Sexuality, Morality, and Contested Heritage: Tracing the History of the Tawaifs of North India

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ABSTRACT

Several generations of communities have contributed to the weaving of India's cultural tapestry and the contribution of many of these groups has gone unnoticed. This thesis is an attempt to highlight the contribution of a group of such women whose history has been marginalized in the public sphere. *Tawaifs*[1] were courtesans in North India, who were valued for their dance, music, and etiquette skills. They received patronage from royalty and were doyennes and custodians of high art *(Kathak* and Hindustani classical music). They engaged in sexual liaisons with the selected elite in society. Historical studies show that *Tawaifs* exercised significant political and diplomatic influence in the royal courts of India and were some of the wealthiest women of their times. The royalty and the elite sent their sons to the *Tawaifs* to train young men in etiquettes and Urdu poetry. Association with the *Tawaifs* was a symbol of prestige and the cultural soirees that took place in their establishments (*kothas*) contributed to the development of Kathak and Hindustani music. The thesis uses 'microhistory' as a methodology to study *Tawaifs* and examine their embeddedness in the Indian society. It demonstrates the long-term impact of Victorian morality and colonialism on Indian sexuality. The thesis shows how the moral concerns regarding *Tawaif's* sexuality led to their heritage becoming a contestation ground and several "upper castes" tried to appropriate her heritage as their own. Finally, the thesis uses three films as case studies to examine how the *Tawaifs* are situated in public memory, their representation in the public discourse, and how 'sexual' became a perpetual taboo.

This thesis employs microhistorical study of *Tawaifs* to answer the following research questions:

- What was the historical context in which the institution of *Tawaifs* evolved? Is the institution embedded in Indian history or is it a foreign import?
- What role did the *Tawaifs* play in the culmination of syncretic Hindustani cultural symbols like music, dance, and poetry? In what political and social context did these cultural symbols evolve, and what role do they play in articulating Indianness?
- The British colonization led to shifts in the self-perception of Indians and the contestation for power between Indian and British men for control over women and their bodies. How can these processes be examined through the microhistorical study of *Tawaifs*?

[1] The word Tawaif is derived from Tauf which meant courtesan's mobility and her freedom from the conjugal bounds of marriage.

- To see how British colonization led to the imposition of Victorian morality and how it was legitimated through laws. To examine how the legal divisions manifested themselves in the nationalist discourse and led to power contestations to control sexuality. Where did *Tawaifs* figure in this contestation? To see through *Tawaifs* why the 'sensual' or 'sexual' is seen as problematic and taboo?
- The question of legacy and representation. To look at remnants of *Tawaif's* art and how they are situated in the popular imagination. To find the voice of *Tawaifs* in the sources written by elites and men. Finally, to break down the elitism that shrouds Indian 'classical' art and culture and give *Tawaifs* their due share in history.

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INTRODUCTION

Several generations of communities have contributed to the weaving of India's cultural tapestry and the contribution of many of these groups has gone unnoticed. This thesis is an attempt to recognize the contribution of a group of such women whose history has been marginalized in the public sphere. *Tawaifs*[2] were courtesans in North India, who were valued for their dance, music, and etiquette skills. They received patronage from royalty and were doyennes and custodians of high art (Kathak and Hindustani classical music). They engaged in sexual liaisons with the selected elite in society. Historical studies show that *Tawaifs* exercised significant political and diplomatic influence in the royal courts of India and were some of the wealthiest women of their times. The royalty and the elite sent their young sons to the *Tawaifs* to train them in etiquettes and Urdu poetry. The *Tawaifs* also played an important role in the sacred realm. Association with the *Tawaifs* was a symbol of prestige and the cultural soirees that took place in their establishments (*kothas*) contributed to the development of Kathak and Hindustani music. A Tawaif had to be skilled in various art forms and well-read to attract a patron.

The institution of the *Tawaif* is embedded in ancient Indian history. Despite the claims made by communal nationalists deeming *Tawaifs* as foreign, this thesis shows the evolution of *Tawaifs* from ancient *Ganikas*[3] and medieval *Kanchanis*[4]. This thesis shows the continuities of the late medieval *Tawaifs* with the ancient *Ganikas*. It shows how the norms and rules set up by the Kamasutra for *Ganikas* were followed by the *Tawaifs* even in the mid-20th century, right before the dissipation of the institution. The legitimacy of what consists of 'traditional' in the Indian public discourse was vested in its backing by the ancient Indian sources during the colonial and even in the post-colonial period during the nation-building process. Traditional was authentic and added to Indian distinctiveness. Following this line of argument, I show how the authority and contribution of *Tawaifs* and their ancient predecessors *Ganikas* were grounded in Sanskrit sources like the Kamasutra[5] and Natyasastra[6]. The first chapter shows the role *Ganikas* played in the social and sacred realm of Hinduism and Buddhism.

[2] The word Tawaif is derived from Tauf which meant courtesan's mobility and her freedom from the conjugal bounds of marriage.

[3] *Ganika* was the chief courtesan in Ancient India and was the predecessor of the Tawaif form of Indian courtesan.

[4] Kanchanis were performing women from the Kanjar caste, and they were the medieval predecessors of the Tawaifs in Mughal India.

[5] Kamasutra is the Indian treatise on love, sex and erotica written by Vatsayayana and dates to 2nd-3rd century BCE.

[6] Natyashastra, the authoritative ancient Indian treatise on dance, music, theatre, and aesthetic pleasure (rasa) was written by Sage BharataMuni and claims to have divine origins. It is dated between 200 and 300 CE

A word of caution on terminology, '*Ganika'* and '*Veshya*' were two different categories of women.' The word *Ganika* implied a culturally refined women with considerable wealth along with engaging in sexual liaisons with select elites in the society. The word '*Ganika'* and '*Tawaif*' are often conflated with words '*Veshya*' and '*Randi*'. It should be noted that *Veshyas* and *Randis* were primarily sex workers who did not possess the cultural, social and material capital that the Ganikas and the Tawaifs did.

The lack of a word in English that encompasses all the aspects of the institution of *Ganikas* and *Tawaifs* has led to historians using the term 'Courtesans', which is a much more neutral term. Although it does distinguish a *Tawaif* from a sex worker, it still runs the risk of homogenizing different categories of 'courtesans' like *Tawaifs* and *Devadasis,*[7] for example. The overarching term 'courtesans' has been used in the chapter dealing with medieval *Tawaifs* because the term '*Ganika*' fell out of use with Persian becoming the dominant language. The *Ganikas* of ancient India had to adapt to the new Islamic context and they learned the Persian techniques of singing, dressing, and etiquette. These women hailed from different caste communities and were referred to by their caste names, for example, *dominis, vilasini*, or *kanchanis*. It was in the 18th century that the term *Tawaif* was used to refer to courtesans. Also, some medieval words like *domini,* remained in use along with the word *Tawaif.* One of the impacts of British colonization was homogenizing all categories of performing women under the term 'nautch girl' and later 'prostitutes'.

The dissertation further shows the blending of the performing arts of North India with Persian elements, and the role that the women from these performing communities played in the development of performing arts in India. Through Courtesans, we also see how social change was intertwined with changes in the political landscape. This thesis employs 'microhistory' as a methodology to examine large social processes by focusing on *Tawaifs*. The thesis follows the structural foundations of microhistory as laid down by Giovanni Levi[8] and Carlo Ginzburg[9], the founding figures of this field. They argue for a dialogue between macro history and microhistory. Microhistory does not impose a single theoretical framework and the structural narrative is built by the historian through microscopic analysis.[10] They argue for limiting the scope of observation and making it more individual- or community-centric. The second point of emphasis is 'thick description' which entails a layered analysis of unique individual/community experiences and then structuring it instead of superimposing a theoretical framework. Levi also stresses the need to contextualize to foreground the experiences of individuals under consideration and analyse the social, cultural, and economic contexts in

[7] Devadasi' can be translated as 'servant of god'. Devadasis were women symbolically married to Hindu deities, usually Goddess Yellamma. While some of the women dedicated themselves voluntarily to the temple, others were coerced to do so. The latter usually came from the lowest, most marginalised castes in the Hindu social hierarchy. Association with the temple brought socio-economic mobility to the Devadasi's family. The Devadasi, in turn, was perceived as a goddess herself and exercised considerable influence in all spheres of social life.
[8] Levi in Burke (eds) (1992)
[9] Ginzburg (1993)
[10] Levi in Burke (eds) (1992), p.98

which these individuals are embedded.[11] The thesis uses *Tawaifs* as a microhistorical subject to examine the impact of larger political processes like the coming of Islam to India and British colonization on India. The scope of inquiry is limited to North Indian *Tawaifs*. However, it also necessitates contextualizing North Indian *Tawaifs* with global processes and trends wherever necessary to avoid their isolation. Finally, we delve into the agency of *Tawaifs* as a collective group and examine their story of survival in the face of adversity.

This thesis employs microhistorical study of *Tawaifs* to answer the following research questions:

- What was the historical context in which the institution of *Tawaifs* evolved? Is the institution embedded in Indian history or is it a foreign import?
- What role did the *Tawaifs* play in the culmination of syncretic Hindustani cultural symbols like music, dance, and poetry? In what political and social context did these cultural symbols evolve, and what role do they play in articulating Indianness?
- The British colonization led to shifts in the self-perception of Indians and the contestation for power between Indian and British men for control over women and their bodies. How can these processes be examined through the microhistorical study of *Tawaifs*?
- To see how British colonization led to the imposition of Victorian morality and how it was legitimated through laws. To examine how the legal divisions manifested themselves in the nationalist discourse and led to power contestations to control sexuality. Where did *Tawaifs* figure in this contestation? To see through *Tawaifs* why the 'sensual' or 'sexual' is seen as problematic and taboo?
- The question of legacy and representation. To look at remnants of *Tawaif's* art and how they are situated in the popular imagination. To find the voice of *Tawaifs* in the sources written by elites and men. Finally, to break down the elitism that shrouds Indian 'classical' art and culture and give *Tawaifs* their due share in history.

Some of the methodological drawbacks of employing microhistory in studying *Tawaifs* are:

- It covers a rather broad time period because of the pressing need to contextualize *Tawaifs* and examine their embeddedness in society.
- Another drawback is the lack of sources that are written by the *Tawaifs* themselves. Veena Oldenburg's study is the pioneering study that gives voice to communities of *Tawaifs* as she interviewed women from *Tawaif's* background. Some other works like Saba Dewan's podcast where she worked with individual *Tawaifs* also help us paint a picture of the individual personality of *Tawaifs*. Other than that, most studies delve into *Tawaif*'s experience as a group and collectivity. It is difficult to recover individual voices.

[11] Levi in Burke (eds) (1992), pp.93-113

- Another drawback is the male bias in literature written by men about women where women's voices are scanty. This study has tried to counter and point out these biases wherever possible.

Literature Review and Chapterization:

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study that includes studies from the fields of history, anthropology, ethnography, gender studies, and visual studies. It uses feminist, subaltern, and post-colonial theories in its analysis to recover the voice of the courtesan.

The first part of the thesis uses primary sources like the Kamasutra[12] and Natyasastra to establish *Ganika*'s position in society. It establishes how *Ganikas* were the locus of pleasure beyond marital life and the high position they acquired in society. The institution of *Ganika* continues in line with the basic rules set in the Kamasutra even when it evolves into the institution of *Tawaifs*.

The second chapter deals with early medieval and medieval courtesans. In the historiography of courtesans, the early medieval period in North India has been ignored. This chapter will show continuities and transitions from ancient *Ganikas* to medieval *kanchanis*. This part of the chapter draws parallels with the South Indian *Devadasis* and uses them as a reference to comment on the position of *Ganikas*. The chapter analyses how the religious legitimacy of the *Ganikas* was established in this period, and how the transition into Islamic polities changed that. The works of medieval historians like Amir Khusrao, Ziauddin Barani, and Abul Fazl have been used to reconstruct the history of performing arts in various courts. Works of scholars like Katherine Butler Schofield, [13] and Madhu Trivedi [14] from ethnomusicology have helped deciphering the performing culture in medieval India. Their works demonstrate the blending of Indian arts with Persian elements and the creation of new cultural arts. The chapter has been structured to look at these processes using medieval courtesans.

The third chapter focuses on the regional history of Awadh and analyzes the formation of the institution of *Tawaifs* and how they rose to fame within this regional context. The chapter uses the work of Abdul Halim Sharar,[15] a 19th-century historian, to reconstruct the history of Awadh as well as the position *Tawaifs* occupied in it. Works of ethnomusicologists like Peter Manuel [16] and James Kippen [17] have been used to examine the performance culture that

[12] Vātsyāyana Vātsyāyana Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar. (2003) *Kamasutra: A New Complete English Translation of the Sanskrit Text: With Excerpts from the Sanskrit Jayamangala Commentary of Yashodhara Indrapada the Hindi Jaya Commentary of Devadatta Shastri and Explanatory Notes by the Translators*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[13] Schofield (2010), Orsini, F., & Butler Schofield, K. (Eds.) (2015), Schofield in Orsini (2006)
[14] Trivedi (1999)
[15] Sharar (2001)
[16] Manuel (1986)
[17] Kippen (1988)

developed in Awadh through *Tawaifs*. Veena Oldenburg Talwar,[18] a pioneering historian of *Tawaifs* interviewed the last of *Tawaifs* and recorded their testimonies. Her work has been used in the chapter to provide insights into the actual life stories of *Tawaifs*. The chapter also shows the gradual transition into British colonialism and the pre-Revolt British attitude towards *Tawaifs*.

The fourth chapter analyzes the legitimation of Victorian morality through colonial laws and the larger impact on Indian sexuality through the imposition of these laws. This chapter uses Partha Chatterjee's[19] postcolonial framework of nationalist discourse dividing nationalism into 'spiritual' and 'material' realms and the space women occupied in it. The material realm was seen as something 'external' while the spiritual realm was 'inner'. The inner realm represented by 'home' and 'family' was not to be penetrated by the British colonizer, and women who lacked association with the material realm were to protect it. The analysis in the chapter deviates from this framework and views *Tawaifs* outside both realms. Hence, no protection was available to them, and the British directly intervened to uproot the institution. MB Fuller's *Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (1900) shows the intersection between Christian morality, colonialism, and how nautch girls seemed to have threatened the 'righteous Indian womanhood'. Finally, the chapter deals with the agency of *Tawaifs* and analyzes how they survived despite the legal intervention.

Chapter five deals with *Tawaifs'* agency and how their diverse skill set opened new possibilities for them in cinema and gramophone recording. It continues in the line of nationalist discourse and uses works of dance anthropologists like Pallabi Chakravorty[20] and Margaret Walker[21] to show the integration of Kathak dance in the Indian 'Classical' dance repertoire, and the process through which the dance was delinked from *Tawaifs*. It discusses the resultant 'othering' of certain aspects of the dance reflecting a desire to link it with communal identities. It shows the dual attitudes toward *Tawaifs*, who were valued for their artistic skills but at the same time shamed for their sensuality. It explores how the 'erotic' became a perpetual taboo in India through an exploration of Indian cinema and the courtesan genre. The chapter also uses works from visual studies by Sumita Chakravarty[22] and Ruth Vanita[23] to understand the representation of courtesans in Hindi cinema.

The final chapter looks at three Hindi films from the late 20th century to examine the representation of *Tawaifs* and explore the duality in the courtesan genre. It sees how the *Tawaifs* are situated in popular memory and how the stigma attached to the 'sensual' aspect of *Tawaif's* personality

[18] Oldenburg (1990)
[19] Chatterjee (1989)
[20] Chakravorty (2006), (2008) and (2010)
[21] Walker (2004), (2010) and (2014)
[22] Chakravarty (1993)
[23] Vanita (2018)

Chapter 1: Searching for Tawaifs in Ancient India

The term *Tawaif* comes from the root word 'tauf'[24] signifying mobility and freedom from the constraints of heteronormativity. *Tawaif*s were one of many groups of courtesans who encompassed all space and eras in India. Their current absence, not only from the public discourse but also from society has a lot to do with shifting mindsets that swept the Indian subcontinent with the coming of the British. While this would be a subject of discussion in the subsequent chapters, this chapter traces the history of the institution of *Tawaif*s from ancient times. The chapter aims to show how unproblematic the institution has been throughout history deriving legitimacy from authoritative Sanskrit sources like the *Kamasutra*, *Natyasastra*[25], and *Arthasastra*[26] in Ancient India. I will also touch upon Buddhist sources and some important literary works in which courtesans appear.

Courtesans were a regular occurrence in the Ancient Indian courts and are extensively mentioned in court chronicles and accounts of/by aristocrats. They were vanguards of culture and art as well as educators for the royal children. The freedom from the domesticity of a married life allowed them to focus on refined things and pleasure. This chapter will trace the history of the institution in the ancient times till Gupta period,[27] see how it was organized, and the duties and roles that courtesans were expected to perform. This chapter does not use the word '*Tawaif*' because the institution of the courtesans was relatively fluid before and the strict divisions took place at relatively later stages. The *Tawaif* form of Indian courtesans mutated from its early counterparts called Devadasis and *Ganika*s. The scope of this chapter, however, will remain confined to the North Indian *Ganika*s. The word '*Ganika*' and 'Courtesans' is used interchangeably throughout the chapter because of the diversity of words used to describe them in the ancient sources.

1.1 Ganikas in Ancient Sanskrit Sources

While the sources before the Common Era throw little light on the institution of courtesans, scholars have found some traces of their presence in sources like *Vedas, Mahabharata,* and Buddhist and Jain sources. It is Moti Chandra's[28] pioneering work that discusses the courtesans in these sources. The problem with his work is that he converges prostitution with the courtesans. In the first chapter of his work where he discusses courtesans in Vedic, Puranic, and Sanskrit literature, he clubs the slave girls and prostitutes with courtesans which in my opinion, is problematic. Chandra has cherrypicked instances from the Vedas and Puranas where women

[24] Tauf means circumambulating around the Holy Kaba.
[25] The ancient Indian treatise on dance and drama dated between 200 and 300 CE.
[26] Arthasastra is an ancient Indian Sanskrit treatise attributed to Chanakya who was on politics, political economy, statecraft, and military strategies.
[27] The timeline of Gupta period is estimated from early 4th century to 6th century CE.
[28] Chandra (1973), The World of Courtesans

are mentioned and equated them all with a courtesan. it becomes more complicated when one delves into the multiplicity of terms used to describe a 'prostitute'. The Ancient sources also use the terms interchangeably making it difficult to decipher and separate these women. The binary that he does draw is between the wife and all other women who do not subscribe to the category. This indeed shows the mindset of historians even, who consider women outside the conjugal bonds of marriage as 'fallen'. This type of mindset further necessitates this research where recovery of female voices becomes very important.

Chandra clubs together slave girls, concubines, prostitutes, courtesans, or women without brothers under an overarching category of the courtesan. He quotes instances from the Vedas where women had to make some sort of appearance in public gatherings and believes it to be the early form of the institution of courtesans. Further, he mentions that these women extorted money from the Aryans using their 'coquettishness' but nothing is known of the clientele or the ways they did so.[29] The text acknowledges the important social role played by 'courtesans' in the Puranas and the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. However, again there's ambiguity in the use of the word 'courtesans' as he talks about the Puranic origins of prostitution. The *Matsya Purana*[30] attributes the origin of prostitution to the curse cast by Lord Krishna on his 16,000 wives who were to be raped and enslaved by robbers because they were enamored by a man who wasn't their husband.[31] Another Sanskrit text called *Brihatkatha Sloka Samagraha*[32] narrates how the story of a monarch called Bharata who abducted all the daughters of the Ocean with an intention of marrying them. He later has a change of heart and decides to take one wife. Bharata divides the rest of them into eight groups (Sanskrit: *gana*) and a head chosen amongst these women who was called a *Ganika*.[33] Sanskrit texts like Dandin refer to a *Ganika* as *guna-sulka* meaning the one who cares for the qualities of a person in relation to her fees as opposed to a dhana-*sulka* who was a common prostitute and only cared about the money.[34] It is important to note that the Sanskrit texts did denounce courtesans but the institution did not cease to exist. In fact, numerous references in various texts only point to the institution becoming widespread and needed to be controlled by the state.

1.2 Ganikas in Ancient Buddhist Sources

The *Ganika* also appears abundantly in the Buddhist texts of Ancient India, and she is the highest in the hierarchy of courtesans. The outlook of Buddhist sources towards *Ganika*s is relatively positive as compared to the Sanskrit sources. In fact, *Ganika*s were referred to as *nagara-sobhani* or the beauty of the town.[35] *Vannadasi* was lower in the hierarchy and served as a slave to the *ganika. Vesya* as opposed to the *Ganika* was a common prostitute. There are

[29] Chandra (1973), p. 15
[30] The Matsya Purana is one of the best-preserved Puranas and is named after the half-human-half-fish avatar of the major Hindu deity Vishnu.
[31] Chandra (1973), p.16
[32] The text was written by a 6th-century author called Gunadhya and is part of a compendium of texts composed by him called Brihatkatha (the great story).
[33] Chandra (1973), p.17
[34] Singh (1993), p.182
[35] Saxena (2006), p.8

several different names for women who could be labelled as 'prostitutes' but *Ganika* was the highest in the hierarchy by the virtue of her cultural accomplishments. Each big town had a *Ganika*. Services of *Ganika*s were availed by kings, nobility, and rich merchants. The *ganika* was accessible to her clients based on their ability to pay her professional fee.[36]

The nature of the work of *Ganika*s could be deciphered through the Buddhist *jatakas*[37] which demonstrate their importance. Some stories highlight the price the *Ganika*s took, ranging from a hundred to thousand pieces[38] a night. In one of the *Jatakas*, a *Ganika* who received a thousand pieces from a man who later disappeared stopped accepting more clients and plummeted into poverty. This shows the righteousness of the courtesan. The antithesis to this righteous courtesan appears in the *Atthana Jataka*. A courtesan who charged a thousand pieces a night drove away a client who forgot to bring the money. The embarrassment from the incident coerced him into asceticism. Two of the *Jatakas* talk about two important courtesans from Benaras called Sama and Sulasa who fell in love with robbers. While the former got tricked by the robber, the latter put on a brave front when faced with deceit by her lover. These kinds of stories are important because they tell us about the humanistic side of being a courtesan.

Another story in the *Takkariya Jataka* illustrates the life of a famous and wealthy courtesan Kali. Her brother, a drunkard would take her money and waste it on gambling and alcohol. Once her brother lost even his clothes in gambling and rushed to Kali for help but to no avail. One of Kali's clients took pity on him and decided to help him out by giving him clothes. The clothes that Kali's client gave to her brother were given to him by Kali as per the custom of the *Ganikaghara*[39]. It offended Kali and she ordered her *Vannadasis* to kick the client out of her establishment.[40] This particular story throws light on decisiveness and the power that the courtesans held and also the customs. Courtesans like Kali financially supported their families and could exercise a free hand in disbursing their funds. The *Jatakas* humanize courtesans and acknowledge that they have emotions. The numerous occurrences of *Ganikas* and *Vannadasis* in *Jatakas* also show how the institution was normalized in society.

[36] Ibid, p.8
[37] Jatakas are a compendium of stories written in Pali that narrates stories from the life of Buddha. The literal meaning of Jatakas is birth and they are an important source to deduce the teachings of Buddha.
[38] It is not clear what 'pieces' mean here but the currency of the time was called Karshapana. These punch - marked coins were made of silver and copper. My inference is that the fee of ganikas may have been 1000 karshapanas.
[39] *Ganikaghara* literally translates into the house of Ganika. However, the translation given in Chandra's text is 'House of Ill Repute'. He doesn't contextualize the term or offer any further explanation to his translation which again makes it problematic.
[40] Chandra (1973), pp.31-36

1.3 Mahajanapadas and 6th Century CE: Amrapali's Era

The profession of *Ganika* became even more widespread because of the prosperity that ushered in the sixth century. The use of iron and the consequent massive development in agriculture, trade, and industries led to urbanization. The rise of 16 powerful states called *mahajanapadas* [41] which were divided into *rajyas* (monarchy) and *ganas/sanghas* (oligarchy) has been mentioned in Buddhist and Jain sources. These newly emerging states required a new system of social organization and the means to contain the surplus that was generated within society. This also meant tightening the control over women's sexuality so that the surplus remains within the familial unit. The rural economy remained mostly agrarian, and the use of iron tools facilitated surplus production, the emergence of private property, and the division of labor. Thus, the landowning class was separated from the class who worked on the land. The basic unit of society was the household. The head of the household and the landowner was called *Gahapati* or *Grihapati* and the succession was strictly patrilineal. The only exception was *stridhana* which was some moveable property (jewelry or household objects) given to women as a dowry that could be inherited by them. The household was patriarchal, wives were expected to produce male heirs and remain loyal to their husbands. Sons were considered desirable as they could continue the family lineage, consolidate the property, and pay homage to ancestors through rites and rituals. Surplus allowed the *gahapatis* to trade and led to the emergence of a class of merchants called *setthis* who were very influential and powerful. *Setthi*-gahapati were rich merchants and bankers who maintained close contact with the king. A boost to trade was given by the development of coinage which led to massive urbanization. It also gave space to the development of several professions. Buddhist sources talk about the presence of specialized professions like artisans, scribes, surgeons, moneylenders, fortunetellers, magicians, actors, dancers, courtesans, and prostitutes.[42]

One of the most important *Mahajanapadas* was that of *Magadha* (current geographical location is some districts of Bihar, India) which later became the seat of the Mauryan Empire. *Magadha's* strategic location in the alluvial plains of Northern India, its impenetrable capital *Rajagriha*, and its proximity to iron mines and major trade routes added to its power and prominence. The strength of *Magadha* is also attributed to King Bimbisara who consolidated the kingdom by establishing matrimonial ties with other confederacies. Bimbisara and his contacts with Amrapali, who was the most famous *Ganika* of the time help in understanding the social position of courtesans and the strategic role they played in politics. According to Buddhist sources, Amrapali was picked up from the foot of a mango tree in the gardens of the king of *Vaishali* (another *mahajanpada*) by a gardener. *Amra* means mango and she was named after a mango. She was raised by a nobleman and grew up to be an attractive woman and an accomplished dancer, singer and lute player. In order to avoid competition among men to marry

[41] Janapada (literally where people place their feet) means principalities consisting of rural and urban settlement and their inhabitants.
[42] See Singh (2016), pp. 257-300.

Amrapali, she was declared the *Nagarvadhu* or the bride of the entire town. Before accepting the title, Amrapali laid out five conditions demanding an independent residence, declaring her fee as 50 *karshapanas*, controlling her clientele, and limiting surveillance of her residence. These conditions were accepted by the *gana.* Not only did Amrapali assert her independence, but she also consolidated her political position. She received Lord Buddha in the city of *Vaishali* and hosted him at her residence.[43] The *Lichchavi* princes (the ruling dynasty of Vaishali) tried to host Buddha in their establishment instead by offering Amrapali a huge sum of money and later trying to persuade Buddha, only to be refused by both. Amrapali not only added to the wealth of *Vaishali* but also its charm. Later, she was also accepted by Buddha in the Buddhist order.[44]

Bimbisara heard about Amrapali's beauty and influence through the traders of Magadha. He was persuaded by the traders to appoint a courtesan like Amrapali in *Rajagriha* for prosperity. The stories of Amrapali's charm lured Bimbisara to *Vaishali* despite being warned that it could cause political turbulence with the *Lichchavis*.[45] Bimbisara attacked *Vaishali* and took refuge in Amrapali's residence who was oblivious to his identity. The two fell in love and she bore him a son. After discovering the identity of Bimbisara, Amrapali asked him to leave *Vaishali*. Bimbisara, enamored and in love with Amrapali agreed to leave *Vaishali* with no resistance.[46] He also installed a *Ganika* named Salavati in Magadha who was younger than Amrapali and aware of the competition she had. She was talented and set her fee at *100 karshapanas* a night attracting a large clientele. Her daughter, Sirima, maintained an establishment of five hundred *Ganika*s to entertain the friends of her lovers.[47] Amrapali was also persuaded in love by Bimbisara's son Ajatsastru who destroyed the city of *Vaishali* because their relationship was condemned by people of *Vaishali.* He made sure no harm would come to Amrapali because he was in love with her. The *Ganika*s maintained huge establishments, amassed a lot of wealth, and exercised considerable political influence. Many *Ganika*s mentioned in Buddhist sources are presented as talented and spiritual women and there's no stigma attached to them.

1.4 Ganikas in the Mauryan Empire and Arthasastra

The kingdom of *Magadha* (324-187 BCE) further flourished with the Mauryan dynasty. The period witnessed the expansion of trade with the Western world and diplomatic exchanges with the Graeco-Roman empire. It was under the Mauryan rule that the *Ganika*s became more institutionalized. They were even depicted in art (Figure 2). One of the most important texts of the period called *Arthasastra* was written under the rule of Chandragupta Maurya. *Arthasastra* delves deeply into how the institution of *Ganikas* was sanctioned by the state. Unlike other

[43] See Fig 1.
[44] Chandra (1973), pp. 39-41.
[45] *Lichchavis* really treasured Amrapali as their *nagarvadhu* and Bimbisara's interest in Amrapali could be seen as a political intervention and cause conflicts.
[46] Ibid., pp. 41-42.
[47] Ibid., p. 44.

Sanskrit sources like *Manusmriti*[48] which see prostitutes and *Ganikas* as evil and condemn them, *Arthasastra* sees potential in the institution. There is no moral condemnation of prostitution and *Ganikas* in *Arthasastra,* rather Kautilya perceives it to be an extremely profitable institution for the state.

Scholars like YB Singh postulate that it was the Greek influence that popularized the courtesan culture in India. The institution became intimately tied to royalty after the contacts with the Greeks were established. It is important to draw such linkages because they show how the institution did not evolve in isolation within India. The patterns that were followed in the Graeco-Roman civilization permeated Indian society normalizing and popularizing the institution manifolds. The influx of Greek slave women with a background in hetaera culture added to the popularity of courtesans in India.[49] Following the Persian-Greek wars (Indian troops fought on behalf of Persia), enslaved Greek women were sent to India. Indian kings who were allies of Persian kings received Greek slave girls as gifts. Alexander the Great and Seleucus Nikator I[50] tried to conquer India but failed. Seleucus Nikator I signed a peace treaty with Chandragupta Maurya (the founder of the Mauryan dynasty) and not only had to cede his territories in Afghanistan but also had to gift his daughter Cornelia to the harem of Chandragupta. Cornelia brought several slaves, concubines, female guards, and other Greek women who served her as well as acted as political pawns. *Arthasastra* mentions how the owners of foreign entertainers such as actors, dancers, singers, and 'unchaste women' had to pay an extra tax as a license fee to work in India. The tax records reveal how there were numerous Greek women who worked in the sex and entertainment business and appealed to those clients who desired something 'exotic'. Wine, a popular import from the Western world, is linked to the Courtesan culture and has also been talked about in the *Arthasastra*.[51]

Arthasastra clearly defines the rights and duties of the *Ganika*s who received a monthly salary from the state. The *Ganika* worked under the Superintendent of Prostitutes (*veshyadhyaksha*) who also supervised other prostitutes like *veshyas* or *rupajivas* (women who lived off their beauty). The *Ganikas* had to pay a substantial tax from her earnings to the state.[52] The *Ganikadhyaksha* fixed the fee that a *Ganika* charged from her clients and kept tabs on their profits. The state provided *Ganikas* with an establishment, fine clothes and jewelry, and an old-age pension. They received a salary from the state which was determined by their beauty and talent. *Ganikadhyaksha* also looked after their welfare. In *Arthasastra,* one also finds reference to the temple dancers or *Devadasis*[53] for the first time. It states that they could take up spinning after their retirement.

[48] Also known as Manavdharamasastra, 2nd Century CE, the text dictates how a man should live his life in a society. It is one of the pioneering texts on Brahminical law.
[49] See Singh (1993).
[50] He was the Seleucid successor of Alexander the Great in Asia.
[51] See Hain (2020).
[52] This continued even during the time of Tawaifs who were also the highest taxpayers.
[53] Devadasi' can be translated as 'servant of god'. Devadasis were women symbolically married to Hindu deities, usually Goddess Yellamma. While some of the women dedicated themselves voluntarily to the temple, others were coerced to do so. The latter usually came from the lowest, most marginalised castes in the Hindu social hierarchy. Association with the temple brought socio-economic mobility to the Devadasi's family. The Devadasi, in turn, was perceived as a goddess herself and exercised considerable influence in all spheres of social life.

The state also established training schools for *Ganika*s where they were taught skills like acting, dancing, singing, instrumental music, thought reading, shampooing, and in total 64 arts that they were supposed to learn. *Arthasastra* also sets a code of conduct for both *Ganika*s and her clients which was to be strictly adhered to, otherwise, punishment was given to the erring individual. For example, *Ganikas* could not become mistresses as they were an important source of revenue for the state. A contract was drawn between *Ganika* and her client which was binding. Violation of the contract by denying sexual intercourse after receiving the fee could invite fines. Fines were imposed on *Ganikas* in cases of defamation, abduction, and disfigurement of the clients or other *Ganikas*. Heavy fines were imposed on those who cheated, sexually assaulted, or caused any physical harm to a *Ganika*. Kautilya, the author of the *Arthashastra*, set the laws of inheritance, acquiring private property, and the role of the children of *Ganikas*. The daughters of *Ganika* could only become *Ganika*s if they had beauty and talent. The sons of *Ganikas* had to train in music and acting and they received a small salary from the state. The succession was matrilineal and the wealth of *Ganikas* could be transferred to her daughter, sister, or a substitute *Ganika* (*pratiganika*).[54] The *Ganika's* household show traces of matriarchy as *Ganikas* were only women who had full control over their property and could dispense it at their will. Also, male members of the family were dependent on them. The mention of regulation of *Ganika* households in *Arthasastra* shows a need to set rules for such matriarchal households. *Arthasastra's* attempt to regulate the institution is very telling of the need to control women who were free from patriarchal regulations. Ganikas were put under the authority of *Veshadhyaksha*, who was a man. Even though the Ganikas may have exercised influence in their own domain, but they still existed in a patriarchal society and checks like *Veshyadhyaksha's* office made sure the freedom of Ganikas does not disturb the patriarchal order of society.

1.5 Ganikas in the Kamasutra

While the *Arthasastra* is more concerned about the economic position of *Ganika*s, the *Kamasutra* lays down the role of the *Ganika* in the erotic sphere. *Kamasutra* and *Natyasastra* were written under Gupta rule (4th-6th century CE) and the institution of *Ganika* became firmly established under the Guptas. A significant portion of the *Kamasutra* has been dedicated to the courtesan. The *Kamasutra* clearly separates the figure of the courtesan from the figure of the wife. Although, at some point, there is an overlap when the courtesan transitions into a wife. But the treatment of the *Ganika* by a man must be completely different from the treatment of a wife. The role of the wife is confined to producing heirs and maintaining her chastity for the purity of the lineage. Erotic pleasure between a man and a wife is not given as much importance as the birth of a son. Courtesan, therefore, becomes a channel to articulate sexual desires that do not contribute to reproduction. Unlike the wife who was confined to the household, the courtesan could accompany the man in public. A *Ganika* was expected to participate in rituals, worship lord *Kama*,[55] and engage in other rituals. Such a prerogative was not available to a wife.

[54] See Chandra (1973), pp. 62-80.
[55] Kamadeva is the erotic god of love.

The *Ganika* was also expected to be educated and trained in sixty-four arts. The first twenty-four arts were professional arts like instrumental and vocal music, dancing, knowledge of colors, testing of precious stones, furniture, garland making, etc. The next twenty kinds of arts are based on speculation like diplomacy, proper use of dice, knowledge of coins, mesmerism, etc. The other sixteen arts are essential in the bedroom like expressing love, scratching with nails, touching the sexual organs, simulating a long sleep and encouragement, etc. The last four arts are practiced after sex like crying and cursing the patron or following him.[56] She is expected to sing songs about him, praise him, boost his confidence, and give him what he wants in bed.[57] The fame of a *Ganika* is dependent on how many skills she acquires. Other women who could acquire these sixty four skills were considered lucky in love. Women of high status like daughters of kings or ministers could use these skills to make a living in case of a separation from their husbands.

The *Ganika* has been presented as an authority on erotica. She is a lawmaker in the field of erotica. The *Kamasutra* deals with the types of courtesans, their clientele, how to attract and keep the client, exacting money from him, getting rid of him, feigning affection, and even managing of the finances of the *Ganika*. *Kamasutra* also provides tips and tricks to put these clients under the courtesan's power through black magic and home remedies. There are interesting concoctions that could be produced to seduce the client and even improve a man's virility and the girth of his organs. The *Kamasutra* also instructs the courtesans about maximizing their gains through clients and choosing a client who is more generous.[58]

The *Kamasutra* not only separates the *Ganika* from wife but also *Ganika* from a prostitute. The definition of the *Ganika* becomes more precise and developed in the text. The *Ganika* was supposed to cultivate and feign love in the heart of her patron followed by sex. This was unlike the prostitute whose relationship with the patron was strictly sexual and economic. *Kamasutra* recognizes the duality of a patron-*ganika* relationship as it was both supposed to be both loving and economic. To deal with this contradiction, the *Kamasutra* divides the professional and erotic aspects of the relationship. The mother of the *Ganika* was delegated with the responsibility of handling the economic aspect of the relationship. The mother manages the finances while the *Ganika* continues her love-sex relationship with her patron. The *Kamasutra* establishes the importance of love in the sexual relationship of *Ganika* and her patron. The mother becomes an authority figure in *Ganika*'s life who is supposed to enforce the code of conduct that the *Ganika* must follow to maintain her independence from the patron. *Kamasutra* instructs the *Ganika* to not engage in conversations about money with her patron and to obey her mother. The removal of this duality of the relationship, *Kamasutra* warns, might result in the loss of relationship or the *Ganika* becoming a wife.[59] When a courtesan spends a significant period of time with one patron, she may take the role of courtesan-wife. The *Kamasutra*

[56] Chandra (1973), pp. 83-85.
[57] Kumar Gautam (2016), pp. 96-98
[58] See Vātsyāyana, Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, (2003-2002) *Kamasutra*, pp. 131-159.
[59] This continue till the period of Tawaifs as the *chaudhrayan* became the chief figure who handled finances and was also represented in films. This makes an important case for continuity and evolution of Tawaifs from *Ganika*.

instructs the courtesan to take on the role of a wife once she succeeds in winning her patron's love. The courtesan-wife becomes subordinate to her patron-husband and loses her autonomy. Like a traditional wife, the *Ganika*-wife was to persuade her patron-husband to have a son with her. While the daughters of *Ganika* were most likely to become *Ganika*s, the sons mostly remain anonymous and did not have any defined role. [60] Sanskrit texts like *Manusmriti* condemns adultery and the *Ganika* is therefore considered to deviate from the path of *dharma*,[61] However, in *Kamasutra*, a *Ganika* is a locus of erotic pleasure (*kama*). She is also advised to transition into a wife so that she could be incorporated within the Brahminical framework of society. As she transitions into a wife, *Ganika* loses her autonomy and is subjugated by patriarchal norms. She is also advised to do a theatrical display of affection for her patron and act like a wife. This theatre of love found its continuities in *Natyasastra*, argues Sanjay Kumar Gautam.[62]

1.6 Ganikas and the Natyasastra

Natyasastra, the authoritative ancient Indian treatise on dance, music, theatre, and aesthetic pleasure (*rasa*) was written by Sage Bharata Muni and claims to have divine origins. The theatre was given as a gift to humanity by Lord Brahma[63] and he incorporated different elements of theatre from the four existing Vedas creating *Natyaveda* which was further transferred to Bharata Muni. Bharata trained his hundred sons in the art of theatre and staged a play for Brahma and other gods. Within this story, another story is integrated where Brahma narrates to Bharata how theatre had existed on earth prior to Bharata bringing it to earth. The origins of theatre on earth are attributed to Urvashi, a celestial courtesan.[64] Urvashi fell in love with an earthly King Puruavas and decided to live with him until she bore him a son. She was to leave earth as soon as she gave birth. During her stay with the king, she educated the members of the king's harem in the art of theatre which was then lost after her departure from Earth. *Natyasastra* divides plays into two genres: *Sukumar* or delicate plays and *aviddha* or violent plays. The *aviddha* plays mostly depicted battles between gods and demons and were mostly performed by men. While the *sukumara* genre was mostly associated with erotic-romantic style called *kaisiki*. The predominance of women in the *kaisiki* style was highlighted by Bharata to Brahma in the *Natyasastra*. Since Bharata had only his 100 sons and no women to perform, Brahma created celestial courtesans or apsaras to perform in these plays. The celestial courtesans didn't need training in theatre as it was believed that they naturally possessed these skills to perform in *kaisiki* plays. The erotic-romantic plays consisted of either royal romance with the king as a primary male figure or popular romance with a male member of non-royal background. The central female figure was always a courtesan. In the royal romance, *apsara*

[60] Kumar Gautam (2016), pp. 88-112.
[61] Brahminical law as dictated in the sastra. The path of righteousness as guided by the Brahminical law.
[62] Kumar Gautam (2016), pp. 113-114.
[63] Brahma is the Hindu god of creation.
[64] Other terminologies used for celestial courtesans are *divyavesya* or *apsara*. Celestial courtesans are different from *Ganikas* or other earthly courtesans as the erotic-romantic relationships with the celestial courtesans did not involve use of money. Her nomenclature as celestial courtesan is reflective of her freedom as a single woman outside the family (Kumar Gautam, p. 115).

was the main lead while in the popular romance, *Ganika* was the main heroine.[65] The relationship between a courtesan and her patron dictated popular and royal romance and erotic-aesthetic pleasure dominated its core. These plays usually involved dance and music. The *Natyasastra* also goes into the nitty-gritty of building this narrative of love. The practices of perfuming, gift-giving, sweet talking, and using ornaments and jewelry to seduce a patron were all part of this theatric display of affection. Intermediaries like page or maids of *Ganika*s played an important role in aiding *Ganikas* in attracting a patron.

Both *Kamasutra* and *Natyasastra* press on the importance of the courtesan in the field of the art of erotics. Her very nature of existence is considered theatrical as she is not only supposed to cultivate the sixty-four arts but also practice them in real life to make a living. In *Kamasutra* and *Natyasastra*, she has been described as a '*nayika'* or an actress while the patron-consort has been called '*nayaka'* or an actor. Both these texts not only establish the position of courtesans in society but also of people who associate with them. It can be deduced from these texts that women who were not courtesans did not have that much freedom. The freedom that *Ganikas* possessed is what made them attractive to their clientele. The level of emotional detachment as well as financial independence allowed *Ganikas* to think critically and be assertive. The wives could be subjugated easily because they were financially and emotionally dependent on their husbands, however, *Ganikas* could freely choose their partners that would put men in a vulnerable position. They had to please the *Ganika* as much as the *Ganika* had to please her client. This is also a reason why the normative texts try to regulate the *Ganikas* because of *Ganikas* could threaten the patriarchal framework without any regulation.

1.7 *Ganikas* in Sanskrit Literary Sources

Around the 4th century CE, the institution of *Ganikas* became more pronounced, and one can find *Ganikas* being mentioned in popular literature and dramas. One of the most significant popular romance dramas of the time is *Mricchakatam*[66] by Sudraka. The drama is centered around a virtuous courtesan called Vasantsena and her pauperized Brahmin lover Charudutta in Ujjaiyni[67]. The play gives insights into the social life of the time and the various social classes that existed. The play begins with Charudutta explaining his trials and tribulations to his friend Maitreya and is interrupted by Vasantsena who rushes into his house while escaping from the king's brother-in-law Shakara and his servant. This is when the love affair between Charudutta and Vasantsena begins. Vasantsena leaves her jewels in Charudutta's house for safekeeping and is escorted by Maitreya to her house. In another scene, she tells her attendant that she left the jewels so that she could visit Charudutta again. Incidentally, the jewels are stolen by a thief called Sarvilaka who takes it to Vasantsena to buy the freedom of her lover, Vasantsena's attendant Madanika. Meanwhile, Charudutta's wife sends her only pearl necklace to Vasantsena through Maitreya to save Charudutta from embarrassment. Maitreya lies to Vasantsena that Charudutta lost her jewels in a gamble. Vasantsena uses the necklace as an excuse to visit

[65] Ibid., pp. 115-125.
[66] Translated into Little Clay Cart, the historians estimate its date around 5th century CE.
[67] It was the capital of the powerful Mahajanpada of Avanti. Its current location is in Central India in Madhya Pradesh.

Charudutta and tries to return it to his wife. His wife refuses to accept it and that is when Charudutta's child enters the scene. He complains to his mother that he only had a little clay cart (Mrichhakatam) to play with. Overcome with pity and compassion for the child, Vasantsena offers her own jewelry to the child so that he could get a golden toy cart made. In the same scene, Vasantsena is informed by her driver that the bullock cart is ready for her. The driver is instructed to wait outside till Vasantsena is ready. The driver then takes the cart with him to fetch a cushion. At the same time, the cart of Shakara is parked at the same spot which Vasantsena mistakenly enters and driven away. When discovered by Shakara, he again pursues Vasantsena only to be rejected by her. He then strangles Vasantsena and she falls to the ground. She is revived by a Buddhist monk who gives her water and appears in several other scenes. The monk takes Vasantsena to a Buddhist monastery in care of a nun. Charudutta is put on trial as he was falsely accused by Shakara of murdering Vasantsena for money. Vasantsena appears with the Buddhist monk just before the execution of Charudutta and saves him.[68]

Mricchakatam is riddled with details and gives us a vivid account of the people who would usually be excluded from official sources. It humanizes not only the courtesans but her attendants and even thieves. These voices usually do not find mention in other sources. It also shows how *Ganika*s had agency. Vasantsena was not only rich but also had the authority to decide whom she wanted to engage with. She comes across as generous, powerful, and majestic. There's also a description of her physical appearance and how she dresses with her sari girdle across the hips and red realgar on her lips and cheeks. Her palace is also described as highly ornate consisting of lush gardens with flowers, big kitchens, places to gamble, and aviaries. Her opulence is also made evident by her having numerous people to tend to her needs.

What is also striking is the fleeting character of the Buddhist monk and the possible cultural association of courtesans with Buddhism. As we have established before, unlike the Sanskrit sources, Buddhist sources attached no stigma to courtesans. It is striking that Vasantsena first helps the Buddhist monk who in turn helps her in time of her need as a payback. The curious association of courtesans with Buddhism could be implied from this. It is noteworthy that Charudutta's wife appears briefly and is virtually absent from the rest of the narrative. She is a typical representation of a wife described by the Sanskrit sources: devoted, loyal, and more concerned about her husband's reputation than his affair with Vasantsena. She is only a side character who does not have a voice. Vasantsena's attendant Madanika, on the other hand, is portrayed as a woman with wits and in charge of her romantic relationship with Sarvilaka. When she learns that her lover stole the jewels, she condemns him and advises him to return the jewels, which he does. Overall, the play reverses the conventional narrative of women being saved by men. In *Mricchakatam*, it was Vasantsena who saves Charudutta's life.

[68] Chandra (1973), pp. 180-190.

Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*[69] and *Ritusamhara* give us glimpses into the lives of *Ganika*s at the time. Kalidasa describes courtesans picking up jasmine flowers in the mountains to embellish their bodies and then dancing in the temple of Mahakala[70] in Ujjain. In *Ritusamhara*, he paints a delicate image of courtesans. In the scorching heat of Indian summer, the courtesans would wear fine muslin drapes, flower garlands, and jewelry and smear sandal paste on their chest. In Indian winter, the courtesans would smear their breasts with saffron paste, wear pearl necklaces, paint designs on their faces, and fumigate their hair with aromatic plants. Kalidasa describes lovers embracing each other and engaging in lovemaking.[71]

Other literary works that throw light on the lives of courtesans are *Chaturbhani* which is a collection of four plays, *Padmaprabhritakam* by *Sudraka*, and *Vasudeva Hindi*[72]. These works of literature just like *Mricchakatam* and *Ritusamahara* paint a picture of the lives of courtesans, people who associated with them, their association with powerful people and royalty, and the complex web of relationships that surrounded them.

To conclude, we analyzed multiple sources that throw light on the institution of *Ganikas* in Ancient India. The institution flourished under big empires like the Mauryan and the Gupta Empires and was also influenced by the Greek courtesans. Not only were they mentioned in the authoritative texts but also in literary texts. It is also noteworthy that the code of conduct prescribed by *Manusmriti* requiring refuting food offered by *Ganikas* to Brahmins or even killing a woman who made money through prostitution might not have been universally accepted. The shame and stigma attached to *Ganikas* by some sources like *Dharmasastras* and *Manusmriti* is countered by the multitude of sources like the *Kamasutra*, Buddhist sources, or even Sanskrit plays. The chapter also shows how the normative texts tried to regulate the institution to prevent *Ganikas* from having unlimited power.When the British tried to homogenize the Indian society by codifying the indigenous laws, they were aided by Brahmins who gave precedence to texts like *Manusmriti* over all other Sanskrit texts. That is how *Manusmriti* became synonymous with Hindu law in general. The next chapter will see how the institution of courtesans developed in medieval India.

[69] Kalidasa is considered the greatest Sanskrit poet of ancient India. *Meghaduta* translated as 'cloud messenger' is dated around 4th-5th century CE. The poem is centered around the love of Yaksha and his wife and the cloud as a messenger between them.
[70] Mahakala is another name for Lord Shiva.
[71] Chandra (1973), pp. 145-149.
[72] Oldest surviving Jain literary narrative written by a Jain monk called Sangha Dasa in Prakrit language.

Appendix

Figure 1: Amrapali greeting Buddha. Part of Ivory Tusk depicting the scenes from Life of Buddha, National Museum, Delhi[73]*, Date estimated to 20th century.*

[73] By Nomu420 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30601694

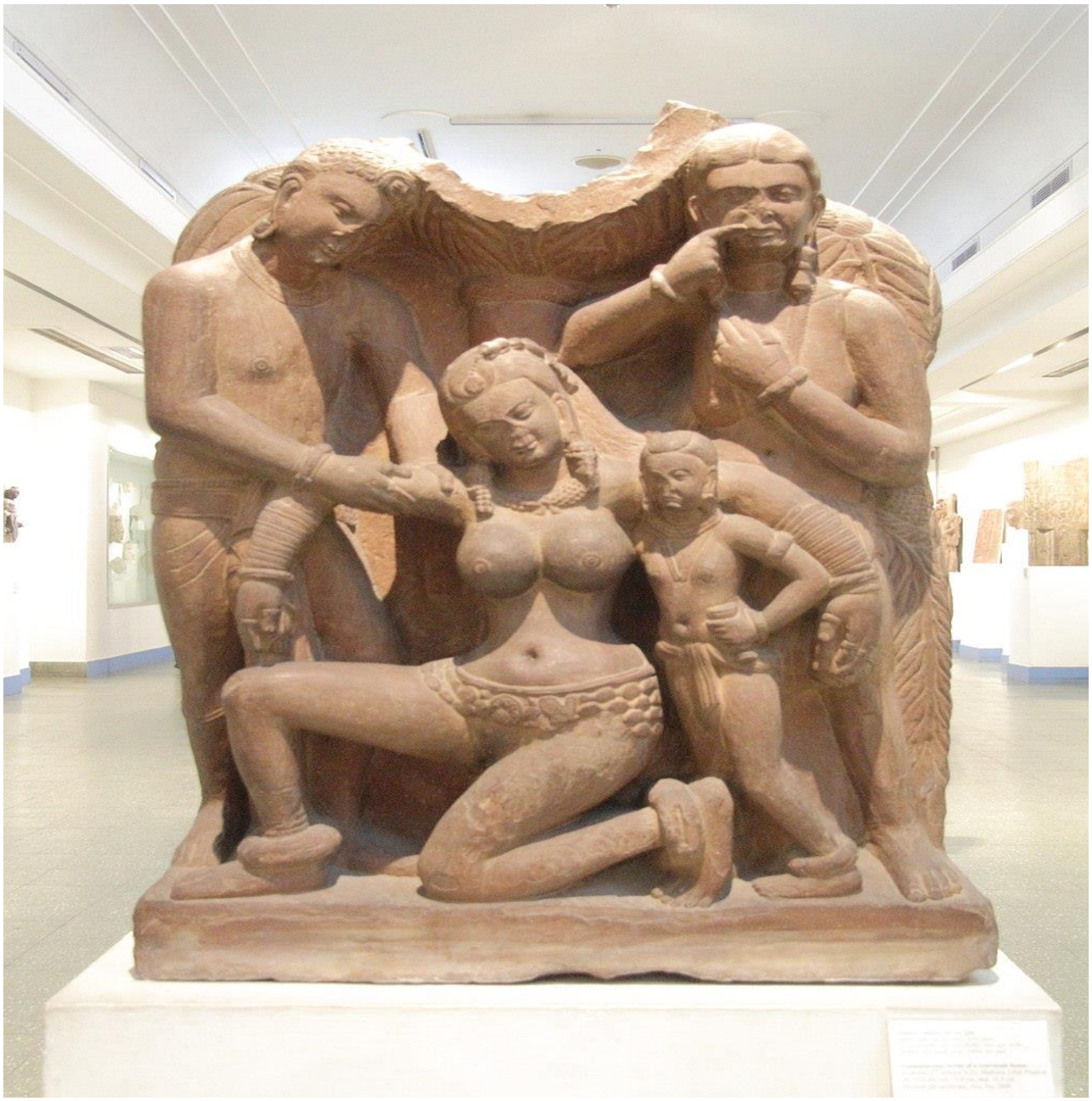

Figure 2: Drunk Vasantsena from Mricchakatam, National Museum, Delhi[74]

[74] Photo credits: By Rabe! - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nationalmuseum_Neu-Delhi_2017-12-27v.jpg#/media/File:Nationalmuseum_Neu-Delhi_2017-12-27v.jpghttps://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=79581013

Figure 3: Didarganj Yakshi, Patna Museum[75]

3rd Century BCE (disputed)
Patna Museum, India
Chunar Sandstone

This sculpture is widely debated. Some argue that she might be a yakshi (protective guardian deity) and others if she is a ganika.
The debate is because of the fly-whisk in her hand, also known as Chauri. She is also called a Chauri bearer. The chauri is used to keep cool and keep the insects away. The other point if debate is the voluptuous and the erotic element in the statue. Fertility deities are usually voluptuous but so are Ganikas.
Both Yakshis and Ganikas carry Chauri. Arthasastra even mentions in the responsibilities of Ganika that she fans the king in processions.

[75] *Photo by: Shivam Setu*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didarganj_Yakshi#/media/File:Didarganj_Yakshi_statue_in_the_Bihar_Museum.jpg

Chapter 2

In Search of the Ganika: Courtesans of Early Medieval and Medieval India

The decline of the Gupta Empire in the 6th century CE left a political vacuum in North India which was filled by the emergence of several other kingdoms in different parts of the country. The intermediate period (600-1200 CE) between the ancient and medieval periods is called the early medieval period. This period witnessed several significant changes like the rise of new kingdoms, the system of land grants leading to the segmentation of power, the proliferation of new castes, the development of new religious sects, and changes in the position of women. These changes ultimately altered the way the institution of *Ganika* functioned. The establishment of Islamic rule in India around 1206 and the introduction of Persian courtesans in Indian courts led to the exchange of skills and techniques between Indian *Ganikas* and Persian courtesans. This syncretic exchange culminated in the creation of a new courtesan culture. This chapter will analyze the courtesans of the early medieval and medieval periods and see the shifts that the institution underwent after Islamic rule crystallized in India.

2.1 The Early Medieval Period in India: Politics and Religion

The early medieval period in India was marked by the rise of regional polities like the *Karkota* dynasty in Kashmir (8th century), *Pushyabhutis* in Northern India, *Rashtrakutas* in the Deccan, *Pala* dynasty in Eastern India, and several *Rajput* clans in Western India. One of the most common features of all these regional polities was the segmentation of power through the system of land grants. Land grants were given to Brahmins[76] and religious institutions as gifts and donations by the rulers for management. These land grants were called *Brahmadeyas*. The revenue collected from the *Brahmadeya* landholding did not go to the state but rather to the donee. The donee could determine what revenue was to be charged and collect and retain it for himself. *Brahmadeyas* led to the strengthening of Brahminical hold over the society with extensive economic power vested in them. The political backing from the royalty and the economic power facilitated the process of exploitation of other castes by the Brahmins. *Brahmadeyas* facilitated the expansion of agriculture into tribal areas leading to the integration and assimilation of these tribes in the Brahminical order of society. The tribes were introduced to plow cultivation and labeled as '*shudras'*. This process had implications in the religious realm as well. The incorporation of tribes in Brahminical society also led to the integration of tribal cults, rituals, and beliefs in the pre-existing Brahminism[77]. Brahminism in this period also

[76] Brahmins are the priestly caste in the four-fold varna or caste order. Brahmins are the highest in the hierarchy followed by Kshatriyas (the warrior caste), Vaishya (the traders), and Shudras (peasants and laborers).

[77] Brahminism instead of 'Hinduism' has been used here. Brahminism until this period implied adherence to Vedic rituals and texts like Dharamasastras (talked about in the previous chapter).

incorporated deities from other sects as the manifestation of pre-existing Vedic gods like Shiva and Vishnu. New sects based around the worship of these deities were also formed and their followers were called *Saivites* and *Vaishnavites* respectively. The idea of *Bhakti* (devotion to the supreme god) became central to Hindu theology. This devotional aspect made Hinduism more inclusive for women as the rites, rituals, and priests acquired a secondary status, and the relationship between the divine and his '*bhakta*' [78] became central. There was also a proliferation of women saints in *Saivism* and *Vaishanvism.*[79] The tribal fertility rites related to the worship of the mother goddess/energy (*Shakti*) also penetrated Brahminism, Buddhism, and Jainism and were called 'Tantrism'. Tantrism accorded a higher status to women and there was a strong emphasis on the sexual union. The worshipper was transformed into a deity in tantric worship. The main five elements involved in Tantric practices are *mamsa* (meat), *madya* (alcohol), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (parched grain), and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse).[80]

In fact, in Tantric sects, particularly Buddhism, *Ganikas* had an important role to play in the performance of rites and rituals. They acquired a divine-spiritual status that was to be revered. The ability to dance and mastery of the arts of erotica gave them control over their bodies, making them ideal for performing Tantric rites like Tantric orgies. Tantric literature focuses on equality between men and women in relationships. The relationships based on submission, exploitation, and oppression of women are absent in Tantrism. People who joined and practiced Tantrism were from all walks of life- from royalty to peasants, as Tantrism preached equality among the members. All women in the world were considered manifestations of *Vajrayogini* [81] and had to be respected unconditionally by men. Curses, obstacles in enlightenment, and strict punishments are meted out to those men who fail to adhere to this rule.[82]

Many female Tantrics possessed *Ganika*-like qualities- freedom to choose their sexual partner, freedom of marriage, mastery of arts, and spiritual independence. The possession of the said skill set would have made Tantrism attractive to the *Ganikas*. Alcohol consumption associated with courtesan culture was an integral part of Tantrism. Unlike Brahminism, Tantrism exalted the *Ganikas* and *Devadasis* to a semi-divine status. They became manifestations of the goddess and ritually more important and relevant. Many *yoginis* [83]and female Tantrics did come from a *Ganika* background. Since Tantrism permeated all three main religions of the time, the *Ganikas* seemed to have acquired the religious legitimacy and spiritual backing.

The religious legitimacy provided to the *Ganikas* and *Devadasis* of the time was further exacerbated through land grants. The process of granting land for the construction of temples was associated with the display of wealth and power of a kingdom. Consequently, there was an

[78] Bhakta is a devotee.
[79] Singh (2016), pp. 546-616.
[80] Singh (2016), p. 511.
[81] Vajrayogini is the goddess of knowledge and wisdom in Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism.
[82] Shaw (1994), pp. 20-63.
[83] Yogini is a female practictioner of yoga and tantra and the earliest Yoginis were considered goddesses.

acceleration in the temple-building process and temple urbanism. Several inscriptions record the contribution of *Devadasis* in the temple-building process, particularly in South India.[84] There is scanty evidence to prove that *Ganikas* in North India made donations to temples but given the overarching nature of the social processes engendered by land grants, it can be argued that the North Indian *Ganikas* may have ritually associated themselves with the temples and made donations. The inscriptional evidence from North India (Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Kannauj[85]) suggests that women, both royal and non-royal could make donations to temples and owned property.[86] Given that *Ganikas* continued to be influential in this period and often performed in temples, it could be argued that they donated to temples to strengthen their religious position.

2.2 Temple Urbanism in the Early Medieval Period

In the early medieval period, because of temple urbanism, temples became centers of entertainment and attracted communities of performers. Places of pilgrimage like Kashi[87] and big temples became hubs for theatrical shows and musical congregations performed by flute players, male dancers, and courtesans. Exclusive performances for the royalty and important merchants were organized by the manager of courtesans in theatres. A copper plate inscription of 10th century Rajasthan throws light on various entertainers who performed at the temple of Nadol. The entertainers include a chief singer known as *Mehari,* [88]*a Vilasini*,[89] a drum player, a flute player, and a supporting singer. *Vilasinis* were dancers and *Vilasini natyam*[90] is a dance form attributed to them. The inscription also talks about a senior *Vilasini*, the daughter of a *Ganika*, who was receiving a land grant which she was to share with other *Vilasinis* of the temple. *Mehari* was the recipient of wheat from the temple deity's collection. Trivedi argues that this proves that *Vilasinis* were higher in the hierarchy than *Meharis.* Part of the temple's income was used to educate and train *Vilasinis* and *Meharis*.[91]

As temple urbanism continued to flourish in southern India, the political landscape of northern India changed dramatically with the consolidation of Arab power. Arab merchants made inroads into the Indian subcontinent as early as 636 AD. with the intention of strengthening the commercial foothold as well as spreading Islam. However, these expeditions were only for pillaging and not conquests. The first Arab invasion took place during the conquest of Sindh by Muhammad bin Qasim in 712 AD., but the Muslim rule remained

[84] See Verma (2018-19); She discusses inscriptional evidence of donations/grants made by Devadasis to the South Indian temples.
[85] Located in present day Uttar Pradesh.
[86] See Thakur (2017).
[87] Present day Varanasi.
[88] Mehari could be translated into wife, especially in the context of Rajasthan. It is noteworthy that the inscription uses this word to refer to a temple singer.
[89] *Vilasini* has multiple connotations. in general, it is referred to as a coquettish woman.
[90] *Vilasini Natyam* is believed to be the earliest dance form of India particularly attributed to the Devadasis of Andhra Pradesh. Today the dance form is virtually absent from the Indian public sphere. However, remnants of the dance form have merged with other classical dances like Bharatnatyam.
[91] See Trivedi (1999), pp. 75-76.

confined to Sindh.[92] The Arabs around this time remained relatively tolerant towards other faiths and the power was decentralized and shared with Hindu kings.

2.3 Islam Comes to India: Early Invasions and the Delhi Sultanate

The situation changed in the 11th and 12th centuries with the frequent plundering raids of Mahmud of Ghazna (Iran) as he ascended the throne at Ghazni. He made seventeen raids into India covering geographical areas like Punjab, Gujarat, and Gangetic plains, and successfully managed to bring parts of Afghanistan, Multan, and Punjab under his control. In Indian historical memory, he is remembered as a plunderer and raider as he destroyed several important temples and amassed a lot of wealth from this destruction. Despite all the wealth, the Ghaznavid rule soon dissipated because of a lack of stable administration structures and was replaced by Ghurids[93]. The foundations of the Delhi Sultanate were laid by Muhammad Ghuri following the monumental Battle of Tarain.[94] The Turks were able to expand their sphere of influence to Bengal, Bihar, and the Ganga Valley. Ghuri was succeeded by a Turkish slave called Qutubuddin Aibek in 1206. Qutibuddin Aibek was the first ruler of the Slave dynasty that ruled Delhi.[95] The Slave dynasty was succeeded by the Khaljis and Tughlaqs, and the Sultanate was ultimately replaced by the Mughals.[96] It was in this political context we witness a significant shift in the position of *Ganikas* and women in general and their transition into a medieval courtesan. The new Muslim rulers also embarked on large-scale destruction of temples in North India for establishing their religious supremacy and amassing the wealth harbored in the temples. This meant the decline of temple urbanism in North India pushing *Ganikas* and other entertainers in the temples to look for alternate sources of patronage. The following part of the chapter will reconstruct the history of courtesans in the Delhi Sultanate followed by their history during the Mughal period.

The insights into the social life of the period are provided by court historians, Persian literature, traveler's accounts, and alternate sources like paintings and architecture. It is noteworthy that the introduction of Islam in India and the consolidation of Islamic rule did not lead to the disappearance of Hinduism. In fact, there was a collaboration between the two religions even though power dynamics favored Muslims. The same paradigm continued under the Mughals. The religious autonomy of Hindus was respected if they paid the taxes like *jizya*[97].

[92] See Chandra (2007)
[93] Ghurids were the Turko-Persian tribe, and their capital was at Ghur province in Afghanistan.
[94] The highly historicized Battle of Tarain took place between Muhammad Ghuri and the Rajput Hindu prince Prithviraj Chauhan. The battle is reconstructed in the famous epic poem called Prithviraj Raso by Chandrabardai.
[95] See Chandra (2007), pp. 57-76.
[96] Ibid
[97] It was a tax imposed on non-Muslims.

2.4 Entertainment and Performing Women in the Delhi Sultanate

The social life under the Delhi Sultanate was centered around the Sultan and his nobles who maintained a lavish lifestyle with multiple slaves at their disposal. All the Delhi Sultans built their own palaces with a large harem attached to them. The harem housed all the women related to the Sultan including his concubines and was protected and served by slaves and eunuchs. Music and dance were important parts of courtly entertainment. Most Sultans patronized Persian music and dance and had little knowledge or appreciation of the Sanskrit language and pre-existing Indian art forms. This led to a decline in the status of *Ganikas* and they had to adapt and learn new skills and languages to maintain their status quo. Since Delhi became a bustling center of commerce and culture by the 13th century, many artists, scholars, musicians, and dancers migrated from Iran and other parts of Central Asia in search of patronage in the courts of Delhi Sultans. This contributed to the strengthening of Persian traditions and the gradual assimilation of Indian traditions. The assimilation began during the reign of Muizzudin Kaiqubad [98] as he patronized several musicians, jesters, and entertainers who built a colony in the vicinity of his palace. Ziauddin Barani[99] informs that during Kaiqubad's reign, the sale of wine increased, and rope dancers (*gada ghazis*) and prostitutes became extremely wealthy. Indian courtesans (*jalab kashan-i-Hindustan*[100]) and slave girls (*kaniz bachgans*) were trained in the Persian language, etiquette, and customs of the court and singing, *ghazal*[101] recitation, playing instruments like *rubab*,[102] telling jokes and in the game of chess. The new Indian courtesan represented the fusion of Persian and Indian cultural traditions of the period.[103]

Amir Khusrao's [104]*Aijaz-i-Khusravi* describes music at the courts of Khalji sultans. Talking about Alauddin Khalji's court, Khusrao reconstructs the grandiose royal gatherings with the finest wines, fruits, and scents, and extremely talented instrumentalists and vocalists whose performance of *ghazals* and *qawwali*[105] was superior to the Persian musicians in Baghdad and Cairo. Khusrao points out that the court musicians and those who migrated to Delhi had a firm grip on the techniques of song and rhythm allowing them to formulate new styles with ease. Khusrao also encouraged Indian artists to collaborate with descendants of

[98] Muizuddin Kaiqubad ruled from 1287-90 and was the tenth sultan of Delhi. He was known for his indulgence in women and wine.

[99] Ziauddin Barani was one of the most prominent Persian chroniclers of the Delhi Sultanate. His work Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi covers Indian medieval period from the reign of Ghiyasuddin Balban (1216-87) to the first six regnal years of Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1309-88).
See (https://archive.org/details/IrfanHabibBaranisTheoryDelhiSultanate/page/n3/mode/2up)

[100] Persian name for Indian Ganikas.

[101] Ghazal is a form of Arabic poetry (an ode) and it consists of rhyming couplets mostly 7-12 in number. It was popularized by Sufi mystics in India during the Sultanate period, and it is associated with elitist culture in the Indian public sphere today.

[102] Rubab is a stringed instrument prominent in North-West parts of India. (Now Pakistan and Afghanistan)

[103] See Trivedi (1999), pp. 78-80.

[104]Amir Khusrao was a poet historian, a Sufi, and a disciple of Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. He was a prolific writer and multitude of ghazals/ texts are attributed to him. He learnt Sanskrit in India. More on Khusrao (https://ia801400.us.archive.org/13/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.219675/2015.219675.Amir-Khusrau.pdf).

[105] Qawwali comes from the root Arabic word Qaul which means affirmation and Qawwali is a devotional Sufi singing.

distinguished Persian artists. A new form of *qawwali* developed in Delhi under Khusrao's vigilance. This form used handclasps to create rhythm and hand gestures to regulate the volume.[106] Khusrao learned both Turko-Persian court traditions and Indian classical and folk traditions and fused them to lay the foundations of *Hindustani* music.[107] Even the popularization of the local Hindavi[108] language is attributed to Khusrao as he composed poems, verses and ghazals in both Persian and Hindi *Brajbhasha*[109]. Other important Sufi mystics, Hindi poets, and Bhakti saints like Kabirdas, Guru Nanak, Tulsidas etc. adopted the same strategy of blending Hindi with Persian and Arabic words and popularized the use of Hindavi.[110] The *Hindustani* music which was further developed and was associated with *Tawaif*s found its beginnings in Khusrao.

The Sanskrit *natya*[111] performed by *Ganikas* revived around the time of Khaljis and Tughlaqs and the art of theatre came to be known as *patur bazi* which means performance by a *patur*.[112] Malik Muhammad Jayasi[113] refers to a *patur* who was a *swangi* (someone who performs the art of disguise) and excelled in acting and makeup in the court of Alauddin Khalji. *Paturbazi* took place in *Akharas*[114] and was a popular form of entertainment even in the Mughal period. Similar to *Paturbazi* was *Bhagatbazi* practiced by the Bhagat caste. *Bhagatbazi* entailed disguising and mimicking[115].

Interestingly in the Sultanate period, one does not find any Persian equivalent of a *Ganika*. We simply know about the slave girls who sang, danced, and may have offered sexual services. The sexual service may have been conditional depending on the exact role and position of the slave girl. What we do know about these slave girls is through the foreign accounts al-Umari[116] and Ibn Battuta[117]. According to al-Umari the beautiful and accomplished slave performers in Delhi fetched a high price in the 14th-century market of Delhi. These slave women were highly refined and wore magnificent jewelry and ornaments. They excelled in music, dance and verse writing, and poetry recitation. Ibn Battuta points out that Tarababad (city of music) consisted

[106] This *Qawwali* is still popular in Delhi and *sama/mehfil* nights are organized at the Dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya one day (usually Thursdays) a week. Bollywood also popularized this form of *Qawwali* in the film Rockstar (2011).
[107] Trivedi (1999), pp. 81-85.
[108] Hindavi is a Hindustani language which is a blend of Persian and Hindi.
[109] Brajbhasha is a dialect of Hindi primarily used in the Braj region which includes some parts of Uttar Pradhesh and Rajasthan.
[110] See Khusrao Memorial Volume (1897), p. 17. (https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.219675/page/n7/mode/2up).
[111] Natya connotes dance-drama.
[112] The word patur comes from the Sanskrit root word patri which means an actress. In this context, the interpretation is that she was the Sanskrit nayika/ganika.
[113] Jayasi (1477-52) was a Sufi poet best known for his epic poem Padmaavat which was a story of siege of Chittor by Sultan Alauddin Khalji who was captivated by the beauty of the queen of Chittor.
[114] In today's context, it means a space where Indian wrestling or kushti takes place. It also means playground. But in the context of Sultanate, it was a playhouse where the paturs performed. See Trivedi (1999), p. 86.
[115] Trivedi (1999), pp. 86-88.
[116] He was from Damascus and travelled to India during the reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1325-510) and recorded his experience of India in his work Masalik al Absar fi Mamalik al Ansar.
[117] Ibn Battuta is one of the most prominent 14th century foreign travelers who also visited India during the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq and recorded his experience in his book the Rihla.

of forty large pavilions laid out for housing musicians of Delhi. Ibn-Battuta also suggested that all female musicians were the slaves of the Sultan.[118] While these slave girls did have many courtesan-like aspects, why weren't they given special titles like the *Ganikas*? The answer could be in finding parallels in the Islamic world. If we look at the Islamic world of the 9th and 10th centuries, we do find *Ganika*-like figures called *Qiyans* who rose to positions of prestige in the wake of cultural growth in the Islamic world, particularly Baghdad. Most *Qiyans* were slave girls who possessed a variety of skills like singing, poetry, mastery of musical instruments, calligraphy, and shadow puppetry.

By virtue of being slaves, the *Qiyans* had to provide sexual services to their owners, but they were more expensive to maintain.[119] Acquisition of *Qiyans* took place through trade or conquest and were chosen based on their physical beauty, level of skills, and country of origin. They were often imported from outside the Muslim world and then trained in the arts. These *Qiyans* performed in the Caliph's courts in a musical gathering called *majlis*. Free women were often jealous or envious of *Qiyans* because *Qiyans* were refined, and sophisticated, and had more mobility and access to the outside world. The decline of the institution of the *Qiyan* has been attributed to the overall decline of the Abbasid empire which was in no position to afford the cultural refinements and the cost of *Qiyan's* maintenance. The absence of primogeniture and Turkish military imposition which resulted in corruption and neglect of culture are the main reasons cited for the Abbasid decline. [120] Thus, the institution of *Qiyan* did not come to India with Delhi sultans, but in fact, the Sultans did continue to maintain the institution through slavery. The absence of a *Ganika*-like institution could be because of the lack of the sacred role and religious backing of *Qiyans* or other courtesans in Islam. The institution of *Ganika* and *Devadasi* had a sacred role attached to it and their functions could not be performed by other women. However, in Islam, the courtesans did not have a religious role, their primary function was to entertain which any woman could do with training. Thus, the new Islamic rulers of North India may not have felt the need to systematize entertainment.

2.5 Performing Women and the Mughals

Under the Mughal rule, entertainment became more systematized, and we hear of a plethora of specialized communities that were associated with music and dance. Glimpses of these communities are available in the autobiographies of the Mughal kings, accounts of court historians and travelers, and miniature paintings. Under the Mughals, particularly Akbar, syncretism became more pronounced through the devolution of power to Hindus, and a general absorption of various cultural aspects of the indigenous population. While less is said about the performance culture in the early Mughal rule of Babur and Humanyun, the reign of Akbar saw a cultural zenith, who patronized several musicians and singers hailing from different regions.

[118] Trivedi (1999), p. 85.
[119] Reynolds (2017) in Gordon and Hain (eds), pp. 101-105.
[120] See Caswell (2011), pp. 241-272.

Abul Fazal, the court historian of Akbar talks about these performers in his *Akbarnama*.[121] These musicians and singers were usually associated with a particular caste and were referred to by their caste names like *Bhands, Paturs, Dominis, Lulis, Kancanis, Ramjanis, Dhadhis*, etc. The name of the caste was derived from the instrument or art form the performers specialized in. For example, *Dhadhis* from Punjab played *dhadd*[122], and *Dhadhi* women called *Dominis* played *daf* and *duhul*.[123] These women performed *sohla* [124]and *dhrupad*[125]at weddings and birthdays. The *Natwa*[126] and *Kanjari* women engaged in both singing and dancing accompanied by instruments. Several denominations were used to address the dancing and singing women like *Paturs, Domini, Kanchani, Huruki, Loloni* or *Luli*. *Lolonis* were descendants of Persian courtesans and sang in Persian while *Dominis* sang in Hindustani and they swayed modestly to the rhythm of their songs. However, Francois Bernier[127] points out that the *Kanchanis* from the *Kanjari* caste were the most reputed and respected class who performed at the weddings of Mughal nobles. He also informs that the mothers of these courtesans were vigilant about their health and bodies. Madhu Trivedi draws parallels with ancient *Ganikas* which seems fitting.[128] It is *Kanchanis* who come closest to being *Tawaif*s and 18th-century Anglo-Indian dictionaries refer to *Kanchanis* as courtesans and later as *Tawaif*s. The *Kanchanis*, like *Tawaif*s, were independent and could cater to anyone who could afford their services. According to Katherine Butler, the *Kanchanis* could be separated from other classes of performers through their access to the harem or the female space. While performers like *Dominis* had access to both the male space and female space, by virtue of their chastity and no sexual relations with the patrons, *Kanchanis* did not have access to female harems. The courtesan was not to intermix with the veiled women of the harem. The separation of the male and female space had to do with men being in power and controlling the women.[129] While on the onset, one could interpret this separation in terms of separating the 'respectable' women from the harem with courtesans to signal the sexual unavailability of women of the harem to other men. It can be argued that the *Kanchani*s, much like the *Qiyans*, were a source of envy for the women who were confined to the harem. *Kanchanis* could roam about freely without a veil and had the freedom to choose their partners. They could also maintain deep friendships with men. This kind of privilege was not available to the 'respectable' women of the harem, hence, the interdiction on intermingling with the courtesans is a way to control their sexuality.

Schofield points out that in the Mughal period, music was endowed with the power to evoke emotions. Every *raga* (melodic note) was to evoke a specific emotion and required the engagement of both performer and the listener. Music possessed the power to arouse love, and

[121] Akbarnaama is official chronicle of Akbar's reign.
[122] Dhadd is an hourglass-shaped music instrument that produces sound when it is beaten by a stick or hands on both sides.
[123] Daf is a tambourine and duhul (dhol) is a bass drum. Both instruments are played in present day Punjab.
[124] Sohila style of music is particular to Punjab.
[125] Dhrupad is a Hindustani classic genre, and it connotes structured songs.
[126] Natwas usually engaged in the Sanskrit natya.
[127] 17th century French traveller and physician who stayed in India for 12 years.
[128] Trivedi (1999), pp. 88-91.
[129] Schofield (2012), pp. 154-158.

love-separation was a thematic focus of Persian and Hindustani poetry and *khayal*.[130] Schofield argues that this put courtesans in a position of power as she could use music to make her patron fall in love with her who could possibly abandon his responsibilities in pursuit of this love.[131] Thus, the medieval courtesan was to be controlled because of her vivacious sexuality and her musical talent that could defray a man from his duties. Also, it was important to prevent the *Kanchanis* from getting too politically close to the nobles or the king because they might ask for political favours. This is the kind of leverage that Mughal kings did not want to give to courtesans.[132] One can see the continuities with the *Ganikas* who had to be regulated and controlled through institutionalization and setting rules. It is important to point toward the kind of emotional power these courtesans possessed, and men feared that the courtesans could weaponize these powers against them. Hence, the rules set for engaging with the courtesans signal attempts to safeguard men's position and warn them of the potential dangers of dealing with the courtesans.

The musical and literary traditions continued to flourish in the reign of Jahangir (1605-27) and Shah Jahan (1628-58). They patronized many musicians and dancers, and cultural synthesis reached its peak during their reigns. *Riti*[133] poetry of the seventeenth century refers to *paturs* being trained in literary compositions. *Shringara rasa*[134] in poetry was a dominant theme that was written from the female perspective (*nayika*) and the themes depicted longing, waiting, and teasing the beloved. *Nayikas* were revived in other literary forms like *nakh-shikh varnan*[135] and *nayika-bhed*[136]. *Nayika-bhed* was incorporated into Persian musicology texts and was absorbed into *Kathak's* vocabulary later. These *Nayikas* were a reincarnation of the ancient *Ganikas*.[137] It was also around this time that *Hindustani* musical knowledge started being codified and translated into Persian and made available to the connoisseurs of music called *Rasikas*.[138] Patronizing music signified high social status in society by the time of Aurangzeb (1658-1707). A few elite male connoisseurs of music who engaged deeply with the performance congregated together in a *mehfil.* The performers could interact with the men of high social status intimately in *mehfils* which nurtured Indo-Persian musical and dance traditions. The patrons were to not assume the role of the performer to maintain the hierarchy. According to Schofield, even though codes of conduct were laid down for *mehfils*, transgressions took place within these spaces.[139] These *mehfils*, are predecessors to *Tawaif*'s *kotha*[140] performances and continued to be relevant until the dissipation of the institution.

[130] Khayal was one of the most preferred Hindustani music genres of the Mughal emperor. The meaning of the word means thought or imagination. In Khayal, melodic notes are highly embellished.
[131] Schofield (2012), pp. 161-162.
[132] Schofield in the History Hack podcast.
[133] Riti Poetry mostly consists of poems of romance in Hindi.
[134] Rasa connotes the energy that human emotions possess and there are 9 rasas that must be balanced by a human for their well-being and health. Shringara rasa represents beauty, union, and love.
[135] Head to toe description of the main heroine or an actress.
[136] Nayika-bhed usually describes types of heroines and their emotions.
[137] Trivedi (1999), pp.92-93.
[138] Schofield (2015) in Orsini and Schofield (eds), pp. 411-412.
[139] Schofield (2007) in Orsini (eds), pp. 66-76.
[140] Kothas were accommodation of Tawaifs where they often met with the clients. See Oldenburg (1990).

After Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire started crumbling. Historians argue that it is because of the lack of a strong leader, the decentralization of Mughal polity, and a rise in regional powers. These regional powers continued to patronize music and dance and the institution of *Tawaif*s developed in these regional polities. The transition into the late Mughal period also witnessed upward mobility in the status of women performers as they began to take the lead and performed independently of male performers.

This chapter tried to trace the transition of *Ganika* into the medieval courtesan. In the early medieval period, *Ganikas* got strongly integrated into religious practices through Tantrism and land grants. We noticed a lack of *Ganika*-like figures in medieval times and how remnants of *Ganika* culture survived in poetry and Indo-Persian literary traditions. The lack of a central courtesan like *Ganika* in medieval North India can be attributed to the absence of the sacred role of courtesans in Islam. Also, a safe distance was to be maintained from courtesans because performance embodied power. They possessed the power to defray a noble from his religious and political duties. The chapter also traced the development of Hindustani culture and the role medieval courtesans played in this development.

Chapter 3:

The Tawaif in Making: Post-Mughal and Pre-1857 Tawaifs of North India

After Aurangzeb, the Mughal empire started crumbling and historians have long debated the process of Mughal decline. A plethora of theories have been formulated to explain the Mughal decline. Most of them rest on the premise of the crumbling of the Mughal administrative system. Reasons cited for the Mughal decline range from the divisive policies of Aurangzeb that alienated Hindus, his weak successors, and continuous wars of succession that exhausted Mughal resources and weakened the army. The expansion of the empire led to an increase in the number of nobles and the competition among them for revenue and resources. The weakening of central Mughal authority strengthened the position of aristocrats in regional states making them virtually sovereign in their own territory.[141] By the middle of the 18th century, the Mughal authority was only symbolic, and regional powers became more consolidated. The three successor states of the Mughal Empire were Hyderabad, Awadh, and Bengal. The polities of these states were consolidated by Mughal provincial governors who maintained cordial relations with the Mughal Emperor but at the same time acted as independent rulers in their territory.[142] The focus of this chapter will remain the North Indian state of Awadh and the development of *Tawaif* culture in this state. The chapter will discuss the evolution of *Nawabi*[143] culture with *Tawaifs* acting as vanguards. We also examine the pre-colonization attitude of the British towards the *Tawaifs* or the so-called *nautch* girls. This chapter will employ microhistory to see the consolidation of Hindustani culture through *Tawaifs*. It is important to examine this process because it shows how the attack on *Tawaifs* also translated into the destruction of Hindustani cultural blend and was weaponized by the British for their divisive politics.

3.1 Consolidation of the Awadh State: Politics and Culture

Awadh's location made it strategically important to the Mughal Empire and numerous nobles hailed from Awadh. Lucknow was the capital of Awadh and the seat for most of the *Nawabs*. Abdul Halim Sharar, in his works, reconstructed the history of the *Nawabs* of Awadh based on oral testimonies and he also details the everyday life in Lucknow.[144] The *Nawabs* of Awadh played an integral role in the crystallization of Lucknow's culture.

Burhan-ul Mulk is credited for establishing the Awadh state independent of the Mughals. He was appointed as the governor of the Awadh state by the Mughals in 1722 and was conferred

[141] Bandyopadhyay (2004), pp. 1-12.
[142] Ibid., p. 13.
[143] The new rulers of Awadh state were the governors also known as Nawabs. The culture associated with Nawabs is Nawabi.
[144] Sharar was born in 1860 and authored several works in Urdu and is considered the first novelist in Urdu. His work *The Lucknow: The last phase of Oriental Culture* has been used in this chapter and in most of the other works cited in this chapter.

with the responsibility of crushing the rebellions of local chiefs. He achieved this task within a year. He maintained cordial relations with the Mughal court till the point he quarreled with one of the Mughal Emperor's favorite nobles. Exasperated by Mughal court politics, he decided to set up his power base in Awadh free from Mughal intervention. He got his son-in-law Safdar Jung recognized as the deputy governor of Awadh. Safdar Jung was the first one to be called a *Nawab* (Governor). The revenue collection in Awadh was now done independently from the Mughal court and directly under the vigilance of Burhan-ul-Mulk. Burhan-ul-Mulk expanded the borders of Awadh significantly.[145]

The Awadh state was further consolidated under his successors Shuja-ud-Daula (1754-75), Asaf-ud-Daula (1775-97), and Saadat Ali Khan (1798-1814). These *Nawabs* not only developed Awadh architecturally but also paid great attention to cultural developments and in many ways continued the legacy of the Mughals. They built magnificent palaces and residences for themselves and many great *Imambaras* (religious meeting places) in Awadh can be dated back to their time. They patronized musicians, dancers, poets, and other artists. The period also witnessed a large-scale migration of these performers from Delhi to Lucknow.[146] The British had started intervening in Awadh's polity and they coerced Saadat Ali Khan to cede half the territory of Awadh to them. After Saadat, the *Nawabs* that followed were known for their indulgence and profligacy rather than their administrative skills. The *Nawabs* fully indulged in music, dance, and poetry, and their courts were swarming with courtesans and musicians.[147]

3.2 Entertainment in *Nawabi* Awadh

The city of Lucknow, the capital of Awadh, came to be identified with the Persianized court culture of the *Nawabs* that promoted refined arts, music, speech, and etiquette. Although the official language of the Mughal empire, Lucknow courts, and the early British rule was Persian, Urdu which is a blend of Persian and North and Northwestern Indian dialects became widespread during the period. Urdu became highly ornate and laden with Persian idioms and vocabulary. The use of Urdu became associated with politeness, good manners, good upbringing, and education. Prose and poetry in Urdu also developed considerably in Lucknow. *Ghazals*, a form of Urdu poetry with 7-10 couplets and themes mostly reflecting love for God or humans, were performed in gatherings called *mushairas*. Other poetic forms that developed in Lucknow were *Marsiya* which was a form of eulogy usually reviving the tragedies that encumbered the Prophet's family, *Vasokht*[148], and *Rekhti* which was written in women's language and voice. The Lucknow theatre picked up themes from Hindu epics like Ramayana and reproduced them in an opera-like production called *Rahas* with dance and music. Parsi theatre, the best-known theatre form in India drew its inspiration from Lucknow. The last *Nawab* of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah inspired by *Rahas*, wrote a play where he himself played the role of Lord Krishna who was perused by several beautiful women.[149] Wajid Ali Shah

[145] Bandyopadhyay (2004), p. 18.
[146] Kippen (1988), pp. 2-4.
[147] Ibid., pp. 4-6.
[148] *Vasokht* poetry included 6 lined erotic verses describing a lover and his infidelities and proclaiming their love for them.
[149] Sharar (2001), pp. 82-87.

established a training school, called *Parikhana* (Fairyhouse), where young courtesans were trained in singing, dancing, and theatre.[150] *Dastaangoi* or the art of storytelling in Urdu became a routine element of elite gatherings. The themes of *Dastaangoi* were categorized under war, pleasure, love, deception, and beauty and the storytellers used ornate Urdu and were influential in disseminating the knowledge of Urdu. Some elements used to enhance the wit and humor of Urdu by the storytellers were *phabti* (metaphoric way of making fun of someone) and *tukbandi* (rhyme formation). These tools were employed by ordinary people in their everyday lives and became part of Lucknow etiquette. Courtesans were experts in using *phabti*.[151] *Ghazals* and *Rekhti* poetry were also associated with the *Tawaifs*.

The cultural developments in Lucknow facilitated the evolution of courtesan culture or *Tawaifbazi*, and *Tawaifs* added to the richness of *Lucknowi*[152] culture. Numerous courtesans had migrated from Delhi to Lucknow during the time of Shuja-ud-Daula and it was customary for the courtesans and musicians to accompany the *Nawab* in his travel journies.[153] Asaf-ud-Daula, Shuja-ud-Daula's son, continued his father's legacy of patronage to musicians and courtesans, and they accompanied the *Nawab* on his hunting expeditions. The *Nawabs* patronized performers from diverse backgrounds as well as distinct styles and forms of music and dance.[154] The women performers who migrated to Lucknow were *Kanchanis*, *Chunewalis*, or lime sellers who rose to fame, and *Nagrants* from Gujarat. *Dominis* were also employed by several households to perform at weddings. However, the chief category of courtesans was *Tawaifs*. While some *Tawaifs* hailed from hereditary performing communities like *Kanchanis*, others were from outside such communities.[155] The sources lack clarity about the exact origins of the word '*Tawaif*' but some like Trivedi theorise that *Tawaif* was a generic term for the courtesans instead of their caste name.[156] McNeil points out that the *Tawaifs* could be categorized into those who came from hereditary performing castes like *Kanchanis* and those who are from outside the performing circle like widows. His work also suggests that the majority of the *Tawaifs* were Shia, either converts or by birth.[157] What we can certainly infer is that the *Tawaifs* were not a homogenous category of courtesans and hailed from diverse backgrounds. Given the fact that Lucknow's cosmopolitanism allowed the shedding of regional and caste differences, it can certainly be believed that the Mughal *Kanchanis* and other courtesans got subsumed into the category of *Tawaifs*. The word *Tawaif* comes from the Arabic word '*Tawaf*' which has multiple meanings. *Tawaf* means movement or mobility or frequent visits to the beloved.[158] Another meaning of the word *Tawaif* is tribe connoting the people who wander.[159] Overall, the word means freedom from the conjugal bonds of marriage.

[150] Trivedi (1999), p. 102.
[151] Sharar (2001), pp. 91-93.
[152] *Lucknowi* is to symbolize something from Lucknow.
[153] Ibid., p. 134.
[154] Kippen (1988), pp. 17-19.
[155] McNeil (2010), p. 48.
[156] Trivedi (1999), p. 104.
[157] McNeil (2010), pp. 48-49.
[158] Waheed (2014), p. 987.
[159] Qureshi in Feldman and Gordon (2006), p. 317.

3.3 Tawaifs, Kothas, and the Nawabs

Tawaifs rose to high ranks in Awadh and were doyennes and guardians of *Hindustani* culture. They became an integral part of court routine and exercised considerable influence in politics as well. For instance, the Prime minister of *Nawab* Asaf-ud-Daula fell deeply in love with a *Tawaif* called Jalalu. Jalalu was an intelligent and cultured woman who managed to influence the decision-making of the Prime Minister and instigated him to create misunderstandings between the *Nawab* and his mother. *Tawaifs* also impacted the way the elites acted. Naseer-ud-Din Hyder[160] spent a lot of time in the company of the *Tawaifs* to the extent that he became extremely feminine and started singing and dressing like them and abandoned his administrative duties. He also exiled one of his *Tawaifs* because she was cohabiting with other men. The nobles quarreled among themselves for *Tawaifs*.[161] Some men also attributed their success to *Tawaifs*. Hakim Mahdi, the Prime Minister of Naseer-ud-Din Hyder, credited his early success to a *Tawaif* called Piyaro. Piyaro gave her own money to Mahdi to enable him to make an offering to the ruler after his appointment as the Governor of Awadh. Sharar suggests that a man was not considered a polished man if he did not have some association with the courtesans.[162]

While some *Tawaifs* housed themselves in the royal court, others chose to settle in their own establishments called *kothas*. Veena Oldenburg Talwar interviewed descendants of *Tawaifs* in Lucknow in 1976 and reconstructed rich insights into their world. *Kotha* was a hierarchical institution headed by an older successful *Tawaif* called *Chaudhrayan*. *Chaudhrayans* used to train and recruit new *Tawaifs*, maintained the *kothas*, and recruit musicians, chefs, and others who could contribute to the maintenance of the *kotha*. Most *Tawaifs* catered exclusively to elite clients and were valued for their artistic skills. These elite *Tawaifs* were related to the *Chaudhrayan* in some way. Also attached to the *kotha* were women called *Randis* and *Thakahi* whose artistic talents and appearance were inferior to the *Tawaifs* and they primarily provided sexual services. Oldenburg's work also debunks the myth of recruitment through the kidnapping of young women within the *kotha*[163]. Her interviews show how many of the women from outside who joined the *kotha* were widows or victims of domestic violence and poverty and joined the institution to escape their marriages or be financially independent, and they managed to do so. She also paints a vivid picture of perceptions of these women about themselves and how their fate had changed after joining the *kothas*. *Tawaifs*

[160] He was the ruler of Awadh from 1827-1837 and was the descendant of Ghazi-ud-Din Hyder who ruled from (1814-27). Naseer-ud-Din Hyder is known for his indulgence in women and wine.
[161] Kiran (2021), pp. 282-83.
[162] Sharar (2001), p.192, In the chapter Sharar is rather frustrated with the courtesans and goes on to talk about morality and chastity among women. He prays to prevent the licentiousness and promiscuity of Europe from reaching Lucknow. It is an important reminder that Sharar was born after the 1857 Revolt and as we shall see his mentality was conditioned by Victorian morality and nationalism. Nevertheless, he does not deny the importance of Tawaifs and that had to be established.
[163] This myth was popularized with the publishing of Umrao Jan Ada, the most popular Urdu in 1905. As we shall see, the novel showed the recruitment and training of a Tawaif through kidnapping. As the novel was extremely popular, it shaped the general perceptions about the institution.

considered the *burqa*[164] as a symbol of liberation because they did not want men to look at them for free. A mere glimpse of a *Tawaif* was supposed to be paid for by the men who wanted to see her.[165]

The interviews also reveal the tricks these women employed to extract money from their clients. These tricks included feigning sickness, sexual injuries, anger for being neglected,[166] and being subjected to *Chaudhrayan's* anger in front of the patron to gain his sympathy. One of the interviewees described the *kotha* as a haven for both men and women allowing them to escape the drudgeries of conjugal lives. *Kotha* represented an institution where patriarchy was subverted constantly. Matrilineal succession, economic independence of women, camaraderie, lesbianism, perceiving heterosexual relations as work, and functioning outside the patriarchal framework of marriage were common features of *kothas*.[167]

Oldenburg's account reminds one of the Kamasutra and the recommendations made therein to *Ganikas* for extracting money out of the client. Another parallel is that the *Chaudhrayan* acted like the mother figure of *Ganikas and Tawaifs*. Another similarity between the *Tawaifs* and *Ganikas* is the religious legitimacy of *Tawaifs* who performed *Marsiya* in the *Imambaras* of Lucknow. This allowed easier integration of *Tawaifs* into society giving them religious legitimacy.[168] This is essential in making a case for continuity. In previous chapters, it is discussed how the figure of the *Ganika* was normalized within society through religious and royal affiliations and this continued until the British colonization of India.

Performance was the most important distinguishing factor between the *Tawaifs* and others in the *kotha*. The training of *Tawaifs* in music and dance began around the age of five and continued for more than ten years. The training was imparted by expert male members (*Ustads*) of the caste *Tawaifs* belonged to. Some *Ustads* were patronized by the court and getting trained by some *Ustads* accentuated the fame of the *Tawaifs*. They were trained to become experts in *Thumri*[169] and *Kathak*[170]. Rahim Bai of Charkari, Luttan Bai, Khurshid Bai, and Dhanna Bai were the most well-known *Tawaifs* during Wajid Ali Shah's time.[171]

The courts of Awadh also saw a revival of dance and the dance techniques that were preserved by *Kanjaris*, *Nartak*, *Nachavayya* castes. Folk styles such as *nauch* and dance dramas crystallized into the *kathak natwarai nritya*. [172]The development of *Kathak* was attributed to

[164] Burqa is a long cloak usually worn by Muslim women over their regular garments to protect themselves from the male gaze. Now considered a symbol of oppression in general Indian discourse and the practice of burqa is seen as archaic by most Non-Muslims and some Muslims.
[165] Oldenburg (1990), pp. 273-274.
[166] Some of these tactics are also mentioned in the Kamasutra to be used by *Ganikas.*
[167] See Oldenburg (1990), pp. 261-276.
[168] See McNeil (2010), pp. 60-62.
[169] Thumri is a light classical dance song with an evocative text.
[170] Kathak is a classical Indian dance form prominent in North India. In its 'unclassical' form it was part of Tawaif's mujra and was performed by Tawaifs.
[171] McNeil (2010), pp. 50-52.
[172] Nritya is a Sanskrit word for dance and comes from the word 'nritta' meaning dance-drama.

the family of Prakash Nartak who was a master of dance and was patronized by Asaf-ud-Daula. The team of Kalka Prasad and Binadin from the family enriched the dance and lyrical side of *Kathak* with the composition of various *thumri*s,[173] *ghazals*, and *bhajans*.[174] *Thumri* was a way for the courtesan to attract a clientele and it included erotic themes enhanced stylistically by dramatic changes in voices, gestures, and *nakhra* (coquetry).[175] Binadin added to the dramatic element of *Kathak* called *natya-ang* by incorporating *nayika-bhed* of *Ganikas*. Kalka and Binadin trained many *Tawaifs* and the *Bhand* caste in this dance form. *Kathak* also incorporated court etiquette and Wajid Ali Shah himself choreographed 36 pieces in *Kathak* and instructed other performers.[176] The majority of musicians who accompanies the *Tawaifs* belonged to the *Dhari* caste and their livelihood depended on *Tawaifs*.[177] *Kathak* is associated with the *Kathak* caste who were Brahmins. The *Kathak* caste was speculated to have links to a Sanskrit word called '*katha*' which means devotional storytelling.[178] The *Kathaks* were originally accompanists or teachers of *Tawaifs* in the *kotha* and they were responsible for starting new stylistic schools called *Gharanas* to teach the dance form and protect their art form in the wake of colonialism.[179]

Tawaifs played an integral role in the making and crystallization of the classical *Kathak* dance. A lot of elements in *Kathak* dance can be attributed to them. However, after the imposition of Victorian morality, their influence was purged, and they were pushed to the margins. This took place after 1857 and shall be discussed in the next chapter.

3.4 Here Come the British

The British East India Company (BEIC) made its inroad into India as early as the 17th century and started consolidating its position after the decline of the Mughal empire. The British got attracted to Lucknow during Shuja-ud-Daula's reign who was defeated by the British in the Battle of Buxar in 1764. But instead of deposing the *Nawab*, the British decided to let him administer the vast territory of Awadh as he had access to Awadh's resources and was a good administrator. The *Nawab* recruited European military advisors to reconstitute his army prompting the BEIC to set limits to *Nawab*'s military strength. The BEIC had installed a Resident at the Awadh court to oversee the territory and the *Nawab*. The Resident handled all political communications in and out of Awadh leading to Awadh's political isolation. The BEIC guaranteed the protection of *Nawab*'s rules from both external and internal enemies by stationing its own troops in Awadh decimating *Nawab*'s own army.[180]

The BEIC extracted all the resources it desired from Awadh. The company frequently intervened in the hereditary succession of the *Nawabs*, threatening to depose the designated

[173] Thumri is a light classical dance song with an evocative text.
[174] Bhajan is devotional form of singing, usually expressing love towards God.
[175] Manuel (1986), p. 486.
[176] Trivedi (1999), pp. 99-100.
[177] McNeil (2010), p. 56.
[178] Walker (2014), p.15
[179] Chakravorty (2008), pp. 139-140.
[180] See Fisher in Graff (1997), pp. 32-45.

heir or installing a new one who could be easily manipulated for their own material gain. It is noteworthy that there was resistance on the part of *Nawabs*, and they were not completely passive. They did try to intervene and protect their territories and people. However, the political circumstances dictated *Nawabs* should compromise. The army of the *Nawabs* was decimated and the BEIC stationed its own troops in their territories. As mentioned before in the chapter, the BEIC forced Saadat Ali Khan to cede half of Awadh's territories. The BEIC established itself as an alternate source of authority. From 1764-1856, the BEIC had several opportunities to completely annex Awadh, but they only did so in 1856 during Wajid Ali Shah's reign as his dedication to poetry, religion, and women was seen as misgovernment by the British. The British Resident took over Awadh's administration and the final blow to Wajid Ali Shah's rule was the 1857 Revolt which forced him to go into exile.[181]

The cultural attitudes of the British prior to the Revolt are essential for our understanding of shifts towards the attitudes on *Tawaifs* that occurred due to colonialism. Before colonization, the British tried to cooperate with the Mughals and regional rulers for permission to expand their trade. They also tried to assimilate into the society by identifying with the Mughal ruler and the *Nawabs*, later on. The attempt by the BEIC to assimilate and identify was also to gain political legitimacy and establish themselves as elites. The process entailed adopting the same cultural practices[182], architecture, language, clothes, and lifestyle.[183] This sense of appeasement had an ulterior imperial motive. For example, Warren Hastings[184] recognized the key to successful governance lay in appealing to "native sensibilities" and engaging in conciliatory practices that were grounded in native customs and traditions. [185]

The *Tawaifs* stood at the juncture of the intercultural exchanges that took place between the BEIC officials and the Indian elites. The participation in the *mehfils* of *Tawaifs* or the *nautch*[186] allowed the BEIC officials to connect with the Indian rulers. Local rulers also extended their hospitality to the officials and would host them over food and drink and *Tawaif*'s *mehfils* at their courts. Along with leisure activities like hunting, racing, and fishing, *nautch* was one of the most treasured forms of entertainment among the BEIC officials. The officials attended as well as patronized the *Tawaifs* as a symbol of appreciation for their art. One of the most influential, diplomatic, and enigmatic *nautch* girls whose mehfils have been recorded in British historical as well as fictional sources was Begum Samru.[187] Born Farzana, she was a *nautch* girl in Delhi's *kotha* at the age of eleven and captured the interest of her then husband and lover, Walter Reinhart Sombre[188]. Sombre was Austrian mercenary who acquired considerable power in the province of Sardhana.[189] After Sombre's death, Samru became the ruler of Sardhana and later she converted to Christianity. Dalrymple informs that her court

[181] Ibid.
[182] For example, smoking hookah, chewing paan (betel leaves) and appreciating Persian poetry.
[183] See Nevile (2004), pp. 45-52.
[184] Warren Hastings was the first Governor General of India from 1772-85.
[185] Dodson, (2010), p. 20.
[186] Nautch is an anglicized version of the word 'naach' which means dance. Nautch girls was the word used to refer to the Tawaifs.
[187] See Fig 4 and 5
[188] Sombre was Indianized to 'Samru' and Begum Samru retained his last name.
[189] Sardhana is located in the Northeast of Delhi, close to Meerut where the 1857 Revolt started.

blended Mughal and European customs. Three European mercenaries from her court became influential Urdu poets. In her court, Christmas was a three-day festivity with nautch, fireworks and poetry recitation and the Christian converts tried to keep their Mughal heritage alive in Sardhana. In her court, Diwali, Holi and Dussehra were celebrated with gusto. Mourning the dead was done in the Islamic manner for forty days. The architectural style adopted by Begum Samru reflects this cultural blend of Islamic, Hindu, and Christian elements.[190] Samru was also a military commander, and she commanded a mixed-race army. Her charming personality attracted a lot of Europeans to her, and she reportedly was involved with an Irishman and a Frenchman after her husband's death. She recognized the importance of diplomacy and maintained political relations with the British, French, Mughals, and the Nawab of Awadh.[191] Begum Samru is a key example of the influence *Tawaifs* possessed.

Both British men and women engaged with the '*nautch*' girls[192]. However, the *nautch* girls catered mostly to men, and an advance warning was issued to the *Tawaifs* to be 'graceful' if British women were participating. Sexual relations between the *Tawaifs* and the officials were not uncommon. Before 1857, only a limited number of British women came to India. Some of the officials became enthralled with the *Tawaif*'s charms, beauty, and sensuality and have recorded their experience. *Tawaifs* also frequently appeared in British paintings and photographs.[193] (See Appendix) For example, James Forbes in his Oriental memoirs (1813) praised the *Tawaifs* and said:

> *They are extremely delicate in person, soft and regular in their features, with a form of perfect symmetry, and although dedicated from infancy to this profession, they, in general, preserve a decency and modesty in their demeanor, which is more likely to allure than the shameless effrontery of similar characters in other countries*.[194]

In *Memoirs of a Griffin*, Captain Bellew described the *nautch* girls as:

> *Pretty gazelle-eyed damsels arrayed in robes of sky-blue, crimson, and gold in stately guise whose languishing eyes stare brightly through their antimonial borders*.[195]

Although these testimonies do not represent the collective attitude of all the British officials, the British men prior to 1857 were either neutral or fascinated by the institution. The British women, however, had a more complex and ambiguous reaction towards the *nautch* girls. Some of them were disenchanted with them and some others had deep admiration towards them. Mrs. Elwood in her *Narrative of a Journey* describes the *nautch* with fascination "as so perfectly new and completely oriental" [196] Some British women like Mary Martha, who was a religious

[190] Dalrymple in Keay (2014), pp.9-12
[191] See Keay (2014)
[192] Kuiry and Rath (2023), pp. 117-118
[193] See Nevile (2004), pp. 52-53.
[194] Ibid., p. 53.
[195] Ibid., p. 53.
[196] Ibid., p. 56.

woman, didn't approve of the British obsession with the *nautch* and compared it to an intoxicating drug that corrupted those who engaged with it.[197]

In the subsequent chapter, we will examine the British women's reaction in greater detail as there are more testimonies and sources available after 1857. However, it should be remembered that the British had no pre-existing knowledge or appreciation of Indian music and culture. Those who didn't speak the language could only focus on the dance visuals and the meaning would be lost. Those who did know Urdu tried to understand Urdu poetry and *ghazals* from the literary lens of Wordsworthian Romanticism which implied that the content of the poetry was the poet's vision of the world.[198] It's been established that the themes of *thumri* and *ghazals* were often intense love and devotion for the beloved and contained metaphors with sexual innuendos. Those who understood *Urdu* might have considered the *ghazals/thumri* as immoral and erotic. So, the disenchantment or fascination of the British could either point towards the prejudiced attitude that deems everything oriental as 'inferior' or the exoticization of the *nautch* girl who was tantalizing and visually appealing.

To conclude, this chapter examined the process of the Mughal decline, the creation of the Awadh regional state, and the British presence in Awadh. The chapter analyzed how the medieval courtesan transitioned into a *Tawaif* and how the institution functioned in the pre-modern time. *Tawaif*'s performance provided them with upward social mobility as the royal appreciation of arts and culture increased. This chapter demonstrates the process of secularization of the *Tawaif*, and the *kotha* becoming a cultural space that allowed intermixing of the elite from different cultural contexts. A case can be made for a secularized *Tawaif* who had mutated from its Hindu *Ganika* form and assimilated different aspects of Indo-Persian culture. Through *Tawaifs*, one can see the culmination of secularized spaces and art forms that came to represent the high points of Hindustani culture.

[197] Ibid., p. 56.
[198] Shandliya (2017), p. 78.

Appendix

Figure 4: Begum Samru of Sardhana, Portrait[199]

She wears ornate jewelry and clothes. She is holding a smoking pipe (hookah) typically associated with nobility and c*haudhrayans* of the kotha.

[199] Picture credits: By Historien spécialiste du bassin minier du Nord-Pas-de-Calais JÄNNICK Jérémy, Wikimedia Commons & Louvre-Lens, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=23024913

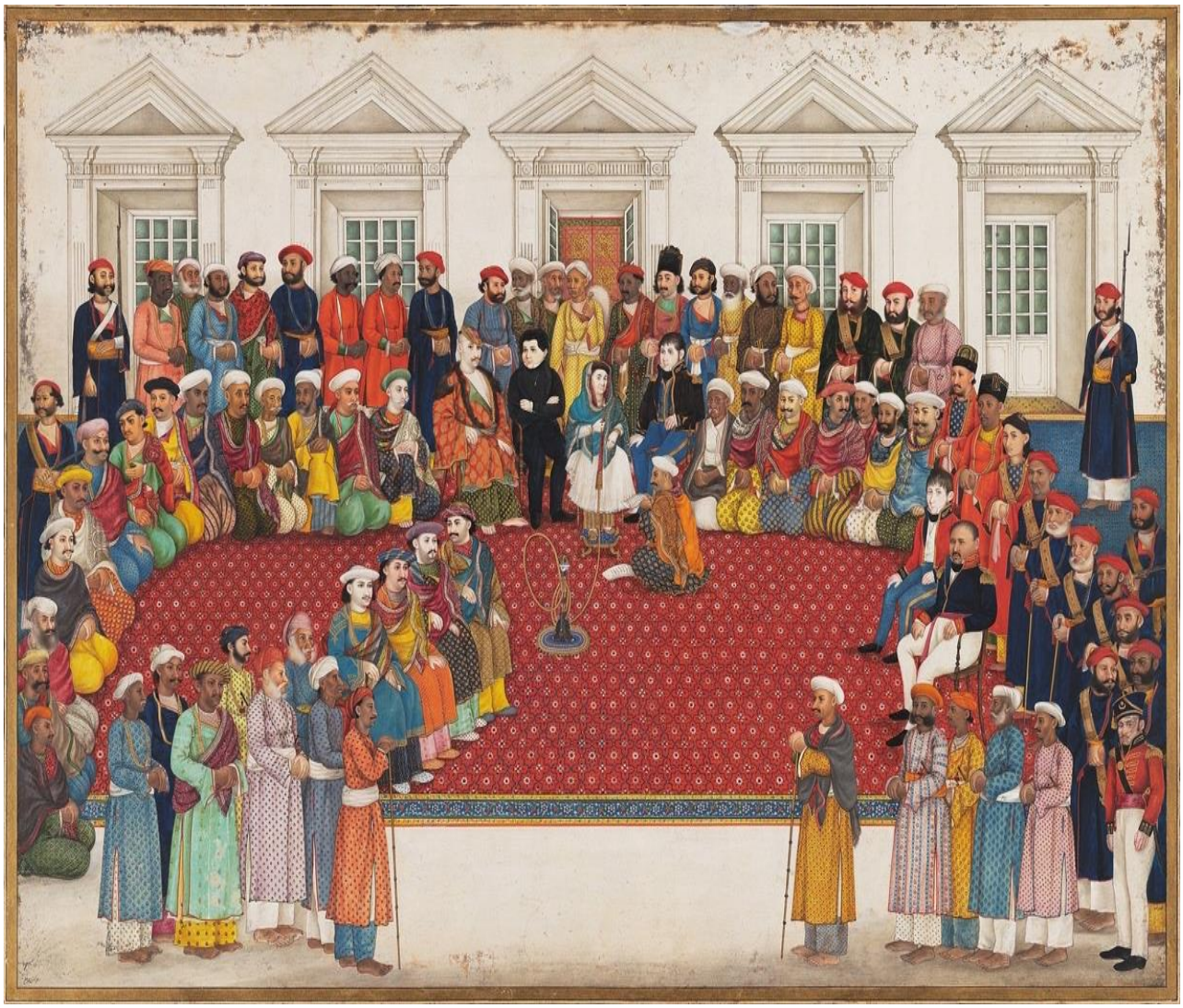

Figure 5: Begum Samru's Household[200]

One can see people from diverse races and religions with Samru in the centre. No other woman can be spotted.

[200] Photo credits: By Muhammad A'zam - https://viewer.cbl.ie/viewer/object/In_74_7/1/LOG_0000/, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18114963

Paintings taken from Pran Nevile's book

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(above) ***A group of Europeans being entertained by nautch girls in the courtyard of a splendid Indian house, drawing by William Prinsep c.1840***

(bottom) ***A nobleman watching the performance of three dancing girls in a carpeted open hall with a punkha (fan) hanging over them, oil painting inscribed 'The Nautch' by T. Daniell, c.1810***

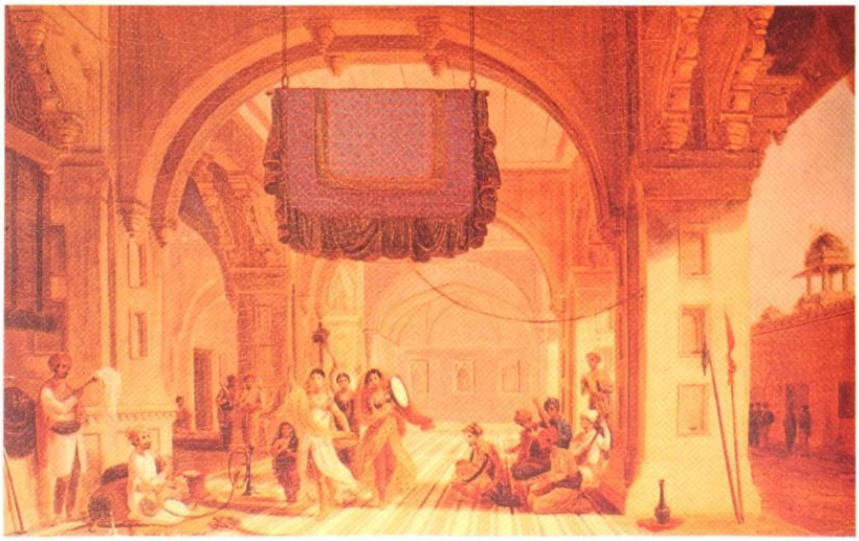

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Figure 6: Glimpses of Nautch[201]

[201] Photo credits: Nevile, Pran. (2004). *Stories from the Raj: Sahibs, Memsahibs, and Others.* New Delhi: Indialog, p.50

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(above) *A young British cadet watching a nautch, drawing by Sir Charles D'oyly, Calcutta, c.1810*

(bottom) *Lt Col W.R. Gilbert and other British officers being entertained with a nautch by the Raja of Sambalpur (Orissa). They are seated under a tent in a courtyard of the palace, water colour by a Calcutta artist, c.1825. Inscribed: Entertainment at the Rajah's*

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Figure 7: Glimpses of Nautch[202]

The first painting depicts nautch on Durga Puja[203] *and no other woman except for the nautch girls can be seen. One can also see their dresses (worn by the Kathak dancers today) and the accompanying musicians.*

[202] Photo credits: Nevile, Pran. (2004). *Stories from the Raj: Sahibs, Memsahibs, and Others.* New Delhi: Indialog, p.51

[203] Durga Pooja is the biggest festivity in Bengal celebrated with pomp and show. The festival is celebrated in praise of Goddess Durga who is worshipped and it's followed by a feast.

British gentlemen watching a nautch by a dancing girl from Lucknow, drawing by Sir Charles D'oyly, Calcutta c.1810

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Figure 8: British Men Enjoying Nautch[204]

[204] Photo credits: Nevile, Pran. (2004). *Stories from the Raj: Sahibs, Memsahibs, and Others.* New Delhi: Indialog, p.54

Chapter 4

Battling Victorian Morality: *Tawaifs*, Colonialism, and Law

The Revolt of 1857 marked a monumental shift in the British administrative policies in India and their attitude towards Indians. Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858 brought Indians directly under the control of the British crown. The Revolt resulted in growing suspicion towards the natives, bolstered by the wave of social Darwinism in the West. Images of British women and children being murdered, and other horrors of the mutiny were publicized in Britain. This contributed to an attitude shift towards the native Indians who was perceived as untrustworthy, and it reaffirmed the British belief of their own superiority.[205] Also, there was a recognition that the British East India Company (BEIC) governance was faulty. Thus, the new government was to be based on the policy of non-interference in Indian social customs, traditions, and religious practices.[206]

4.1 Reshaping the 'traditional' and formation of national consciousness

The colonization of India by the British crown spurred new processes of ethnographic data collection, codification of laws, and, in general, attempts on the part of British colonizers to understand Indian society for better governance. Governance required codification of laws, and clear-cut demarcations between Hindu law and Muhammadan laws were made. These processes were facilitated through the works produced by Orientalists who had collaborated with the upper caste Brahmins and Muslims to produce knowledge about Indian society that would aid governance. The process was relatively simpler for Islamic law because laws from the Sharia governed the lives of Muslims. However, for Hindus, this collaboration between Orientalists and Brahmins resulted in the sidelining of several indigenous traditions, and giving of preference to the text and sources that the upper castes deemed important. The pre-existing Brahmanical texts like the *Sastras* were perceived as synonymous with Hindu law. Due to the political ascendancy of Brahmins, Hinduism became synonymous with Brahminism, to the detriment of other diverse traditions. Orientalists, thereby molded Hinduism into a familiar Semitic model, argues Thapar, and the texts translated from Sanskrit to English had undertones of Christianity.[207] "Deriving largely from the Orientalist construction of Hinduism, emergent national consciousness appropriated this definition of Hinduism as well as what is regarded as

[205] See Metcalf (1960), pp. 24-31.
[206] To contextualize this point, the main cause of the 1857 mutiny was the BEIC forcing Indian soldiers to use cartridge bullets that were covered in beef fat and were unacceptable to both Hindus and Muslims. This was seen as an interference in their religious beliefs and started the mutiny. This led to a recognition that India could only be goverened through its own customs and the British would have to find a way to learn about Indian customs.
[207] See Thapar (1989).

the heritage of Hindu culture."[208] These complex processes can be decoded through the microhistorical study of *Tawaifs*. By focusing on *Tawaifs*, this chapter examines how Tawaifs stood at the intersection of complex processes like orientalism, colonialism, and nationalism.

4.2 New Government, Law, and Non-Interventionism

Prior to 1857, the administration style of the British resonated with the local rulers. *Tawaifs* were praised and patronized for their skills in the pre-1857 British accounts.[209] Post-1857, the British piggybacked their imperialist agenda on *Tawaifs* who now became symbols of native decadence, sexual depravity, and civilizational decline. The post-1857 administration style of the British crown was to be based on the policy of non-interventionism in the customs and traditions of Indians. There was a recognition of BEIC'S misgovernment and interventionism in traditional practices and Christian missionary activities that ignited the Revolt.[210] Queen Victoria's proclamation captures the essence of the new government:

> *We declare it Our royal will and pleasure that . . . none be molested or disquieted, by reason of their religious faith or observances, but that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law; and We do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under Us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of Our subjects on pain of Our highest displeasure.211*

Non-interventionism, however, needs to be analyzed further. There was a bifurcation of law between public and personal affairs. The British government was not to legislate or interfere in the 'personal' affairs of Indians. The 'personal' affairs entailed laws related to women, family, marriage, inheritance, and property. These 'private' issues were to be resolved through customary laws which were set forth through authoritative religious texts and figures in both Hinduism and Islam. Determining what customary law consisted of was challenging as that required intervention. The British collaborated with village elders or Brahmins and conducted ethnographic surveys to determine what customs and practices were important to which community. The validity of the custom could be determined through the length of time it had been in practice, and the custom had to be preserved in its original form. This process of codification gave natives a space to negotiate with the colonial authorities and some agency in determining how they could be governed. At the same time, the methodology, questions, and translation led to the distortion of the custom. Many times, British officers superimposed their own judgment in sync with what they deemed was better for civilizing India against the assumed 'barbarism'.[212] Thus, the personal realm was a space of contestation between the colonizers and the upper-caste Indian men. For the upper-caste Indian men, the personal realm was where they could assert their authority. This kind of dichotomy manifested itself in the nationalist discourse. As Partha Chatterjee argues, a dichotomy was created between the

[208] Ibid., p. 229.
[209] See Wald (2009), pp. 1470-83.
[210] Belmekki (2008), pp. 116-117.
[211] Ibid., p. 117.
[212] See Chitnis (2007), Mantena (2010).

'material realm' (public) and the 'spiritual realm' (personal). The Nationalists believed that the predominance of the British in the material realm (i.e Western sciences, industrialization, modern economy, and statecraft) allowed them to colonize India and that India should emulate the West in the material realm. The same discourse highlighted the superiority of India in the 'spiritual realm' which made India culturally distinct from the West. The material realm was seen as something 'external' while the spiritual realm was 'inner'. The inner realm represented by 'home' and 'family' was not to be penetrated by the British colonizer, and women who lacked association with the material realm were to protect it.[213] The Indian man, who felt emasculated by the colonizer in the public sphere, sought to exercise control in the private sphere by controlling the bodies of Indian women.[214] Thereby, a dichotomy arose between the "chaste wife" and the "immoral public woman". The chaste wife was supposed to be loving, caring, chaste, and devoted as opposed to a woman who tried to emulate a Western woman who was seen as loud, sexually promiscuous, and morally corrupt.

4.3 Tawaifs and the Colonial Law

The *Tawaif* fell outside the purview of the 'personal realm' as she was a 'public' woman. Therefore, the so-called patriarchal protection of the 'chaste woman' was not made available to the *Tawaif*. Therefore, the British colonizers found it comfortable to legislate and control the bodies of *Tawaifs*, and the Indian men could not intervene. *Tawaifs* were considered a threat not just by British men and missionaries but also by British women who saw them as a deviation from the Victorian model of family. The new notions of respectability were forged and *Tawaif* did not figure in these notions. The *Tawaifs* were considered problematic not just because of their sexuality but also, and more importantly so, for their participation in the 1857 Revolt against the British. The *Tawaifs* were blamed for instigating and financing the rebels and harboring them in their *kothas*. The Revolt had drained the financial resources of the British, hence, spending money on *nautch* seemed like an unnecessary expenditure. The British were aware of the widespread influence of *Tawaifs* in the elite circles and their association with the *Nawabs*, so they also suspected that the *Tawaifs* were involved in espionage. In fact, many of the *Tawaifs* of Lucknow got their property confiscated by the British because of their proven involvement in the Revolt, and their names are mentioned in the British list of offenders.[215] We know of a *Tawaif* from Lucknow called Azizunbai who was intimate with the rebels and used to harbor them in her *kotha*. Azizunbai settled in Kanpur and fought against the British in Kanpur with the rebels dressed like a man.[216]

Another suspicion was that the *Tawaifs* were trying to decimate the British army by transmitting venereal diseases to the soldiers.[217] Some laws that affected the *Tawaifs*, contributed to the uprooting of *kothas* and merging of the *Tawaif* with the common prostitute.

[213] See Chatterjee (1989).
[214] Sarkar (2000), p. 604.
[215] See Singh (2007), pp. 1677-78.
[216] Singh (2007), pp.1677-78
[217] Lapinski (2005), p. 68.

The Indian Penal Code of 1860, The Cantonment Act of 1864, the Venereal Diseases Act of 1868, the 1870 Criminal Tribes Act, and the 1893 Anti-*Nautch* Movement reflect how Victorian morality manifested itself in colonies and was formalized through laws.

These laws again must be viewed in the background of the Revolt and, in general, the relationships between British men and Indian women. Social Darwinism and the Revolt led to questioning the relationship between the British colonizer and the native women. The earlier trend of marrying certain classes of Indian women came to be abandoned considering growing concerns about miscegenation and the maintenance of racial distance. Sexual liaisons between native women and British officials came to be highly policed. Although it was normal for British officials to have Indian mistresses even in the late 19th century, the Victorian model of a British household with a British wife and children was idealized. The government policy dictated that British officials have resident white wives. This policy shift was because of the deep suspicion of native women and the high maintenance cost of mixed-race children who had to be provided for by the British government. The native mistress was believed to have 'nativized' the British man, thereby emasculating him and threatening the established racial hierarchies.[218]

Even Indians became more suspicious of the colonizers, and Indian women were dissuaded from pursuing relationships with British men. The concerns about miscegenation led the government to deploy native prostitutes for the pleasure of British soldiers. This shows the oppression of native prostitutes at two levels: first, their dehumanization as women, and second, their oppression as colonial subjects.

4.4 The Contagious Diseases Act, 1864

The economic pressure of the mixed-race children and bringing white wives to India and the concerns about white women's health in the tropical conditions of India added to the financial burdens of a system already financially exhausted by the Revolt. These reasons contributed to prostitution being an acceptable practice in India.[219] This was ironic because the British at the same time tried to contain prostitution in their home countries through Contagious Diseases Act and appeals based on morality were made to the government by missionaries and concerned feminists. If one is to look deeply into the Act in Britain, we can see a collaboration between Christian authorities and liberal feminists who pushed toward the repealing of the Act. They maintained that any woman who was suspected of being a prostitute was to be hospitalized based on the sworn testimony of a policeman. The argument given by feminists in Britain for revoking the Act was that the Act was unchristian as it imposed a double standard of morality and prostitutes who were also creations of God were treated as a vessel of sin.[220] The Repealers in Britain believed in purity and were against the idea that sexual copulation was a natural impulse in men and could not be controlled. They believed that by providing 'clean' prostitutes

[218] Sen (2001), pp. 1-4.
[219] See Levine (1994).
[220] Smith (1971), p. 127.

to the soldiers, the soldiers were being degraded to the level of animals. The animalistic urge for sex could be controlled by men. Another argument was that the act increased clandestine prostitution and secondary diseases like syphilis increased.[221]

However, in India, the law had different implications as the 1864 Cantonment Act and Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 regulated and legitimized prostitution to cater to the sexual needs of the army. The idea of morality used in Britain was not used in India because the British believed that in Hinduism prostitution was legal. In reality, some sources suggest that the concerns regarding the deployment of prostitutes in cantonments were regarding a pervading fear of homosexuality and the fear of young soldiers raping native women.[222] The Contagious Diseases Act echoed a deep fear that cohabiting with native women was causing the spread of venereal diseases and to prevent the spread, institutions called Lock Hospitals were established. Regular checks were imposed on prostitutes deployed in the cantonment. The checks were imposed on native women instead of the British troops to protect their modesty, which was linked to their refined 'European sensibilities'.[223] This was also to protect the racial boundaries and maintain the superiority of the British man. Emphasis on women's modesty which was central to Victorian morality was subverted in the case of native women. This was done to protect racial boundaries and shows the dehumanization of native women.

Women who were employed within the British cantonments were no longer allowed to cohabit with native soldiers. The Indian troops were believed to have dodged the venereal diseases that the white man was susceptible to through a 'secret language'.[224] Thus, regulation of sexual spaces became a way to reinforce the distance between the 'rulers' and the 'ruled'. The British feminists who rallied for repealing the Act in their home country were not concerned about the dehumanizing aspect of the Contagious Diseases Act in India and were more concerned about preventing the nature of their own Victorian household that was being threatened by the native prostitutes.

One of the most negative impacts of the Act was the homogenization of the category of sex workers. As established, within the *kotha* itself, multiple categories of women catered to different clientele. However, after the Revolt of 1857, many of the *kothas* were uprooted and women from these *kothas* were deployed in the cantonments. The British paid little attention to these hierarchies and chose the healthiest and most beautiful women for the cantonments. All of them were required to register themselves in the Lock hospitals. This registration process paid no heed to the artistic accomplishments of the women. The loss of patronage due to the displacement of nobility and *kothas* coerced many of the high-ranking *Tawaifs* to work in the

[221] See Ibid., pp. 130-131.
[222] Levine (1994), p. 596.
[223] The authorities feared that if the troops were to go through genital examinations to contain venereal diseases, they would simply hide the disease. Here the power dimension becomes apparent which dehumanized the native woman to protect the modesty of a European man.
[224] Levine (1994), p.598 In my understanding the term 'secret language' here reflects the insecurity of British men who still were trying to make sense of Indian society. Indian men had an upper hand in terms of access to Indian women which leads to questioning of established hierarchies. Indian women were objectified by both British and Indian men.

cantonments. Thus, many of the *Tawaifs* were relegated to the category of prostitutes. The artistic and cultural aspects of their identity were shed, and their sexual function became the primary aspect of their identity. Another detrimental consequence of the Act was the uprooting of *kothas* as the *kothas* were hubs of cultural refinement and places where the British could interact with the locals. However, we should not assume that all *Tawaifs* would have given in to the British demands as the chapter shall show many resisted them.

4.5 The Criminal Tribes Act

Another law that affected the *Tawaifs* was the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. It allowed the British to criminalize any group that they deemed had a criminal tendency or a bad livelihood. Any community that stepped outside the established notions of caste order was deemed to be one of hereditary criminals. The basic implication of the Act was that anyone who indulged in a 'vagrant lifestyle could be deemed a criminal'. The collective word 'tribe' as communities and not individuals are deemed criminal. These communities could be removed from their original residence and settled into an establishment provided by the local government. This provision forced the sedentarization of many tribal communities. Anyone registered under this Act could be imprisoned without a warrant. The Act also subsumed within its ambit eunuchs, who, if ornamented like women and engaged in dancing or playing music in a public place, could be arrested.[225] The Act has been scientifically contextualized in the background of Cesare Lombrosos's pseudoscientific notion of the presence of a class of born criminals with a hereditary criminal trait in them.[226] The Criminal Tribes Act in India reflects British anxieties about gypsies and the Victorian notions of habitual criminality. The British analyzed Indian literary traditions which talk about 'robber castes' who are low-caste groups with hereditarily acquired criminal knowledge.[227] The colonial government attacked the families of such tribes and intervened in their familial relationships and marriage to make sure they are distributed evenly in different parts of the country.[228] The colonial government basically displaced and criminalized many caste groups like *Nats*, *Doms*, *Kanjars*, and *Bedias*, groups to which the *Tawaifs* belonged. The women from these caste groups were seen as promiscuous and hypersexualized, and their customs, traditions, and marital practices were attacked. Their influence was seen as corrupting by both the British and upper-caste men.[229] The criminalization of these tribes also meant the displacement of *Tawaifs* and the breaking up of *kothas*. Many musicians attached to the *kothas* belonged to these castes. The criminalization of these groups may have led to the loss of patronage by native elites and the marginalization of their art forms, dance, and customs. A process of homogenizing India into a familiar framework and the creation of broad categories like 'criminal tribes' or 'prostitutes' for easing governance can be shown by studying *Tawaifs*.

[225] See https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealed-act/repealed_act_documents/A1871-27.pdf.
[226] Bej (2021), p. 3.
[227] See Hinchy (2020), p. 1675.
[228] See Hinchy (2020).
[229] Ibid.

The native upper caste tried to distance themselves from the so-called 'criminal' tribes to avoid administrative troubles. Another process that was at play here was the crystallization of identities. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, many *Tawaifs* were able to shed the caste-religion aspect of their identity once they entered the *kotha*. But attempts at ethnographic data collection systematized their linkages to caste identities singling them out as criminals. As we saw, the 'spiritual realm' that was to be impenetrable by the British does not apply to these women or caste groups. Hence, we see the dual marginalization of *Tawaifs* at the hands of upper-caste Indian men and the British.

4.6 The Anti-*Nautch* Movement

The dual marginalization and anxieties about *Tawaifs* become more evident when we look at the Anti-*Nautch* Movement of 1893. The Anti-*Nautch* Movement must be contextualized with Indian social reform movements. The Social Reform Movements rest on the recognition by Indians that there were some social evils that had to be eradicated or reformed. This recognition is mostly linked to the British charge of savagery and barbarism against Indians. The Reform Movements were led by upper-caste Indian men mostly English-educated "new-middle class" who were the first ones to directly work with/under the British officials and heavily influenced by their ideas. Most of the reforms by upper-caste Indian men were geared towards the 'personal realm' because that's where they were authoritative. However, the Anti-*Nautch* Movement was a collaboration among Indian Reformers, the colonial government, and Christian missionaries. One of the very interesting sources to view this intersection is the Evangelical book of Mrs. Jenny Fuller's *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*."[230] British women supported the imperial ambitions of the colonial government and were deeply conditioned by Christian values. In *Chapter 8: The Nautch Girl*, the book establishes how the courtesans, monopolized education and sang in public. The association of the dancing, singing, reading, and writing skills with the courtesans made education disreputable for 'respectable women'.[231] The chapter makes an appeal to disassociate singing and education with *nautch* girls. It also appeals to the British to boycott the *nautch*. It is replete with quotes and instances that point towards the amount of wealth *nautch* girls amassed, the freedom they possessed as 'public women', and how they were responsible for breaking up families. Following are some quotes that reflect the British perception of *Tawaifs*:

Dr. Murdoch quotes the Indian Messenger (a Calcutta paper), as saying:

> *We have seen with our own eyes these women introduced into respectable circles in open daylight, and men freely associating with them, while the ladies of the house were watching the scene from a distance as spectators and not taking part in the social pleasures going on before them, in which the dancing-girls were the only female participators. Could anything more detrimental to the cause of morality be conceived? In Punjab, the dancing girls enjoy public favor; they move more freely in native society than public women in civilized countries are ever allowed to do. In fact, greater attention and respect is shown to them*

[230] Published in 1900 but written in 1899.
[231] Fuller (1990), p. 129.

than to married ladies. In the Northwest Provinces, we have seen a dancing girl treated with as much courtesy as if she were a princess descended from a distinguished royal line.232

Fuller: "That is true, but the nautch-girl has a recognized place in society and religion that gives her a peculiar vantage ground. In South India, she has her right and place in the temple. In Western India she is there by invitation; and in society, all over India, she is everywhere. Never having married, she can never be a widow. Hence her presence at weddings is considered most auspicious. And in Western India, in certain circles, if her presence can be afforded, she is the one that ties the wedding necklace; (equivalent to putting on the wedding ring with us), thus her defiled hands become a bright omen that the girl bride may never be a widow. Aside from weddings, she graces many another festive occasion, such as the tread ceremony, house warmings, and evening parties and entertainments"

These statements show how notions of morality and immorality permeated society through the British missionaries. Murdoch was a missionary and clearly, there was no Christian equivalent of *Devadasi* or a *Tawaif*. Morality here is conditioned by Puritanical and Western values and ethos. Missionaries conflated morality and modernity with Christianity. The discourse on modernity strongly rested on a critique of Hindu customs which, according to missionaries, were responsible for the backward state of Indian women. The most striking part is the comparison between the Western "public woman" and *Tawaifs* being freer than them. The colonial patriarchy's discomfort with native women possessing the kind of freedom that even Western women don't have is expressed. Although *Tawaifs* do operate within the patriarchal framework as their clients occupy a higher place in the hierarchy than them, they also subvert the patriarchy as other men are dependent/inferior to them. This subversion of patriarchy is incomprehensible to the colonial mind who tried to see *Tawaifs* from an ethnocentric puritanical lens. The words 'native' and 'civilized' encapsulate the underlying racism that deems India as uncivilized. The sacred role of *Tawaifs* that provided them with ritual legitimacy also made it difficult for the British to challenge the institution directly.

To show the internalizing of Victorian morality, this chapter quotes some parts of the appeal made by the 'educated class' of the Hindu Social Reform Association to the Governor General of India and Viceroy in 1893:

"That this practice not only necessarily lowers the moral tone of society, but also tends to destroy that family life on which national soundness depends, and to bring upon individuals ruin in property and character alike.

That this practice (nautch) rests only upon fashion and receives no authority from antiquity or religion, and accordingly has no claim to be considered a National Institution, and is entitled to no respect as such.

[232] Fuller (1990), pp. 130-131.

The chapter goes on to analyze the replies to the above-mentioned appeal by the Madras Government House; the Governor refuses to act on the appeal because having attended several *nautches* he did not find them inappropriate and saw the nautch girls as professional dancers.[233]

The process of internalization of Victorian morality by the natives could be understood through Macauley's 'Downward Filtration' theory 1835[234], which made a case for educating only Indian elites in Western values and ethos as opposed to imparting mass education. The Indian elites would 'filter down' the knowledge they possessed. However, the result was very different from the one anticipated as these elite classes got cut off from their social surroundings. Western English education became a distinguishing factor between the elites and others, and the elites became English-minded. Anyone who did not adhere to the same living standards as them was disliked.[235] The Anti-*Nautch* Movement led by Indian elites was through the internalization of ideas of degeneracy. Interestingly, the Governor refuses to support the movement as he had 'little to gain' by intervening in the 'personal realm'. The British Governor sought legitimacy of the *nautch* in Hindu customs and scriptures while the upper-caste Hindus are denying that. This chapter mainly refers to Hinduism because the movement was led by upper-caste Hindus. However, new notions of respectability and correct behavior conditioned by Victorian morality were also forged by the Muslim upper and middle-class community.[236] The British intervention was more ideological than legal in this case. Thus, the collaboration of missionaries, colonial officials, and native elites is made visible.

4.7 Agency of *Tawaifs*: Recovering their voices

However, legal intervention assumes no agency on the part of *Tawaifs*. This was far from true. Despite these legal attacks, the institution survived long after the independence of India. Many *Tawaifs* fled the cantonments area, never registered themselves, and dodged checkups at the Lock Hospitals.[237] Given that many of them were educated, self-aware, and knew the kind of position they held in the society, they would have devised ways to survive like marrying to integrate within the society. *Tawaifs* also fostered long-term relationships with some clients who continued to patronize them even in the face of adversity. The North Indian *Tawaifs*, instead of taking recourse to the colonial legal system, solved disputes amongst themselves. They didn't allow any intervention in the affairs of *kotha* which allowed them to maintain

[233] Ibid.
[234] Part of Macauley's Minute on Indian Education, 1835. "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, --a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect".
See: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html
[235] See Carnoy (1977), p. 102.
[236] See Waheed's discussion of *Tawaifs* in the Urdu public sphere (2014).
[237] See Levine (1994).

solidarity and support each other.[238] The control over their art and performance and a plethora of other skills that *Tawaifs* possessed would have facilitated their finding an alternate livelihood in arts and culture. Finally, the kind of freedom from domesticity that *Tawaifs* embodied made British *memsahibs*[239] envious.

An interesting study done by Charan Jagpal examines the novels written by *memsahibs* and their longing to be like *Tawaifs*. The study provides insight into the 'white woman's burden'; the white woman was responsible for protecting the white man from falling into the temptations of the East. The *memsahib*'s role was one of a 'domestic angel' that served the imperial goals of the Empire through the maintenance of proper domesticity in Anglo-Indian homes. Since the voices of *Tawaifs* are scarce and scanty, these literary works provide deeper insights into the world of *Tawaifs* from an outsider's perspective. Flora Annie Steel's[240] fictional work *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* shows how a *memsahib* Grace, who is burdened by domesticity and stuck in a loveless marriage, tried to find liberation through the figure of *Tawaif*. She was enraptured by the freedom and rebellious attitude of the *Tawaifs* that causes disturbances in her life as an imperial mother and a wife. Another character in the novel is *Begum*[241] Sobrai who gives up her domestic life to become a *Tawaif* to live a life of independence and in pursuit of music and dance. The characters meet when Grace finds Sobrai dancing in the bazaar. Steel juxtaposes the two characters to show burdened domesticity and freedom in the figure of '*Tawaif*'.[242] In another novel *On the Face of Waters* (1897) Steel portrays Kate, a *memsahib*, burdened by domesticity and an unhappy marriage as physically transforming herself into a *Tawaif* by darkening her skin color, dying her hair, and living in the *kotha*.[243] The female characters of these novels sometimes transgressed racial lines through their associations (romantic or marital) with native men. This was highly problematic as it threatened reverse colonization and the Empire because Western women were symbols of morality, refinement, and high culture. British women were vanguards of imperial patriarchy and racial distance sustained imperialism. In imperial patriarchy, British women occupied a higher place than Indian men. hence, any relationship between British women and Indian men was considered a violation of racial hierarchies and a threat to imperialism.

The novel *Life of My Heart* by Victoria Cross is the story of Frances, a *memsahib*, who defies her 'domestic angel' role to marry a Muslim Indian man and puts on a show for Indian men. Bithia Mary Croker's *The Company's Servant* (1907) is a story of Rosita who lives and acquires the skill of *Tawaifs* and earns fame and wealth like them in the end. In *Her Own People* Croker conflates the figure of *Tawaif* and freedom-seeking *memsahib* by creating an institution of Dominga who was Eurasian and lived with Anglo-Indians but possessed the skills and grace of a *Tawaif*.[244] Dance and performance were not only seen as entertaining but also liberating by

[238] Saba Dewan in the Seen and Unseen.
[239] It was a word used to refer to wives of British officials in colonial Indi.
[240] Steel was a strong advocate of the 'domestic angel' role of women in civilizing mission of the Empire. See Jagpal (2009).
[241] Begum was a title used for wives of elite Muslims.
[242] Jagpal (2009), pp. 255-56.
[243] Ibid., 256-257.
[244] Ibid., pp. 257-58.

*memsahib*s. In the absence of Western forms of entertainment that *memsahib*s would have indulged in, *nautch* girls and their performance is the locus of ultimate freedom from domestic boredom.

These novels are questioning the established domesticity and gender roles in colonial India. They are seeking an escape from confinement and finding liberation in the figure of the *Tawaif*. The literary sphere became a way for women, both Indian and Anglo-Indian, to articulate their desires, challenge the established norms and question their place in society. The only difference was that the concerns of educated Indian women often aligned with the nation-building project and the space they occupied in it. Indian upper-caste women reinforced the notion of their role in the 'personal realm'. For example, the women's magazines in 19th century Bengal focused on reforms within the household and "educative motherhood" where the *Bhadramahila*[245] is an educator and a nurturer as opposed to a "*Bibi*"[246] who was masculinized through overstepping women's domain. [247] While for many *memsahib*s the *Tawaif*'s lifestyle provided resonance, liberation, and envy, for Indian upper-caste women, she was the symbol of evil, corruption, and denigration. This also shows how conditioning through Victorian morality affected different groups of people differently.

A part of Veena Oldenburg's interview with a *Tawaif* shows how *Tawaifs* themselves challenged the established domesticity and exercised their agency:

> *Those who dare to hold 'moral' objections to the life of a Tawaif should first examine the thankless toil of an average housewife including her obligation to satisfy a sometimes faithless or alcoholic or violent husband for the sake of a meager living. Such an existence is without dignity and was not the situation of the housewife tantamount to that of a common prostitute, giving her body for money?*
>
> *It is we who are brought up to live in sharafat*[248] *with control over our bodies and our money and [it is] they who suffer the degradation reserved for lowly (neech) women.*[249]

Thus, this chapter examined the post-Revolt India in which Victorian morality manifested and legitimized itself in colonial India through law. The legal sphere was divided into 'public' and 'personal' realms and this division permeated into the nationalist consciousness that would not allow any intervention in the 'personal' realm. It established how *Tawaifs* were outside both realms and hence suffered dual marginalization at the hands of the British as well as Nationalists. Finally, it discussed the agency of *Tawaifs* and how they became a symbol of liberation for Anglo-Indian women.

[245] Bengali word for an upper caste educated 'gentlewoman.'
[246] Bibi was the word often used to refer to Tawaifs.
[247] Banerjee examines the writings of several upper caste Bengali women to make these arguments. See Bannerji (1991).
[248] Genteel respectability.
[249] Oldenburg (1990), pp. 272-73.

Chapter 5

The Nation-Building Project: Tawaifs, Legacy, and Cinema

The nation-building project commenced with the rise of nationalism and national consciousness in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The concept of nationalism originated in Western Europe in the 18th century and then spread in different cultural contexts.[250] In India, it was imported through British colonialism, and Indian nationalism remained largely anti-colonial. However, it would be a mistake to homogenize Indian nationalism as just 'anti-colonial' because it got segmented into 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' cultural nationalisms broadly. These two categories predated the discourse on Indian cultural nationalism at the time, and even now in some ways. Within these two nationalisms, we can see different approaches to nation-building. Some common factors that underscored these nationalisms were: the newly emerging middle class taking the lead and inspiration from the Western world about nation-building and consolidating a religious identity against the 'other' under the grand anti-colonial narrative. This chapter will demonstrate the breakdown of the syncretic Hindustani culture that took place through an attack on *Tawaifs* and the process through which their art got appropriated by the upper classes as part of the nation-building process. It will demonstrate how the memory of *Tawaifs* was preserved and, in a way, distorted in Indian cinema.

It was only in the late 19th century that the discourse on music, dance, and art become relevant in the nation-building project. The question of national identity became linked to the 'traditional' aspects of Indian culture that would set it apart from the West. The revival of performing arts was connected to the exaltation of Indian spirituality as opposed to Western materialism.[251] Dance and music which came to represent the high points of 'traditional'[252] Indian culture were deeply influenced and, in a way, monopolized by the *Tawaifs*. There is a need to problematize what was considered traditional. 'Traditions' themselves were deeply conditioned and influenced by Victorian morality. The previous chapter showed how various customs and traditions got distorted due to ethnographic data collection, translation, and knowledge production by the British. Hence, these processes should be analysed in line with British colonialism and not be isolated from the imposition of Victorian morality. The discourse on the 'classicization' of dance and music was incorporated within the stream of Hindu nationalism. The process of classicization not only required curbing the influence of *Tawaifs* but also of Muslims, in a way. Muslim nationalists never made any claim to the *Kathak* dance because Islamic law does not allow women to dance in public and breaches the established 'respectability' espoused by Muslim nationalists. The Muslim rulers/ elites who patronized the *Tawaifs* were propagators of Hindustani culture, but communal nationalism entailed separation

[250] Anderson (1983), p. 11.
[251] See Johar (2016), pp. 36-50.
[252] Tradition here implies an unbroken sense of continuity with ancient Indian past.

from the 'other'. The clearest manifestation of this process was in the Hindi/Urdu divide. The Hindi Movement in the 20th century paved the way for the creation of Hindu communal consciousness. There were attempts to Sanskritize Hindi and purge Urdu and Persian words. Hindi was personified as a chaste and nurturing Brahmin matron while Urdu was personified as a prostitute. It was believed that Urdu could not be used by Hindus to express themselves as it was vulgar, erotic, and the language of the *Tawaifs*. Even certain dialects of Hindi were gendered. Braj[253] was vilified as a language of erotic poetry while Khari Boli[254] was valorized as masculine and dignified. Effeminacy is equated with degeneracy in the case of Braj.[255] Thus, communal nationalisms caused the breakup of Hindustani culture and *Tawaifs* were the chief representatives of Hindustani culture.

5.1 Kathak Revival

Similarly, in this line, certain aspects of Indian art which were associated with devotion and spirituality were appropriated and the erotic and sexual were rejected and associated with the 'foreign'. 'Classical dance' was also linked to 'purity'. The Anti-Nautch Movement of 1893 was the first step towards 'liberating' classical dance forms like *Kathak* and Bharatnatyam from the 'shackles' of 'fallen women'[256] The scope of this chapter allows us to only discuss *Kathak* which was associated with *Tawaifs*.

The early dance revival movements have been traced to personalities like Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar[257]. Tagore's Santiniketan was a co-educational school that gave impetus to performing and visual arts. Tagore posited dance as an 'expression of freedom' and invited folk dance teachers from all parts of India to add to the dance movement vocabulary. Santiniketan gave an equal footing to both male and female dancers. In the early 20th century, the 'Oriental dance' captured the interest of Western dancers who got inspired by it. Uday Shankar was a product of this time. He got inspired by Western aesthetics and wanted to place Indian dance forms at the same level as the Western ones. His touring company played an important role in the promotion of Indian dances abroad. The performances choreographed by Shankar helped in positioning issues of contemporary relevance like dowry, gender, and religious and caste equality in the public discourse. The training school founded by Shankar focused on cultivating skills like concentration, discipline, imagination, composition, and choreography. The endorsement that Tagore and Shankar received contributed to the acceptance of dance as a respectable activity. The binary between disciplined, skilled, and 'respectable' female dancers and the 'depraved' *Tawaif* became pronounced through the attempts of these Revivalists.[258]

[253] Braj was a dialect in Hindi and many poetry with 'rasas' were written in Braj. Braj poetry also had descriptions of nayikas.
[254] Sanskritized Hindi. Khari literally means upright. It is equated with the upright/erection by subaltern scholars. That is why Khari Boli is deemed as masculine.
[255] See Gupta, (2001), pp. 4293-4295.
[256] Walker in Chakravorty and Gupta (2010), p. 290.
[257] Uday Shankar (1900-1977) was a dancer and a choreographer.
[258] See Dutt and Sarkar, pp. 210-231.

In this light, the *Kathak* revival began. As already established in the third chapter, the crystallization of *Kathak* started during the time of Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula, who patronized the family of Prakash Nartak. The dance was a syncretic blend of elements from the Natyasastra and elements added by *Tawaifs*, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, and court etiquette. The performance by *Tawaifs* was called *mujra* which entailed the submission of the *Tawaif* to her patron. *Mujra* is a way of communication between a single female and her male audience through artful gestures and the presentation of the *Tawaif* as a desirable female. She alters her performance according to the response she receives from her patrons in the form of gestures or material rewards. Depending on the clientele, *mujra* was accompanied by *ghazal*/*thumri* in both Urdu and Hindi.[259] *Mujra* was also a way for *Tawaifs* to express their innermost desire. Many *ghazals* (elite Urdu poetry) are part of *mujra* texts. The composers of *ghazal* speak of their partnership with the *Tawaifs* who give expression to their words. [260]

5.2 The 'Purification' of Kathak

However, the 'pure' *Kathak* was to get rid of some of these foreign/*mujra* elements. The *Kathak* revival was spearheaded by upper-caste women who aided in the classicization and Sanskritization of *Kathak*. Leila Sokhey[261] (known as Madame Menaka in the dance world) witnessed and was inspired by many *nautch* performances. She refashioned *nautch* as a classical art form of modern India. Sokhey was trained by the *Kathak*s[262] and she started referring to the dance that she learned as '*Kathak*'. She started learning and performing in temples. Her troupe didn't recruit any woman who had linkages to *nautch* and only 'respectable' women were recruited. Dance drama became central to the format of the new *Kathak*.[263] Sokhey showed little interest in 'solo dance' as the solo performers at the time had *Tawaif* lineages. She produced *Kathak* ballets with Hindu mythological themes. The re-fashioning undertaken by Sokhey elevated the status of *Kathak* as a symbol of Indian distinctiveness and made it acceptable to the middle classes. Her chief disciple, Damayanti Joshi tried to curate solo-*Kathak* performances distanced from the *nautch*. The seductive gestures of lip-biting and raising of eyebrows were removed. *Thumri* was now cleansed of its erotic element. The transgendered element of the dance in which solo performers played the role of both men and women in storytelling had courtesan lineages. It is now connected to ancient Indian spirituality and the figure of *Ardhnarishwara* (hermaphroditic union of Shiva and Shakti).[264] The new *Kathak* got rid of bold movements, swaying of hips, and the use of the veil which is associated with *Tawaifs*. The suggestive sounds of the Sarangi, a string instrument, were removed. The veil has been replaced with a drapery called a *dupatta* to protect the dancers from the male gaze.[265] The absence of a veil also allows us to raise questions about religion. The veil or *purdah* is associated with Islam and was worn by 'respectable' women to protect themselves from the

[259] Qureshi in Feldman and Gordon (2006), pp. 318-324.
[260] Qureshi (2000), p. 824.
[261] Leila Roy (1899-1947) was the daughter of a Bengali lawyer, and her mother was British.
[262] Kathaks were a caste category of dance practitioners who practiced Kathak.
[263] Chakravorty (2006), pp.117-118.
[264] Walker (2006), pp. 117-122.
[265] Walker (2004), pp. 183-187.

gaze of men who aren't related to them. While *purdah* was seen as a tool of oppression by the British and later both Muslim and Hindu reformists, for the *Tawaifs*, it was a way of subverting the notions of respectability. *Tawaifs* wore a veil everywhere outside their *kothas* because they weren't supposed to and didn't want men to look at them for free. A mere glimpse of a *Tawaif* was supposed to be paid for by the men who wanted to see her.[266] The association of the veil with the *Tawaif* and Islam would have also prompted its replacement with a *dupatta*. Other elements associated with Muslim royal courts like *salami* (salutation), *thata* (slow movement and stillness), and Islamic *farmayshi* (request performance) were removed. The Muslim-style headgear was rendered obsolete.[267] However, these elements were retained in films about *Tawaifs*.

Thus, purging the influence of *Tawaifs* as part of the 'purification' of the dance form entailed cherry-picking elements that were deemed appropriate and rejecting those which were seen as foreign/erotic. What we also see is the separation of elements deemed as 'Hindu' and 'Islamic'. *Tawaifs* were representatives of this syncretic Hindustani culture. However, Hindu cultural nationalism sought authenticity in tradition. Thus, the process of classicization was done strategically by the Brahmins with the state's collaboration.[268] Not only did it lead to the marginalization of *Tawaifs* by forging direct links to the Natyasastra but it also gave birth to a certain form of elitism that shrouded *Kathak*. This elitism was linked to caste. Even though some *Kathak* dance dramas composed at the time tried to address pressing issues like dowry, gender, religious, and caste inequality, the performers, and the composers themselves came from upper castes. This created some sort of a hierarchy and distance between people from other sections of society. Further, the themes reflect a superimposed perspective. However, the position of performing women (sometimes even classical dancers) remained in limbo in a general patriarchal setup. While the Revival movements did help re-establish dance and music as respectable, performing women do violate the established domesticity. Even today, such notions are held in some families. In my own family, one of my uncles refused to let his daughter learn *Kathak* because he did not want his daughter to dance in front of other people.

The *Kathak* performances today take place in closed ticketed auditoriums which are not accessible to everyone. This elitism pervades many Indian art forms. Learning classical dance and music is a symbol of prestige and not accessible to everyone. The elitism has also resulted in the loss of patronage and audience of 'classical' art forms. This loss can also be contextualized by looking at the appearance of other sources of entertainment which became more popular and had a broader mass appeal. Gramophone recordings was the first area where *Tawaifs* carved a space for themselves. Then, they made inroads into cinema and even radio. This allows us to see the resilience and agency of *Tawaifs*. These women were educated, talented, and highly skilled; it was unlikely that they would just resign to their fate. Despite all the marginalization, some of the *Tawaifs* managed to acquire both national and global fame.

[266] Oldenburg (1990), pp. 273-274.
[267] Chakravorty (2006), p. 119.
[268] Ibid., p. 120.

5.3 Survival and Experimentation: The Gramophone Comes to India

Tawaifs were the first artists to experiment with the gramophone in India. The first commercial recordings of Indian music were done in 1902 in Calcutta by Fred Gaisberg, the representative of London-based Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd (GTL), along with two *Tawaifs*. Gauhar Jan[269], a *Tawaif* from Calcutta rose to fame through gramophone and was a major recording artist in India. She recorded in multiple dialects like Hindustani, English, Arabic, and Sanskrit, and in diverse genres and styles like *thumri, khayal, ghazal*, etc. If we get into the conversations Gaisberg and Gauhar Jan had, we get insights into her personality as a headstrong, extremely confident, and adaptable woman. She was not intimidated by Western technology and Gaisberg thought she was meant to be a gramophone star. Her records were widely sold in the major cities of India and abroad. The performances in the *kotha* lasted for hours but Gauhar Jan figured out a way to perform her songs in a three-minute recording space of the gramophone. She ended her performance by saying "My name is Gauhar Jan". Gauhar Jan was known for her luxurious lifestyle, and she wore elaborate dresses and jewels for her recordings. She never wore the same jewels twice.[270] In Gauhar Jan, we get to see how *Tawaifs* exuded self-confidence, glamour, and refinery.

The gramophone seemed to have popularized the music of *Tawaifs*. This music had hitherto was a prerogative available only to male elites. The gramophone seemed to have partially democratized music as it was more easily available than the elite performances in the *kothas*.[271] The recorded performances cut across time and space restrictions. It also may have provided new respectability to the *Tawaif's* music because middle-class aversion to the institution was due to the sexual aspects of the *kotha*. The gramophone acted as a tool to separate *Tawaif's* music from her seductive arts. The fact that the records of Gauhar Jan were extremely popular testifies to middle-class acceptance and appreciation of her music. For *Tawaifs*, it may have provided new avenues to assimilate into the new order of society, given how the patronage to their institution was crumbling and dwindling. The Gramophone also allowed the virtual immortalization of the voices of *Tawaifs*. Since most of their *ghazals* and *thumris* reflected their innermost desires, it would also be interesting to extrapolate their inner voice from these songs which could be a further field of exploration.

The gramophone was a new, alien, Western device introduced in India during colonization during the anti-colonial struggle. It was likely that it may have aroused the suspicions of many male artists and traditional Indians. Fearing the loss of control over their art, the authenticity, and the uniqueness of their voices, male musicians refused to record their voices in the gramophone. Later, seeing the kind of success Gauhar Jan and other female musicians acquired through the gramophone, some male musicians gave up their superstitions to record their music on the gramophone. These male musicians frequented the *kothas* and their

[269] Born Angelina Yeoward (1873-1930) to parents of European descent, Gauhar Jan was also known as the 'Gramophone Girl' because she recorded more than 600 of her songs in twenty languages and dialect. See Farrell (1993).
[270] See Sampath (2010), pp.162-165. For glimpses into the conversations, see Chapter 8: Gramophone Comes to India, pp. 146-184.
[271] Ibid., p. 177.

style was highly influenced by *Tawaifs*. They sang falsettos in a shrill, feminine way like a *Tawaif* because of the influence *Tawaifs* had on them and because that's what was in demand.[272] To get rid of the superstitions that shrouded the gramophone, the GTL advertised the device in a way to appeal to the newly emerging middle class. The middle class would have appreciated the gramophone as it represented the embracing of modernity as well as retaining the linkages to their own roots through Indian classical music. More importantly, the middle classes could afford it.[273]

According to Farrell (**Figure 9**) the gramophone became a bridge between Western and Indian cultural domains and became a precious possession for the emerging middle class. The device cuts across various generations and the son in the picture leans towards a future with mass media. He points towards the dark-skinned servant who sits on the floor and was also listening to the gramophone hinting at the partial democratization achieved through the gramophone. [274] The gramophone is shown as a prized possession that would have elevated the status of those who owned it.

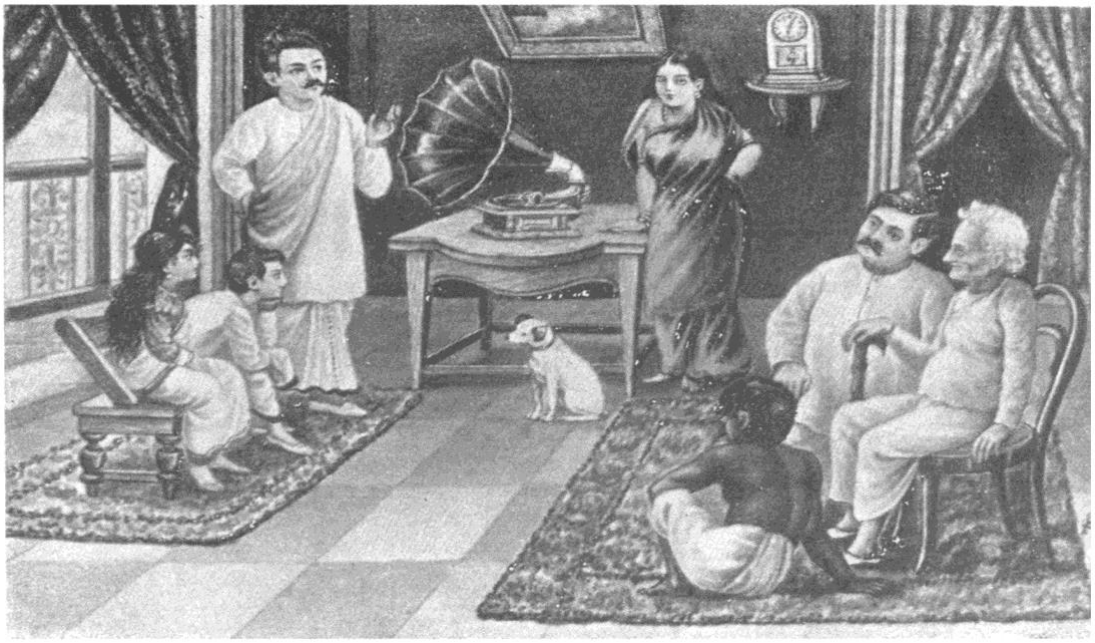

Figure 9: Advertisement of Gramophone by GTL 1907[275]

GTL also tried to appeal to the religious sensibilities of Indians by using imagery from the Hindu religion. **Figure 10** shows Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, knowledge, and language holding a gramophone over her veena.[276] Goddess Sarasvati is worshipped by singers, dancers, and students before their performance and during Basant Panchami.[277] In **Figure 10**, the

[272] Ibid., p. 176.
[273] The gramophone was priced around 250 Rupees a device and the upper middle class could afford it. (Farrell 1993) p. 44.
[274] Farrell (1993), pp. 42-43.
[275] Photo credits: Farrell (1993), p.43
[276] Veena is a stringed instrument used in Indian classical music and is associated with Goddess Sarasvati.
[277] It is a festival celebrated in spring and people wear yellow, eat yellow food and worship Goddess Sarasvati. It is celebrated differently in different parts of India.

background depicts spring, and Goddess Sarasvati is shown as promoting the gramophone. This would have added to the appeal of gramophone amongst skeptical as well as religious Hindus.

Figure 10: Ma Sarasvati promoting the gramophone 1907[278]

For *Tawaifs*, control over their performance and art was a source of liberation. Not only did it provide them with material gain but also with fame and recognition. However, we need to problematize the relationship between the gramophone and *Tawaifs*. While in *kothas*, *Tawaifs* had full control over their performance, when recording for gramophones, *Tawaifs* had to cater to the demands of the Company and adapt and improvise. Also, their audience became anonymous, unlike in *kothas* where they altered their performances to cater to the client's demands. Gramophone made music a less personal affair and the anonymity can contribute to decontextualizing the *Tawaif* from her background and place her in a new light. Gauhar Jan was a star, yet there was a stigma attached to her background for those who knew about it.

For example, Mahatma Gandhi requested her to raise money for the Swaraj Fund[279] and Gauhar Jan agreed to it on the condition that Gandhi would attend the fund-raising concert. She raised around twenty-four thousand rupees but only gave half of it to Gandhi as he did not keep his promise.[280]

[278] Photo Credits: Farrell (1993), p.44
[279] Swaraj means self-rule. Swaraj Fund was the independence fund and money was raised to sponsor anti-colonial activities like marches, publications and events.
[280] Sampath (2010), pp. 329-330.

Many other courtesans from different parts of India tried to raise money for the Swaraj fund through concerts and even integrating anti-colonial and nationalist themes in their songs. However, people like Gandhi refused to accept any funding from them or allow them in political parties like the Indian National Congress. In June 1925, he wrote an editorial in his weekly publication Young India:

> I am firmly of opinion that, so long as they continue the life of shame, it is wrong to accept donations or services from them or to elect them as delegates or to encourage them to become members of the Congress.[281]

Gandhi was one of the most influential figures of the time, so his voice carried a lot of weight. His words have a reductive tendency to equate *Tawaifs* with just sex work. Plus, sex work is shameful for him. Gandhi's views were shared, internalized, and followed by many middle-class people. Gauhar Jan's agency is demonstrated by the fact that despite all the stigma attached to her, she did raise a handsome amount.

Thus, we can see a certain kind of ambiguity in the reaction of the Indian middle class toward the *Tawaif*. On one hand, she is being devalued and reduced to the status of a prostitute, and on the other hand, she is garnering support and popularity through her talent. However, her artistic talents were overlooked by those who viewed women just in terms of their sexuality and dehumanized the woman in question. Giving up sex work is a precondition to gaining respectability which equates respectability with heteronormativity and marriage. An educated woman who would acquire all the talents of a *Tawaif* but remains outside the domestic sphere or does not get married would also be considered 'corrupt' and 'depraved' like a *Tawaif*. This was the case with some lower caste working women who were clubbed into the category of 'immoral'. However, it was uncommon in colonial India for middle-class women to violate these boundaries because not many women had the same artistic talents as *Tawaifs*. And the respectability of women like Leila Sokhey and Damyanti Joshi was never questioned because they were married. Thus, this chapter argues that operating outside the marital framework is what made *Tawaifs* dangerous for middle-class sensibilities. It also posits that sexual pleasure became marginal to the utilitarian needs of reproduction. The key purpose of sexual relations became reproduction.

Following the *Kamasutra*, the wife figure was a locus of reproductive/familial roles while the *Ganika* was the locus of sexual pleasure/companionship. The marginality of *Tawaifs* can be located in the sexual/pleasure aspect of the work.

5.4 *Tawaifs* in Indian Cinema: The Courtesan Genre

The kind of ambiguity where *Tawaifs* are stigmatized but at the same time valued for their skills is constantly reflected in the courtesan genre of Hindi cinema. To contextualize Hindi cinema, India was introduced to the cinema in 1896 when the first cinematograph films of the Lumière

[281] Taken from https://scroll.in/magazine/921715/how-history-erased-the-contribution-of-tawaifs-to-indias-freedom-struggle

Brothers were shown in Bombay and were widely watched. The pre-history of Indian cinema is located in Parsi theatre (which drew its inspiration from Lucknow and was deeply influenced by *Tawaifs*).[282] However, it was only in 1913 that Dadasaheb Phalke[283] produced a fully Indian feature 'mythological' film called Raja Harishchandra. Along with the mythological genre, early 1900s films were dominated by the stunt[284] and historical genre and were categorized as 'lower class' films as they offered only a spectacle. However, 1930s talkies, which used music and sound and were narratively driven, were categorized as 'middle class' films.

The themes of 1930s cinema were class-caste hierarchies, child labor, and other social evils that plagued society. The genres were devotional,[285] social, and Muslim social. Rachel Dwyer defines 'social' as a theme reflecting contemporary social settings and even social reforms. 'Muslim social' deals with elements from Muslim society encapsulated in the 'Islamicate cultures'.[286] The term 'Islamicate' refers to social and cultural features associated with Muslims and Islam and could be used to refer to both Muslims and non-Muslims. The Islamicate idioms used in Muslim socials and historicals often articulated images of glory, power, and refinery associated with nobility, Mughal kings and queens, and elites. These images were symbolic of 'high cultural' life in the pre-British era and their manifestation in cinema contributed to the acceptance and elevation of cinema as a respectable artistic form. The common features underscoring these films were grandiose Indo-Islamic architecture, *mehfils, ghazals,* and *qawwalis*, and the use of ornate Urdu.[287] The three Islamicate film genres that were widely produced were Muslim social, Muslim Historical, and Muslim courtesan genres.[288] During the colonial time till 1947, films with anti-imperial themes never got approval from the censor board. However, the Muslim historicals and courtesan genre exalted life and lifestyle before the British thus making them inherently anti-colonial.

The 1950s-70s have been called the 'golden era' of Hindi cinema as in the newly independent context, filmmakers were more independent and flexible. However, there were concerns about financing the films and the role of government in cinema production.[289] Another challenge to the national and social consciousness was the contestation between the established norms and values in the rapid transition from colonialism and feudalism to industrialism.[290]. The themes of the movies in the 1950s-70s articulated the emerging middle-class sensibilities that collided with nationalism, socialism, and ideal moral visions of domestic life, and most of the themes were centered around domestic family life. Within the domestic setting, both men

[282] Discussion in Chapter 3.
[283] Phalke (1870-1944) was a prolific filmmaker who learned film making in the West.
[284] Sumita Chaktravary defines stunt films as a struggle between good and evil through the magical agency of a well-executed rescue. In a colonized nation, it gave Indians a sense of rescue through magic. See Chakravarty (1993), p. 59.
[285] Devotional genre usually narrated the lives of India's medieval singer-saints and their devotional love (bhakti). See Dwyer pp. 18-19.
[286] See Dwyer (2002), pp. 13-18.
[287] Allen and Bhaskar (2009), pp. 6-7.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Since India was under Nehruvian socialism, the government had partial control of the industry and determined the import of equipment, taxation, profit sharing and censorship. See Chakravarty (1993) pp. 57-79.
[290] Chakravarty (1993), p. 99.

and women had assigned roles to which they had to adhere. A woman was supposed to be a 'chaste wife', a loving mother, and also caring and nurturing. Any deviation from this heteronormative version of domesticity was considered problematic.

The courtesan genre of Bollywood films depicts the anxieties about the 'other' woman who is not a 'chaste wife'. The figure of the courtesan breaking away from the banalities of heterosexual marriage is what makes the genre more appealing to the audience.[291] The courtesan genre also breaks away from the vamp vs heroine or Madonna-whore binaries.[292] The women shown in these films are astute, grounded, and well-intentioned.

Scholars assert that the underlying theme of most films under this genre is the desire of the courtesan to be married or unite with one man. This is antithetical to the actual reality of the *Tawaifs* who saw heterosexual relationships as work and perceived freedom from marriage as liberating.[293] The courtesan in herself appears to be a free, independent woman with a strong personality in these films. What makes the genre ambiguous is her connection with the hero who is often confused and conflicted about his acceptance of love for the *Tawaif.*[294] Some scholars believe that the *Tawaifs* are closer to being heroes in films than heroines. The *Tawaifs* do not subscribe to the typical portrayal of a heroine that is connected and controlled by her familial relationships, making her a respectable member of society. The conventional heroine does not engage with men beyond these familial or social relationships. While *Tawaifs* are placed outside the 'respectable' society due to the absence of familial bonds, they often pursue men (like a conventional hero would), are assertive, and are subject to the male gaze. The men in courtesan-centric films are relatively passive. The narrative either ignores the past of the *Tawaifs* or shows how they were victims of their circumstances. The *mujra* (dance and music) of the *Tawaif* is her way of self-expression. Her deepest emotions, inner voice, thoughts, and dilemmas are expressed through her *mujra*.[295] The narrative depicts life from the point-of-view of the courtesan. While it was possible for the conventional heroine to sing and dance, she could not do so in the presence of men other than her lover. *Tawaifs*, that way, were free to express their sexuality and desires through music.

Ruth Vanita points towards a chronological break in the depiction of courtesans in the courtesan genre. She suggests that the directors in the 1950s and 60s knew the courtesans, hence, the representation was closer to reality. They were shown as working women, living independently, and driving their cars and the sexuality was not problematized as much. However, from the 1970s onwards, there was emphasis on *Tawaif's* sexual purity and chastity. If the Tawaif was to get married, she had to be chaste. The narrative of these films in the 1970s shaped the imagination of later film producers who did not know *Tawaifs* personally and their imagination was shaped by such films. There were exceptions, of course.[296]

[291] Hubel (2012), p. 214.
[292] Vanita (2018), p. 10.
[293] See Oldenburg (1990), pp. 267-280.
[294] See Hubel (2012), pp. 225-230.
[295] See Booth (2007), pp. 1-13.
[296] Vanita, (2018), p. 11, Also see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byD2IMB8TgA

From the 1990s onwards, instead of the 'cultured Islamicate' courtesan, Bombay cinema depicts the transition of a courtesan into a cabaret girl.[297]

The films created in the courtesan genre facilitate keeping the memory of *Tawaifs* and other courtesans alive. Not only that, but it did also provide employment and opportunities to *Tawaifs* and their descendants. Several important Indian actors, actresses, singers, and dancers come from *Tawaif* backgrounds. However, filmmakers were apprehensive about revealing the *Tawaif* background of these performing artists as the *Tawaifs* were trying re-fashion themselves and assimilate into the established middle-class society.[298] Many song compositions of *Tawaifs* were also incorporated into the films.[299] In fact, even the dances shown in Hindi cinema are never fully classical. They are semi or light classical like the *Tawaifs*' performances.

Films played an important point in 'humanizing' the *Tawaifs*. The absence of courtesans from the public sphere now can catalyze the audience to think of them as anachronistic and their depiction as fictitious. Even though their representations are sometimes problematic and ambivalent, the film reminds us of their existence and how they morphed into a cabaret dancer later. These films evoke a certain kind of nostalgia towards the pre-colonial lifestyle and even though romanticized, provide an alternate vision of what ifs... of an uncolonized India. That way, cinema plays an important role in discerning how the *Tawaifs* are situated in the popular imagination**.** It is also essential to note how the *Tawaifs* perceive themselves in the movies. The next chapter will analyse three remarkable films made in the courtesan genre and see how the dynamics of domesticity, performance, and sexuality pan out.

[297] Ibid., p. 18.
[298] Ibid., p. 19.
[299] Ibid., p. 19.

Chapter 6

Sex, Subjectivity, and Performance: Representation of Tawaifs in Pakeezah (1972), Umrao Jaan (1981), and Devdas (2002)

In the past few years, Bollywood producers have revitalized the courtesan genre and many of them have become deeply interested in the lives and times of *Tawaifs*. Since the lives of *Tawaifs* are shrouded in mystery and their voices have not yet been fully recovered, cinema is a great way to visually reconstruct their history from new and fresher perspectives. This chapter uses three case studies to show how cinema pandered to the general emotional sentiment in post-independence India. The two films *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Devdas* (2002) are adaptations of novels from the early twentieth century, so the analysis of the films is contextualized within that time frame. However, the films reflect social attitudes towards women in post-independence India. These attitudes are a continuation and legacy of reformist nationalism during the colonial period. The analysis of the films achieves the task of justifying the long-term impact of Victorian morality which articulated an ideal heteronormative monogamous version of domesticity with defined gender roles. Women were expected to chaste, passive and caregiving while men were supposed to be breadwinners. The films show how deviating from this version of domesticity could chaos, confusion, and disrupt the lives of people involved.

The choice of films is based on popularity. These films became extremely popular, flooding the theatres at the time and becoming the highest grossing films. The film's choice of actors and actresses contributed to their fame. All three films delve deeply into the courtesan genre and are a great way to compare *Tawaif's* representation with their history found in ethnographies. The reasons for choosing these films are primarily their popularity and the significance of *Tawaifs* in the narrative. The chapter is divided thematically into six categories: familial relations and *kotha;* the sexuality of the *Tawaif;* the relationship with the male protagonist; performance, religion and money; and overstepped domesticity. These thematic divisions allowed a deeper analysis of *Tawaif*'s representation as well as comparison, to an extent. The aim of the chapter is to single out contested aspects of *Tawaif*'s personality like sexuality, dance/ performance, and their relationship with men, and juxtapose them with the larger social context.

6.1 Background and Plot of the Films:

It is worth mentioning that even though the films are made about women, all three films are told from a male perception of *Tawaifs.* The two films *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Devdas* (2002) that are from the novels are also written by men and they clearly reflect the Reformist attitudes towards *Tawaifs* and how the conditioning done by Victorian morality. *Pakeezah* (1971) is a work of pure fiction, but the narrative superimposes patriarchal moral judgement on

women who could not or did not get married. However, in all the three films, narrative is patriarchal and the Tawaifs trying to navigate within this patriarchal set up.

Pakeezah,[300] a film made in the 1970s was known for its creative brilliance. It left an indelible mark on the Indian cinema scene. It set extremely high standards for the films to come.[301] It also influenced the subsequent filmmaking in the courtesan genre. Ruth Vanita has argued that after *Pakeezah*, the filmmakers started stressing the chastity of the *Tawaif* and how she could not get married.[302] Its heroine, the 'Tragedy Queen' of India who starred in 93 films is immortalized in the memory of Indians for her performance in *Pakeezah*. The film was released after the untimely passing of Meena Kumari, who played the character of Sahibjan, and Indians watched it in large numbers as a tribute. Set in the city of Lucknow, known for its *Nawabi* court culture[303], the film delves into the experience of being a *Tawaif*. The plot of the story revolves around a *Tawaif* called Sahibjan and her desire to break free from the *kotha*. She is renamed *Pakeezah* or 'the Pure One' by her lover to signify her purity and erase her past as a *Tawaif*.

Unlike the other two films, *Pakeezah* is a work of pure fiction, so it departs so far from any embeddedness in history and is completely conditioned by social attitudes that saw women outside the marital framework as helpless. The film runs for two hours and twenty-five minutes. It is laden with symbolism, melodrama, music, and dance with encrypted meanings. It took almost 15 years to produce this film. The personal romantic escapades of the lead actress Meena Kumari and the filmmaker Kamal Amrohi add to the novelty of the film. Meena Kumari's alcoholism hindered production and her performance. Some scholars have argued that Kumari's desire to break free from the marriage with Amrohi was reflected in her performance in *Pakeezah*. Kumari also comes from a *Tawaif* background and her brilliant performance in *Pakeezah* as a dancer and an actress reflects her brilliant training.[304]

Umrao Jaan (1981) is an adaptation of Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's novel *Umrao Jan Ada.* It's a story of a young girl Ameeran who gets kidnapped by her father's rivals and gets sold at a *kotha* in Lucknow. The film shows her transformation into a well-known *Tawaif* 'Umrao Jan' (Rekha) and the trials and tribulations in the lives of *Tawaifs*. The novel was published in 1899 and Muzaffar Ali (the filmmaker) does a commendable job of bringing attention to details. Originally in the novel, Ruswa presents the story of Umrao Jan in an interview-like format which is abandoned by Ali.[305] He does a good job of reconstructing 19th-century Lucknow and *kothas*. Rekha's performance as the lead actress in the film is treasured, loved, and was received very well. The novel gives some insights into the contemporary social realities of the time. It

[300] It means the pure one in English.
[301] Many other directors who made films in the courtesan genre used Pakeezah as a reference model.
[302] Vanita (2018), p. 11. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byD2IMB8TgA
[303] Nawabi links to the Nawabs (Princes) of Lucknow some of whom were well known for their decadence and patronage to the *Tawaifs*.
[304] Hubel (2012), p. 223.
[305] See Ruswa, Muhammad Hadi (1899), Umrao Jaan Ada, Translated by Khushwant Singh and MA Husaini, Orient Paperbacks, 1970

shows the relationship between the *nautch* and thugs[306] as well as the disruption of *kothas* during the Revolt of 1857 and so does the film.

Devdas (2002) is the most popular[307] adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Devdas* (1917). The plot of the movie is centered around a London-educated lawyer Devdas (Sharukh Khan) who descends into alcoholism after his family objects to him marrying his childhood sweetheart, Parvati (Paro). The film is a commentary on casteism, classism, and how patriarchy operated in Nationalist Bengal. Devdas leaves home after Paro (Aishwarya Rai) is shamed by his father for spending a night in Devdas's room. He moves to his friend Chunnilal's house. Chunnilal introduces Devdas to the world of *kotha*, *Tawaifs*, and drinking. Here Devdas meets Chandramukhi (Madhuri Dixit) a *Tawaif*, who falls in love with him. The plot revolves around the love triangle of Devdas, Paro, and Chandramukhi. *Devdas* (2002) was directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali known for his aesthetically opulent sets. The film became extremely popular because of the star cast as well as the music.

6.2 Familial relations in the film and the *kotha*:

Tawaif ethnographies[308] show how kothas were matrilineal with *Chaudhrayan* at the helm and bonds strong female friendships. The first two kotha-centric films in discussion do show such representations to be true yet kotha appears to be a space which the heroines of the films had to escape. These bonds of friendships/family appear marginally in the narrative but are impactful. However, the heroine is distracted from these relationships and focused on moving towards domesticity by marrying the male protagonist.

The familial relations in *Pakeezah* are extremely complex and add a lot to the melodramatic element of the film. Sahibjan, the protagonist of the film is a *Tawaif* who was born out of wedlock between her mother Nargis (also played by Meena Kumaari), and her father Shahbuddin. Shahbuddin takes Nargis to his house where she gets rejected by his family. Shahbuddin is shamed by his father for bringing a *Tawaif* home. Shahbuddin tries to defend her by saying "You can't use the word *Tawaif* for Nargis". This shows how the word *Tawaif* itself carried a negative connotation. Nargis immediately runs to a graveyard where she takes her last breath and gives birth to her daughter. Nargis's daughter is rescued by her elder sister Nawabjan who runs a *kotha*. The grimness of the first set and the graveyard appeared comparable. The fact that Nargis could run away without anyone questioning or following her shows her agency and detachment from established society. The filmmaker tried to reinforce the narrative of tragedy and loneliness in *Tawaif*'s life. From the graveyard, she writes letters to Shahbuddin informing him about their daughter and her pain. She wrote that she wasn't lucky enough to die

[306] Thugs anglicized word used for thieves and robbers during the colonial period. Some tribes were declared hereditary thugs.
[307] If one is to go through the Youtube comments about the film, it is cherished as a masterpiece by almost all the comments. People are all in praise for the performances of the stars. The audience response is mostly emotional, awe and praise for the movie.
[308] Oldenburg (1990)

at his doorstep and they will reunite on doomsday. These lines stress the tragedy, the desire for union, and the loneliness that encircles her life. The pain and helplessness of Nargis are in contrast with the authoritative and commanding personality of her sister Nawabjan, who is the *chaudhrayan* of the *kotha*. We see her buying property, investing her money, and looking after the *kotha*'s well-being. When Shahbuddin gets to know about the existence of his daughter, he comes to take her. Nawabjan asks him, "which *Tawaif* do you want to rescue now, and which graveyard was calling Sahibjan?' Nawabjan holds him accountable for her sister's death and takes Sahibjan away the next day and closes her *kotha*. When Shahbuddin inquires why the *kotha* was closed, the man near the *kotha* suggests that *Tawaifs* are like birds and very mobile. Within the *kotha*, everyone is friendly, and they address each other as 'apa' or sister. Sahibjan also finds a friend in another *Tawaif* called Dibban. However, these relations are not emphasized in the narrative.

In *Umrao Jan* (1981) a small 'respectable' and loving family from Faizabad consisting of parents and their two children breaks up when Ameeran is kidnapped by her father's enemies. She is sold in Lucknow in Khanum Jan's *kotha*. The newly arrived Ameeran is renamed as Umrao Jan by Khanum Jan. Khanum Jan is portrayed as an assertive and decisive woman who negotiates the price with every man and takes all the decisions in the *kotha*. She is also presented as an intimidating and even humorous woman who commands the respect of men around her. Umrao is placed under the care of Hussaini Bua (subordinate of Khanum Jan) and Maulvi Sahab who act like her foster parents. Maulvi Sahab extends fatherly love to Ameeran, educating her and training her in the Quran and poetry. The relationship between Hussaini Bua and Maulvi Sahab is shown as being loving, caring, and playful, even though Hussaini is not his wedded wife. Eventually, Ameeran forgets about her family in Faizabad and tries to assimilate within the *kotha*. We also get insights into what the world inside the *kotha* may have looked like. The *kotha* shown in the film is very lavish and ornate with multifoliate arches, ornate *paan* [309]boxes, and hookah[310] being smoked by Khanum Jan. Unlike the Pink Palace of *Pakeezah*, the *kotha* here has less color. The *Kotha* in *Umrao Jaan* is shown as a training institution in dance and music for the *Tawaifs*. The reputed *Ustad*[311] is invited to train young Umrao and she learns and practices with him and transitions into a famous *Tawaif* whose *ghazals* are well-known in Lucknow. We also get insights into the subordinate status of men related to *Tawaifs* through Gauhar Mirza. He is related to Khanum Jan and depends on her for his livelihood. He often steals and lies to her to sustain himself. He also takes money from Umrao on several occasions. When he offers to marry Umrao, she rejects the proposal on the grounds that she will have to sustain him for life, and she is better off working for herself. This is a good representation of a *Tawaif* and even a *Ganika* household. *Tawaif* ethnographies and Buddhist Jatakas show how men related to *Tawaifs* and *Ganikas* were dependent on them. Gauhar Mirza has not been portrayed in the best light in the film, however, he gets away with all that he does because he is man. There is no moral judgement attached to him and he is even taken back in the kotha by

[309] Paan is a betel leaf preparation with tobacco and was served in Kothas. It was an important part of Lucknowi culture.
[310] Hookah is a tobacco pipe with a long and flexible tube that draws smoke from water.
[311] Ustad is a Persian word for the master of arts, usually music, dance and poetry.

Khanum Jan. This shows male privilege that even those men who were dependent on women had.

*Devdas (*2002) is the only movie out of the three which is not *kotha*-centric. The family background of the *Tawaif,* Chandramukhi is unknown. The familial background of Paro and Devdas is more important to the plot. Devdas hails from an upper-caste Zamindari background and is English-educated just like his father. This family is the closest representation of the middle class discussed previously. The family patriarch, Devdas's father is shown as authoritative and controlling, while his wife, in general, is shown as subservient. Their marriage seems almost formal and loveless. This is in contrast with the marital relations of Paro's parents. Paro's mother is from a *Tawaif* background, and her father comes from a Zamindari high caste. Their marriage seems more intimate and equal as her mother expresses herself freely. Devdas' parents chide Paro's mother as they see her *Tawaif* background as low-caste and cite that as a reason for refusing the marriage between Devadas and Paro. Devdas' father also calls Paro a *Tawaif* after she sneaks out of Devdas' room. Devdas tries to defend Paro's honor by condemning the institution of *Tawaifs*. He says that 'even a pimp won't use such vulgar language for anyone's daughter'

His attitude toward *Tawaifs* is encapsulated in the iconic dialogue to Chandramukhi:

> *A woman could be a mother, a sister, a friend, and a wife and when she is none of these, she is a Tawaif.*

This dialogue confirms how being within the marital framework is essential for respectability. The respectability Paro gains through marriage with an upper caste zamindar is a privilege not available to Chandramukhi.

6.3 The sexuality of the Tawaif

Pakeezah's emphasis is mainly on sexual purity and chastity. The subtle and playful sexuality of Sahibjan at the beginning of the film transitions into a desire to be rescued from the *kotha* and become a wife. She remains a virgin throughout the film allowing her to become 'marriageable'.

Umrao Jaan is the only film where sexual relations with a man are shown through symbolism. In the first half, jealous of her friend Bismillah's relationship with her patron, Umrao agrees to Gauhar Mirza's sexual advances. However, the scene is interrupted by Maulvi Sahab. In the following scene, Khanum Jan gets angry with Gauhar Mirza who blames Umrao for making a pass at him and gets kicked out of the *kotha*. However, Umrao does engage sexually with her love interest Nawab Sultan who is now presented as her first lover. Sexual relations are very clandestine in the movie and are shown using symbolism. The Indian Censor Boards did not allow sexual relations to be displayed explicitly in the films, so all the titillation and erotica were merged into the songs. The couple would go to bed together and the camera

goes upward and focuses on the other parts of the room. In the next scene, the couple wakes up together and sexual relations become obvious. However, the expression of sexuality is done explicitly through *mujras* and the lyrics.

Chandramukhi's sexuality is subtle, subliminal, and devotional. She is a well-known *Tawaif* of the area known for her beauty and talents. It is not clear if they engage in sexual relations because Devdas constantly rejects her advances but when drunk, he did allow her to get close to him. Chandramukhi also initiates physical contact with him. However, her sexual consummation with Devdas is ambiguous.

6.4 Relationship with the male protagonist

As per Kamasutra instructions, the *Ganika* must maintain an emotional distance and mostly feign her affection for her patrons. *Tawaif* ethnographies also follow the instructions given by Kamasutra. However, the films and the novels show lovelorn *Tawaif*s who lose themselves in these relationships with men. With an exception of Umrao Jan, Sahibjan and Chandramukhi both start shedding *Tawaif* aspects of their personality to seek their lover's approval.

The first male protagonist in *Pakeezah* is Shahbuddin, who could be perceived in a heroic light as he tries to rescue Nargis from the *kotha* and life of perceived depravity but ultimately fails. The second prominent male figure is Salim, her lover in the film who finds her sleeping in the compartment and leaves an anonymous note at her feet. The note reads, "your feet are beautiful, do not put them on the ground lest they be sullied". The dialogue is ironic because Sahibjan is a *Tawaif,* and she must put her feet on the ground to dance. Sahibjan falls in love with Salim and starts obsessively fantasizing about him. Her fascination with trains and meeting Salim takes the best of her, and she feels like she is losing herself. Her friend, Dibban, also a *Tawaif*, reminds her that the message was not meant for her because she is a *Tawaif*. Since Sahibjan has not met Salim yet in the film, she starts projecting the same love onto the Nawab who patronizes her and showers her with lavish carpets and a bird in a cage. A bird in a cage symbolizes entrapment and losing freedom. Following this scene, Sahibjan does a private *mujra* for the Nawab on the ornate carpet and is invited to a private feast by the Nawab on a boat. Right after Sahibjan is alone with the Nawab in his chambers, the boat meets with an accident and the Nawab dies. The sexual union between them is stopped through natural intervention and incidentally, she ends up meeting Salim after her separation from the Nawab.

Sahibjan's relationship with Salim is hindered by the sense of shame she attaches to herself. Sahibjan does not think she is worthy of the protection and wife status that he is giving to her. Even after Sahibjan reveals that she is a *Tawaif*, Salim does not stigmatize her. Salim even proposes to marry her and renames her *Pakeezah* (the pure one). All this is based on the assumed chastity of Sahibjan by Salim. But when the priest asks her if she agrees to the marriage, she does not answer (background noises yell that she is a *Tawaif*). In *Pakeezah*, Salim comes across as a very positive character who tries his best to give Sahibjan the kind of domestic life she dreams about. This sets *Pakeezah* apart from the other two films because, unlike their male

protagonists, Salim is not in two minds about her. The internalized bias of Sahibjan about Tawaifs is the patriarchy and Victorian morality speaking through and for her.

Nawab Sultan becomes Umrao's first love interest. Nawab Sultan gets captivated by Umrao's voice and her ghazals even before seeing her in person. Gauhar Mirza introduced them by inviting Nawab Sultan to Umrao's *mujra.* He becomes enthralled by her charm and gifts her his necklace. Nawab Sultan is presented as having a great appreciation for arts and poetry and he recognizes Umrao's talents. Their conversations in private are them exchanging *ghazals.* This sets *Umrao Jaan* apart from the other two movies where *Tawaif*'s love is submissive and to an extent, obsessive. The relationship between Nawab Sultan and Umrao seems equal and based on mutual respect. When a rude man defies *kotha* etiquette by entering the private chambers of Umrao when she is with Nawab Sultan, Nawab Sultan retaliates by shooting the man for disrespecting him and Umrao. To digress a bit, the ambiguous relationship between *kothas* and law is also visible in this scene. When someone points out that Nawab Sultan would be sued for murder, Khanum Jan urges him to leave and says she will handle the situation by herself. Not only does it show the agency and authority of Khanum Jan but also hints at the discussion from Chapter Four where we discussed how within *kotha*s, matters were settled without any recourse to colonial law.

Coming back to the relationship between Umrao and Nawab Sultan, Nawab Sultan gets conflicted about his relationship with Umrao when his mother urges him to marry a girl of her choice. The preceding scene is a conversation between Nawab Sultan's father and mother who are separated, and Nawab Sultan's mother blames him for investing money and time at Khanum Jan's *kotha* for their separation. The film reinforces the fact that *Tawaifs* were responsible for breaking marriages and Nawab's mother does not want the same to happen to her son's marriage. She urges him to cut ties with the *kotha*. Nawab Sultan ultimately ends up marrying the woman of his mother's choice putting Umrao through deep anguish. She tries to channel her affection onto her next patron and love interest, a thug, Faiz Ali. She decides to escape the *kotha* with Faiz Ali who gets killed midway. Here the relationship between *nautch* and the thugs that preceded the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 is also shown.[312] Following this, Umrao establishes herself at Kanpur only to be found by Khanum Jan and brought back to Lucknow. The disturbances of the 1857 Revolt disrupt the Lucknow *kotha* and Umrao goes back to Faizabad where she meets her birth family. While welcomed by her mother, she is chided and rejected by her younger brother. Umrao's relationship with men is turbulent, however, it does not break her spirit. as she tries to recover from the pain and tries to move on without attaching any guilt to herself or the profession. The film constantly hints at the double standards of society that value *Tawaifs* for their arts, ritual significance, and money but refuses to acknowledge them as respectable human beings.

Chandramukhi's relationship with Devdas is devotional. She gives wife-mother-like affection to Devdas. Chandramukhi also acquires an almost heroic character and tries to save Devdas from alcoholism and the pain he holds in his heart because of separation from Paro.

[312] See Chapter 4 and Rath and Kuiry (2023).

Devdas, on the other hand, loathes Chandramukhi and loves her at the same time. When Chandramukhi finds him unconscious on the road, she brings him back to Chunnilal's place and takes care of him until his health is restored. Devdas humiliates her by giving her money as compensation for her absence at the *kotha*. He also says that a *Tawaif* knows nothing about love. Chandramukhi replies, "Love is ordained by god, and it is the ultimate goal of life" and disses Devdas by saying "Money is thrown at *Tawaif*'s feet every day in the *kotha,* and if you are so filled with pride, you must return my time". Here we see a resolute, witty, and intelligent woman who is not afraid to say what she feels and is not ashamed of her identity. Devdas tries to commodify her time and love, but she calls him out on that. Devdas' character shows how men who are governed by emotions instead of rationality are destined to be doomed. His deep emotional love towards Paro and Chandramukhi are presented as reasons for his alcoholism and eventual death. Chandramukhi, just like Paro, also craves love, and therefore, despite Devdas' loathing of her, she continues to help/save him. She provides him shelter in her *kotha* and tries to distract her from Paro, but she is aware of the fact she can't replace Paro. Impressed by her devotion, Paro befriends her and even invites her for Durga Pooja[313] at her house. Paro also reminds Chandramukhi that *Tawaifs* can't have husbands. In this movie, the chaste wife and the fallen woman come together. The dichotomy between their roles becomes blurred as both have the same goal-- to save their lover. They even dance together at Durga Puja.

6.7 Mujra and Performance

After the Kathak (Dance) Revival Movement, the stigma attached to dance was more or less removed. The impact, however, was not universal. The new respectability given to dance democraticized it, but respectability was given in a different context with a middle-class educated audience and far removed from any *kotha.* The other factor contributing to the respectability was removal of all sexual and erotic elements. Singing and music were contested only in the context of *kotha.* However, the three films have different approaches and relationship with dance and music. *Mujra*s in *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* reflect on the journey as *Tawaif* and get progressively intense. *Devdas* does not follow the same pattern and includes other sorts of dances, for example, contemporary Bollywood in its repertoire.

In *Pakeezah*, Sahibjan becomes disenchanted with the *kotha* and performance as she starts internalizing the biases imposed on her by society and starts losing herself. The *mujra*s of this film are choreographed by Lacchu Maharaj of the Kalka-Binadin group of Lucknow *Gharana.* His influence is certainly visible in the *mujra*s. He had worked and trained many *Tawaifs*, and Meena Kumari was also from a *Tawaif* background. The *mujra*s in the film retain classical and erotic elements. The collaboration between the classical *Kathak* master and Meena Kumari manifests in the beautiful *mujra*s of the film.

[313] Durga Pooja is the biggest festivity in Bengal celebrated with pomp and show. The festival is celebrated in praise of Goddess Durga who is worshipped, and it's followed by a feast.

The mise-en-scène of the first *mujra* "*Dupatta mera'* (my veil/drapery)[314] has elements of typical Mughal architecture like multifoliate arches, lattice screens, and fountains. Amrohi does a commendable job of evoking nostalgia for *Nawabi* Lucknow. One can also see other courtesans dancing in the background. Vanita points out that the *Tawaifs* never put themselves on display like they do in *Pakeezah.*[315] The space where Sahibjan dances appears to be octagonal and evenly distributed among her patrons. We also get occasional glimpses of instrument players accompanying her. Sahibjan is youthful and full of energy in this song. Sahibjan in her *thumri* personally caters to all her patrons by engaging with them in her dance. There appears to be a contradiction in the lyrics and the general mood of the scene. While the mood of the scene is playful, she is blaming her patrons for her ill repute. She sings that her '*dupatta* has been taken away by her patrons present at the *mujra*'[316]. *Dupatta* is a drapery that protects the dancers from the male gaze and replaced the veils used previously in dances.[317] Further she sings that 'Don't believe me ask the merchant who sold me this *dupatta'* further 'ask the dyer who dyed it pink'. Pink here is significant because she is in the Pink Palace, wearing a pink dupatta currently and she reinforces that her patrons are taking away her modesty at the moment. In the subsequent stanzas, she says "Don't believe me but ask these men (merchant, dyer, and soldier)". This could be interpreted in two ways: first, a woman's truthfulness must be established by a man, and second, as she is a *Tawaif*, no one is going to believe her.

The last *mujra* is the most tragic one in the film. After Sahibjan refuses to marry Salim, she returns to the *kotha* and compares it to a graveyard and a *Tawaif* to a corpse. She receives a letter from Salim who, heartbroken by rejection, decides to marry the girl his family chooses for him. He invites Sahibjan to perform at his wedding. As opposed to the colorful sets of previous *mujras*, this one appears to be relatively white but still opulent. Sahibjan also wears white which, as discussed, symbolizes purity and mourning. She retains her veil. A huge gathering of men watches Sahibjan as she performs. No woman except for Nawabjan and Sahibjan can be seen in the presence of men. One can observe women admiring Sahibjan's dance from behind the curtains. This has a lot to do with the gaze. 'Respectable women' were not allowed to be present before a gathering of men, at least without a burqa. The 'chaste wife' vs the *Tawaif* rhetoric is applicable here. Salim seems uncomfortable with the setting and leaves when he could not bear to look at Sahibjan dance in front of men. The moment he leaves, Sahibjan breaks the glass lamp and starts dancing hysterically on it.[318] Her feet getting injured is symbolic of the pain she endured because of her love for Salim. She destroys her feet which Salim adored, and, in turn, her ability to dance. This can be interpreted as her shedding two vital aspects of her personality – her dream of being loved by Salim and her identity as a *Tawaif*. She expresses her pain and agony through the lyrics, "It is bad for someone with an eager heart to love […] your arrow like glances wounded my heart […] Tonight, the atmosphere of love seems fatal, and I shall see the dawn if I make it out alive". The *mujra* ends when Nawabjan

[314] Figure 11
[315] See Vanita see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byD2IMB8TgA
[316] All the translations in the essay are done by me.
[317] Walker (2004), pp. 183-187.
[318] Figures 12 and 13.

reveals that Sahibjan is Shahbuddin's daughter. Sahibjan uses performance to express herself but has a troubled relationship with it. She perceives her artistic talents as a binding agent to the life in *kotha* which she is desperately trying to escape.

"*Dil cheez kya hai, aap meri jaan lijiye*" (my heart is nothing, take my life)[319] "*In aankhon ki masti ke, mastaane hazaaron hain*"[320] (my beautiful eyes have thousands of admirers). These two *mujra*s are immortalized in the memory of Indian cinema viewers. These first two *mujra*s from *Umrao Jaan* were extremely famous and well-received. Choreographed by famous classical *Kathak* dancers, these two *mujra*s in *Umrao Jaan* reflect Umrao's self-confidence and awareness about her intoxicating sensuality that can draw anyone towards her. In the next two *mujras*, she sings about her plight and the tragedy that encircles her life. She performs '*justaju jiski thi..usse na paaya humne'* (I could not get the one I desired) at the birth ceremony of Nawab Sultan's son. Incidentally, Nawab ends up marrying the girl (Ramdeyi) who was kidnapped with Umrao but sold to his mother as a servant. The past of Ramdeyi just like Umrao's was erased, but still, she could marry Nawab Sultan. This is because Sultan's mother was impressed by Ramdeyi's commitment to her well-being and since Ramdeyi has been with his mother all her life, her sexual chastity was assumed. Ramdeyi is friendly, and almost envious of Umrao's talents and praises her ghazals. The last *mujra* is rather tragic, where Umrao performs at her hometown Faizabad and asks "What place is this?" Unlike Sahibjan, Umrao keeps on performing despite her desire to be wedded. She maintains her individuality and is resilient. In *Umrao Jaan,* performance has artistic value. This also sets it apart from the other two films as Muhammad Hadi Ruswa was capturing the time before the Revolt when Reformist intervention in the performing world was minimal. The Reformist stigmatiza

The first *mujra* in *Devdas* takes place right after Devdas is introduced to Chandramukhi. The *mujra* is called '*Kaahe chhede*' (why tease me?)[321] and is choreographed by Birju Maharaj from the Kalka-Binadin group of Lucknow. The *mujra* takes place within an ornate *kotha.* The inside of the *kotha* has elements from temple architecture like the pillared pavilion with temple carvings but the outside is Islamicate with the dome and turets. Chandramukhi wears a *lehenga choli*[322] and the *Kathak* dance includes plenty of *abhinaya* (acting) element that makes her performance a dance-drama. The lyrics are taken from Hindu mythology, a playful scene from the life of Lord Krishna. Radha, the lover of Lord Krishna, is complaining to his mother about how he teases Radha, doesn't listen to her, and took her honour. In the song, Chandramukhi is Radha and Krishna is Devdas. Her performance is devoid of swaying of the hips and the movements are crisp and precise. The erotic element is very subtle and implied only in the lyrics and *abhinaya*. The *mujra* consists of pure *kathak.* However, Devdas gets up in the middle of the *mehfil* and leaves. When questioned by Chandramukhi, he says 'dancing in front of men is shamelessness'. This stigma attached to dancing in front of men from the novel reflects

[319] See Fig. 14.
[320] See Figs 15 and 16.
[321] See Fig 17.
[322] Lehenga choli is a traditional Indian wear consisting of a blouse and a skirt usually worn by women in Rajasthan, Haryana, and Bihar. Today, it is worn mostly by brides and on festivities as traditional wear.

Reformist attitudes. Even though classical dance around the 1900s was being 'redeemed' as respectable, it is unlikely that all the members of the upper caste would have accepted it.

The second *mujra* '*Maar Daala*' (It killed me) is choreographed by Saroj Khan. Saroj Khan is known for choreographing *mujra* and adding eroticism to her choreographies. If one is to look at this *mujra*, it is quite visible. The movements are slow and graceful. The *mujra* is more Islamicate in terms of lyrics and costumes. Chandramukhi wears an ornate green color Anarkali[323] suit and doesn't wear a *bindi*[324] giving her an Islamicate appearance. The most magnificent dance performance in the film is the song called '*Dola re Dola*' (swayed) in which Chandramukhi and Paro come together to dance at *Durga Puja*. As analyzed previously, in Tantrism and Shaktism, all women are to be treated equally and with respect. The *Tawaif* and chaste wife coming together in the performance together at Durga puja symbolizes equality. The piece is again choreographed by Saroj Khan and was the film's ticket to fame. The song is extremely popular. Here we see the blurring of caste-class lines between Chandramukhi and Paro as they dance together and sing about the omnipresence of their beloved. They are wearing the same saree and there are no indicators of inequality visually. However, the lyrics spell out the chaste wife and *Tawaif* dichotomy. While Paro says, "I will wear my anklets" Chandramukhi says, "I will wear my *ghungroo* (dancing bells)". Dancing bells tie Chandramukhi back to the *kotha*. *Ghungroo* is often used as a symbol of entrapment, especially in the context of a *kotha*. This is how their identity is separated. In one of the lines, Paro urges Chandramukhi to wear vermillion which is the sign of a married woman and can't be worn by *Tawaifs*. The euphoric equality ends soon when Chandramukhi's identity is revealed by Paro's stepson-in-law and she leaves.

Ghungroo is used as a symbol of entrapment in the *kotha* also in *Pakeezah*. When Sahibjan expresses her anxiety to her friend Dibban about the note that Salim left at her feet, Dibban tells her that the note was left at her feet only because she was not wearing her ghungroo.

6.8 Individuality/agency of the Tawaif

In all the three films, Tawaifs are shown in conflicted situations because of their identities as Tawaifs, however, their attitude towards these situations determines whether they had agency or not.

Pakeezah reflects the possibility of *Tawaifs* internalizing the bias against them. Out of the three *Tawaifs* analyzed in this chapter, Sahibjan definitely is the most passive and drifts away from the independent *Tawaifs* analyzed so far in the literature and films. As the narrative progresses, she becomes more ashamed, and confused and indulges in self-pity. Sahibjan

[323] Anarkali derives its name from a courtesan in Akbar's court called Anarkali or pomegranate's bud. She was later murdered due to her illicit relationship with Jahangir. Several other courtesan genre films like Anarkali (1928) and Mughal-e-Azam (1960) depict this relationship. The dress is a frock-style flowy dress paired with tight leggings and a dupatta. This dress is a typical Tawaif dress and is worn by traditional Kathak dancers today.
[324] Bindi is a dot worn by Hindu women between the eyebrows and it is a sign of auspiciousness.

thought of herself as unworthy of Salim's love because she was a *Tawaif*. At the same time, she yearned for his love and union with him. She expresses herself through *mujras* which gives her agency. Control over her art makes her who she is and provides her with a livelihood. In the analysis of the *mujras* in *Pakeezah*, it was only after she falls in love with Salim, that she desires to change her identity and even shed those aspects of her personality which make her a *Tawaif*. She becomes sad, aloof, and conflicted when she stops dancing and singing. Conversely, she stops dancing because she feels trapped and wants to escape. In *Pakeezah*, the only control Sahibjan has is over her performance which in turn, constrains her. Sahibjan, is thus a passive *Tawaif* figure.

Umrao is an assertive, resilient, and talented *Tawaif*. She is aware of her literary talents and uses them to bond with Nawab Sultan. Unlike Sahibjan who is victimized by her *Tawaif* identity, Umrao is just a victim of circumstances. Umrao does not change or become obsessive in love but accepts her fate with grace and dignity. She commands the respect of both men and women for her artistic talents. However, she is shamed due to her identity as a *Tawaif* on two occasions. First, at Nawab Sultan's friend's house by a female caretaker, and then by his friend's wife. Umrao leaves the house and asks Nawab Sultan to meet her at the *kotha* if he wants to continue the relationship. She gives him an ultimatum which shows agency. The second time, she faces rejection from her brother who tells her, "You have ruined our family's reputation and should have died instead". This is ironic because Umrao is treasured for her artistic brilliance but being from a 'respectable' family, she should have become a wife to be accepted by society instead of a *Tawaif*. Umrao walks out of there and the last scene shows Umrao looking in the mirror. The mirror here reflects the duality of Umrao's life. She fulfilled her destiny as a *Tawaif* by being famous but not as a 'respectable woman' or Ameeran (her former self)

Chandramukhi is an astute *Tawaif* who does not attach any kind of shame to her profession. Throughout the film, she is devoted and tries to morph into the 'chaste wife' character while being fully aware that she can't be one. After the '*Dola re Dola'* song when she is shamed by Paro's step-son-in-law for being a *Tawaif*, she retaliates and says that '*Tawaif*'s *kothas* are popular because of *Thakurs*[325] and *Thakurs* have left generations of children in the *kothas* as a sign of their decadence'. She urges everyone to look at her like a woman and says there's nothing wrong with her being friends with Paro. The ultimate act of defiance is when she stops Paro's stepson-in-law from slapping her and slaps him instead. This scene created an image of a strong and resilient woman and is the closest image of the descriptions of *Tawaifs* analyzed so far in this study. It is also noteworthy that Chandramukhi, like Khanum Jan, holds men accountable for her misery. It also reflects the emotional detachment from her profession and humanizes her character. She perceives work as work and does not attach any value judgment to it. Her profession is thriving because there's a demand for her work. In another dialogue, she tells Devdas, "I have done the trade of love many times but loved only once". This dialogue also has the same humanizing effect separating her profession from her personal feelings.

[325] Upper-caste Hindu men from zamindari background.

6.9 Religion and money

In all three films, *Tawaifs* are not shown as having any direct relationship with money. It is the *chaudhrayan* that handles her finances and deals with clients. She determines the amount of money the patrons must pay and negotiates with them. This is in line with Kamasutra establishing that the *Ganika* should have no direct relationship with money. That is also a reason why money became secondary in all three films, the central narrative ran along the lines of love and chastity. Also, it is important to note that *chaudhrayans* do not inhibit any guilt or stigma for running the *kothas*. For example, in *Umrao Jaan*, when Ameeran is sold to her *kotha*, she says that the men who sold Ameeran to her should feel guilty. Khanum Jan holds that if Ameeran was not sold to her, she would be sold somewhere else, and at least at her *kotha* Ameeran would be safe. To an extent, *Chaudhrayans* do extend mother-like protection to the *Tawaifs* and that aids in building a family-like environment at the *kotha*. However, the intentions of *chaudhrayan* remain unclear. Both in *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan*, *chaudhrayan* is often concerned and caring but at the same time strict and practical.

Religion in all three films plays a marginal role. The stigma attached to *Tawaifs* is not sanctioned or in any way related to any religion but rather it is a social construct. The reading of the films in this analysis is more in cultural terms; however, it uses religion as a category to reinforce *Tawaifs* as representative of Hindustani culture.

Sahibjan in *Pakeezah* could be characterized as a Muslim *Tawaif*. All the characters in the film hail from a Muslim background. The Islamic element is reinforced through Islamic-style weddings, graveyards, and symbolism. The dialogues are mostly in the ornate Hindustani language.

Umrao Jaan evokes nostalgia for the *kothas* in the 19th-century Lucknow and *Nawabi* culture. The dialogues and *ghazals* are written in Urdu. However, the education Umrao receives is quite diverse. Along with education in Quran through Maulvi Sahab (Muslim cleric), she also receives an education in cultural arts.

Chandramukhi falls under the category of a Hindu *Tawaif*. She defies the Hindu nationalist's argument of viewing *Tawaifs* as 'foreign and Muslim'. The religious element is quite strong in Devdas as we see a temple within the *kotha* complex, and Chandramukhi prays several times to Devi Ma[326]. Before the *Durga Puja* scene, Paro is informed by her mother-in-law that the idol of Durga is made from the soil of the *Tawaif*'s *kotha*. This confirms the auspiciousness and religious significance of the *Tawaifs*. Chandramukhi is a quintessential representation of the Hindustani culture as her repertoire of skills incorporates *ghazal*, *shayari* (poetry), classical *Kathak* as well as semi-classical *Kathak*, and *thumri* in Braj. While the 'Muslim' *Tawaif* does not wear *bindi*, Chandramkukhi is shown wearing a *bindi* many times.

[326] Devi Ma is a generic term used for Hindu mother goddesses.

6.10 Overstepped domesticity and conclusions

Domesticity in these films can be equated with respectability. The Victorian family model established in colonial India was upheld and nurtured in post-colonial India as well. This Victorian model of the family in India consisted of a stereotypical heteronormative family with husband-wife, their children, and other auxiliary relatives (grandparents or husband's siblings, etc.). This new domesticity espoused class-caste proximity and the utilitarian needs of the family (hereditary succession through sons) and marginalized pleasure. Woman's role as mother and wife was upheld.[327] Also, the familial network was based on blood relationships. As we already discussed that this model of family was the subject of many Bollywood films. A *kotha* depicted in the films does not adhere to these standards. Hence, there is a marginalization of strong family-like relationships established in the *kotha* within the film narrative. The narrative barely emphasizes female friendships or *chaudhrayan-tawaif* (mother-daughter-like) relationships and it is merely mentioned in passing, thus getting missed.

Salim's grandfather tries to shoot Nawabjan when Sahibjan's true identity as Shahbuddin's daughter is revealed by her. He believes that Nawabjan is trying to humiliate his family in public. The old patriarch, however, accidentally shoots his own son. As a token of redemption and to honour Shahbuddin's last wishes, Sahibjan is accepted as Salim's bride by his grandfather. While no reference was made to Nargis' (Sahibjan's mother's) past, Sahibjan's history and her connection to Shahbuddin make her eligible to be accepted in the same family. This is noteworthy because this drags Sahibjan from the status of being a detached free woman and places her within a familial relationship. The overstepped domesticity of her singing and dancing in public can now be overlooked. Her chastity as '*Pakeezah*' is restored, and respectability is established. Her transformation into a 'chaste wife' status is complete with her being married. It is noteworthy that the woman Salim is set to marry appears nowhere in the narrative. We don't know who she is or if she is a 'chaste wife'. Even on the day of her wedding, she does not resist her husband marrying someone else nor appear on the screen. This makes a case for the passivity of women who were not *Tawaifs*. She is just expected to accept her fate.

Umrao's respectability is established through her own talents but is corrupted by her association with the *kotha*. The point that needs to be stressed is Ameeran was to get married before she was kidnapped, she was barely a teenager and uneducated. The chaste wife-*Tawaif* dichotomy is reinforced by reflecting on Umrao's own past. Her own reflection at the end creates this dichotomy. In Umrao Jan, one truly sees the process of humanizing the *Tawaif* through her emotions (jealousy, anger, pleasure, and joy).

Caste-class dynamics play a huge role in being domesticated in Devdas. A woman had to belong to a high caste to be eligible to be Devdas' wife. Paro's mother's *Tawaif* background makes her daughter ineligible to marry Devdas despite the fact that Paro's father was also a *zamindar*.[328]

[327] See Banerjee (2010).
[328] Zamindars were upper-caste landholders.

Thus, this chapter shows how overstepping domesticity is equivalent to the loss of respectability. If one is to chronologically analyze the films according to the time frame they are set in, the synchronization of Victorian morality and nationalist aspiration becomes visible. *Umrao Jaan* is set in pre-rebellion Lucknow but written in 1899 when reformist sentiment became prominent. Thus, we see the duality where *Tawaif* is being valued for her skills and being shamed for overstepping domesticity. Ruswa, in the novel, is sympathetic toward the plight of *Tawaifs* but at the same time is conditioned by nationalist-reformist ideologies. The film sticks to the details in the novel and therefore, reflects the same duality of *Tawaif*'s plight. *Devdas* is set in the 1900s Colonial Bengal when reformist-nationalism reached its peak and clearly reflects the class-caste complexities and its entanglement with conjugality. It comments on a society that is governed by logic, rationalism, and utilitarian needs as opposed to emotions and pleasure. Hence, conjugal relations must adhere to the utilitarian needs of reproduction, succession, and maintaining caste purity as opposed to marrying for love. Transgressions lead to chaos, anarchy, and doom in a man's life. It reflects on the dangers of alcoholism and letting emotions supersede rationality constructed through societal norms. Chandramukhi is the antithesis of this rationality and that is why she fails to enter domesticity. There is also a general disdain toward performing arts, despite the dance revival movements. It is important to note that even today, there are cases where performing arts are not deemed suitable for women belonging to 'the upper caste' families as it is not considered respectable. Finally, *Pakeezah* reflects conflicted attitudes toward performing women and arts in post-independence India. It reflects on what position women were to hold in a newly independent nation. Conjugality and sexual fidelity occupy a central place in the narrative and being married was equated with harmony. This narrative is pushed even today in the Indian public discourse where marriage and domesticity are seen as the goal and the way of securing respectability, especially for women. The *Tawaifs* of the time very much resonate with independent working women today who are not seen as complete until they are married.

Appendix

Figure 11: Dupatta Mera mujra from Pakeezah (1971), A screenshot from Pakeezah (1971)

Figure 12: Last mujra from Pakeezah at Salim's wedding, A screenshot from Pakeezah (1971)

Figure 13: Sahibjan dances on broken glass shedding her ability to dance and her Tawaif identity, A screenshot from Pakeezah (1971)

Figure 14: Umrao performing 'Dil Cheez Kya Hai, A screenshot from Umraao Jaan (1981)

Figure 15: Umrao performing 'In Aankhon ki Masti' and engaging with the Nawabs. Khanum Jan sitting in the corner and smoking hookah. A screenshot from Umraao Jaan, 1981.

Figure 16: Umrao singing and dancing (close up), A screenshot from Umrao Jaan (1981)

Figure 17: Chandramukhi performing Kaahe Chhede, A screenshot from Devdas (2002)

Figure 18: A glimpse of Chandramukhi's kotha space, A screenshot from Devdas (2002)

Figure 19: Chandramukhi performing Maar daala, A screenshot from Devdas (2002).

CONCLUSION

The thesis demonstrates continuities between the ancient Indian institution of *Ganikas* and pre-Modern *Tawaifs* and highlights the evolution of the institution. The microhistorical study of *Tawaifs* throws light on the cultural arts that were developed and nurtured by them and eventually got delinked from them. It also highlights a major paradigmatical shift that ushered in with the coming of the British. The imposition of Victorian morality was legitimized through law, but it was also a very subtle psychological process. British colonialism rests on the assumption that Indians were incapable of governing themselves and that it was the duty of the British to help India modernize. The assumed barbarity of India by the British mostly was linked to the customs and traditions that oppressed Indian women. As per the British, Indian women needed protection from Indian men and the religious customs that oppressed them. There was this sudden narrative of 'primitiveness' and 'barbarism' that the newly emerging English-educated Indian middle class internalized. This motivated the Social Reform Movements in the 19th century trying to reform women's position in Indian society. It is noteworthy, how in this narrative of 'protecting' and 'reforming', the passivity of Indian women is assumed. This study of *Tawaifs* makes a case for the agency of Indian women. Not only does it counter the assumed passivity of Indian women by the British colonizers who actively tried to victimize, exoticize, and at the same time oppress Indian women themselves, but also shows how *Tawaifs* were not always victims but could subvert patriarchy. The cultural arts (music, dance, and poetry) in the discussion are tools that gave them their agency. Speaking in a very modern sense, financial independence, and control over their arts paired with institutionalized mechanisms (*kotha*), where women support each other and are trained to be confident, must have made it easier for them to subvert both colonial and native patriarchy. Also, *Tawaifs* did not carry the baggage of their family's reputation, which women from middle-class households did.

The *Tawaifs* became problematic when the masculinity of Indian men was challenged. The charge of inability to self-govern, effeminacy, and oppression of women by the British motivated Indian men to take charge and "reform". Since the British superiority in the 'material realm' (i.e statecraft, sciences, military, industrial, and economic growth) could not be challenged, the 'spiritual realm' represented by domesticity and ideal family became a zone that Indian men could claim their own superiority in. The 'spiritual realm' became a marker of Indian distinctiveness. On one hand, the spiritual realm was to be 'classicized' by linking it to 'tradition'. On the other hand, classicization required changes to counter the charges against barbarity.[329] The thesis shows how traditions were conditioned by Victorian morality.

This process is demonstrated by studying *Tawaif's* relationship with *Kathak* dance. Indian distinctiveness was also marked out by the superiority of Indian cultural arts like dance and music. That is one of the reasons why the 'classicization' of Indian arts became an important part of Indian nationalism. We examine how *Tawaif's* influence was purged from the

[329] Chatterjee (1989), p.627

Kathak dance. First, an unbroken continuity with the Natyasastra (tradition) was forged and second, the erotic elements were removed to make the dance "pure". *Tawaifs* were a threat to a spiritual realm because they did not figure in the ideal model of domesticity, and instead challenged it. *Tawaifs* were also the only women practitioners of cultural arts. Thus, opposing the institution of *Tawaifs* served Indian men in two ways: first, the threat to Indian domesticity was removed and second, cultural arts could now be appropriated and be practiced by 'chaste' women.

In the new notions of Indian womanhood, middle-class woman's role as a mother and a wife was espoused. To go back to *Kamasutra*, a woman's role as a wife and mother catered to the functional needs of reproduction and *Ganika*/*Nayika* were the locus of pleasure and sensuality. The new domesticity did maintain continuities with the Kamasutra in terms of the reproductive role of wives, however, pleasure took a back seat. Sex became clandestine to cater to Victorian morality. Sex and expression of sexuality became taboo, and the husband-wife relationship became more contractual/functional. The removal of *Tawaifs* from the public sphere testifies to the expression of sexuality as immoral. Since *Tawaifs* were public women and were not given the same 'patriarchal' protection as middle-class women, their marginalization set an example for the dangers of transgressing the new patriarchy. They could be assimilated into the 'respectable' society through marriage or proven chastity. The emphasis on their sexuality overshadowed all other aspects of her personality. It is also telling of how the need to control women's sexuality occupied a central position in the new domesticity.

This kind of duality was represented in the Hindi films. That is why they have been deeply analyzed as a major part of the dissertation. It shows how notions of respectability were conditional and sexuality was considered dangerous. Any expression of sexual desires beyond the marital framework was depicted as immoral and led to chaos. The three case studies in the thesis and many other films demonstrate this. While it is simplistic to assume that these films were a true representation of society in the post-independence area, it is true that they shaped the mindset of people in a newly independent nation. For formerly colonized Indians, these films articulated and shaped the vision of what free Indian society must look like. Domesticity and household, the smallest unit of the nation, are something close and personal, and most Indians are/were bound to each other through domestic networks. Thus, Hindi cinema reinforcing a certain kind of domesticity ultimately ended up becoming the favored model of domesticity. Thus, by studying *Tawaif's* representation in Hindi cinema, this thesis demonstrates the articulation of middle-class domesticity conditioned by Victorian morality. The long-term impact of Victorian morality can be gauged through the obsession with marriage in the Indian public sphere and this pressing desire to be within the domestic household model.

In the current changing social structure of Indian society, in a very feminist sense, the figure of *Tawaif* could fit neatly into the framework of the 'strong and independent working woman' model. However, if one is to start discussions about *Tawaifs* with a common person, her sexuality would be the first thing that would be pointed out. The word 'Tawaif' is not a respectable term, it is used for frivolous women or for prostitutes. The cultural significance of the institution is not known beyond the confines of academia. This microhistorical study of

Tawaifs highlights and shows their contribution at every stage of Indian history with the hope of humanizing *Tawaifs* and keeping their memory alive. It also hopes to give *Tawaifs* and other women, whose contribution has been wiped out, their due share in history.

Glossary

Arthasastra: Arthasastra is an ancient Indian Sanskrit treatise attributed to Chanakya who was on politics, political economy, statecraft, and military strategies.

Begum: Begum was a title used for wives of elite Muslims.

Braj: Brajbhasha is a dialect of Hindi primarily used in the Braj region which includes some parts of Uttar Pradhesh and Rajasthan

Burqa: Burqa is a long cloak usually worn by Muslim women over their regular garments to protect themselves from the male gaze. Now considered a symbol of oppression in general Indian discourse and the practice of the burqa is seen as archaic

Chaudhrayan: Chaudhrayan was an older woman (usually a former Tawaif) who was the authoritative figure in the kotha. She managed the expenses, disbursed salaries, and made major decisions about the kotha. She was also responsible for training and recruiting Tawaifs. She could be compared to a male breadwinner of a middle-class household. For more, See Oldenburg (1990)

Domini: Dominis were performing women from Dhadi caste and they excelled in Dhrupad

Dhrupad: Dhrupad is a Hindustani classic genre, and it connotes structured songs.

Ganikas: *Ganika* was the chief courtesan in Ancient India and was the predecessor of the Tawaif form of Indian courtesan.

Ghazal: Ghazal is a form of Arabic poetry (an ode) and it consists of rhyming couplets mostly 7-12 in number. It was popularized by Sufi mystics in India during the Sultanate period, and it is associated with elitist culture in the Indian public sphere today.

Hindustani culture: Hindustani culture is a syncretic blend of Indian music, poetry, dance, and language with Persian elements.

Jatakas: Jatakas are a compendium of stories written in Pali that narrates stories from the life of Buddha. The literal meaning of Jatakas is birth and they are an important source to deduce the teachings of Buddha.

Kathak: *Kathak* is a classical Indian dance form prominent in North India. In its 'unclassical' form it was part of Tawaif's mujra and was performed by Tawaifs.

Khayal: *Khayal* was one of the most preferred Hindustani music genres of the Mughal emperor. The meaning of the word means thought or imagination. In *Khayal*, melodic notes are highly embellished.

Kotha: *Kothas* were accommodation of *Tawaifs* where they often met with the clients. *Kotha* was a hierarchical institution that was under the control of a *chaudhrayan* who was at the helm of the institution and was the commanding figure. *Kotha* was also a relatively free space where caste and religious boundaries mattered little and all those who could afford the material demands of the Chaudhrayan were welcomed.

Mehfil: Mehfil connotes a gathering of men who consider themselves connoisseurs of the fine arts (music, dance, and poetry) and enjoy performances by the Tawaifs. The performers could interact with the men of high social status intimately in *mehfils* which nurtured Indo-Persian musical and dance traditions.

Mujra: Mujra is a way of communication between a single female and her male audience through artful gestures and the presentation of the Tawaif as a desirable female. She alters her performance according to the response she receives from her patrons in the form of gestures or material rewards. See Qureshi in Feldman and Gordon (2006), p.318-324

Natyashastra: Natyashastra, the authoritative ancient Indian treatise on dance, music, theatre, and aesthetic pleasure (rasa) was written by Sage BharataMuni and claims to have divine origins. It is dated between 200 and 300 CE

Nautch: Nautch is an anglicized version of the word *'naach'* which means dance. Nautch girls was the word used to refer to the Tawaifs.

Nayika: Nayika is the lead heroine in a dance drama. The word is used to refer to Ganikas/Tawaifs when they are performing.

Nawabs: The new rulers of Awadh state were the governors also known as Nawabs. The culture associated with Nawabs is Nawabi.

Rasa: Rasa connotes the energy that human emotions possess and there are 9 rasas that must be balanced by a human for their well-being and health. Shringara rasa is considered the queen of rasas and it represents beauty, union, and love.

Thumri: Thumri is a light classical dance song with an evocative text.

Urdu: Urdu is a blend of Persian and North and Northwestern Indian dialects that became widespread during the period. *Urdu* became highly ornate and laden with Persian idioms and vocabulary. The use of Urdu became associated with politeness, good manners, upbringing, and education.

Veshya/Vesya: Vesyas were just sex workers and lower in the hierarchy than Ganikas.

Qawwali: Qawwali comes from the root Arabic word Qaul which means affirmation and Qawwali is a devotional Sufi singing.

Qiyans: Qiyans were slave girls from Baghdad who possessed a variety of skills like singing, poetry, mastery of musical instruments, calligraphy, and shadow puppetry. By virtue of being slaves, they had to provide sexual services to their owners, but they were more expensive to maintain. Acquisition of Qiyans took place through trade or conquest and was chosen based on their physical beauty, level of skills, and country of origin.

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