Occupants of various castes and all social levels but not necessarily well off.

Type D: High proportion of kshatriya and chetabanajigeru - including land owners, administrative officers and doctors.

Type E: Also nearly all owned by higher castes (kshatriya and chetabanajigeru) - usually architect designed, occupied by people of high standing through either status or wealth.



Torso of a Fertility Goddess  
 From the Great Stupa at Sanchi, India  
 Sunga period (25 B.C.–A.D. 25)  
 Sandstone



Yakshi (Kanayi Kunhiraman)  
 Malamphuzha Gardens, Kerala, India, 1969  
 30ft bronze structure

## YAKSHI

The image of the fertility goddess, or the Yakshi, is a reoccurring figure in Indian history, associated with both Buddhist and Hindu narratives. The specific Yakshi in the image to the left, was originally located at the Great Stupa at Sanchi, India, a prominent and meaningful Buddhist site at which the remains of the Buddha are buried; from where it was removed in the mid-nineteenth century and taken to England. The sandstone sculpture of the Yakshi with voluptuous curves and lines, is an interesting icon to be located at the Great Stupa as it displays the pan-Indian belief in the auspiciousness of the female figure. The female figure shows a veneration and respect for the feminine, which was associated with fertility, health, fruitfulness, good fortune, and abundance. While the Buddhist theology viewed women “as a distraction to a monk intent on the path to salvation”<sup>1</sup>, the woman, and the female figure were never considered or associated with sin. The placement of the Yakshi at the Great Stupa tied together pre-Buddhist and ancient Indian beliefs into the Buddhist narratives that were carved into the architecture at Sanchi.

The sculpture would have been a part of twenty-four other Yakshis located on the four toranas (gates) at the Great Stupa, which faced each of the cardinal directions and were the entrance points for visitors and pilgrims to begin the circumambulatory path around the stupa. The repeated use of the Yakshi serve to emphasise her importance and relevance in the narrative, as a motif visible at the visitors ‘entrance’ and ‘exit’ at the Stupa. Her raised arm, broken from the sculpture seen above, would have reached up to touch a sandstone carving of an

1. Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997). #64

overhanging branch, similar to the other yakshi sculptures seen on the toranas at site. This is a significant action as it signified the ancient belief that the Yakshi's touch, or a woman's touch, could cause the tree sap to run, allowing the tree to flower and bear fruit. In some texts, it is stated that specific actions would cause different trees to react to the presence of a woman; an Ashoka "responded to the touch of woman's foot, [while the piyala tree responded] to the sound of her singing"<sup>2</sup>. One of the trees depicted at the toranas of the Great Stupa with a yakshi figure is a mango tree and was believed to respond to the sound of woman's laughter. The mango tree is also seen as a motif in the narrative of the Buddha's five hundred and fifty previous lives, one of which is seen in the Mahakapi Jataka (from the Jataka tales) and is also depicted on the pillar at the West Torana. This is an interesting point to note as the Yakshi figure in Buddhist art and architecture is more commonly found associated with the Ashoka tree instead.

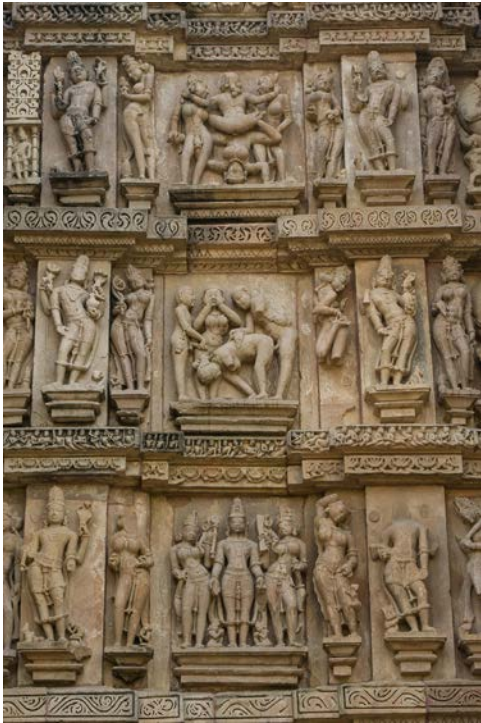
While sexual and sensual imagery was fairly commonplace in ancient Indian temple architecture, and the female form is still depicted in some modern temple architecture, the removal of the Yakshi from this temple setting is one that is extremely controversial in India today. An obvious example of this would be Kanayi's larger than life Malampuzha Yakshi sculpture in Kerala which has been faced with protest and controversy since before its installation over fifty years ago. Standing at 30ft tall, the nude Yakshi was highly condemned and perceived as an attack on Indian values, morals and traditions. This perception is widely shared despite the fact that not only was

the sensual imagery clearly visible in ancient Indian architecture, but it is also a "pivotal canon of the art culture in [modern-day] India"<sup>3</sup>. However, as a result of the patriarchal and colonial influences on the current social climate, Indian society has instead "nullified [the Yakshi figure's] significance and deemed them [to be] "tainted" from the very beginning of its evolution"<sup>4</sup>.

2. Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997). #66

3. Priya, Krishna. 'Nudity In Art: Analysing The Politics Of Nakedness Through The Sculptures Of Kanayi Kunhiraman'. *Feminism in India*, 30 September 2021. <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/10/01/nudity-in-art-analysing-the-politics-of-nakedness-through-the-sculptures-of-kanayi-kunhiraman/>

4. Priya, Krishna. 'Nudity In Art: Analysing The Politics Of Nakedness Through The Sculptures Of Kanayi Kunhiraman'. *Feminism in India*, 30 September 2021. <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/10/01/nudity-in-art-analysing-the-politics-of-nakedness-through-the-sculptures-of-kanayi-kunhiraman/>



Carvings on the walls of Khajuraho Temple Complex  
Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, India  
ca. 885 - 1000 AD

## KHAJURAHO

The use of the human figure is heavily prominent in the arts throughout Indian history. In addition to metaphorical and symbolic imagery, it is also used to depict the vedic and puranic gods, semi-divine figures, and everyday human life. While there are differences in the extent to which this imagery is used in the north when compared to the south of the Indian sub-continent, it remains a vital and key aspect to temple architecture. One of these differences lie in the restriction of imagery in southern temples built in the Dravida style, to the gods and goddesses being worshipped. The north, following the Nagara style of architecture is significantly more expansive with their use of the human figure, specifically the female figure, depicting women and yakshi figures in various poses, often provocatively shown and offset with couples in embrace. This is seen most visibly at the Khajuraho temples in the Chhatarpur district in Madya Pradesh. They are a group of Hindu and Jain temples, built by the Chandela dynasty and suspected to have numbered 85 in total by the 12th Century CE. Today, only 25 of these temples remain intact.

The congregation of temples at Khajuraho was not a new style of building, however the scale and speed within which the temples were built implies that the temple complex was built with specific goals. The temples are some of the more sophisticated examples of the Nagara style of temple architecture and are made with “balanced proportions, elegant contours and rich surface treatment”. The temples are situated within the Vindhya Mountain range, a location significant to Hindu mythology as it is a site where the Shiva and other gods were said

to enjoy visiting. Their location close to bodies of water is a feature commonly associated with Hindu temple architecture and depict the sacredness of water in the religion. The Hindu temples are all clustered together, similar to the Jain temples which are located on the south-eastern part of the Khajuraho temple complex. All temples at the complex are intricately carved with thousands of statues and artworks. The largest temple at this complex, the Kandariya Mahadeo which stands at around 100 feet tall, has around 900 of these.

The Kandariya Mahadeo is a highly intricately carved and decorated temple, indicative of the Nagara style at the time. The temple itself is built with a primary long axis from the west to the east, with the front face of the temple facing the sunrise. There are an additional two secondary axes from the north to the south that create a two-barred cross plan. It consists of four spaces or units that overlap and work together to create a singular and complete piece of architecture. It is most popularly known for its erotic and sexual themes within its carvings, although these only make up a small amount of the images carved. While there is a likelihood that the erotic imagery on the walls of the Kandariya have links to the Kaula sect of Shiva worship, this is not confirmed and can be easily disputed. A majority of the sculptures actually focus of the daily lives of both the deities and human beings as well as symbolic depictions of various values that are treasured in the Hindu religion. While the imagery is not always sexual in nature, there is a clear reverence that is given to the female figure with the sheer number of sculptures depicting women and yakshi. While the female figure has always been venerated

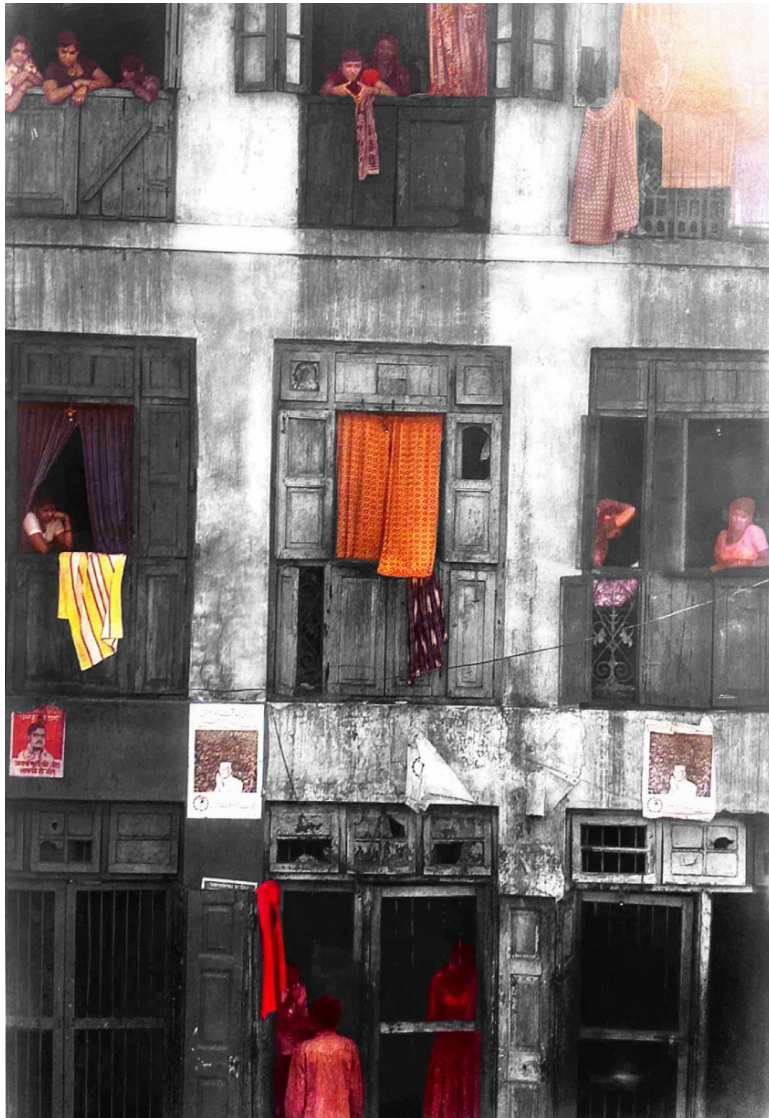
in Indian architecture, its presence at the Khajuraho is emblematic of a new architectural point of view that stated that images of women were a necessary aspect of temple architecture. In addition to this, the female figure is shown in poses that are often provocative and similar to the silhouettes formed by yogic practices.

Today, the perception of sex and its related imagery is one that is extremely conservative and taboo in Indian culture, yet there is clear evidence of the act of sex was viewed as a necessary aspect of love and fulfilment of life in the past as seen at Khajuraho. Kama (love) was viewed as an important goal to achieve in the span of ones life, and the way in which to gain and subsequently maintain it, was something that was taught rather than kept quiet.



Carvings on the walls of Khajuraho Temple Complex  
Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, India  
ca. 885 - 1000 AD





## CURRENT CONDITIONS

Sex work is a taboo in Indian culture, sidelined and looked down on, with a severe lack of dignity of profession. Often, sex workers are faced with violent treatment by both police and clients. Today, the largest and most well known sites of sex work are G.B. Road in New Delhi, Delhi, Reshampur in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, Sonagachi in Kolkata, West Bengal, Sonapur and Kamathipura in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and Majestic in Bangalore, Karnataka. However, regardless of location, the plight of the buildings in which sex workers live and conduct their business are clear indications of severe neglect. Falkland Road in Mumbai showcases brothels designed as storefronts for their business, with cage like windows and doors at the ground floor, and rooms above for clients. The buildings are often in disrepair, with several women to a small cramped room. There is little to no privacy afforded to the sex workers and no attention given to their needs.

Image by Author, Adapted from Falkland Road:  
Prostitutes of Bombay, Mary Ellen Mark, 2005 reprint,  
Steidl, Gottingen, Germany



Image by Author, Adapted from Falkland Road:  
Prostitutes of Bombay, Mary Ellen Mark, 2005 reprint,  
Steidl, Gottingen, Germany

## KAMATHIPURA: A CONTEMPORARY MUMBAI



## Kamathipura, Mumbai, Maharashtra

Kamathipura is a known red-light district in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. It was initially settled by Kamathis, who were a group of people, originally from Hyderabad, who migrated to Mumbai around 1775 to work on the construction of the British causeways that linked what were the seven islands of Mumbai. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, a large number of women from continental Europe, Japan and China were trafficked into Kamathipura, where they were made to work as prostitutes servicing the British soldiers in 'chaklas'. Over time, this led to a social hierarchy within the prostitutes living in Kamathipura; a busy road in Kamathipura was known as Safed Gully (White Lane) because of the European prostitutes living there during the British Raj. This red-light district, formed under the British Raj, continued past Indian Independence. Today, Kamathipura is split into 14 lanes and is separated roughly according to the regional backgrounds of the sex workers who largely migrated from other Indian states. As a result of low interaction between divisions, social organisations are unable to organize the sex workers into a movement or union. A lack of public opinion, political leadership or social activism that recognises the validity of their profession further worsen the conditions by which they live and are treated.

*“We found no Nautch girl among all the hundreds of prostitutes we interviewed who were living in Cantonments. The profession of a Nautch girl implies so much training of voice and muscle and ensures so large an income that she feels far above the position of the degraded woman consorting with the British soldier.”*

Andrew and Bushnell, 1892

## Site Visit

I visited Kamathipura in December, 2022, to gain a better understanding of the conditions and work habits of sex workers in the district. While I was unable to take any photos within the area due to privacy concerns, the visit was invaluable to my research. The district itself, despite being an area of sex work, also housed other industries, including a jean drying and bag making industry. I found that the streets were highly populated by men which led to a distinct feeling of unease within the smaller streets. While visiting, I used an app to track my movement within the area, and found that subconsciously my pace of walking sped up drastically within the main brothel streets as a result of this unease. I visited the site at two times; once during the morning to get an understanding of distribution of space and utilities, and once during the evening at peak traffic for sex workers, to understand spaces of movement and their use by sex workers. One point of interest was the women who stood at equal intervals on the main streets to secure clients, often standing on the road due to the busy passage on the sidewalks. Women were also populating all brothel doors, windows and balconies, presenting themselves as a storefront display with their bodies as the products. As I walked the main street during the evening, it was clear which populations of men were clients and which were simply permanent residents of Kamathipura based on their interactions with the women on site. The structural conditions of the site were as expected and largely in disrepair, and economic boundaries between the sex district and neighbouring areas were also clearly visible.



Image by Author, Adapted from Falkland Road:  
Prostitutes of Bombay, Mary Ellen Mark, 2005 reprint,  
Steidl, Gottingen, Germany

*“...extended the meaning of the right to life beyond the protection of limb or faculty to include the **right to live with human dignity** and all that goes along with it.”*

Interim Order by the Supreme Court of India,  
19th May 2022



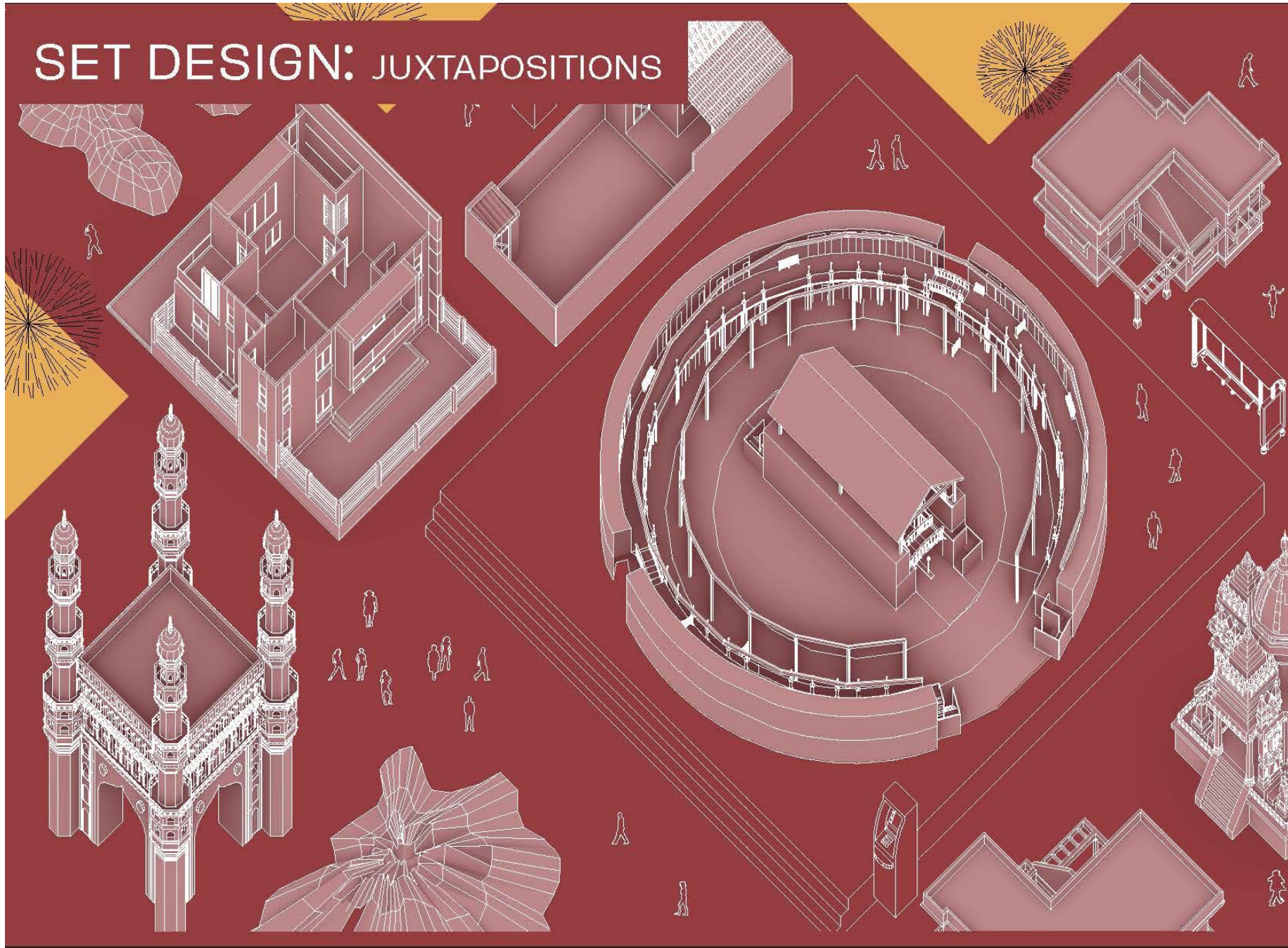
November 2020, Press Trust of India Ltd

Sex workers have lost work, earnings and their homes during multiple lockdowns in attempts to contain the spread of Covid-19.

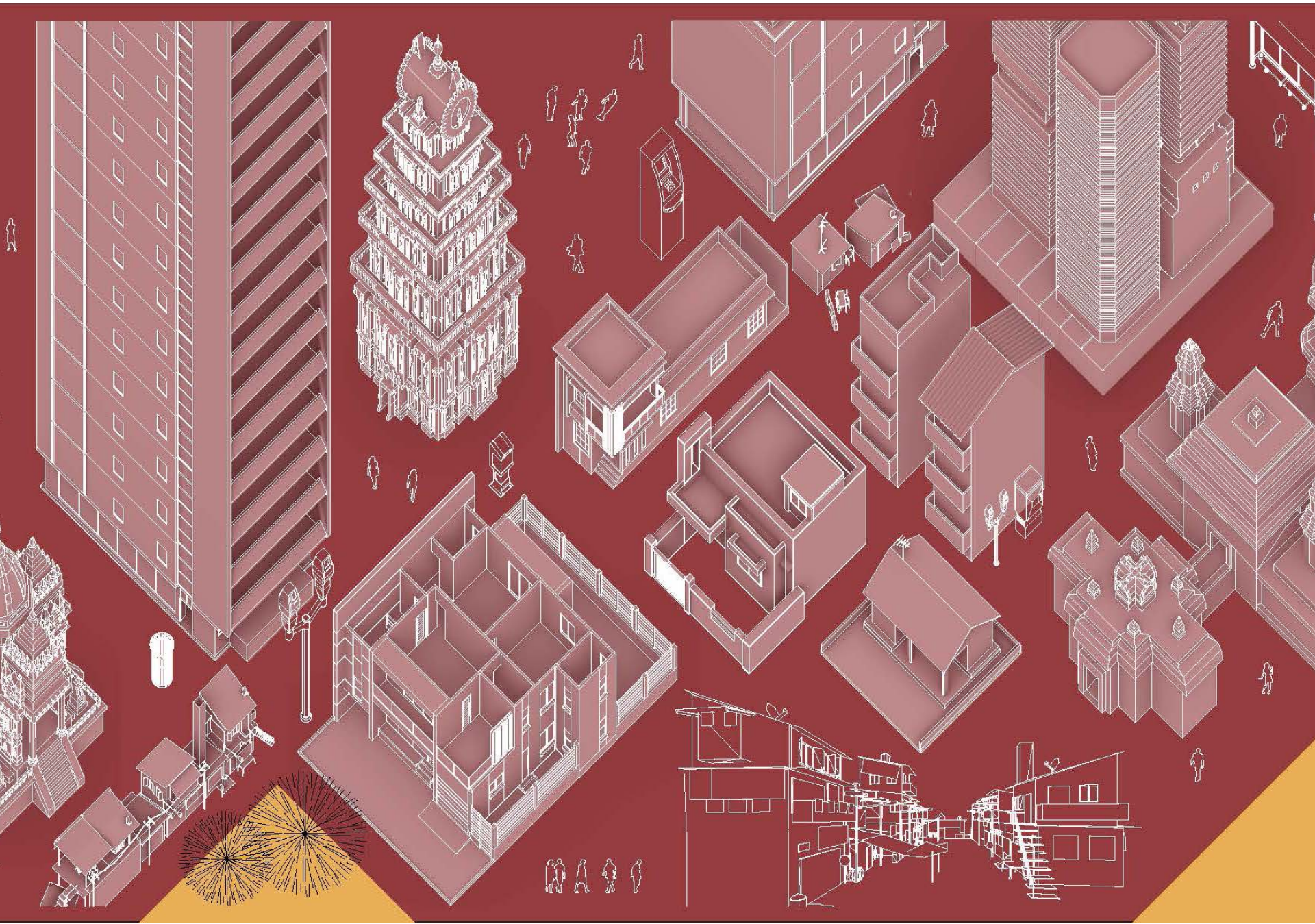


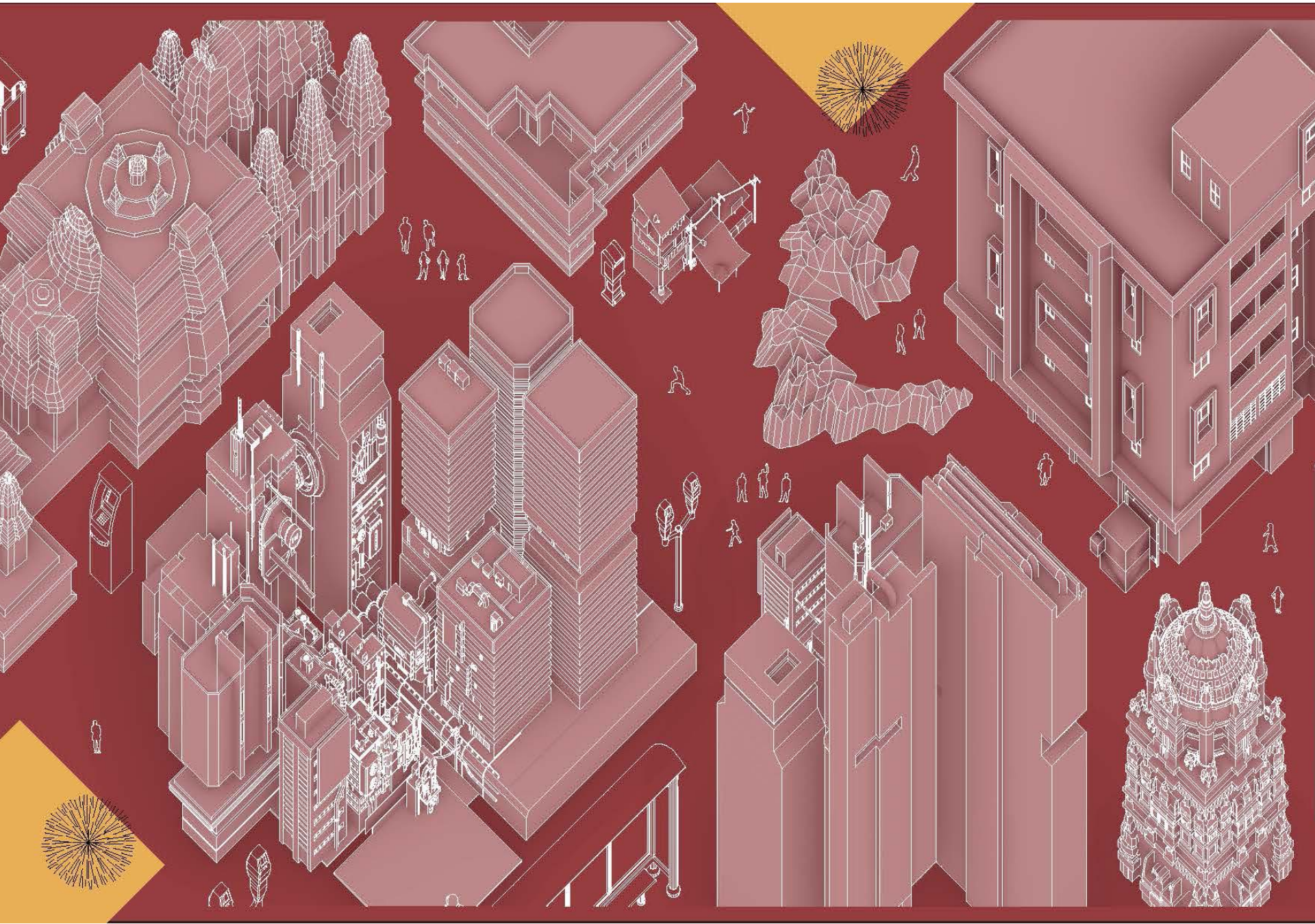
Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay, Mary Ellen Mark, 2005 reprint, Steidl, Gottingen, Germany

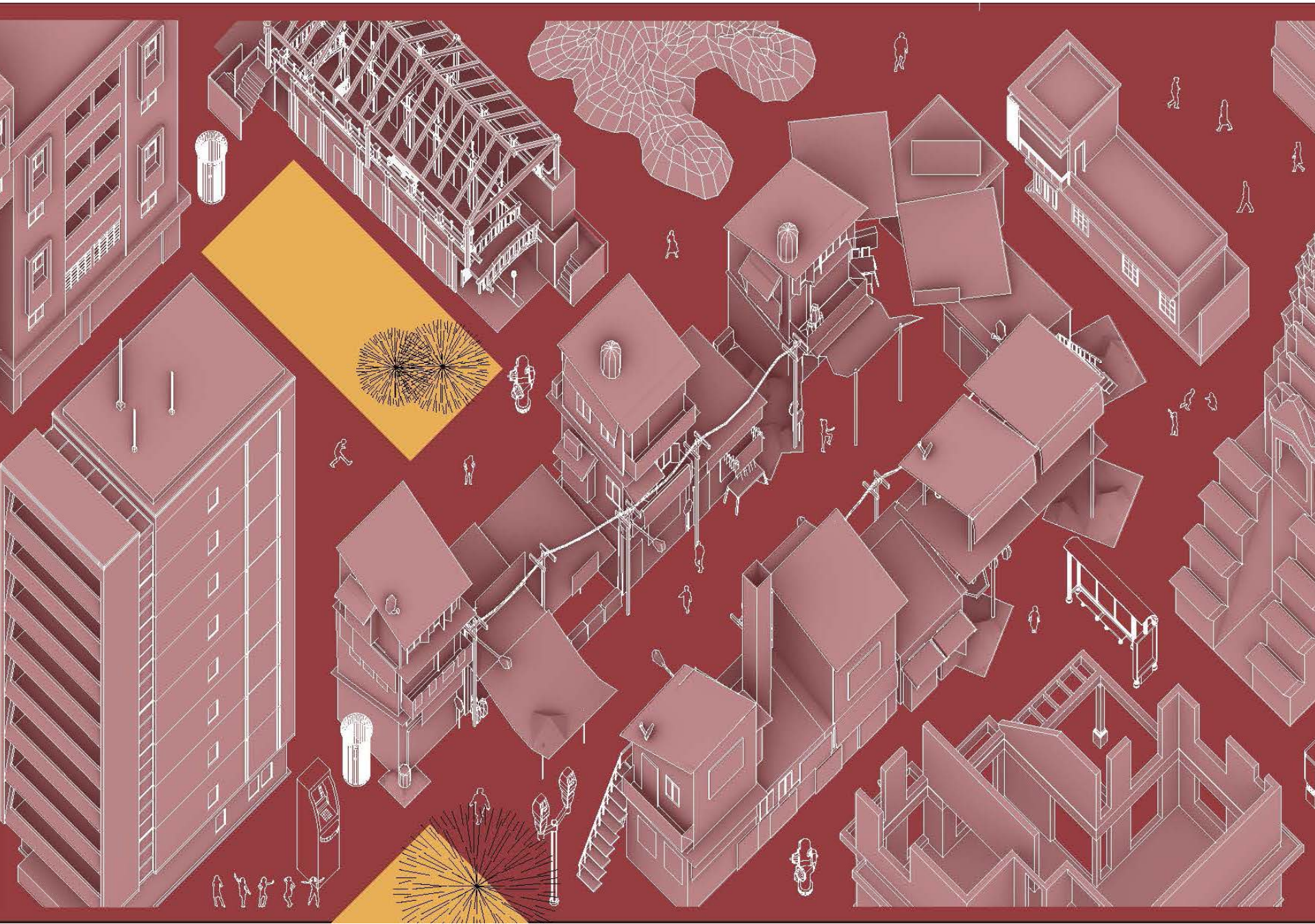
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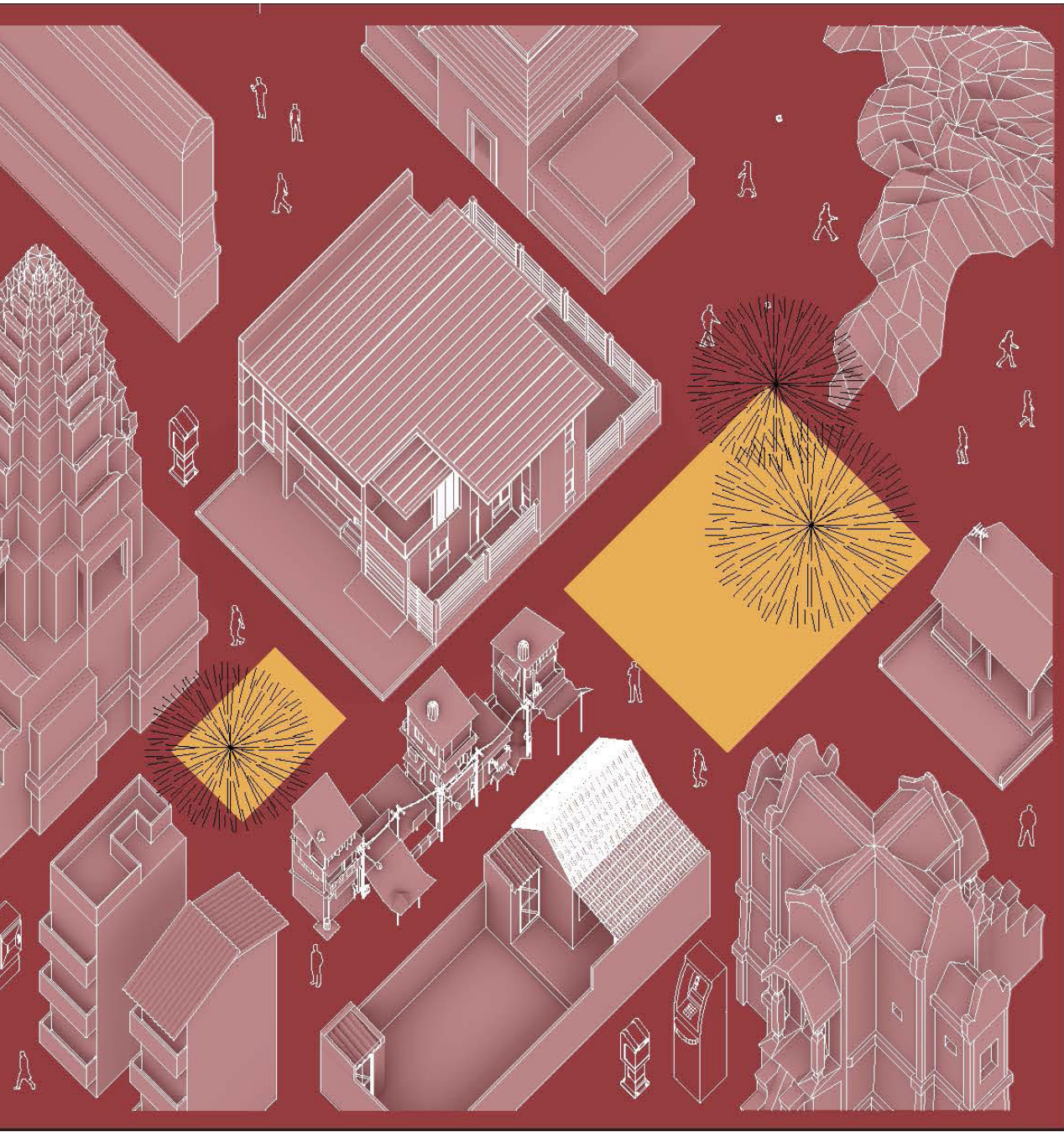




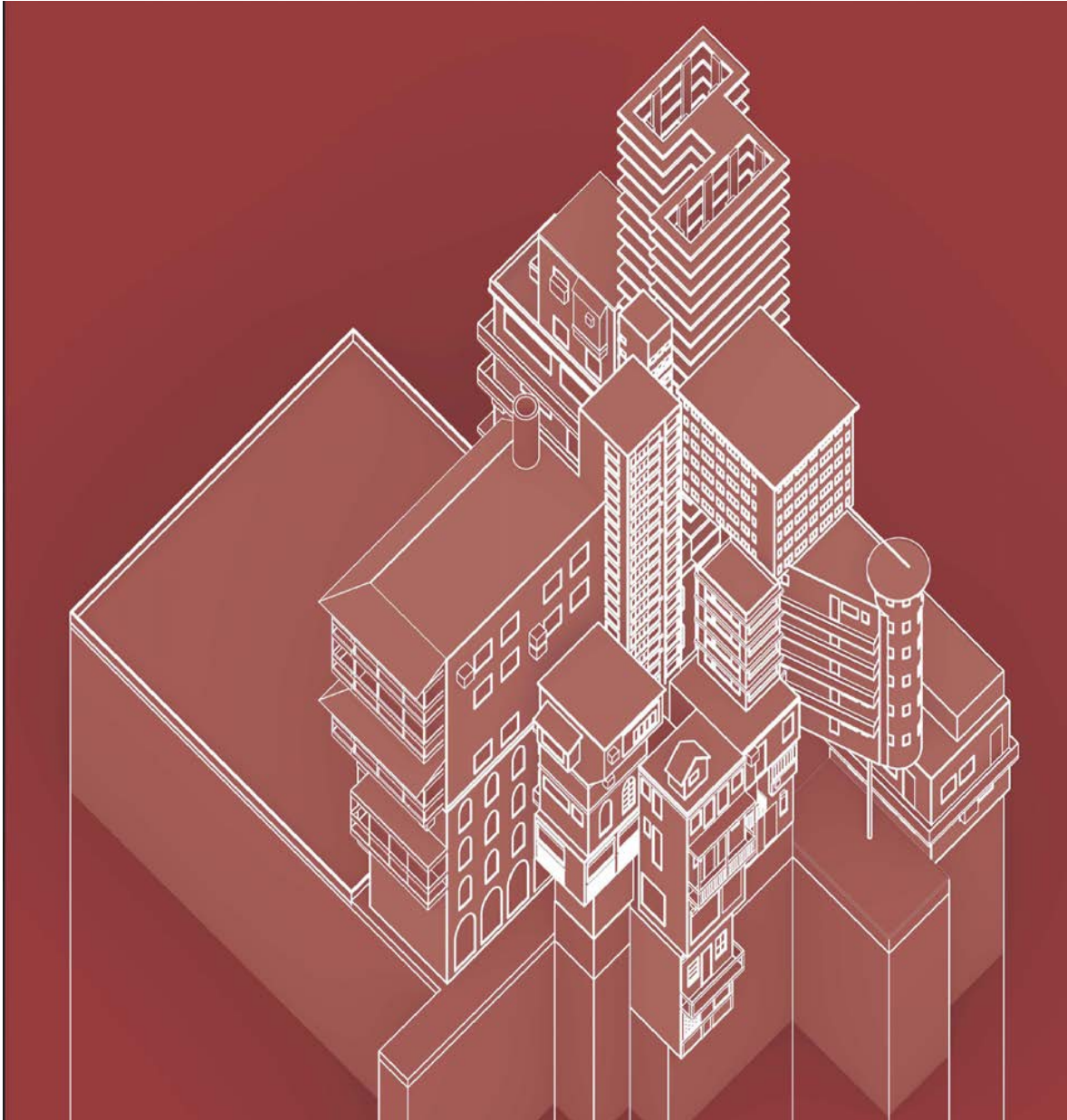


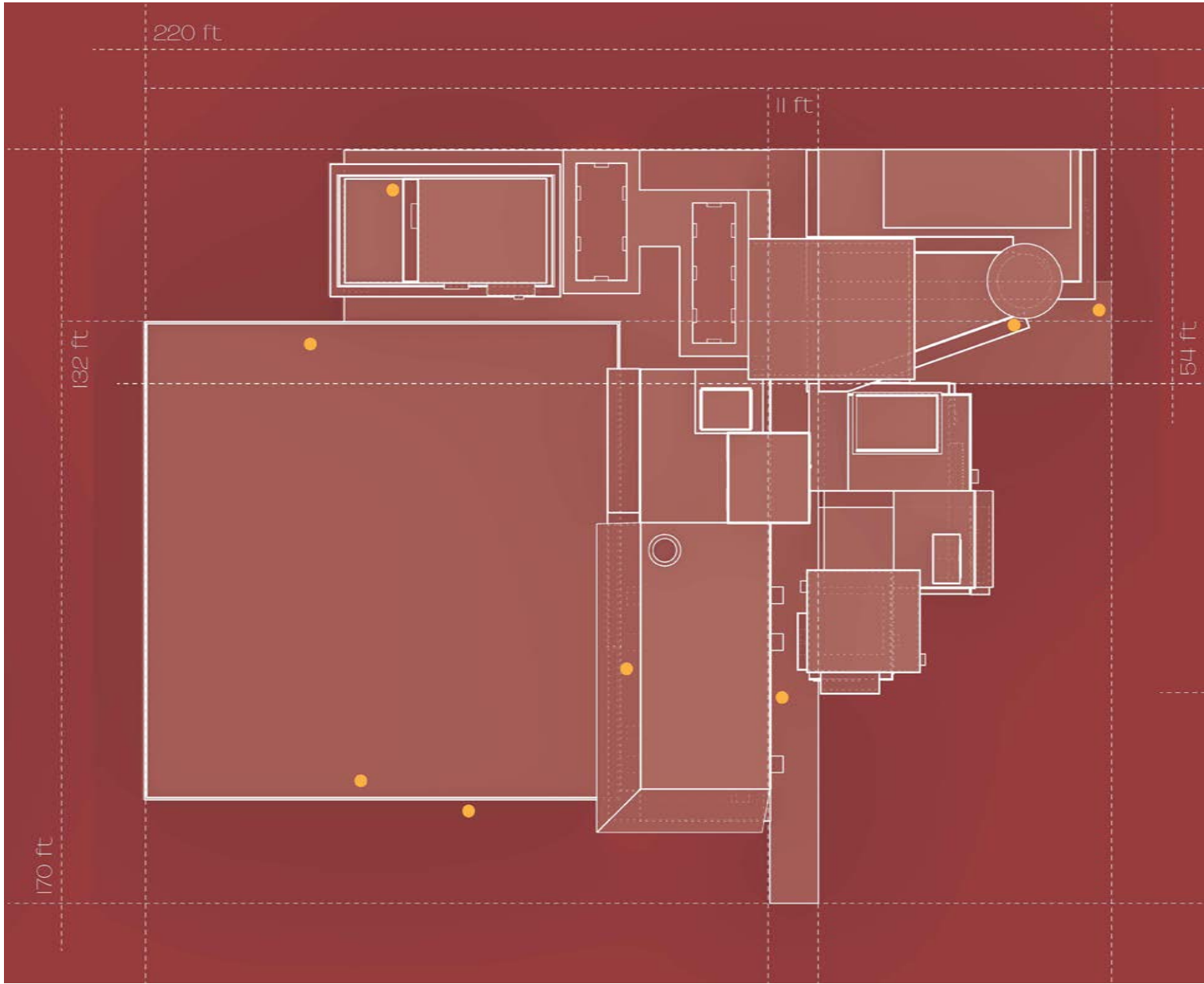


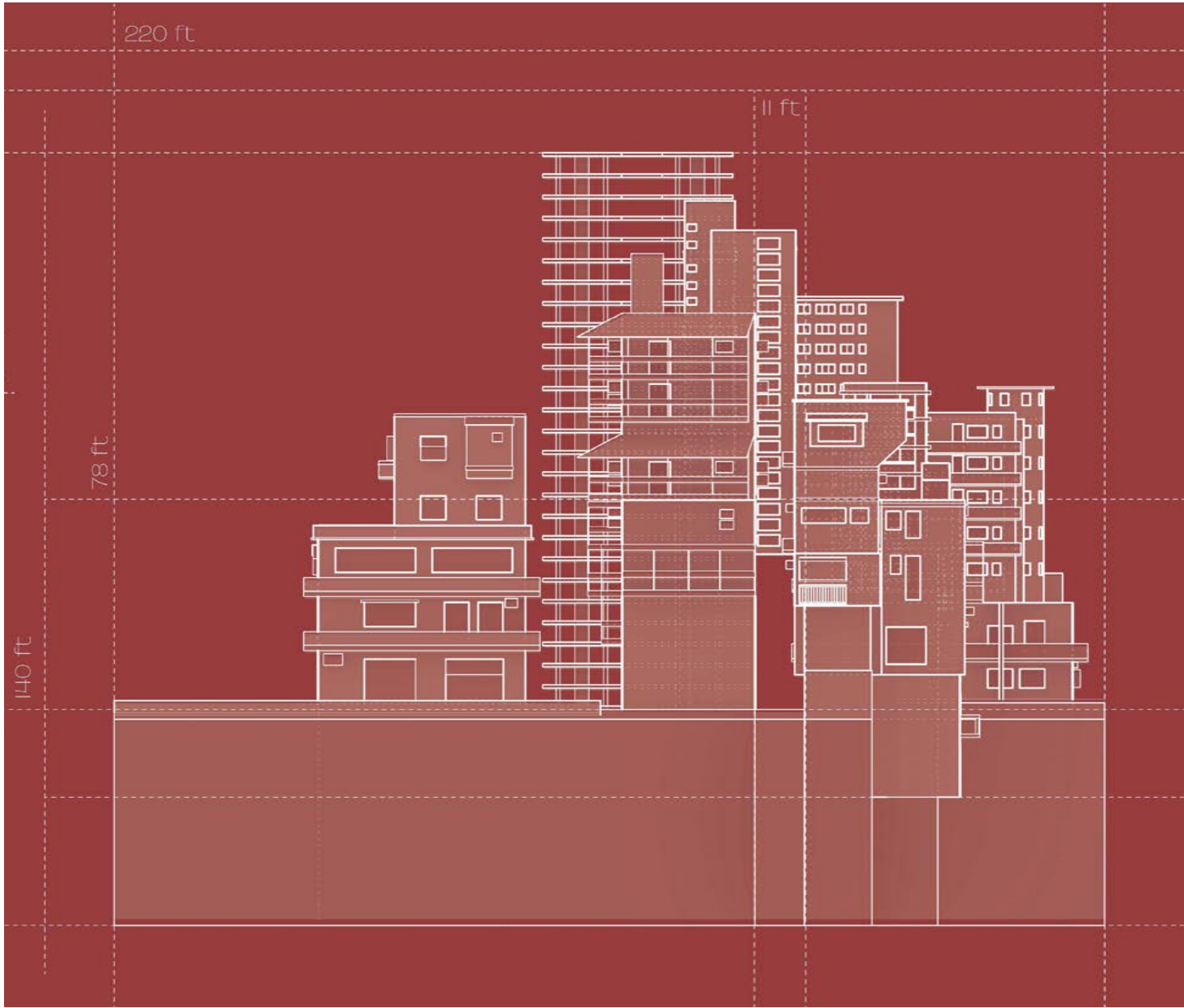


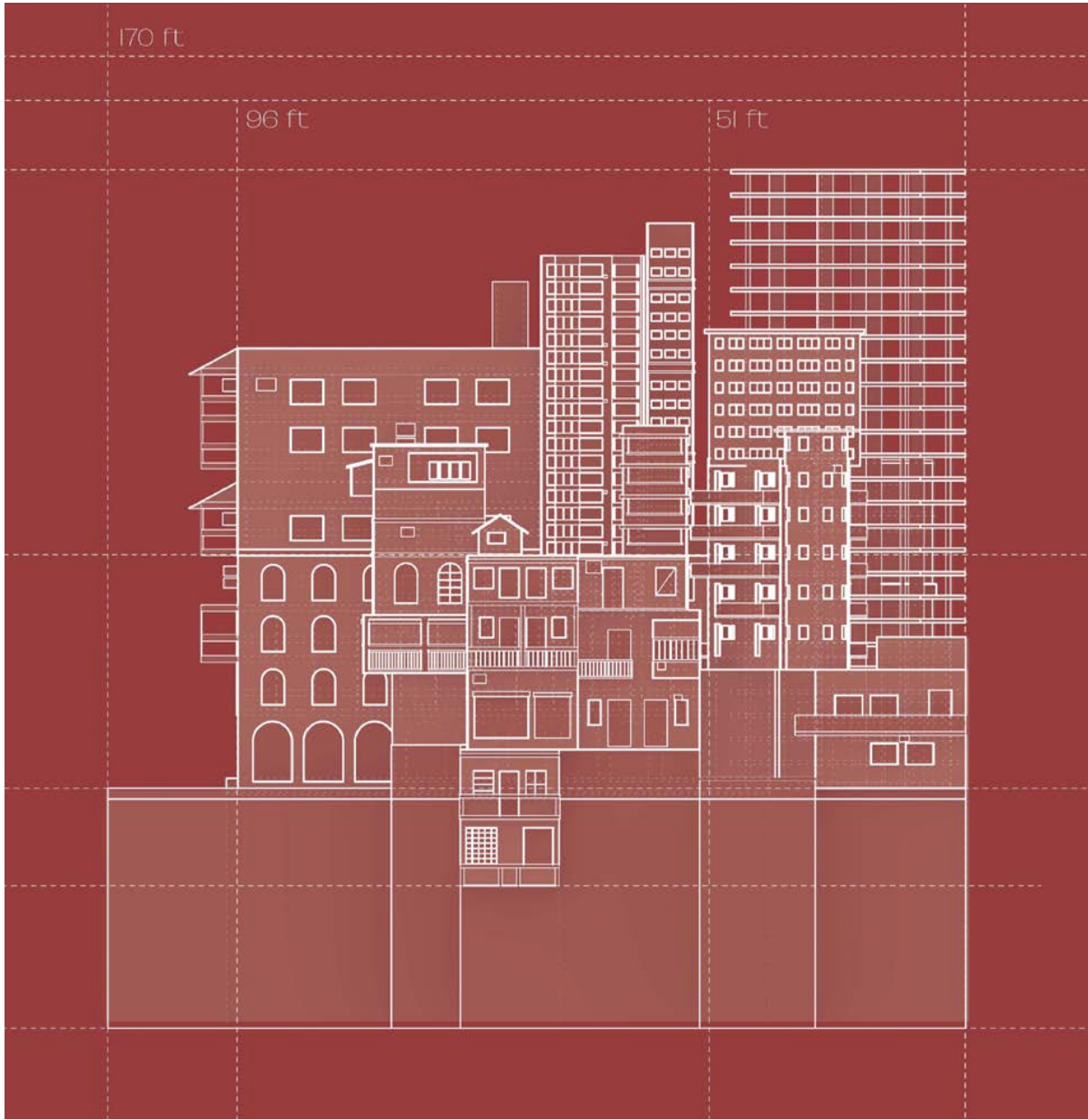


SET DESIGN: COMPILING  
SPACES OF NARRATION

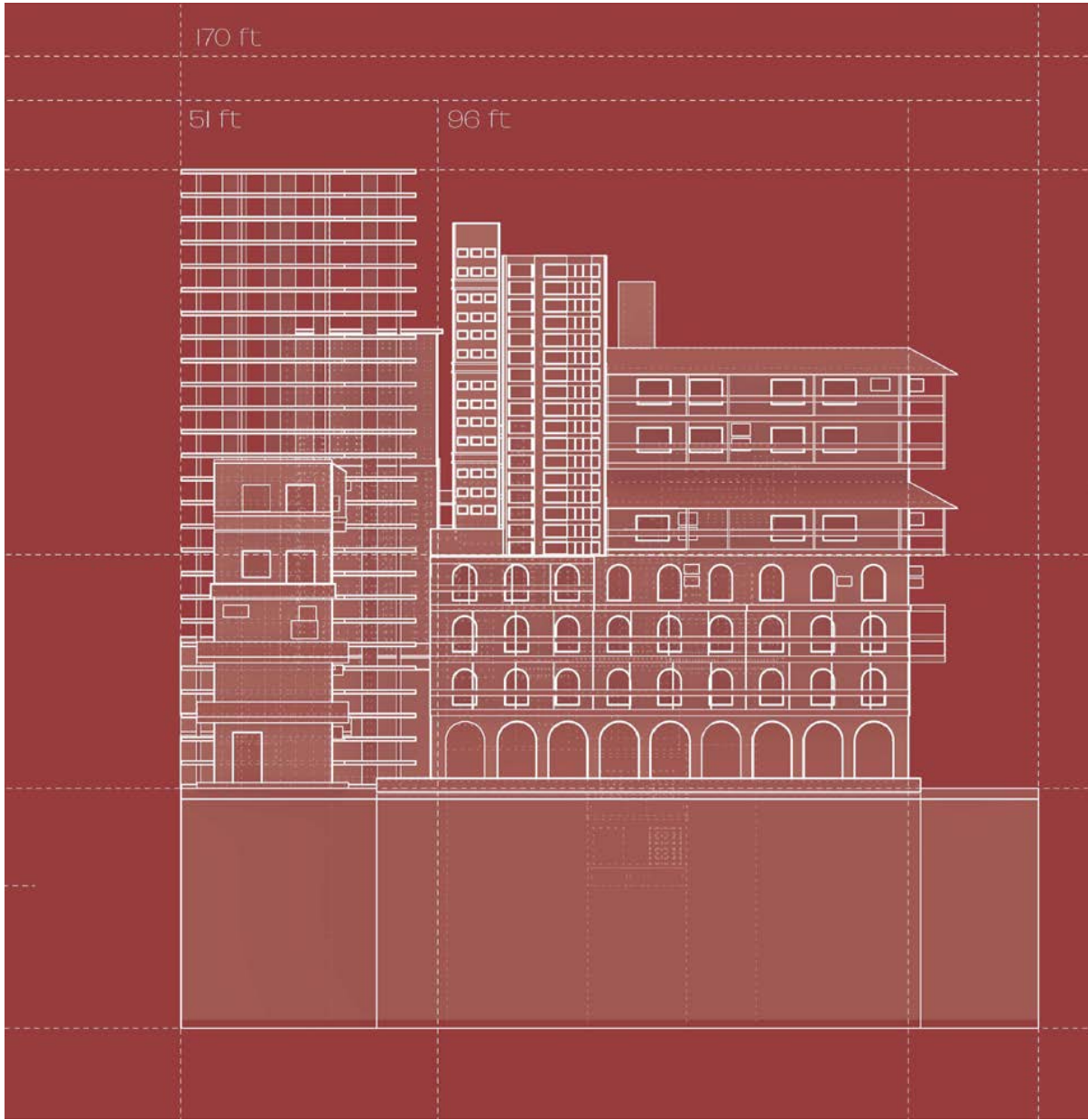






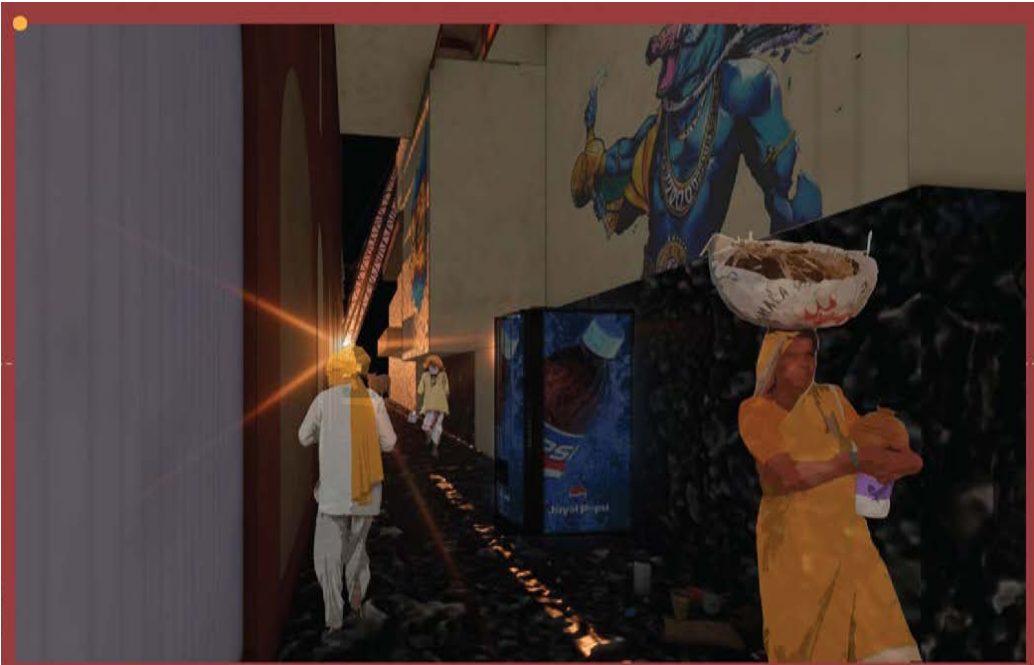














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“Birth of a prince”, Rajasthan, 1725

Carvings on the walls of Khajuraho Temple Complex, Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, India, ca. 885 - 1000 AD

Dancing Girl, Tilly Kettle, 1772

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“Group of Courtesans”, Northern India, ca. 19th Century

Illustration from the Kamasutra, Vatsyayana, c. 400 BCE

Krishna and Radha in a Pavilion, ca. 1760

Krishna Watches the Gopis in the Garden Pool Bijapur, Deccan School, c. 1650

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Melancholy Courtesan, Rajasthan/Bindi/Kota, ca. 1750

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“Nautch dancers in India”, ca. 1860-1870

“Nautch girls, Bombay,” from *The Graphic*, 1875

Rig Veda, c. 1500 - 1000 BCE

Sex workers at Sonagachi, country’s biggest collective of sex workers in North Kolkata celebrate the recent observations of the Supreme Court on sex work. Debasish Bhaduri, May 2022

Sex workers have been holding a demonstration in support of their demand for voting rights, employment opportunities, and the right to a dignified life. Image by Ashok Bhaumik for the Press Trust of India.

Tanjore Balasaraswati, Studio Portraits, Madras, 1934

Torso of a Fertility Goddess, From the Great Stupa at Sanchi, India, Sunga period (25 B.C.–A.D. 25), Sandstone

Yakshi (Kanayi Kunhiraman), Malamphuzha Gardens, Kerala, India, 1969, 30ft bronze structure





