

**PRECARIOUS CONTROL, ANXIOUS DESIRE:  
COURTESANS AND EMERGING PUBLICS IN LATE  
COLONIAL INDIA**

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## **Declaration**

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## Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Certificate	ii
Acknowledgement	iii
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction—The Courtesan and Colonial Modernity: Theoretical Considerations</b>	<b>1-40</b>
1.1 Research Objectives	2
1.2 Existing Frameworks Courtesan Histories	4
1.3 Courtesans and Colonial Patriarchy: “Lifestyle as Resistance”?	9
1.4 Subject, Power and Government: A Theorisation	15
1.5 Courtesans, Colonial Modernity and Patriarchy	17
1.6 Producing Subjects: Butler’s Performativity	21
1.7 Situating Popular Culture	23
1.8 Sources	31
1.9 The Case of Hyderabad	32
1.10 Chapterisation	34
<b>Chapter 2: Governing Obscenity: Courtesans, Legality and Morality</b>	<b>41-78</b>
2.1 Obscenity and Colonial Governmentality	42
2.2 Obscene Words, Obscene Thoughts	43
2.3 The Diseased Courtesan	47
2.4 Courtesan and the Nation	54
2.5 Desiring the Courtesan	61
2.6 The Case of the Bar Girls of Maharashtra: A Reprise	64
2.7 Conclusion	74
<b>Chapter 3: ‘Real’ Courtesans in Fictive Worlds: Narratives of Literature and Films</b>	<b>79-115</b>
3.1 Reality and Representations	80
3.2 Flora Annie Steel’s <i>The Potter’s Thumb</i>	83
3.3 Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa’s <i>Umrao Jan Ada</i> and <i>Junun-i-Inteza</i>	92
3.4 Binodini Dasi’s <i>Amar Jiban</i>	102
3.5 Shyam Benegal’s <i>Mandi</i> : New Dispensations	107
3.6 Conclusion	111

<b>Chapter 4: From the <i>Mehfil</i> to the Drawing Room: Music, Courtesans, and Constructions of the Classical</b>	<b>116-156</b>
4.1 Towards an Indian Music: Constructing the Classical	118
4.2 The Exclusions of Respectability: from the <i>bai</i> to the <i>tai</i>	124
4.3 The Courtesan's <i>Thumri</i>	126
4.4 The Courtesan Singer, Rehabilitated	129
4.5 Songs in the Drawing Room	135
4.6 Courtesan Singers on the Gramophone	140
4.7 Listening to the Courtesan	142
4.8 Conclusion	151
 <b>Chapter 5: Plural Visibilities: Courtesan and Photography</b>	 <b>157-195</b>
5.1 The Courtesan in Early Colonial Photography	161
5.2 Courtesans and <i>Zenana</i> Women	163
5.3 A Community of Performers	167
5.4 Private Encounters	172
5.5 The Courtesan and Studio Portraiture	174
5.6 Structures of Intimacy	177
5.7 Tradition, Modernity and the Culture Commodity	179
5.8 Metaphor of Transformation	185
5.9 Indoobala's Scrapbook: Contexts of 'Respectability'	188
5.10 Conclusion	192
 <b>Chapter 6 Conclusion—Re-framing the Courtesan: Summations and Some Further Questions</b>	 <b>196</b>
List of Illustrations	207
Glossary of Hindi/Urdu Terms	211
Bibliography	214
Plagiarism Statistics Report	

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **The Courtesan and Colonial Modernity: Theoretical Considerations**

The title of this thesis juxtaposes the broadly differentiated, but connected and dynamic relations of patriarchal control and desire that emerge around the courtesan's body variously through legislations, mandates, discourses of morality, and commodity-based modern cultural forms like printed literature, gramophone, and photography in late colonial India. The heterogeneous publics that emerge around the new cultural technologies, as well as the practitioners and sponsors, are implicated in modern discourses of respectability, nationalism, and bodily and social hygiene. Simultaneous with the nationalist project of gentrifying cultural practices are disruptions that frustrate attempts at 'reform' and 'decency.' We argue that the domain of mass-produced culture commodities effects intersections between "respectable" and "disreputable" cultural practices, and is constitutively unstable. Moreover, the complicated histories of these engagements show that the notion of the courtesan is being performatively deployed, as a result of which the figure itself is not homogenous and singular in its cultural signification. Rather, it splits into a plurality of articulations, which are often discontinuous with each other.

Many aspects of the erstwhile culturally significant institution of courtesans came to be dismantled in the colonial period, owing primarily to new colonial legislation, and revenue and taxation regulations. Alongside these practices of the colonial state, the emergent indigenous English-educated middle-class also embarked on a project of cultural "reform," whereby they looked to distance themselves from traditions of *nautch*, *mushairas*, *mehfils* (all different types of social soirées), which come to signify for them the decadence of life under Muslim rule. The ban on *nautch* and the social campaign around it in the late nineteenth

century was a precursor to the consolidation of a “classical” tradition of music and dance. At this time, courtesan practices of dance and music came to be deemed vulgar and obscene in discourses of national culture. The nationalist imagination, which emphasised the importance of family and nation, saw the cultural influence of communities of public women like courtesans to be disruptive.

The nationalist project of cultural and social reform, however, is constituted through an internal tension. On the one hand, reformers turned to the possibilities of cultural technologies such as the printing press, photography, gramophone, radio and film to articulate and disseminate their ideas. At the same time, this domain of mass culture is framed by the dynamics of the market of culture commodities. An important effect of this was that the new culture of commodities and mass consumption made the question of censorship urgent as well as one that had no easy solutions. Rather, it came to mark the constitutive instability of these new technologies and form of mass-mediated culture. The association of courtesans with entertainment/performance culture and their existence outside the family structures of patriarchal law translates as them being ‘public’ women. This public status also enables the new intersection between courtesan and modern culture commodities, as they develop new modes of performative citation that invoke their courtesan identity in different ways. However, is the courtesan who sings on the gramophone the same as the courtesan, who performs in *mehfils*, or the one who is exposed to bodily inspections under the Contagious Disease Act, or the one invoked in nationalist discourse? These pluralities are productive and form the context of our research.

## **1.1 Research Objectives**

In this thesis, we argue that courtesans’ “fallen” status must be understood as a historical process of discursive construction and reiteration. We attempt to understand how processes of



‘exclusion’ are implemented through a range of discursive practices, which are never quite complete, and inherently unstable. At the same time, we also look at formations and representations in popular culture that expand our understanding of overlaps between courtesans and modern publics. We aim to write a history of courtesans, which does not simplistically reproduce the narrative of the ‘fallen’ courtesan of colonial India. Rather we foreground the idea that such overarching, homogenised usage of categories/communities is implicated in and needs to be looked at as a function of Power. Any feminist recovery of courtesans, which reproduces the patriarchal dyad of fallen/respectable women, we argue, fails to engage with the productive aspect of Power in its complexity.

We begin with a few questions: is it possible to write a history of courtesans, which moves beyond current frames of victimhood/oppression/obscenity or even resistance? In what way do technologies of mass popular culture produce new performative possibilities for/of courtesans? How does a study of the newer meanings thus produced broaden our understanding of courtesans in particular, and ‘excluded’ women’s communities in general? In addition, how do we contextualise these popular productions within structures of patriarchal power?

Our usage of the term courtesan, much like the various texts accessed from the late colonial period (Steel 1900; Curtis 1905; Dasi 1912) as well as post-colonial narratives about courtesans (Oldenburg 1990; Neville 2009; Morcom 2014), derives from a few variations. These can be loosely characterised as the ‘courtesans’ who cater to high-class patrons, the “nautch girls” who belong to popular performance groups, “tawaifs” who are the courtesans of Lucknow, and ‘singing and dancing girls’ as these women are referred to in administrative documents and tax-ledgers. Even within a given text, these terms are often used synonymously and interchangeably. In relation to their participation in modern cultural practices, we see new performative dimensions of courtesan identity in this period. Also, with

relation to administrative and morality discourses we see an attempted assimilation of functions and meanings of courtesans and prostitutes. This is not to conflate these identities into one, but to indicate that there are overlaps in the discursive construction of these terms of usage in textual as well as visual representations. In the following sections, we will look at the existing histories of courtesans in India before elaborating the theoretical and historical considerations that frame this thesis.

## **1.2 Existing Frameworks of Courtesan Histories**

Academic as well as popular notions about courtesans in post-colonial India may be mapped between two extremes. On the one hand, we have accounts such as Chandra (1976) and Neville (2009) that look to classical Sanskrit texts to recreate a narrative of the cultured courtesans, which extends from golden antiquity to its eventual decline under ‘outside’ influences. On the other hand, texts like Sampath’s (2010) focus on the new celebrity of the courtesan(s), whose talent is supposedly promoted and preserved through typically modern technologies like the gramophone, which ‘save’ them. The courtesan in all these texts is morally debased, ‘lives a life of shame and dies a violent death’ (Chandra) and ‘has a tragic end’ (Sampath). Further, such ideas are reproduced through films like *Pakeezah* (1972), *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006), and *Mandi* (1983).

Even as the courtesan occupies a definitive place in the fantasies of popular culture, there has been a relative lack of extended academic engagement on the subject. In this section, we will briefly discuss some historical writings in an effort to map the anxieties and assumptions that frame the construction of the courtesan in contemporary academic discourse.

As the title makes abundantly clear, Moti Chandra’s *The World of Courtesans: Sensuous Women Who Practiced Love as an Art and Profession* (1976) imagines them

through their associations with sensuality and love. Chandra's history is an exercise in recovery, through various religious and ancient literary texts of the 'glory' of the courtesan of ancient times, who fell into decline post-medieval India and is now motivated by the need to earn a livelihood rather than the pursuit of 'the arts'. He summarises the many roles played by courtesan culture since the Vedic period, until their eventual decline in the medieval period. Alluding to them as a stable community of women with fixed social functions through history, Chandra cites various textual sources to discuss their sexual, ritual and sacred roles. He catalogues the various terms that have been used to refer to courtesans over the ages—like *ganika* and *khumbhadasi*, for instance—and the hierarchies between various sub-communities. He states that, courtesans are women who “served the *baser* needs of society but were also a symbol of culture and *ars amoris*” (Chandra 1).

Chandra also stresses the condemnation of social ostracism faced by courtesans on moral grounds, which is a “common feature of the Smritis and certain Puranas”—for instance, “her person is sold to others for money, while she often meets a violent death” (Chandra 23). For Chandra, such standards of 'morality' and 'shame' are an unvarying feature through history. Such normative constructions, we argue, can be shown to be socially constructed in and through relations of power. Chandra's text only contributes to naturalising and de-historicising the discourse of the courtesan as a category of 'fallen women.' The discourse of moral corruption is accompanied by a history of anxiety towards the “crafty” and “worldly-wise” ways of these women: “...courtesans *tempt(ed)* their lovers, perhaps depriving the rich Aryans of a part of their possessions in cattle and gold” (Chandra 15). For Chandra, the courtesan's primary function is sexual, and determines all other aspects of the social existence of courtesans—ritual, cultural and political. Being problematic in many ways, Chandra's work allows us to map out some enduring naturalised constructions that have come to be established as recurrent motifs in other post-colonial histories of

courtesans—their ‘fallen-ness’, their ancient and medieval cultural lineages, and primarily sexual function.

Pran Neville’s *Nautch Girls of the Raj* (2009) presents a history of the courtesan till the eighteenth century. For Neville, it is the courtesan/nautch girls’ association with dance, which makes her an integral part of Indian heritage and culture, which enchanted even the colonial officers, and has come to be alienated through lack of understanding and ‘outside’ influences on the English-educated classes. Neville’s account presents a contrast to Chandra’s reading, despite a significant overlap in their primary sources. For Neville, courtesans and nautch girls “have contributed to the preservation of Indian classical dance tradition for centuries” (Neville 15), and their “ancient spiritual glory” (Neville 6) of dance and sensual pleasure can be traced to the Vedic texts as well as the *Natyashastra*. For Neville, they are the successors of the *apsaras* who danced and entertained the Gods. In thus situating courtesans within the broader continuum of an ancient Indian cultural tradition, Neville accords a textually derived legitimacy to both courtesans and the tradition of dance. Like Chandra, he too recounts the “auspicious function” and “different incarnations” of courtesans. However, Neville lauds their association with medieval aristocracies (Neville 105), their wealth, and their mastery of arts of performance, love and conversation (Neville 102).

He criticises the new bourgeois class, influenced by Western ideas and education, who had inadvertently become alienated from their “art and cultural traditions” and played a large part in deterioration of the institution of dance in India (Neville 113-123). He bemoans, “The institution of *nautch* dominated the entertainment scene until the end of nineteenth century when the decline began in the wake of the anti-*nautch* campaign” (Neville 5). He adds, “...without understanding the origin and nature of the Indian dance art and mistaking it for a representation of erotic temple sculptures, (they) condemned it as ‘repulsive and immoral’” (Neville 114). Ironically, for Neville, an important indicator of the prestige of the

institution of the *nautch* was that many colonial travellers and officers were enamoured by it and wrote extensively about it. “During the Raj, the sahibs were captivated by the seductive charms of *nautch girls*...(they) sometimes left their groups to become mistresses of wealthy sahibs...The sahibs found that the *nautch girls*...were more than a match for their Western sisters” (Neville 105-106).

In his attempt to rescue the courtesan as artist, Neville draws a clear distinction between “an accomplished professional nautch girl or a *devadasi*, and a common prostitute” (Neville 114). Inverting Chandra’s proposition regarding the relation between the courtesan’s sexual and ritual/cultural functions, Neville argues that the cultural signification of the courtesan and her association with dance acquire primary importance, and her sexual function is but an extension of her role as an entertainer of her male patrons. While this may seem to constitute a break from Chandra’s narrative of courtesan as victim, Neville’s account is equally problematic in that it also traces an authentic Indian tradition of dance that expresses an unvarying cultural essence that can be traced to a classical antiquity. For instance, he finds that “Indian tradition regards sexual desire to be intrinsically divine...the woman is represented as the Primordial Divine Desire, the source of all desires and passions...(and) the *apsaras* were celestial courtesans who offered erotic delights” (Neville 99-100). Where Chandra’s courtesan was a helpless victim of social morality, Neville inverts the construction to produce the courtesan as feminine divinity incarnate.

In contrast to Chandra and Neville’s returns to antiquity, Vikram Sampath’s biographical account *My Name is Gauhar Jan: Life and Times of a Musician* (2010) situates the courtesan in the world of twentieth-century mass-mediated commodity culture. Sampath presents an account of the courtesan Gauhar Jan’s rise to celebrity as a singing star on the earliest gramophone recordings in India. Conscious of the complex overlaps that constitute the domain of popular culture, Sampath goes beyond Gauhar Jan’s recordings to show the

ways in which her fame was consolidated through the circulation of images on matchboxes in Austria, and so on. By situating Gauhar Jan's celebrity and her singing career within the domain of mass-mediated commodity culture, Sampath marks a significant departure from Chandra and Neville, who try to situate the courtesan within a classical aesthetic tradition. This opens up a number of significant questions—why are courtesans like Gauhar Jan amongst the first singers for the gramophone? How did her career as a gramophone singer affect her place in the patronage-based networks of cultural performance that existed alongside the market? Are these two aspects related, and if so, does that support the emancipatory narrative Sampath presents in his biography of Gauhar Jan?

Sampath's Gauhar Jan escapes a life of victimhood that her predecessors led, as she is 'saved' by the modern technology of the gramophone and her new market-mediated celebrity. At the same time, Sampath's account is of a courtesan whose musical accomplishments have been undervalued; of a not-yet modern woman being saved by modern technology, but one whose life nonetheless ends tragically, devoid of money and love. Even as Sampath's account promises to situate the courtesan within the complexities of historical context, his narrative follows a trajectory already charted by the likes of Chandra and Neville—the courtesan symbolises a tragic destiny, of a woman who is unable to escape her "fallen-ness." Thus, on the one hand, Sampath's account opens up the possibility of situating the study of courtesans in relation to the dynamics of modern commodity culture; while on the other, this departure is sustained again by a displaced reiteration of the narrative of the tragic heroine.

This symptomatic reading of Chandra, Neville and Sampath allows us to foreground the constitutive anxieties that these historical accounts try to address. These accounts reveal a tension that frames the construction of the courtesan as a historical subject. On the one hand, they situate the courtesan within the continuum of an authentic classical tradition of the arts,

while on the other each also seems compelled to account for the scandalous overlapping sexual and artistic ‘functions’ of courtesans. Further, it is only by portraying them as “fallen woman” in need of recovery that each of them can render the courtesan as a legitimate historical subject. While Chandra traces a narrative of corruption and decline that extends from the Vedic past into the present, Neville situates a moment of historical break at the emergence of a native, English-educated colonial middle-class. Even Sampath’s biography is able to return to Gauhar Jan only by idealising her as a tragic failure in pursuit of the promise of technological modernity.

### **1.3 Courtesans and Colonial Patriarchy: “Lifestyle as Resistance”?**

Veena Oldenburg, in a 1990 essay, written a result of her study on “social consequences of colonial urbanization in Lucknow” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 259), contests the construction of courtesan as victim by showing courtesan subject formation to be a two way process of ‘repression’ as well as ‘resistance.’ She argues that “the British usurpation of the Kingdom of Awadh in 1856, and the forced exile of the king and many courtiers, had abruptly put an end to the royal patronage for the courtesans...signal(ling) the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 261). She shows how, contrary to “colonial designs,” courtesans commanded influence in native social circles and held large properties. According to her, “In the tax ledgers from 1858-77...they were classed under ‘*singing and dancing girls*’, and were under the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual income of any in the city...” ((italics mine, Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 259). Moreover, “they were also in lists of property and...the value of this part of this booty from war (spoils seized from ‘female apartments’) was estimated to be worth 4 million rupees” (italics mine, Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 259).

The courtesans also appear in the medical records. “The battle to reduce European mortality rates was to be joined at the hygienic front...it became imperative that courtesans

and prostitutes of Lucknow...be regulated, inspected and controlled” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 260). Colonial modernity, according to Oldenburg, reconstituted courtesan culture by re-locating them within the state’s revenue relations, the expanding discourse of disease and moral rehabilitation, and the reorganisation of urban space. Oldenburg points that “it became official practice to select beautiful and healthy specimens from among the *kotha* women and arbitrarily relocate them in the cantonment for the convenience of the European soldiers...It made sex cheap and easy for the men and exposed the women to venereal infection from the soldiers” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 266).

The archive also bears traces of the courtesans’ struggles against an intrusive civic authority that taxed their incomes and inspected their bodies. To circumvent the intrusions of the colonial authorities, they devised “ingenious ways” like keeping two sets of books of their incomes, bribing the local nurse to avoid health inspections, and so on. Oldenburg notes, “The tactics were new, but the spirit behind them was veteran. These methods were imaginative extensions of the ancient and subtle ways the courtesans had cultivated to contest male authority...and added to a spirited defence of their rights against colonial rule” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 261).

Oldenburg goes on to argue that the courtesan came to be situated within the new forces of money and the market—be it as sources of high revenue, or as commercial sex workers: “(the new social structures) *dehumanized* the profession (of the courtesans), stripping it of its cultural function” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 266). Even as she provides a nuanced account of the reconstitution of relations between the courtesans and the colonial state, Oldenburg’s framing of the same through the metaphors of dehumanisation and “courtesan as sex worker,” seems to affirm a simplistic narrative of transition from the pre-colonial moment to the colonial.



Others have tried to complicate this moment of rupture and ‘transition’ brought on by colonialism, showing the ways in which despite its self-descriptions colonial authority remained fragmentary in its reach and erratic in its effectivity as a mode of control of colonial subjects. While we will look at the implementation and significance of the Contagious Disease Act in some detail in the following chapter, some studies (Levine 1994; Ramanna 2000; Heath 2010 and Arondekar, 2009) have noted that there is wide gap between the conceptualisation and the statistical results achieved by these legislations, and they are very scattered in their implementation.

Legislation was geared towards pushing these women out of the urban city spaces into institutionalised red light district areas. Oldenburg argues that this revealed a desire to safeguard the bodies of British soldiers from sexually transmitted diseases, of which the courtesan bodies become carriers: “A greater number of European casualties during the mutiny and rebellion of 1857, it was discovered, were caused by disease rather than in combat...one in every four soldiers was afflicted with a venereal disease. It became clear that the battle to reduce the European mortality rates would now be joined on the hygienic front” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 260). The “diseased body” becomes an object of interest for the colonial authorities: “In 1821, Mr Dickson, the Superintending (sic) Surgeon of the Saugor Field Force, angrily noted his belief that the courtesans were a ‘nest’ of venereal infection. Such resentment by the administrators continued to grow, and as it did, the courtesan’s position as an artist was replaced by a perception of her simply as a prostitute” (Curtis 282). While all these accounts foreground the limits and frustrations of the colonial project of curing and containing the diseased body, there is also a tendency to read the same as instances of native resistance to colonial authority. Oldenburg too, through her recounting of clandestine account keeping and such practices sees these gaps in colonial authority as necessarily implying a moment of resistance. In this thesis, we argue for a more nuanced

understanding of relations of power in the colonial period, and a reading that complicates the simple binaries of repression/resistance.

Oldenburg imagines the courtesan as an emancipatory figure standing outside, and resisting, patriarchal control. And the *kotha* was the space that allowed this freedom: “Here they could be women first...the self-affirming ethos of the *kotha* makes it possible for them to assimilate their newly revised perceptions and behaviour patterns, while living amongst a host of nurturing and supportive women, and without the fear of men” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 271). Oldenburg values the courtesan community for a rather “remarkable inversion in a society that blatantly favours male over females” and argues that they “too are rebelling...against the housewifely stage of life implicitly mandated for all women in both Hindu and Islamic cultural systems.” Describing the ethical principle that constitutes the community of the *kotha*, Oldenburg writes: “the *tawaif* has created a secular meritocracy based on talent and education, accepting Hindu and Muslim alike” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 279). Male residents of the brothels like Chhote Miyan—a male child born in the house of a courtesan and dependent on the women for sustenance—are summoned to testify to the inversion of patriarchal norms within the space of the brothel. In his own words, “My only hope is that I may marry a good woman who has money and who gives me sons who can look after me in my old age...Funny isn’t it, how these women have made life go topsy-turvy” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 262).

Having framed the *kotha* as a space of subversion, Oldenburg reproduces within its safe confines the notion of courtesans as guardians of classical music and dance. She contends, “...they were not only preservers and performers of the high-culture of the court, but they actually shaped the developments in Hindustani music and Kathak dance styles...they commanded great respect in court and in society and association with them bestowed prestige” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 275). Her claims, for instance, that “(their)

patented lifestyles still remain viable modes for women and men to elude the shackles of patriarchy” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 279) need to be evaluated further. In an attempt to valorise the courtesan’s practices of resistance, Oldenburg simplistically reduces patriarchy to the institution of marriage alone.

Through the courtesan’s gaze, Oldenburg approaches the question of the oppression of housewives—as Gulbadan, one of the courtesans, points out, “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*, with control over our bodies and money, and they who suffer the degradation reserved for lowly [*nich*] women” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 271). Elsewhere, she explores the theme of the *kotha* as a space resisting the heterosexual norms of patriarchy. Oldenburg affirms, “Almost every one of the women I interviewed during these many visits claimed that their closest emotional relationships were among themselves... (and) that their most satisfying physical involvements were with other women. They referred to themselves as *chapatbaz*, or lesbians, and to *chapti*, or *chipti*, or *chapatbazi*, or lesbianism... Their explanation for this was that emotions and acts of love are gender-free” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 276). She goes on to argue that “the courtesans have logically ‘constructed’ lesbian existence as a legitimate alternative, just as much as Indian society at large constructs and enforces, through the institution of compulsory marriage, heterosexuality as ‘normative’ behaviour” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 279). She points out that heterosexual relation for most of the courtesans was work, not pleasure. But at the same time, she talks of the “discomfort” or inability of these women to talk about their homoerotic experiences: “there was no other “serious” or “poetic” term for lesbianism... there was no need for a special term for love between two women... In Urdu poetry... homosexual love often passes for heterosexual love” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 276). Oldenburg proposes that “their diffidence to talk about their lesbianism underscores the

thesis that they believe in quiet, but profound, subversion of patriarchal values” (Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle...’ 276).

But what of the problem indicated here—that patriarchal linguistic framework provides no signifier for homosexual love? Is that not a mode of patriarchal exclusion? It is possible to conceive of the homosocial/sexual community of courtesans as introducing a point of rupture within the self-evident constructions of heterosexual normativity. The notion of the “agency” coded into the courtesans as living outside the patriarchal structures, and hence the emancipated other of the ‘house-wife,’ seems to be emerge from a limited questioning of relations of power. However, the homoerotic modes of existence that Oldenburg ‘discovers’ help us raise productive questions about the functioning of patriarchal power, even as the ‘resistances’ of the courtesans need to be critically assessed further.

In *Courtesans, Bargirls and Dancing Boys: The Illicit World of Indian Dance* (2014), Anna Morcom argues that practices associated with courtesans (and later, bar girls and dancing boys or *kothis*) are discursively produced as illicit by framing them as “irrelevant, backward, problems of society and, at best, in ‘need of help’” (Morcom 17). Morcom’s text aims to “bring to light worlds of performing arts hidden from mainstream Indian culture” (Morcom 23). She identifies nationalism as a discourse that operates through a mode of exclusion/inclusion that renders zones like the performing arts—which are “transgressive of patriarchy and other social hierarchies”—form “dangerous zones” (Morcom 204). Further, governmental as well as non-government agencies are engaged in trying to “save” these women, reproducing their identities as “victims” or worse, “problems” (Morcom 20). Morcom argues for “a view of artistic and creative culture that integrates it entirely with social and economic questions of development” (Morcom 206) through questions of livelihood and labour of the practitioners, hence working towards a new kind of legitimacy. Morcom’s work opens up new insights into logic of “exclusion” that situates the courtesans

in relation to the patriarchal ordering of the social. Her emphasis on the social and economic relations within which the cultural practice of bar dancing is embedded is particularly significant. It opens up new ways of thinking through the “transition” from a patronage-based courtesan performance tradition to the modern market of the culture commodity. Her work makes it possible to situate the erstwhile courtesan within the forces of commodity culture, without reverting to the figure of the courtesan as sex worker, and the neat partition between artistic and sexual practices.

#### **1.4 Subject, Power and Government: A Theorisation**

Foucault’s theorisation of subject formation and relations of power opens up the possibility of moving beyond the binaries of repression/resistance through which the courtesan has been constructed as a historical subject. According to Foucault, “The exercise of power is a “conduct of conducts” and a management of possibilities...this power is less a confrontation of adversaries and or their mutual engagement than a question of “government”...the way in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed” (Foucault, *The Essential* 138). Further, power must be understood as a network of relations that interact in different ways: “Power relations are rooted in the whole network of social... The forms and specific situations of the government of some by the others in a given society are multiple, they are superimposed, they cross over, limit and in some cases annul and in some others reinforce each other” (Foucault, *The Essential Foucault* 141).

For Foucault, power is not simply coercive or oppressive: “...it doesn’t only weigh on us as force that says no, it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a *productive* network that runs through the whole social network, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression” (Foucault, *The Essential* 307).

The idea of truth is to be understood as an effect of historical formations of the dyad of power/knowledge. According to Foucault, "...each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth—that is the type of discourses it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault, *The Essential* 316). Consequently, one must study truth effects that are constituted within a specific discursive formation. The objective is "to see how effects of truth are produced within discourses that, in themselves, are neither true nor false" (Foucault, *The Essential* 307).

Following Foucault, we argue that the dominant construction of the courtesan as a "fallen woman" must be understood as a truth effect of a discursive formation that frames its subject in a gesture of recovery. Each of the accounts analysed above situates the courtesan in a teleological narrative, as a tragic supplement to the grand narrative of history. In recruiting the courtesan as a metaphor of the teleology of modernity, such histories render invisible the complex relations of power within which the courtesan is constructed as subject.

Foucault notion of genealogy offers an alternative mode of historical writing that is not premised on the solidity of "objective historical truth," or the promise of teleological redemption. According to Foucault, the writing of a genealogy entails that one must look at the problems of constitution in a historical framework, "instead of referring them back to a constituent object" (Foucault, *The Essential* 306). To do this would be to once again attempt to "historicize the subject" (Foucault, *The Essential* 306) and show its evolution through the course of history. Rather, "genealogy is a form of history that can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects, and so on, without having to make reference to a subject that is transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history." (Foucault, *The Essential* 306). We then look at the how courtesans are 'produced' in the late colonial period through networks of "knowledge, discourses and domains of objects", instead of drawing histories of their 'down-fall' from

erstwhile associations with culture/ tradition and respectability and power in pre-colonial period.

### **1.5 Courtesans, Colonial Modernity and Patriarchy**

The emergence of a new indigenous, English-speaking middle-class in the latter half of the nineteenth century also saw the beginnings of a new anti-colonial nationalist sentiment. Partha Chatterjee (1994) describes the framework of this nationalism as follows: “The subjugated must learn the modern science and arts of the material world from the West in order to match their strengths and ultimately overthrow the colonizer...the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of national culture, its spiritual essence” (Chatterjee 121). Historians of colonial India have described at length the social transformations that accompanied the emergence of this anti-colonial nationalism. The fantasy of the nation that was being consolidated in this moment also invested the Hindu woman with a new ideal of Indian womanhood that could hybridise Western/modern as well as Indian/traditional values in service of the nation as mother and wife. Tanika Sarkar, in her essay, ‘Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal’ (2001) shows how the Aryan Hindu woman became a political resource for Hindu chauvinism, which defined her domestic roles in new precise and scientific ways, and new modes of chastity and ‘*pativrata*’/wifely duties. Chatterjee has also described in detail the reconstitution of the private and the ‘spiritual’ domain as the realm of the modern Indian women, which marked a sphere of Indian superiority, as opposed to the British superiority in the material sphere. Hence, this space becomes an important asset around which national values are ordered.

In *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (2005), Charu Gupta argues that “the discursive management of female bodies was essential to project a civilised and vibrant sectarian Hindu identity and a new nation” (C. Gupta 4). She also explains that “one of the main targets of the Hindu Right has been the representation of women in arts and culture where notions of obscenity/chastity and traditional/modern have come to be contested” (C. Gupta 3). Concerns over “obscenity, sexuality and the ‘other’” (C. Gupta 1) co-mingled in practices that aimed to repress sexuality and mobilise communal loyalties.

The work of Sarkar, Gupta, Chatterjee and Sinha (1995) is useful in understanding the reconstitution of the notion of the middle-class Hindu woman, but it is limited in its scope. For even as they describe the relations between middle-class Hindu men and women, they do not take up in detail the reconstituted relations between them and ‘other’ women. Even as they recognise the limits of such analysis by marking the exclusions that constitute the domain of the national, it leaves undisturbed the question of how to write a history of such ‘excluded’ subjects, such as the courtesan. As we argue in subsequent discussions, the nationalists’ campaign against “immoral” practices and “persons” is not simply an attempt to police public morality and the conduct of women. Rather, they are part of a broader network of signs and practices in the domain of popular culture, presenting a more complex articulation of the logic of exclusion/inclusion through which the space of the nation is constructed and reproduced.

Moreover, the specific location of courtesans also brings into effect the regime of disease and hygiene, in the form of legislations like the Contagious Diseases Act (variously implemented in 1864, 1869 and 1880, and again in 1897) and institutions like cantonment lock hospitals. As we will demonstrate in the Chapter 2, the courtesan women thus come to be constituted within a mode of control significantly different from what has been discussed



by Chatterjee and Sinha with regard to ‘respectable’ women. Beyond the question of sexuality/obscenity, the courtesan is also brought under a regime of medical surveillance: “India would be metastasized into a definitional organism of uncleanness through womanhood...Both sex and disease...required the full power of medical, military and judicial force to control the potential contamination” (Levine 602). Moreover, this concern for disease and hygiene was not exclusive to the colonies—similar project of reforming the “social body” were simultaneously underway in England as well. It is possible to propose that the Indian and British ‘constructions’ of ideal womanhood, were exclusive of each other, informed each other, and they are both directed towards control of women’s bodies.

Thus, instead of taking “woman” to be a homogenous category, it must be thought of as having a dynamic, prescriptive function. Mrinalini Sinha looks to explore the pluralities of gender construction in her book *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Babu’ in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal* (1995). She demonstrates how models of colonial and Indian masculinity cannot be understood as “discrete national cultures...(and) are constitutive of each other” (Sinha 7) and uses “masculinity as a site for understanding the organization of power in colonial India” (Sinha 11). Further, “both ‘Europe’ and the ‘Other’ (Orient) were constructed in the realm of ideas or racial essences, the function of which was to suppress more complicated material” (Sinha 14). She associates the prevalence of the aforesaid racial stereotypes of masculine identities to shifts in material conditions and attitudes. The effeminate *babu* is a well-satirised figure in Bengali art forms like Kalighat paintings (*see* Chapter 2) and even theatre, and “embodied notions about the decline and degeneration” (Sinha 20) of the middle-class public. In contrast, the mainstream ideals of masculinity endorsed qualities like asceticism (Chakravarty 2011). While Sinha is able to theorise the multiple articulations of masculinity in colonial culture in India, the nuanced analysis is not extended to the study of femininities.

Foucault argues that modern forms of government differ from earlier modes of sovereign power in that they are “dominated by the principle of reason of state” (Foucault, *Ethics* 74) and are concerned with “problems of the population” (Foucault, *Ethics* 74), rather than the preservation of state sovereignty. In modern nation-states, accordingly many different types of relations exist between the government and its citizens. There are forms of both ‘upward continuity’, where the citizens effect the practices of governance (like in a democracy), as well as a ‘downward continuity’ where modes of behaviour are passed on to the citizens from the government, as through regulatory bodies like police force or municipality etc. Governance of citizens involves forms of surveillance and control. But within this move towards centralisation of power and formation of the nation state there is the underlying understanding that the state will do what’s best for the people, which is understood as “the reason of the state” (Foucault, *Ethics* 74). Politics, for Foucault, is a triangulation of three elements: sovereignty, disciplining and government. While earlier forms of power—which he describes as sovereignty—are concerned only with adherence to laws, modern forms of governmentality are concerned with the “status of things” and its modes of control and surveillance of citizens work through multiform tactics and institutions of discipline and administrative apparatus. The modes of patriarchal control/desire around the courtesan are to be understood in their governmental aspect as described above.

Foucault stresses that these forms of governmentality emerge in “an age of expansion, free from the great military, political and economic tensions that afflicted the seventeenth century from beginning to end” (Foucault, *The Foucault* 213). Foucault argues that older forms of governance and power are dismantled, which in turn enable the rise of the complex forms of governmentality and consolidation of relatively fixed nation states. To what extent is his theorisation of governmentality and power relevant to understanding the regime of ordering women’s—here, courtesans’—bodies in late colonial India.

On the one hand, administrators in the colonies shared with their metropolitan counterparts a concern for ‘sanitation, health, birth rate’ (Foucault, *Ethics* 74), and the diseased body of the courtesan in particular. On the other, colonial power governed “subjects” rather than “citizens”. This manifested itself most clearly in the “rule of colonial difference.” The historical articulation of this rule of colonial difference saw the emergence of a new indigenous middle-class that looked to establish, through its nationalist cultural politics, a hegemony over the construction of an “Indian modernity.” However, as historians such as Chatterjee have shown, this incipient anti-colonial resistance was constituted around a contradiction between a new nationalist “thematic” that nonetheless framed its liberation in an Orientalist “problematic” (Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought* 36-53). The specificity of inserting governmental practices in a colonial context generates new hybrid formations that resist clear-cut classification as sovereign/governmental power.

The colonial social must itself be understood as built around discontinuous modes of power. We argue that in the specific case of courtesans, there are aspects of the juridical and administrative practices of the colonial state that are best understood through the notion of governmentality. Similarly, rather than seeing the native discourse on various issues like sanitation, health and public decency as framed in the antagonism of coloniser/native (as in Sinha) we argue that there are aspects of morality discourse that are brought into focus through the notion of governmentality as a distinct mode of effecting subjects.

### **1.6 Producing Subjects: Butler’s Performativity**

At the level of the subject, Butler’s idea of “performativity” enables us to understand how discourses “produce the effect they name” (Butler, *Bodies* 2), through “reiterative and citational practices” (Butler, *Bodies* 2). Further, “there is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability” (Butler, *Bodies* 9).

Emphasising the relationship between representation and materialisation, Butler argues, “that reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms... (but) it is the instabilities, the possibilities of re-materialization, opened up by this process that mark the domain in which... (we) call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law” (Butler, *Bodies* 2). For Butler, the possibility of power emerges in the constitutive tension between representation and its materialisation. This simultaneously makes possible the exercise of power, while also rendering it perpetually unstable in its effects.

At the same time, identity categories are reinforced through a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. Butler points out, “... ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life, which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subjects, but those living under the sign of ‘unlivable’...constitute(s) that site of dreaded identification against which—and by the virtue of which the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life” (Butler, *Bodies* 3). However, these excluded social categories which lie *outside* the domain of the ideal subject are, as Butler says, “... ‘inside’ the subject as its own repudiation” (Butler, *Bodies* 3).

Following Butler, the reconstitution of the body of the courtesan within a regime of colonial governmentality must also be understood as a constitutively failed process of materialisation. In the context of our study, various kinds of familial, domestic, religious, social, reformist as well as administrative discourses become the formations through which the courtesan is constituted as an “effect that they name.” We argue that the efforts to discipline the courtesan’s body, and to exclude her from the public sphere situates the courtesan as a subject living under the sign of the “unlivable.” They inhabit spaces that are opened up *through* the constitutive instability of materialisation—excluded spaces that are

nonetheless within the regime of colonial power. The courtesan becomes subject to colonial governmentality *as* a subject whose existence is always already precarious and insecure.

Where Foucault's theorisation of power allows us to describe the nexus of institutions, practices and knowledges in producing the courtesan as subject of government, Butler's notion of performative practice opens up the possibility of the political in the constitutive gap between "courtesan" as body/object of control, and as name/identity. As an illustrative example, we return briefly to Veena Oldenburg's interviews with the courtesans of Lucknow. Oldenburg observes that the courtesan community housed a number of women who were running away from patriarchal oppressions, familial or otherwise. "Desertion had been traditionally resorted to by those trapped in situations they had no other effective means of fighting and changing" (Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle...' 267). She refers to the thirty-five-year-old Rasoolan Bai, who came to the *kotha* as a Hindu child widow. Oldenburg finds her story compelling because "it exposes the ineffectiveness of the social reform legislations passed in the last 150 years" (Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle...' 267). For us, this instance of a Hindu girl adopting the name Rasoolan Bai in the *kotha* is significant in that it shows her courtesan identity as a performative citation of the conventions of the space she now inhabits. Rasoolan Bai—a new name—performatively inscribes her inclusion in the community of women, and her identity as courtesan. Where Oldenburg renders her as a symptom of failed social legislation, for us this becomes a point of departure from naturalised assumptions about courtesans as a predominantly hereditary community, and opens up the performative dimensions of identity as such.

As we take up in subsequent chapters the courtesan as subject and object of a wide range of popular cultural practices, the sign "courtesan" is opened up to a dense network of citational practices that simultaneously sustain and undermine the materialisation of the courtesan as disciplined body.

## 1.7 Situating Popular Culture

With growing markets in urban centres, new technologies of cultural production, new forms of mass-produced, market-mediated popular culture rapidly gained popularity among the emergent colonial middle-class from the latter half of the nineteenth century. These included gramophone recordings, photographs, postcards and printed books in the vernacular languages. Even as technologies like photography—historically associated with projects of colonial ethnography or surveillance—evinced distrust and suspicion, they also encouraged a new re-combination of popular as well as well as classical artistic form as well as content. Photographic studios began to be set up in India in the 1850s in cities like Bombay and Calcutta and acquired popularity in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. These ‘popular’ aesthetic forms became the site for an interaction—often even confrontation—between a ‘modern’ European aesthetic and indigenous modes of artistic practice, framed by the limits of the market of cultural commodities.<sup>1</sup>

Heath points out that India was a very lucrative market for British publishers. “By 1911 India was importing over twelve million packages of books and newspapers a year from Britain...” and “by 1905 there were 1,359 journals and newspapers circulating in India” (Heath 156), indicating substantial circulation as well as local availability of regular printing facilities. There are also instances of gathering of a listening audience, for print culture, to whom printed material was read aloud, especially newspapers, owing to the low rates of literacy in India.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, with the setting up of production facilities for gramophone records in India and the resultant reduction in costs, gramophones become an important drawing room feature in many middle-class households. As Michael Kinnear points out, “with the increase in competition for record sales in which about a dozen companies were

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, in the context of visual culture Ashish Rajadhyaksha discusses the development of a “modern-traditional aesthetic at the intersection of visual technologies and traditional artistic conventions. (See ‘The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology’).

<sup>2</sup> The 1881 census recorded literacy rate of 6.6 per cent in men and 0.3 per cent in women (Heath 159).

active in India, the retail price of discs was constantly being reduced” (Kinnear 68), indicative of a growing market. Given their proficiency in artistic skills, a number of courtesans also began to appear in this domain of popular culture. While Gauhar Jan was the among the best-known courtesan singers on gramophone records, others like Sukumari (Golap), Angurbala Dasi/Devi also took to the commercial theatre. Many also became the subjects of widely recognisable images on postcards, matchboxes, playing cards and so on.

Theodor Adorno’s theorisation of popular culture as a “culture industry” foregrounds the status of these the objects as commodities produced for the market. In his essay ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ [2002 (1974)] he argues that the circulation of artistic production as a commodity brings about a fusion of culture and entertainment that is prominent in media like film, radio and magazines. While in a patronage-based institution of art, they were controlled by the whims and purposes of their patrons, in the context of market economy the “social valuation” (Adorno 128) becomes the standard of merit of the artwork. Art in the mode of social realism and after comes to be derived from and affects everyday life. Adorno observes, “the more all embracing culture industry has become, the more pitilessly it has forced the outsider into either bankruptcy or the syndicate...its victory is two-fold: what is destroyed as truth outside its sphere can be reproduced indefinitely... ‘light’ art as such , entertainment is not a form of decadence” (Adorno 106). It is this “relentless unity of the culture industry” (Adorno 96) that establishes a “rationality of domination” (Adorno 95). Mass culture, according to Adorno, brings about a standardisation of aesthetic form in its pursuit for a cultural product in which “something is provided for everyone” (Adorno 97).

Many of the transformative changes of the “culture industry”—of the modes of production and consumption of culture—are to be observed in the context of colonial India as well. In this moment, existing cultural practices are “broken up” into discrete products that

may then be capitalised as culture commodities. Thus, the singing voice is transformed into a commodity. Amanda Weidman (2006), for instance points to the far-reaching changes in Karnatic classical music practice with the arrival and subsequent popularisation of technologies like the gramophone(as well the microphone). Similarly, traditions of dance prevalent amongst courtesans were also subjected to wide-ranging “reform” in order to be presented viably on the urban commercial stage. Likewise, poetic conventions of courtesan compositions were recombined with other literary genres in paperback erotica/fantasy.

However, Adorno’s generalisations about the culture commodity cannot be productively deployed to understand the political antagonisms and ideological struggles that came to be played out in the turn-of-the-century popular culture. For instance, regarding the widely available popular literature at the time, Heath argues, “not only was it impossible to even attempt to cultivate the aesthetic sensibilities of the bulk of the population...but even among the 12 per cent of the population that colonial education could reach...efforts made in the schoolroom to impress character were being seriously endangered by the wreckage caused by...supply of books that the Professor *cannot control*” (Heath 160). Along with a flourishing book trade there was also a rise in number of newspapers throughout India in the second half of the nineteenth century (Heath 158), and there was also an increase in the ‘functionally literate groups’ like clerks, accountants and letter writers etc. The aim of the colonial government behind introducing English education in India was to “produce a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern” (Heath 160), while in England, education was aimed towards “fostering leadership qualities deemed necessary in the governing elite” (Heath 160). This ‘discrepancy’ in the function of education in turn prompted Indian writers to create a “subjective voice that could balance the inner realm of Indian experience with the encroaching realms of colonial modernity” (Heath 161)—the dimension of their participation in ‘production’ of new voices through print.



Jameson's essay 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture' (1979) critiques Adorno and other scholars of Frankfurt School for their "valorisation of traditional modernist high art" (Jameson 133) and proposes a rethinking of the relations of contradiction between 'high culture' and 'mass culture' (Jameson 133). He proposes that these two domains are interconnected and interdependent, and they both arise out of a set of "social and aesthetic conditions" (Jameson 134). He also diverges from Adorno's notion of mass culture as "sheer manipulation, sheer commercial brainwashing and empty distraction" (Jameson 138). He proposes a view of mass culture as "...transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies" (Jameson 141). In particular, he makes two arguments that are important to our reading of popular culture.

First, Jameson argues that mass culture plays a part in repression of "social anxieties and concerns...(through) narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of the optical illusion of harmony" (Jameson 141). While Foucault's theorisation of knowledge and power allowed us to understand the construction of the courtesan through formations of colonial knowledge, legislation, institutions and practices, Jameson's reading of mass culture as utopia politicises the domain of cultural-aesthetic practices. The fantasy narratives of mass culture enable imaginary resolutions of the real antagonisms that constitute the social. Heath describes the ways in which "a variety of purported threats to an existing social order, (are encompassed by) 'obscenity' (which) is defined wholly in relation to what it threatens" (Heath 39). Distinctions between 'obscene' and 'art' are articulated where 'obscene' is the 'excess' which "seduces, embarrasses or leads the viewer astray" (Heath 40). Also, "in increasingly egalitarian society the acquisition of civil liberty was equated with *self-control*, the loss of self-control, threatened, quite literally, the body politic" (italics mine, Heath 40). This is reminiscent of the discussions of masculinist ideal of martiality and asceticism that gains increasing currency in nationalist discourse.

Jameson also observes the plurality of representations of a given symbol in mass culture. He argues, “...(it) suggests that the very vocation of the symbol lies less in any single message or meaning than in its capacity to absorb and organize all these quite distinct anxieties together” (Jameson 142). This proliferation of meaning is a particular symptom of mass culture. A similar effect may be noted in the context of courtesans. Here, the break-up of the patronage-based institutions of courtesan performance effects their subsequent ‘dispersal’ into the market of mass-produced culture commodities. In this moment, we argue, a retroactive effect becomes operative, in which the “courtesan” becomes a signifier that organises a range of anxieties regarding the organic unity of the social. The ‘dispersal’ of the courtesan identity in the domain of mass-produced culture commodities is a plurality that must be considered as *productive*. The very ‘dispersal’ of courtesans in various mass-mediated art forms now comes to bear new significations that may be mobilised in different ways. Through the early decades of the twentieth century, the courtesan and her cultural repertoire came to be caught up in various ways in the ongoing effort to constitute a national identity and its concrete expression in an ‘Indian’ culture. On the one hand, they become target of ‘reform’ undertaken as part of the project to create a classical music/dance, while on the other they were popular among middle-class consumers of, say, gramophone records or print publications.

William Mazzarella (2013) argues that the question of film censorship is “a response less to the particular image-objects and more to a structural challenge that is inherent to mass mediated societies” (Mazzarella 29). Early modes of cultural censorship in India are critical of “excessive sensuousness” (Mazzarella 63) and endorse “sexual morality as a concrete civic virtue” (Mazzarella 63). This space aspires to a kind of moral stability and distances itself from its performative dimension and its values acquire naturalised dimensions over time. The state in this context acquires the role of ‘patron/police’ (Mazzarella 69), promoting,

supporting and protecting national/classical/endangered folk art forms and their modes. Given the volatile nature of the relationship between performance and meanings generated through representation, the censor helps consolidate the “performative dispensation”, which represents “authoritative cultural order” (Mazzarella 29). Dispensation here denotes the ‘order of things as handed down by authority’, and it helps create a space which safeguards subjects who fall within or align themselves to it.

The censor emerges at a time when there is an intertwining of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art in the domain of mass-mediated cultural practices (Mazzarella 54), and the state endorses certain art forms, this is within the purview of its cultural investments. But to focus on the performative dimension is not just to stress that the “making and re-making of social order relies on enactment” but that “it involves a constant multisensory activation of gesture, bodily comportment, and aesthetic potentialities within and against such scripted expectations” (Mazzarella 41). The authority of patrons and police—through which the performative dispensation is ordered—is made visible in “both the naturalised mode of the way things are and in the moments of rupture or challenge” (Mazzarella 42). And it is in both these modes of performativity and representations that we seek to gather meanings of courtesan identity in popular culture of colonial modernity.

Desires that are disavowed in mainstream discourses re-emerge in reconstituted forms in alternate discourses, which are in turn deemed ‘sub-classical’, ‘popular’ or even ‘obscene’. Courtesans, we argue, become the site where the disavowed anxieties of cultural nationalism—and its notions of authenticity—return in fantasy constructions. In this sense, the figure of the courtesan is simultaneously the ‘other’ through which the subject of nationalist ideology is constituted, as well as the site of instability that renders such constructions precarious. We argue that it is precisely through her reconstitution as the sign of middle-class anxiety that the courtesan comes to inhabit what Butler has called “unlivable”

spaces of the social—the “courtesan” exists as a sign that may be mobilised at will, alongside a disavowal of the bodies that come to bear this sign, marking a failed materialisation.

On the one hand, colonial governmentality looked to ‘control’ courtesan bodies by framing them through a discourse of health. On the other, the discourse of public decency being produced by the new nationalist, middle-class elites was caught up in the production/consumption of an Indian modernity, rendered the courtesan ‘obscene.’ We also established that categories and discourses acquire values in their ‘reiterative’ and ‘citational’ practices and cannot be viewed as absolute, fixed categories. So, we can extrapolate that subjects can perform a host of identities—perform here is used in Butler’s sense of the term, and ‘not a singular act’ (Butler, *Bodies* 2). This plurality is to be considered as *productive*.

We will thus seek to study the courtesan in late colonial India, in two dimensions—one through the government/administrative and Hindu, national, moral framework which produces them as ‘outsiders,’ and other through engagements with the courtesan in popular culture. We are studying courtesans not as a fixed category, always already outside the spaces and ideas of ‘respectability’ and respectability. Rather, we look at how this outside status is consolidated through discursive practices, and how this category is mobilised, reconstituted, restructured and represented. The question of ‘respectability’ and ‘courtesans’ is to be viewed as not simply a question of suppression/exclusion or silencing or even resistance, but a mode of productive power that operates through ‘incitement to discourse’. In the case of the courtesan these effects are articulated in various domains of popular cultural practices such as literature, gramophone and photography. This is not to claim that the history of courtesan thus produced exhausts all possible meanings of courtesan identity, but that such a study of plurality, opens up new questions and notions of power and politics of historiography through categories like courtesan, which have been heretofore considered to be excluded, oppressed and subaltern.

## 1.8 Sources

The historical references in this thesis have been supplemented by archival material from The Telangana State Archives and Research Institute, Hyderabad, including the *Reports on Civil and Medical and Sanitary Departments (1924 to 1939)* and *Report on Administration on Hyderabad District Police for the year 1344 F. (1934-35)*, which have been used to gather data regarding venereal diseases in the dominion of the Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad. We have also looked at articles from newspapers from this period—*The Deccan Post* (1896) and *The Advocate of India* (1901). Data regarding colonial legislations and details of their implementation have been sourced through other studies. These have been studied in detail by Arondekar, Heath, Levine as well as Ramanna. For responses to the Contagious Disease Act we have referred to *The British Medical Journal* (v1, 1939).

The material from popular culture includes a personal archive of Indoobala, a courtesan from Bengal active in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is currently archived at CSSS, Kolkata. We discuss in detail in Chapter 4 *Indoobala's Scrapbook*, from 1902, which is a collection of personal greeting cards, invitations for and of performances for social and religious occasions in and around Calcutta, as well as pages of collected pop art (playing cards). We also look at memorabilia featuring courtesans, like matchboxes and postcards. We analyse four literary texts from the late colonial period all of which feature courtesans: Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb* (1900), Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan* (March 1899), its lesser known sequel *Junun-i-Intezar* (April 1899) and Binodini Dasi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)* (1912), along with some journalistic writings of the period in Chapter 3. Also analysed in this chapter are film adaptations of *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006) as well as the 1983 film, *Mandi*. We have taken up gramophone recordings as well as covers, publicity materials and catalogues of recording companies like HMV, Odeon, Gramophone Company of India Ltd., Columbia Records, Hindustan Records, etc. *The Record News*, published by Society of

Indian Record Collectors has been used for information on gramophone production in the first two decades of the twentieth century, which have been analysed in some detail in Chapter 4. Digital audio versions of gramophone recordings were accessed through the School of Cultural Texts and Records at Jadavpur University. A number of these songs are also available on YouTube. Visual material, which includes photographs, magazine covers/pages, other print publications, Kalighat paintings, advertisements and posters have been accessed through the Alkazi Images Archive (Delhi), Centre for the Study of Social Sciences Archive (Kolkata), the online archive Images of Asia and *Marg* (Vol 62 No. 4).

### **1.9 The Case of Hyderabad**

In the course of the thesis we will look at administrative as well as popular cultural material from various locations. The specificities of regional politics will make these discussions more complex. To account for such possibilities we have included archival material from Hyderabad, given its continued status as princely state in this period. Tamkeen Kazmi, in the historical study, *Hyderabad Aisa Bhi Tha* (translated as *Hyderabad As It Was Also*), talks of the historical splendour of Hyderabad, of which courtesans form an important part. These women were trained in a long-standing tradition of skilled entertainment. The Nizam, from the early years of the eighteenth century, patronised *tawaiifs* by establishing a separate office known as '*Dafter-e-Arbab Nishat*' (Offices of Head of Pleasure). In the Asafjahi court, during the reign of Nizam Ali Khan in the 1730s, a sum of rupees twelve thousand per month was spent towards salaries of *tawaiifs*. (Kazmi 25). The *tawaiifs* continued to hold respectable status in Nizam's society and were looked upon as 'artists'. It was compulsory for *tawaiifs* to sing in marriage functions; and after the *nikah* a group photo was taken for the sake of remembrance, the invited *tawaiif* was also given a place. *Tawaiifs* were an integral part of various festivities—marriage celebrations, Bismillah ceremonies and *Urs* (death anniversaries of Sufi saints) dates.

Kazmi demarcates two categories of professional women in this period, prostitutes and *tawaifs*. There were also famous courtesans like Mahlaqa Bai Chanda in Hyderabad. She is considered a powerful figure in the court of the second and third Nizams of Hyderabad. She was one of the first women poets to compile a full *diwan* of Urdu *ghazals*. She was also adept at music and dance as a “high-ranking courtesan *tawaif*” (Kugle 125). Further, Kugle points out that she chose to write *ghazals*, predominantly considered to be a male form, and most of her poetry was not autobiographical. Some of her poems talk about the court intrigues and her devotion to Ali. Her legacy survives in some existing landmarks in the present day twin cities of Hyderabad-Secunderabad. Inside the premises of the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) campus in Tarnaka, is a tank known to have been built by her as a place of rest for those undertaking the pilgrimage to Maula Ali, at the foot of which is her tomb (built in 1790). Also through efforts of scholars like Kugle and funding from US Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation, 2010, her tomb has been restored and opened to the public, commemorated by a plaque that marks the tomb as a “symbol of friendship and respect” A hostel within the EFLU campus has also been named after her. Through architectural landmarks like these, we can think of extra-textual narratives, apart from commodities of popular culture, which produce public memory and spaces; and how a courtesan, Mahlaqa Bai Chanda is inscribed therein.

Also, governmental and symbolic relations in Hyderabad are of a different character from urban centres in the British-administered provinces in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is not to say that the area was not affected by larger developments of modernity or even colonial governance in India but that the understanding of modernity and functioning of power that emerges here has a different character. In Nizam Osman Ali’s patronage of photography, for instance, it is possible to see “a staging of modernity in the service of tradition” and to dispel the notions that the women of the *zenana* are “idle, sexually

deviant and oppressed” (Weinstein 3). Older forms of patronage still continue to subsist under the Nizam. To delve more into these complexities we will look at some specific archival and photographic materials from the region in Chapters 2 and 5.

### **1.10 Chapterisation**

In the Introduction, we have surveyed some selected historical literature on courtesans and defined our own theoretical approach through Foucault’s notions of productive power and governmentality, and Butler’s performativity. Drawing on Adorno, Jameson and Mazzarella, we identified popular culture as a domain of representations where hegemonic ideology looks to administer a regime of censorship, even as they are undermined by the constitutive instability of the sign in mass-mediated cultural forms. In the following chapters, we look at courtesans not as a fixed category, community or identity with fixed boundaries that can be recovered, but as a site mapped out through means of governmental and social ‘control’ as well as through the desire she foregrounds, and which emerge in popular culture—as an ‘internal outsider’ (Morcom 22).

In Chapter 2, ‘Governing Obscenity: Courtesan, Legality and Morality’ we look at the specificities of intention, implementation and reception of the Contagious Disease Act and Obscene Publications Act, and their framing of courtesans and their bodies as diseased, obscene and hypersexual, alongside discourses of exclusion as consolidated in ideas of a respectable, progressive, modern nation space and population. We will also consider the simultaneous constructions of anxieties around the courtesan, as seen in some Kalighat paintings from nineteenth-century Calcutta, which predicate the idea that these exclusions are not impermeable. We critically examine how these discourses figure within contemporary racial, gender and sexual politics of colonial modernity. Through a study of the text of *The Judgment, Supreme Court of India (Civil Appellate Jurisdiction)* Civil Appeal No. 5504 of 2013, as well as recent newspaper articles about the current ‘controversies’ and legislative



debates around bar girls, we consider how ideas of ‘obscenity’ in popular culture continue to be framed around ‘public’ women communities. In this chapter, we also trace the possibilities of emergence of desire at the interstices of the technologies of mass culture and lay out objectives for subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 3, ‘‘Real’ Courtesans in Fictive Worlds: Narratives of Literature and Films’, we map the representations of courtesans in realist English and vernacular texts written in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, as well as later representations in films. Through the different meanings invested in her through the ‘metalanguage’ of the selected texts, we gain of an idea of the broad range of significations that accrue to the courtesan in the context of colonial modernity. The texts include an English colonial novel, two Urdu novels and a Bengali autobiography of an early theatre actress in Calcutta. The actress Binodini Dasi is not a courtesan, but the text has been included here for a number of reasons. Proscenium theatres became a new avenue of public performance in the late nineteenth century, and a number of stage actresses in early theatre were traditional courtesans, ‘dancing girls’ and ‘public women,’ as Rimli Bhattacharya informs us in her introduction to the translation of Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Jiban*. Moreover, these theatres were dependent on patronage from local connoisseurs and native elites, which would often involve the actresses in intimate relationships with them, as we see in Binodini’s text. Binodini in her early life received singing lessons from a courtesan, indicating further overlaps that shaped the new public theatre. Finally, she constantly refers to herself as a ‘fallen woman’ and ‘prostitute,’ thereby introducing a performative citation of courtesan identity into her writing. Her text itself enacts a symbolic redemption, that tries to re-signify her public persona as an actress, in the process rendering her re-insertion into a fantasy narrative unstable.

In Chapter 4, ‘From the *Mehfil* to the Drawing Room: Music, Courtesan, and Constructions of the Classical’, we look at the specificities of the classicisation of musical

practices and their framing within discourses of nationalism, heritage and respectability of female performers. Janaki Bakhle's work on the reconstitution of the Hindustani music tradition by cultural nationalists such as V.N. Bhatkhande and V.D. Paluskar brings to light the naturalisation of exclusionary attitudes towards Muslim *gharana* musicians. At the same time, we argue, she appropriates uncritically the discourse of transition of music into 'respectability' through a 'transference' of musical practices from *bai* (courtesan) singers to *tai* (elder sister, respectable women) in Maharashtra, in turn contributing to its naturalisation. Amanda Weidman provides a history of Karnatic music through the politics of voice. She sees the microphone as producing a nuanced, interiorised singing voice, of which M.S. Subbulakshmi ('MS' here after) is the prime example. We look at the introduction and popularisation of gramophone records and new practices of listening that develop around such technologies in early twentieth century. The participation of courtesan singers in these early forms of mass culture is seen to produce new connections between the popular imagination and courtesan singers. Also analysed are samples of publicity write-ups for gramophone record releases which are revealing examples of how courtesan singers are advertised to be within the new guidelines of 'respectability' and classical training within musical practices and everyday lives of her new audiences. We discover a plurality in the repertoire of courtesan singers as well as emergence of new forms and disciplinary practices of modern forms of musical performances of the courtesan as well as respectable women singers. Proliferated through the same technologies, for the same audiences, we consider how the persona of the 'entertainer' courtesan and the 'divine' M.S are consolidated.

Chapter 5, 'Plural Visibilities: Courtesan and Photography,' focuses on photographic images, from private collections to those in public circulation in magazines, print publications, postcards and courtesan *cartes-de-visite*. We look at the associations that emerge between courtesan bodies and the camera, and modes of the new visibility of

women's bodies. What are the new ways of seeing the courtesan that are articulated through the camera? What are the conditions of re-emergence of courtesan bodies in public sphere? And most importantly, what significance do we accord to the 'visuality of respectability' that emerges around the bodies of courtesans and other 'public women' who become subjects of early women's photographs in India, which were intended/permissible to circulate amongst the modern publics.

In the Conclusion, "Re-framing the Courtesan: Summations and Further Questions," we reflect on the implications of networks of productive power that emerge through our study, the pluralities of the performative category 'courtesan' that are materialised in the domain of popular culture, and how the two overlap and intersect. The internal organisation and hierarchisation of popular culture acquires significance in our attempt to understand how traditions of popular culture are reclaimed/excluded in cultural discourse. Social categories, especially 'deviant' and 'othered' categories like courtesan women—otherwise homogenised for purposes of governmental control—in their studied plurality and overlaps with the 'respectable,' produce contexts that allow us to dismantle the overarching, naturalising construction of gendered identity. The relevance of these questions is echoed in the current attempts to 'discipline' the bar-dancers and women public performers.

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## **Chapter 2**

### **Governing Obscenity: Courtesans, Legality and Morality**

We have arrived at an understanding of power in its dynamic as well as productive nature. In this chapter, we will establish the specificities of networks of colonial and nationalist power that intersect to reconstitute the courtesan through relationships of productive power. We will take up some instances of administrative and morality discourses in which the courtesan figures, critically examining their agendas within the racial, gender and sexual politics of colonial modernity. The body of the courtesan becomes the site of convergence of varied concerns related to regulation of women's bodies and constitution of racial identities, both British and Indian, which are often found defined in relation to one another, and being constantly re-negotiated. In the connection between the courtesan and the obscene, and their overlaps in popular culture, we invest political significance and use it to open up spaces, which will be explored in more detail in the subsequent chapters.

While legislative mandates define the nature of relationship that exists between the subject and judicial/governmental power, the more mundane dimensions of implementation and reception make apparent the gap between conception and actualisation. This gap is conducive to the production of resistances as well as new identity formations. Our focus, however, is not just to reveal this gap, but to look at the discursive formations that are invested in, against and around these measures of control. We extend Anna Morcom's connection between courtesans and bar girls, and through an analysis of the Supreme Court Judgment of 2013 and recent newspaper articles, think of persisting relations of 'obscenity' to women's bodies in our current context, and new configurations of cultural practices they produce.

## 2.1 Obscenity and Colonial Governmentality

The modern state achieves a consolidation of population through various governmental and bureaucratic measures. Foucault establishes that this happens through a regime of power and disciplining of individual bodies, which is non-coercive in nature, and operates through a form of ‘self-government.’ Governmentality, according to Foucault, is “the way in which the behaviour of individuals became involved, more and more markedly, in the exercise of sovereign power” (Foucault, *Ethics* 68). Foucault argues that governmentality is a mode of power that introduces the notion of population, constructed within apparatuses that are articulated around the relation of power/knowledge. He goes on to state, “a population is not simply a sum of subjects who inhabit a territory...it is a variable dependent on a number of factors...the population appears as ‘naturally’ dependent on multiple factors which might be artificially alterable” (Foucault, *Ethics* 70).

Deane Heath, in *Purifying Empire* (2010), identifies “strength” and “purity” as the values that frame the imperial ambitions of Britain and form the rationale for the “civilising mission” (Heath 4) in the imperial domain—strength to fortify and protect the borders of their domain, and purity that represents their moral superiority over the colonised people. Over time, the reiteration of these claims of purity come to be naturalised as innate values which define a nation and its people. In British public discourse, forms of “degeneracy,” such as “...non-marital sexuality, prostitution...contagion had come to be regarded as external threats brought by ‘foreigners’ or ‘aliens’ who were polluting the geo-body of Britain...” (Heath 85). It also becomes significant for us to understand how colonial modernity in India responds to, and shapes these ideas, keeping in mind, as Heath cautions us, that these developments are to be studied not as a ‘centre-



periphery' model but 'one of cultural transmission and exchange' between the coloniser and the colonised, albeit in an unequal relation of power (Heath 7).

Legislations like Obscene Publications Act (1856 in India, 1857 in Britain) and Contagious Disease Acts (variously implemented in 1864, 1869 and 1880, and again in 1897) both in Britain and colonies like India are attempts to contain the threat of the 'obscene' and of 'errant sexuality'. However, these legislations are not just reactions to an already existing threat. Rather, they constitute and make them visible in public discourse. The 'obscene' is identified through these legislations as being 'contained' in certain kinds of print publications, in the former, and the bodies of the prostitutes who transmit venereal diseases, in the latter. The government then proceeds to take measures to regulate and manage these threats in its attempt to "attend to the problems of the population" (Foucault, *Ethics* 74).

What are the specificities of this relationship to control/contain the obscene in the colonies and is there a unitary idea of the obscene that operates in the widely diverse terrain of the British imperial government? There are some differences between the form and mode of implementation of these Acts in Britain and its colonies and we will look at these legislations in some detail. Juxtaposed with the anti-regulationist demands and representations of courtesans/prostitutes produced in the colonies, we can begin to understand the relationship between patriarchal colonial modernity and errant sexualities of which these women communities become embodiments.

## **2.2 Obscene Words, Obscene Thoughts**

Passed in India before Britain, the Obscene Publications Act sought to regulate (but not prohibit) the circulation of obscene books and prints, in vernacular languages as well as European imports into India. Projects of literary censorship in Britain operated through a nexus between the

government and moral reform organisations like Society for the Suppression of Vice (1802) and their “vigilance networks” (Heath 61). There was a wide range of print material being imported in India “which was one of the most lucrative markets for British publishers” (Heath 149). The Postmaster General of India noted in his report in 1894-5 that “the great bulk of mail from the United Kingdom consists of newspapers and packages of which more than five million are now received in a year, filling some five hundred bags of mail every week” (Heath 149). In 1911, India was importing over twelve million packages of books and newspapers a year from Britain (Heath 149). While in the colonial model of secularised education, English literature was “accorded the primary task of cultivating the aesthetic development of young Indian minds” (Heath 156), Indian literature was considered unsuitable for this task since it was believed to hold divine authority over the minds of the people rather than engaging them intellectually as ‘modern’ subjects. Gauri Vishwanathan, in her book *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule* (1989), demonstrates how English literary education was used as an instrument tool to discipline colonial subjects. She invokes, for instance, the example of the Kalidas play, *Shakuntala*. Called “the jewel of India” by the likes of Sanskrit scholar Horace Wilson and an object of interest for Orientalist scholar across Europe, it was nevertheless deemed unsuitable for study in educational institutions. The justification was apparently that indigenous works of popular culture were believed to be “marked with the greatest immorality and impurity”, and the native minds were considered to be unable to distinguish between decency and indecency (Vishwanathan 5-6).

Moreover, it was also seen to grant sanction to a number of Indian customs that were considered ‘immoral’ and backward by British critics (Tharu and Lalitha 209). The Indian population was considered to be in need of more protection from the obscene because their

response to literature was based on “exercise of faith rather than reason” (Tharu and Lalitha 209). Ironically, it was the proliferation of “cheap literature” from the imperial metropolis, which could potentially endanger the claims of moral superiority and the civilising intent of the colonial project, and the aims of ‘aesthetic imperialism’ (Heath 160). Underlying the regulation of the ‘obscene’ images/texts in India was the fear that the circulation of nude bodies/representations of European women—in pictures, memorabilia like snuff boxes, and print literature—exposed the empire to a new threat by bringing the British claim to political and moral sovereignty “into some disrepute” (Heath 177), and “engendered a grossly incorrect view” of British morals (Heath 178).

Many publishers were prosecuted under the Act. Often, such action was taken by the government at the behest of segments of civil society pressure groups such as missionaries and social reform organisations (Heath 164) that assumed the position of protectors and pioneers of the emergent modern public sphere in India. There emerged a picture of India that “was more sinned against than sinning” and “necessitated defending India from being ‘polluted’ by the imperial metropole” (Heath 164). The government also intervened in cases like the petition submitted by the Municipal Committee of Ulwar, which “protested against obscene publications in Rajputana (that) was preventing the spread of female education” (Heath 166). The fear was that in case these ‘obscene’ books fall into the hands of literate women, they will be able to read them and be exposed to their content. Further, the authorities were anxious that inaction would be understood as tacit approval of such “corruption” (Heath 166).

No coherent guidelines of regulation emerge, and neither do any concrete definitions of the ‘obscene.’ Heath summarises the broad “limits of decency which must not be transgressed, for the British”: first, realistic depictions of sexuality; second, sexual representations that

undermined Indian patriarchies; and third, delineations of the sexual mechanics of the body in a non-scientific manner” (Heath 173). These directives are broadly supported by the indigenous elites. However, contradictions emerged when efforts were made to “prosecute *kamashastra* literature and advertisements for using unscientific...language” (Heath 176) or “religious imagery” (Heath 180). For those opposing such prosecution, the erotic/sexual representations in religious and ancient texts, is ensconced within a kind of ‘divine’ sanction, thus “*producing*, or marking out obscenity where none existed” (Heath 200). This argument emerging from the indigenous elites is articulated in the present day as well—for instance, Pran Neville reproduces them in his history of courtesans (*see* Chapter 1).

“Aesthetic imperialism” (Heath 160), had sought to consolidate an Indian population who would adhere to the “liberal philosophies of Europe” (Heath 154). This class of people was also invested in discourses of Indian nationalism and was “caught in a dialectic of acceptance of colonial governmentality...and a rejection of it” (Heath 169). For them, the circulation of obscene English books and translations in Indian markets, made Britain appear not as an agent of modernity but as anti-modern, opening up India to the “effluvium of the whole empire,” and hindering the production of a distinct Indian modernity” (Heath 7). Also, given that an increasing number of English educated Indians became direct participants in colonial governmental and administration as judges, magistrates, and officials in the police, postal and customs departments (Heath 84), regulation is far from unilateral. At the same time, these kinds of alliances between the government and indigenous groups became ‘necessary’ for governing the colonial state whose “sovereignty is not supported by the popular will” (Heath 168), unlike in Britain. The colonial state thus had to negotiate between preserving differences which justify their imperial mission while at the same time appeasing progressive demands of local representatives. The

regulation of the ‘obscene’ seemed to offer a common agenda, even though the definitions of obscene often varied.

Significantly, the scope and regulation of obscenity is not limited to the areas under the direct control of the colonial state. New locations and boundaries of the obscene emerge. Broadly, “...it encompasses a variety of purported threats to an existing social order, obscenity is defined wholly in terms of what it threatens...words such as ‘indecent, lewd, and obscene can be defined only in terms of one another” (Heath 39). Archival material from Hyderabad, like the *Report on Administration on Hyderabad District Police for the year 1344 F. (1934-35)*, shows that in 1934 “obscene acts and songs” were brought under the purview of the police authority, but they were classified under “other offences” (Class VI), which could not be included in categories of serious or minor offences against state, person or property. Other crimes in the same category include “causing spread of infectious diseases” and “causing emasculation” (*Report on Administration...15*).

Obscenity in this sense acquires broader moral currency in India and there are evident governmental measures launched to control them. We will now look at how both British and Indian concerns with the obscene converge on the body of the courtesan.

### **2.3 The Diseased Courtesan**

The Contagious Disease Act in Britain and in India were enacted to ensure that “rules be made to inspect houses of *ill fame*” (italics mine, Ramanna 1471). The Act, altered many times before its eventual abolition in 1886, and re-implementation in 1897, was directed towards control of the bodies of “prostitute women as a measure against encroachment of syphilis and gonorrhoea” (Levine 581). The measure was seen as a necessity in the face of mounting toll of the venereal infection—“...the number in some stations being 50, 60 or 70 percent of the total strength of the

soldiers” (Ramanna, 1470). The threat of the disease was also visible beyond the colonial cantonments. In Hyderabad, as mentioned, the contagious disease was brought into the purview of the police force as late 1934-35, but even in 1924-25 there are as many as 6,746 cases of primary and secondary syphilis, 7,075 cases of gonorrhoea and 1,739 cases of other venereal diseases treated in out-patient departments in Government Hospitals and Dispensaries (*Report on the Civil...*). In the 1870s, with the start of the Short Service system in the British army in India, the numbers of young officers in India increased—“youthfulness, inexperience and enforced singlehood of this short service army...did not produce a celibate army but rendered recourse to non-marital heterosexuality, and above all to prostitutes all the more likely” (Levine 583-84). Within the colonial discourse, it was the East that came to be held responsible for “luring weak and undisciplined youngsters to its beguiling unhealthy ways” (Levine 596). Through the measures of the Act, according to Levine, Ramanna and Arondekar, Indian prostitutes become the origin as well as carrier of the disease, which necessitate control. Symbolically, these representations supplement ideas of the colonised people as sexually promiscuous, deviant and diseased.

According to the Act, only registered prostitutes were allowed to solicit and were given quarters near cantonment areas. The idea was to provide ‘clean’ women for the soldiers. While in Britain the purview of the Act was only cantonment areas, in India the government purportedly sought to implement it in all major cities and ports, for “regulation, supervision, registration and inspection of prostitutes” (Levine 584-85). The Act called for “compulsory registration of brothels and prostitutes, and medical examination and treatment of those women found to be diseased” in cities like Bombay and Calcutta (Ramanna 1470). Ramanna reports that after the introduction of the Act, “...there was something like a general panic, because of rumours that

women were being subjected to *outrage* and *indignity*” (italics mine, Ramanna 1471). The local reactions to the Act reveal underlying complexities of implementation of legislations which characteristically construct the individuals at the level of community.

Ramanna notes that, “the authorities could not distinguish between kept women and hereditary prostitutes, causing resentment” (Ramanna 1471). This lack of a clear definition of ‘prostitute’ in the Act in India was symptomatic of a specific intersection of discourses and institutional practices. As Levine suggests, in the Act is implicit a production of the ‘Indian woman’ herself as a, “dubious *moral* category” (italics mine, Levine 591). A health memorandum issued by Lord Kitchener, the military chief in India advised his men, “the common women as well as regular prostitutes in India are almost all infected with venereal disease...it can be taken for granted that any woman who solicits your attention is, or has been, (venereally) infected” (Levine 590). All women working in the cantonment fell within the scope of the Act. Through the Contagious Disease Act, visible connections were drawn between Indian ‘womanhood’, ‘uncleanness’ and ‘disease’ which require the “full power of medical, military and judicial force to control the potential contamination” (Levine 602).

The Act focussed on putting restrictions that regulated the bodies of women rather than the soldiers, even though implementation and control over the latter would have been much easier. As Levine argues, “the legislation...with its assumption of the necessary link between heterosexual prostitution and venereal diseases, established a complex pattern of segregation and control that secured an apparent homogeneity of racial and sexual Otherness centred on the person, and literally on the body of the female prostitute” (Levine 601). Venereal disease thus became a metaphor for the malaise of the colony itself, as in certain constructions, “...the venereal disease of the tropics were supposedly more savage than those in gentler climates of

Europe” (Levine 591). Whether a prostitute was diseased or not was established through a genital examination, which was considered controversial. Racial differentiations were mapped onto the responses of women to this mode of surveillance. Along with ideas that the procedure was regarded with “nonchalance in India...(and) the special sensibility of European women...as to corporeal examinations...is absent among the same class in India” (Levine 586), there is also evidence of public opinions that Indian prostitutes “...had regard for ‘modesty’ and were not as shameless as European prostitutes” (Ramanna 1471).

Colonial governance acquires characteristics of a biopolitical project of “imperial hygiene” (Heath 3), which is to be conceptualised through legislations like Contagious Disease Act. They open up a political space where the differentiations between the coloniser and colonised can be studied as a dynamic relationship. Female sexuality embodied by courtesans/prostitutes, as we have seen, poses a conspicuous threat to preservation of racial difference. The anxiety is especially acute in relation to the “existence of European women trading sex in India” (Levine 593), and the link between the obscenity and the British woman, who in turn becomes the embodiment of “the depraved state of Western Culture” (Heath 201). The strategic administrative construction of Indian courtesan as ‘diseased’ achieves two things—it establishes that it is the Indian woman who is serving the sexual needs of the British man, and is the rationale behind guarding the interests of their soldiers, and reinforcing ideas of a hypersexual, lazy and backward Indian population in general and women in particular.

At the same time, it must be noted that the implementation of the Act was scattered at best. In the city of Bombay, for instance, it was “supposed that 10,000 prostitutes would register, only 1,600 registered” (Ramanna 1471) and there was no marked decrease in the actual incidence of venereal disease. This, however, must be understood as an aspect of the expansion



of the biopolitical regime itself. The threat of action under the law itself becomes an important factor in framing the relations between prostitutes and the colonial state. It is under the shadow of the *possibility* of legal action against unregistered prostitutes that a range of possible modes of engagement open up, which constitute informal networks of power within which the state may engage with them. These include arbitrary inspections, bribery, extortion and threats of bodily violence. Here, the colonial state's conflation of the categories of "prostitute" and courtesan/"tawaif" becomes particularly effective, as all these women now come to inhabit a "zone of uncertainty" that is produced precisely through the seemingly ineffective operation of the law. The apparatus of administration and colonial knowledge work in tandem to forge a claim of control on the bodies of public women through gendered regulatory mechanisms.

Even within colonial discourse, variations in terms of responses to the regulations emerged. A memorial submitted to Lord George Hamilton by seventy-three women medical practitioners in England and India, protested against the measures "recently enacted for dealing with venereal disease in the Indian Army" (*The British Medical Journal* 584). The petitioners saw the methods of the Act as degrading to both men and women, and they suggest alternate measures including systematic and prolonged treatment of the soldiers, voluntary treatment and initiation of a detailed and uniform system of investigation into the disease and its spread. The memorial also suggests that the best way to diminish venereal disease is to "make vice difficult...in a practical way, dishonourable to the troops" (*The British Medical Journal* 585). Recommendations include discouragement from authorities over setting up of brothels, new guidelines that define moral character as an important element for promotions and advancements within the army, and clear admonishing of immorality of conduct (*The British Medical Journal* 585). The responsibility of the disease is thus to be shared by the men and women—especially

the troops themselves—and the only way to tackle the disease was to control both the soldiers and the ‘public women’.

How do these anti-regulationist demands fit into gender politics of the time? In Britain, anti-regulation debates were being taken up together with movements for civil and women’s rights, supported by the likes of John Stuart Mill and Josephine Butler (Heath 62). Similar protestations in India, however, are seen by administrators as mere imitations of Western models— “general eagerness to find fault with government measures...a certain class have shown themselves ready to borrow a cry on this subject, as they would on any other, from European agitators” (cited in Ramanna 1473). Levine also suggests that the legislation in Britain was directed more towards reform than punishment. It involved more emphasis on moral and religious instructions to “prevent young women from completing their descent into immorality” (Levine 585-586).

The implementation of the Act in India saw strong resistance, particularly with regard to the definition of the boundaries of courtesan/prostitute identities and hence on the scope of the Act, and more broadly, on boundaries of obscenity in cultural practices. There were petitions for exemption by representatives of communities like “women from Goa, who earned their living singing and dancing at parties of native gentry,” and “*natkeens* or hereditary prostitutes.” Another petition from Belgaum declared that “the application of the Act to dancing girls was both a disgrace and a shame to which death itself is preferable” (Ramanna 1471). However, while there was an element of a reformist “paternal surveillance” at work in the case of prostitute in Britain, there was no such possibility of redemption for her Indian counterpart because of the “...strong British belief at this juncture that prostitution in India was a hereditary caste profession within Hindu society” (Levine 586). Regulation of these women communities

becomes attuned with the efforts to modernise India and the government was of the view that “the regulation of *courtezans* in public interest offended no native susceptibility” (italics mine, Ramanna 1473). This claim was clearly contested, as we have seen, by the petitions for exemption by communities of women performers already mentioned. Moreover, even the response of indigenous social reformers was ambivalent. The newspaper *Nyayasindhu*, for instance, while declaring that they “hated prostitutes” condemned the “tyranny” and the “loss of liberty” due to the Act, and it was observed that “venereal diseases could be controlled only if the men who frequented the houses of prostitutes were also treated” (Ramanna 1470). There were also arguments that “it (the Act) would expose a peculiarly helpless class of native women to oppression of a most cruel kind” (Ramanna 1472). The Act was criticised by the native critics as a “quasi-governmental sanction to vice” (Ramanna 1470).

The opposition to the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Act notwithstanding, the colonial state considered the Indian prostitute as beyond reform, and the profession was “ascribed to a caste system, hostile to modernization” (Levine 586). They were, therefore, a ‘pre-modern’ community of women. Concurrently, ‘pre-modern’ is also ‘pre-colonial’, which opens up possibilities of overlap with traditionalism like Neville’s and other similar appropriations of the courtesan/prostitute as signifier in cultural discourse.

This attitude of the administrators was an instance in the broader moral disavowal of the courtesan/prostitute in shaping of the question of social reform for women in India. Mrinalini Sinha has shown in detail the project of producing colonial masculinities was articulated in and through the antagonism between the colonial authorities and the indigenous patriarchal elites. The authorities’ attempt to enact legislation geared towards the reform of the condition of women, like abolition of sati in 1829, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 and the earlier

Age of Consent Act of 1891, led to large-scale opposition. However, in the course of the heated debates, Sinha points out, "...the colonial authorities were sympathetic to the claims of native masculinity...the curtailment of the rights of the Indian husband...in the defence of orthodox Hindu patriarchy... This resulted, above all, in bringing the claims of native masculinity into closer alignment with the agenda of late nineteenth century colonial rule" (Sinha 138-139).

The attempts to regulate and control the bodies of courtesans/prostitutes, however, must be located in a different trajectory, primarily because unlike the presumed subjects of the social reform legislations, they were not situated within patriarchal family structures. It is not surprising, then, that their demands for exemptions and renegotiation of the limits of legislative authority received no acknowledgement as political demands, nor did the emerging representatives of the nationalist elite take them up with much enthusiasm.

## **2.4 Courtesan and the Nation**

In his essay 'Nation and its Women,' Partha Chatterjee discusses how the nationalist resolution of women's question was to place it in the private domain, which was associated with spiritual purity that marks the superiority of Indian culture, as against the material superiority of Western culture. Chatterjee argues that "the 'new' woman (of the new patriarchy) is quite the reverse of the 'common woman', who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, and sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by the males" (Chatterjee 127). There is a development of "...a more flexible, but nonetheless culturally determinate, domain set by *differences* between socially approved male and female conduct...But the 'spiritual' signs of her femininity were now clearly marked—in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanour, her religiosity" (Chatterjee 130). Moreover, "the image of

the woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home” (Chatterjee 131).

Notably, the nationalist discourse invests in and appropriates valorous, martial, chaste, selfless ideals for both men as aspirational, if not incumbent characteristics, especially as the national movement gains momentum. Chandrima Chakravarty, in her book *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past Present Imaginings of India* (2011) traces the formation of a close relationship between Hinduism, asceticism, martiality, and masculinities that were formulated in the colonial period as the antithesis of the stereotypes of ‘effeminate’ Indian male popular in colonial discourse. These ideals of martiality are still being actively appropriated by right-wing conservative politics in India. As Chakravarty elaborates, “The performative remodelling of the body to prove one’s suitability as a political subject entails a domestication of one’s impulses, seen as ‘nature’, to be disciplined by ‘culture’...and the transformation of sexual renunciation into heroism is reserved exclusively for men” (Chakravarty 23). If sexual renunciation for the cause of the nation is the duty of men, women become obstacles in the path of performance of this duty—“...the emphasis on celibacy and the casting of family life as an obstacle to nationalist commitments result in marginalization of women—as forces of chaos, desire and fear.” The duty of ideal Hindu women is to ‘facilitate’ her man to fulfil the duties of his masculinity, and marriage is but an essential path to performing these duties. “Hindu notions of wifely devotion to husbands coupled with Victorian ideals of the domesticated wife help to reinstate women in their homes” (Chakravarty 29). Feminine sexuality is to be discursively subsumed in the duty towards family and nation and this is essential for the stability of the institutions of patriarchy.

Indrani Sen in her book *Women and Empire* (2009) explains, “In many ways, this culturally forbidden female sexuality was located in the prostitute...female sexuality often came

to be identified with lower class women” (Sen 2). In Chapter 1, we have considered that these ideas are also visible in constructions of the Muslim other, as hypersexual, sexually deviant and morally suspect of which the tawaifs become the feminine types. Indian nationalism adheres to this logic of chaste, pure Hindu woman to be glorified while the promiscuous, debased prostitutes are to be excluded as well as widely criticised for their unbridled sexuality. The anxieties reflected in the mainstreams discourses, whether colonial or Indian national, regarding sexuality both male and female, and what forms they take in various discursive practices in colonial and post-colonial India are important for our purposes. The courtesan/prostitute becomes a marker of female sexuality outside the structure of the family unit and she threatens its stability. Hence, she is invested with a whole range of patriarchal anxieties. These anxieties also signal again towards the fact that the ‘control’ levied on bodies and sexualities by various agencies is not absolute and susceptible to transgression.

To illustrate this point further we will look at some examples of Kalighat paintings, a popular art form in nineteenth-century Bengal, where we see representations which construct the courtesan woman as hypersexual and clever, beguiling men, and using them for their ends. The men in this scenario become innocent victims and the work of seduction, so to say, is transferred onto the courtesan. Patriarchal anxieties about the seductive courtesan and her ability to control men are found prominently in literary productions and visual representations of the period as well.

For instance, Fig. 1 depicts how in front of the vile courtesan the *babu* is like a broken sheep, tied at end of the string in her hands. It betrays a need to protect the men and to warn them against harm courtesans could bring upon them. The depiction can also be seen as popular



Fig.1: *The Courtesan and her Sheepish Babu*. Kalighat Painting, Bengal, India, 1865-70.

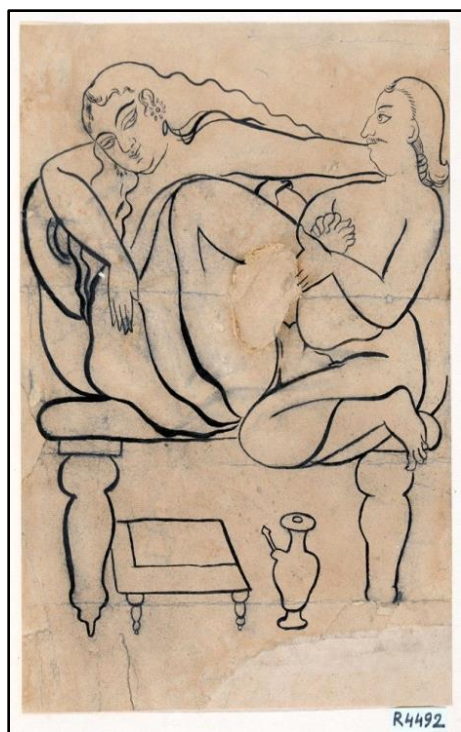


Fig.2: *Courtesan and Lover*. Kalighat Painting, Bengal, India, n.d.

parody of the effeminate, middle class, educated *babu* (Chapter 1) as being controlled and manipulated by the courtesan woman.

Fig. 2 is an example of an unfinished Kalighat painting. In this sketch, the lover is depicted as pressing the feet of the courtesan, in a state of undress, possibly in lieu of sexual favours or as a sign of submission. Similarly, the courtesan's wild, open hair in Fig. 3 is a possible signifier of her unbridled sexuality. In Fig. 4, the heavily jewelled representation of the courtesan not only tells us that the economic situations of the courtesans may vary but also the male peacock in her hands could signify her enraptured male clients as well as a life of finery and opulence. The moral dangers of indulging in women and drink, especially for young men are recurring images in the discourse of nationalist reform and consolidation. In contrast, the new Indian woman is constructed in art and literature of the time as a combination of 'modern education' and homely virtues. The courtesan here then becomes the figure upon which the

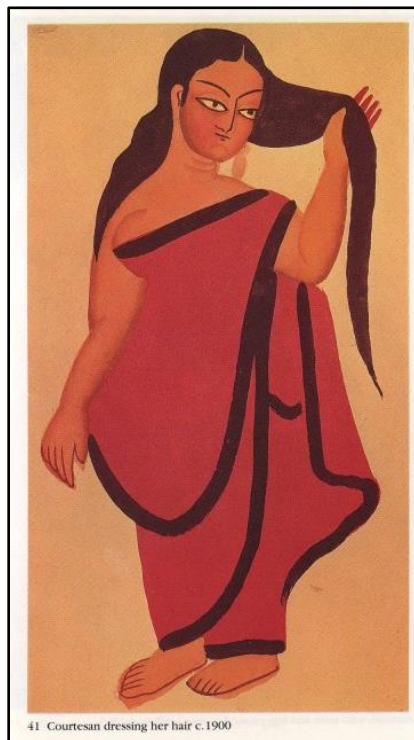


Fig. 3: Kali Charan Ghosh. *Courtesan Dressing her Hair*. Kalighat painting. Calcutta, India, c. 1900.





Fig. 4: *Courtesan with Peacock*. Kalighat Painting. Bengal, India, 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

weaknesses as well as the desires of the middle class *babu* may be projected. Moreover, these fantasies now become available to the emerging middle-class *as* a commodity of cultural consumption, to be bought in street stalls across the city.

While for Neville, the anti-*nautch* campaign is an example of reform initiated by English-educated Indian out of touch with their traditions, thinkers like Morcom draw a more complex picture. She explains that such campaigns evolved from “the indigenising of reform and social purity movements started by British and other foreign reformers and missionaries...around prostitution and matters of sexual morality” (Morcom 38-39), as early as 1892. It is telling that in late 1890s, out of 63 organisations of reform which were active in India about 14 “had passed resolutions to prohibit *nautches* or *nautch* parties as part of community weddings and celebrations such as Holi” (Morcom 39). Under this campaign, *nautch* came to signify a ‘social evil’ which could lead to not only moral degradation but also social and physiological

consequences—“...loss of wealth, bodily weakness, disease and harm to personal character”, as per a pamphlet issued by Madras Christian Literature Society (cited in Morcom 39). In contrast, prior to the imposition of colonial regulation, a balanced engagement with “love and literature in the company of courtesans was positive and a part of being a gentleman” (Morcom 39). *Nautch* is consequently also seen as a part of a Muslim heritage that the Hindu nationalists want to distance themselves from. Morcom also points out that subsequently *nautch* instead of being eliminated, “goes underground”, which involves “more prostitution, less choice and lower status for the women involved” (Morcom 41). This idea is important in that it signals that the repression of *nautch* is not the same as its dismantling, as they are relocated to a subterranean space of illegality. At the same time, we would argue that new forms of popular culture also lead to newer practices associated with courtesans and forms of representations, which produce different possibilities of courtesan conduct in this period.

Strength and purity, which are key points of British self-identification, are also recognisable in the organisation of idealised gender roles within discourses of Indian nationalism. It is important to note that the ordering of the gendered roles, as discussed by Chatterjee (1994), through binaries of private/public, home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine inherently preclude certain subjects like courtesans and prostitutes who do not fit within these paradigms. Chatterjee’s understanding, we argue, remains within what Foucault calls ‘sovereign’ power, where the power is invested in the state, and people are to abide by the laws or regulations. This model does not engage with how governmental control constructs and produces subjects such as courtesans as errant subjects, through the deployment of modes of control that go beyond direct legislations.

We argue that it is through performative citation that these codes of behaviour acquire the status of naturalised values of the national community, and the nationalist imaginary is constructed *around* rather than *against* the governmental machinery that regulates ‘errant’ elements like courtesans. It is important to remember that means of control of courtesans (and other ‘public’ women), and various significations of immorality that they acquire are by no means absolute. Paradoxically, the nature of administrative mandates, medical surveillance and morality acquire authoritative and totalising status, especially in retrospect, which in fact makes them effective in the first place. Butler aptly summarises in her essay ‘Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor’ (1998) that ‘implicit’ forms of censorship are often more effective than ‘explicit’ forms like state policy that make “certain kinds of citizens possible and other impossible” (Butler, ‘Ruled...’ 257).

## **2.5 Desiring the Courtesan**

The initiation of the Indian subject into modernity can be understood to be much like the emergence of a Lacanian subject in the symbolic order. Lacan describes the subject’s entry into language—the field of the Other—as a moment of concept of *alienation* by showing the child’s transformation into a socialised subject. In the Lacanian framework, this submitting to the Other is critical to the formation of the subject within the web of signifiers. At the same time, in thus “submitting to the Other, the child nevertheless gains something: he or she becomes, in a sense, one of language’s subjects, a subject “of language” or “in language” (Fink 6-7). In Lacan’s concept of *alienation*, “the child can be understood to in some sense choose to submit to language, to agree to express his or her needs through language, and to allow him or herself to be represented by words.” (Fink 50).

Lacan introduces the notion of the “castrated subject” to refer to understand the subject in relation to the Other—the master signifier that precipitates the subject in the domain of the Symbolic—as a result of which the subject is caught between a sense of pleasure as well as anxiety (Fink 73). As Bruce Fink argues, “the castrated subject is always presenting itself to the Other, looking to win attention and recognition, and the more it presents itself, the more inescapably castrated it becomes as it is represented by and in the Other” (Fink 73). As the subject is caught up in this play of representation, it comes into relation with what Lacan calls the “object a.” He simultaneously defines it as the residue of symbolisation that interrupts the smooth functioning of law; and as the object-cause of desire (Fink 83). The subject’s relation to “object a” is articulated in the form of fantasy structures through which the subject attains a phantasmatic sense of wholeness, completeness and fulfilment (Fink 59-60).

In the context of our study then we will seek to complicate our understanding of ‘naturalised’ discourses of government, morality, sexuality and gender roles, through an emergence of a subterranean desire for the ‘obscene’ courtesan in the public sphere. Desire for the courtesan here is signified not just as an expression of a physical ‘want’ but as an engagement with and an expression of the Lack generated by the regulatory frameworks of colonial modernity. It is through an ostensible play of this desire that one becomes subject to the symbolic order. The courtesan must be understood as an “object a” of the Symbolic order of colonial modernity. Even as the logic of colonial governmentality produces the courtesan as “diseased body” and an “obscene” presence that must be regulated, the courtesan also marks a “residue” of the process of her symbolisation as a “diseased body,” as the smooth operation of the law is repeatedly disrupted.

At the same time, the courtesan is also the object-cause of nationalist desire for modernity. By situating themselves *against* the figure of the courtesan in fantasies that produce her as a figure alternating between revulsion and attraction, the nationalist elite are able to displace the anxieties of being not-yet-modern onto the courtesan, which are brought on by the structure of colonial modernity.

We first have to consider contexts in which expression of these desires become possible. Culture, as identified by Heath, is “difficult to subject to governmental control” (Heath 4). The domain of culture can typically be understood to open up a space where regulatory mechanisms, especially of morality, become difficult to sustain, especially in the age of cultural technologies of mass production; as evidenced by the challenges posed in the implementation of Obscene Publications Act, for instance. There exist within this space relations of hierarchy—like obscene versus its antithesis (Heath 40). Within the Western aesthetic tradition, obscene defines an “excess” (Heath 40), or a less defined “sensory pleasure” (Heath 40) as defined by Kant in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (1790). As Heath notes, “For Kant, what is bad...is that which is motivated, which seduces, embarrasses or leads viewer astray, away from proper consideration of high form” (Heath 41). Contemplative and disinterested pleasure, for him, is the aim of Art. These distinctions, points out Heath, come to be used to distinguish between art and obscenity in the nineteenth century, and “the latter is denied the status of art because it not only invited *interest* rather than disinterested contemplation but, in promoting action or arousal, engendered embodied viewers or readers” (Heath 41).

Some questions emerge at this point. How does the biopolitical regime of obscenity and hygiene produce a courtesan body that emerges as an object of desire in the domain of popular culture? And, insofar as the courtesan becomes a subject of government that is constituted in a

play of visibility/invisibility, are all appearances of the courtesan considered obscene? What kind of relationships emerge between courtesan and ongoing projects of consolidation of classical traditions in performance cultures, which are invested with values of national heritage in late colonial India? While we shall take up these specific questions in detail in the subsequent chapters, we will conclude with a “return” to the present that trace the ways in which the regime of control of courtesan bodies in the colonial moment remains operative in the present-day context.

## **2.6 The Case of the Bar Girls of Maharashtra: A Reprise**

Obscenity remains in the present a contested category. Even as mainstream discourses disavow the constitutive instability in the everyday performance of the obscene, repeatedly issues erupt in the public domain that throw into relief the persistent questions that are at stake. In her study of dance in contemporary India, Anna Morcom identifies courtesans, bar girls and dancing boys as communities which comprise the ‘illicit’ world of Indian dance. She makes a particularly perceptive observation regarding the semantics of the label of ‘obscurity’ in relation to bar dancers on the one hand, and Bollywood dances on the other. “The Bollywood dance revolution represents the liberation of middle-class, with the discourse of ‘freeing yourself’ through dance abounding. With the emergence of a middle class zone, dance can be safe or safe enough”, notes Morcom (139). The “sexiness” of Bollywood dance, “...structured very differently from the seductiveness and erotic nature of the illicit world” (Morcom 140) in fact, encourages middle class people to look at the bar dancers and courtesan in a different light, whereas until now the tendency has been to view a ‘public erotic performer’ as a prostitute, ‘hence not a performer’ (Morcom 16). There is also a wide network of support for bar dancers within the Mumbai film industry (Morcom 140). The contexts of the performance and viewership in conjunction with

economic considerations become imperative to understand the new boundaries of obscenity, which are being negotiated in contemporary media.

Morcom goes on to argue that these associations between the middle class and bar girls would pave the way for a legitimacy for these communities, as their activities come to be framed in mainstream discourses of livelihood, security and so on. She also talks of overlaps in the civil rights movements like *kothis* ('dancing boys') in LGBT movements (Morcom 24). While Morcom's work is perceptive in the connections it draws between the "illicit" world of the bargirls, mainstream entertainment culture, and contemporary politics, we argue that this supposed 'legitimacy' is likely to be achieved on a reconstituted basis, as these communities come to be situated in new discursive formations. Further, we must problematize this mode of reconstitution and foreground the anxieties of the patriarchal order that are being rendered invisible through the promise of inclusion in the mainstream.

To illustrate this point further, we take up the judgement of the Supreme Court on the Maharashtra state government's ban on bargirls' performances in Mumbai, in 2013 (*The Judgment, Supreme Court of India (Civil Appellate Jurisdiction) Civil Appeal No. 5504 of 2013*). The civil appeal seeks to challenge the Bombay High Court's order, in which Section 33A of the Bombay Police Act, 1951, as added in 2005 "has been declared to be *ultra vires* Article 14 and 19(1)(g) of the Constitution of India" (2). We will first look at the details of the High court judgment and the civil appeal in the following sections.

The Bombay Police Act in its initial conception in 1951 was related to the exercise of power by the State Government to maintain public order (2). Section 33 contains rules regarding "regulating places of public amusement and entertainment" (2). This section was invoked to place a ban on bargirls' performance in the many dance bars in the city. The judgment document,

at the outset, records that in 1986, orchestra as well as dance performances were “permitted to be performed” in spaces which followed the terms and conditions laid down therein. However, such performances had become a subject of concern, with as many as 20,196 cases of violation and “various cases” of minor girls being made to work in these establishments (4). This eventually prompted the government of Maharashtra to pass a resolution on December 16, 2002 to constitute a committee to make changes to the rules regarding such performances (4).

The recommendations submitted by the review committee in 2004 included directives regarding: the dress of the dancers, railings to be installed around the space of the performance, dimensions of the dance floor, customers rewards to be directed through the management rather than showering money on the dancers, and maintenance of the employment registers at these establishments (4-5). The practices which are declared “prohibited,” like showering money on the performer or physical intimacy between the dancer and the audience, are clearly an attempt to sanitise the bar-girls’ performance. The committee was anxious to frame them as “purely” cultural performances, organised around a clear separation between dancer and audience, and new conventions that tried to frame the dance stage as a proscenium space that may not be violated by the audience. Moreover, the committee seemed to implicitly read practices like showering money to be remnants of a decadent and degenerate *mujra* culture, which needed to be reformed to fit the more appropriate, “modern” convention of “tips,” routed through the management of the establishment.

The Maharashtra government, however, ignored these recommendations and proceeded to introduce amendments Sections 33A and 33B to the Bombay Police Act, passed by the state legislature on July 21, 2005 (9). The amendments placed a blanket ban on performance of dance in eating houses/permit rooms and beer/dance bars. Significantly, an exception was made for



hotels rated three-star and above. The appeal also notes the “deep concern” of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly over the “ill effects of dance bars on youth and dignity of women”, which are seen to be “indecent, obscene, vulgar...deprav(ing) or corrupt(ing) public morality” (8). Further, there are fears over the “...ill-effect on society in general including ruining of some families...and young girls desirous of earning easy money” (9). Thus, the dance bars have a destructive influence on youth, women, family and society as such. The profession is considered to be ‘de-humanising’ (44) and the ban is seen to be in accordance with CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) (37). Groups ranging from Indian Hotel and Restaurant Owners Association, Bhartiya Bar Girls Union, women’s organisations, Association of Dance Bar Owners and other proprietors (10), vociferously challenged the ban as unconstitutional, and the High court eventually struck down the proposed ban in 2006.

The argument articulated in the 2013 civil appeal seeking the intervention of the Supreme Court, reveals some of the patriarchal anxieties that frame the question of dance bars. Some of the allegations that emerge here are reminiscent of the ones made against courtesans during the anti-*nautch* campaigns. For instance, the chairperson of the Maharashtra State Commission for Women wrote to the state government about “the ongoing racketeering to lure girls to work in dance bars and their consequent acts of prostitution and immoral trafficking” (5). The letter states, “...the problems of the bar girls have acquired grave dimensions and have resulted even into the death of many bargirls...forcibly induced into prostitution” (6). The institutionalisation of bar dancers is seen as a ‘grave’ threat to “social health” (6) and the commission seeks a ban to “relieve the women from their physical, sexual and financial exploitation” (6). The dance bars are seen, on the one hand, to pose a threat to the bodily well-being of the dancers, while on

the other, the performances are deemed to endanger “social health” as such. Further, “overwhelming evidence on record” in the form of two 2005 survey reports from the NGO Prayas (regarding the rehabilitation needs of bar girls) and SNTD (Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women’s University) both argue that the dance bars invariably include an element of human trafficking. Consequently, they offer a negative environment for minor girls and make young children vulnerable to sexual threats (7). These representatives of “empowerment” are thus able to articulate their position only through a simplistic construction of the dancers as victims. The reports reproduce their assumptions with statements like “no dignity in this work” (54). The Court eventually dismissed the findings of both these surveys on the grounds that the sample size of the Prayas report was too small, and the trafficking allegations were found to be baseless (68).

The Bar Girls unions as well as proprietors of establishment presented their argument as a question of right to livelihood. The Court also noted that as many as 75,000 women were at the risk of losing their jobs, as a consequence of the ban (128). The government countered this with the argument of “degree of harm.” It is argued that “the legislature understands and correctly appreciates the needs of its own people...(they) are free to recognise degrees of harm, and may confine its restrictions to those cases where need is deemed to be the clearest (29). This, in turn, is used to validate the argument of confinement of restrictions of only certain types of establishments.

The Supreme Court, in its final judgment in 2013, upheld the 2005 decision of the High Court against the ban, finding the discrimination into three-star establishments and above as arbitrary. Moreover, it found the ban to be in violation of Article 21 of the Constitution of India. In the legislature’s move to attach the threat of the ‘obscene’ to bar dancers of what are

undeniably lower-class establishments and lower class clientele, there is a clear attempt to consolidate the middle and upper class construction of decency, against the obscene other. The judgment recognises and takes exception to this: “our judicial conscience would not permit us to presume that the class to which an individual or the audience belong brings with him...a particular kind of morality or decency...that the enjoyment of the same kind of entertainment by the upper classes leads only to mere enjoyment and in the case of poorer classes it would lead to immorality, decadence and depravity” (100).

The Court acknowledges the “creative talent” (61) of the dancers and their right to earn money through it. Further, most of these girls being “illiterate” (68), they are considered not employable in other jobs. A number of them were known to be the sole breadwinners of their families and were able to make anywhere between 5,000 to 20,000 rupees per month through dancing (75). Instead of taking away the employment of the bar girls the court considers it more appropriate to “...bring about measures which would ensure safety and improve working conditions of persons” (124).

The Court also delinked the question of bar dancing from that of prostitution and recommended “alternate mechanisms for preventing trafficking in women” (60-62). The Supreme Court advises the state that instead of “putting curbs on freedom and empowerment of women, new modes of security must be developed” (63) and also recommends the proposals of the 2004 committee regarding regulation of performance spaces be considered, instead of a complete ban. The last section of the judgment, a statement by Chief Justice of India, Altamish Kabir reproduces at least some of the biases regarding bar girls in its language as well as content. He says of bar girls who have lost their jobs in consequence of the ban, “...many of these *unfortunate* people were *forced* into prostitution merely to survive, as they had no other means of

survival” (italics mine, 128). Dismissing the argument that many women take up the profession by choice, the statement responds: “...more often than not...it is a...choice between starving and in resorting to bar dancing....not very many women would willingly resort to bar dancing as a profession” (130). Within the scope of the judgment which ostensibly empowers the bar dancers is the analogy that inscribes the ‘otherness’ of another women’s community—‘the prostitute’—whose exclusion is reinforced here through a narrative of victimhood and helplessness. The Court advises the government to “provide alternative means to *support* and *shelter* to persons engaging in such trades or professions...some of whom...have nowhere to go or earn a living after coming out of their *unfortunate* circumstances” (132). In doing this, it naturalises a paternalistic attitude towards these “misguided souls,” which seems like a reproduction of the “victim-savage-saviour” (Morcom 19) discourse of the colonial period.

Thus, the ‘inclusion’ of bar girls in the discourse of livelihood is contingent on transformation of older practices that are seen as ‘obscene’/ ‘anti-modern’/ ‘exploitative’. Through judicial intervention, these labels acquire a presence in historical discourse. At the same time, we must problematize the fixity of these markers, and the predictability of their effects. It is important to note that there is a burgeoning plurality in representations and meanings attached to bar-girl communities that are evident in these stories, which might or might not overlap with the narratives of the State.

The positions of the government and the Court seem to coincide on the need to transform the bar dance performance from an obscene remnant of pre-modern decadence into a properly “modern” form of culture industry. The divergence in their respective positions, however, has the effect of rendering precarious the legal existence of the bar dancers as subjects of the state. The bar dancer is thus situated in a field of uncertainty that is not unlike the state’s mode of

controlling the “diseased” courtesan. An article written by Roli Srivastava, published in *The Hindu* on March 21, 2016, notes that the recommendation of the Supreme Court to the Maharashtra Government to start issuing bar licenses to dance bars by March 15, 2016 didn’t produce any results. The meeting where the ‘no-objection certificates’ were to be issued was postponed to March 26, 2016. The article says, “Owners said they had complied with the conditions to hold dance performances on the premises of their bars, and the state government was adding to the conditions and making the process longer” (Srivastava, 21 March, 2016). The Supreme Court has also recommended, according to the article, installation of CCTV cameras at the entrances of establishments, rather than in areas of performance as suggested by the State government. The article quotes Bharat Thakur, the president of the Dance Bar Association and also owner of three bars as saying, “the ban on dance bars was lifted after the Supreme Court’s order. But they (the state government) are not allowing us to open it. We will move the court on March 28 if we don’t get the licence until then” (Srivastava, 21 March, 2016). The variance of ideas and oscillating intent of the judiciary and the state produces uncertainty over the consequences. According to Varsha Kale, honorary president of the Bar Dancers’ Union, “the girls are worried that the matter will go to court again” (Srivastava, 21 March, 2016).

According to an article by Tembhekar and Jain published in *Times of India*, Mumbai on March 31, 2016, an updated draft of regulations for dance bars was in the process of being prepared by the State. Among the proposed modifications is the increase of distance from registered schools and religious place from 500 metres to 1 kilometre, which is expected to hit “several hundred permit rooms and liquor serving hotels” since as per the Supreme Court judgment, isolated restrictions on dance bars are not permissible. The draft was to be tabled at both the houses by April 13, 2016. Other “controversial regulations” include: 11:30 pm deadline,

separation of drink and food serving areas, age limit of 21 for entry, provident funds for bar dancers, penalty of up to Rs 25 lakhs for breach of any of the regulations and patrons may face up to three-year imprisonment. No drinking will be allowed when the dancing is in progress as per the new excise laws (Tembhekar and Jain). Adarsh Shetty, president of Ahar, an association of more than 8,000 bars and hotels, felt that provident funds would not be practical for dancers who work on a freelance basis and “ridicules” the proposed hefty fines. Advocate Veena Thandani feels that the government was “indulging in an arbitrary exercise of power and appeared determined to create hurdles for opening of dance bars” (Tembhekar and Jain). She feels that state should instead follow the directive of the court to ensure “*no obscenity and vulgarity in the business and ...(that) dignity of women in maintained*” (italics mine, Tembhekar and Jain). Shetty suggests that instead of levying fines, “...the government and its expert members should *define obscenity*” (italics mine, Tembhekar and Jain). But arguably the process of “defining obscenity” is perhaps a re-defining, a restructuring that is currently underway, through the arguments over regulation of spaces and practices of bar girls in the current context, as they were with courtesans and other public women in late colonial India. The bar dancer is simultaneously a threat to society, as well as threatened by it. In an extension of the governmental logic described in this chapter, the bar dancer is no longer a subject of a repressive, sovereign authority that rules through the ban—the state now claims to adopt a “pastoral” approach and looks to provide for the welfare of its subjects.

Various human interest news stories about the plight of bar dancers look to legitimise this pastoral regime of power. Even as they are sometimes critical of the state’s approach to the problems of bar dancers, they reproduce at another level its welfarist assumptions. Another article by Roli Srivastava, published in *The Hindu* on March 27, 2016 provides a humane angle

to the story of bar girls and discloses new complexities in the composition of bar girl communities in Bombay. “A staggering 90 per cent of the dancers were from the tribal communities who were performers by tradition” (Srivastava, 27 March, 2016). The article recounts the narrative of Pinky, who was forced to enter the “flesh trade” at the age of thirteen, and others like her who were *mujra* performers, and transitioned into bar dancing for better earnings. Kale, in conversation with Srivastava, reveals that a large number of bar girls “...hailed from tribes of traditional dancers, had joined these bars on their own and, in doing so, had escaped sex work” (Srivastava, 27 March, 2016). The article talks of another performer Mahek, a known Rajasthani singer who had recorded a cassette, who belonged to the *nat* community. A performer in *nautanki* performances in her village, Mahek migrated to Bombay in search of better opportunities. While she got jobs, others in the community who didn’t had to return to the village and become prostitutes, often operating on highways, like the notorious 100-150 kilometre stretch from Alwar to Bharatpur on the national highway, and risking HIV infection, and other forms of exploitation, which now constitutes a complex social problem, according to Kale.

The article talks about the lack of plans from the state for the rehabilitation of these women. Mahek talks of an occasion where the dancers were encouraged to get involved in a government scheme for ‘women in distress’ to make pickles and *papads*. The earnings were as low as 250 rupees a month. Mahek interrogates the logic which assumes that it is more respectable to make pickles than dance. The article ends with an important question, posed by Mahek, to a country which rallied for Nirbhaya’s rights (after the Delhi gang rape of December 16, 2012) “We are also being wronged. *Kya main bharat ki beti nahin hoon?* (Am I not India’s daughter?)” (Srivastava, 27 March, 2016).

The article ends with a final redemptive gesture that situates the courtesan in the midst of the struggle for independence. Srivastava cites Kale's research on communities of dance performers, during which she came across references to courtesans in different contexts—including the freedom struggle—where Mahatma Gandhi asked the tawaifs who wanted to participate in the freedom movement to “continue dancing and do their bit in that realm” (Srivastava, 27 March, 2016). The tawaifs then proceeded to write revolutionary songs and perform them, according to the anecdote. Interestingly, Sampath in his book recounts an anecdote where Gauhar Jan at behest of Gandhi organised a concert to collect funds for the freedom movement, on the condition that he would attend the concert. In the end, he did not make an appearance himself, sending a representative instead, which offended Gauhar Jan, and she did not donate the entire amount collected from the concert, because Gandhi did not keep his word. The relationship between the national movement and tawaifs has pluralised narratives. However, for Srivastava, Kale's anecdote is a proof of the “respect the dancers once enjoyed”. In the context of our study, we have seen that these claims seem simplistic. Nevertheless, a new kind of linkage between courtesan and bar girls emerges here which is different from the narrative of the ‘illicit’ world of dance.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

Thus, through the various constructions of the bar girl in the current context we see newer formations of obscenity in performance culture, around which continue to be organised charges of corruption, immorality and indecency, and associated with certain spaces, class affiliations and etiquettes of performances. The detailed study of the Supreme Court judgment helps us understand some of the mainstream constructions of the bar girls in administrative discourse and the judicial mandates with regard to the regulation of their practices in the present-day context.



However, the newspaper articles in their investigative mode, claim to reveal the ‘real’ issues being faced by the bar girls and their ‘endangered’ mode of performance. The ‘real’ stories would help the reader to empathise with the community of bargirls in that they are just women trying to escape ‘flesh trade’ or folk performers seeking better prospects in the harsh city. Newer linkages between the reading publics and bar dancers can be extrapolated.

Having delineated the regime of control of courtesans’ bodies through their representations in different orders of discourse, contextualising these constructions within the prevailing discourses of identity formation and nationalist consolidation, and having studied their ‘precarious’ character, we argue for specific attention to two aspects of courtesans and their associations with popular culture. First, we widen the scope of study of the courtesan in late colonial India by identifying the plurality in representation and participation of courtesans through the domain of popular culture. These constructions of courtesans have characteristics that are derived from prevalent discourses of morality and sexuality, but at the same time engender variations and provide a site for political engagement with entrenched structures of power. Second, we look at how the frameworks of desire for the courtesan are re-negotiated through modern forms of performance culture like gramophone and photography, and how they provide contexts of production of new relations with courtesans in popular imagination, and their relationship with and within colonial modernity. It is noteworthy that with increasing popularity of these forms, newer measures of regulations and control emerge. For instance, in 1950s All India Radio barred vocal performances of women “whose private lives were a public scandal” (Das Gupta 2005; Lelyveld 1994) (*see* Chapter 4). The theoretical and historical concerns articulated in this chapter will frame our exploration in the subsequent chapters of such modes of exclusion-inclusion.

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### Chapter 3

#### **‘Real’ Courtesans in Fictive Worlds: Narratives of Literature and Films**

In the previous chapter, we established that the project of controlling the courtesan’s body in India is inscribed within broader discourses of race, sexuality and gender. Also, in their implementations these legislations were non-uniform as well as periodically opposed. Having identified the domain of culture as a site where configurations of power and their relationship with the ‘obscene’ are fortified and mediated, in the current chapter we study courtesans, as they are constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in selected colonial and vernacular literary texts. We consider these constructions are connected to their contexts not just as representations in a realist mode but also in that they simultaneously derive from, differ from and contribute to meanings of categories of social identities. Realism in literature can be loosely defined as an objective representation of reality and as a movement gained significance in nineteenth century in Britain and also in India. The literary texts that we look at in this chapter embody different forms of realist aspirations and they all engage with courtesans: Flora Annie Steel’s *The Potter’s Thumb* (1900, English), Mirza Hadi Ruswa’s *Umrao Jan Ada* (March, 1899, Urdu), *Junun-i-Interzar* (April, 1899, Urdu) and Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Jiban* (1912, Bengali). The discussion will also involve film versions of *Umrao Jan* (1981, 2006) and Shyam Benegal’s *Mandi* (1983).

Intersections and overlaps between national and colonial modern discourses in the emerging public sphere in late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been looked at in some detail. These developments can be traced in the literary sphere as well, where various models of modern, Indian writings emerge, which negotiate their positions vis-à-vis colonial

literary models in both forms and themes, especially the social realist novel, which is the latest import of colonial modernity in India in the period.

As we have noted in the previous chapter, India in this period was a major market for British print publications. How do these colonial texts then negotiate their position in the literary market, and cater to the new, heterogeneous reading public, who are implicated in the various discourses of nationalism as well as modernity? What is interesting to observe is the ‘reality’ constructed within these texts, and how they configure within the colonial politics of aesthetics. Two questions that we will explore are: first, how the courtesan is constructed within the ‘real’ world of the texts and what political ends do these constructions align with.

### **3.1 Reality and Representations**

To the extent that any practice of literary realism implies a notion of reality as such, Colin McCabe, in his essay ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses’ (1974) notes that “Realism is not an issue only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue—and must be handled and explained as such” (McCabe 7). The realist text is not an indexical presentation of some presumed level of transparent, objective reality. Realism, argues M. Madhava Prasad, “is not so much a matter of the object of representation but a mode of textual organisation of knowledge, a hierarchical layering of discourses” (Prasad 58). The ‘reality’ of the text McCabe explains, is an effect of the metalanguage<sup>1</sup> of the text, which in the case of the ‘classic realist text’ is the narrative discourse or the voice of the narrator. This theorisation of the “reality effect” allows us to frame the question of realism in the terms of the Foucaultian dyad of power/knowledge. Reality must be understood as an effect of discourse, and

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<sup>1</sup> Metalanguage is described as “unwritten” by McCabe, not because it is not present in the novel but precisely because its ambition is to become a transparent medium for making visible the meanings immanent in the object language-world.

the realist text as a site where it is materialised. Implicated in relations of power, the realist text cannot be seen apart from its political effects.

This becomes particularly pertinent in understanding the politics of realism in the colonial modern context. Even as realist novels began finding their way into the hands of English-educated Indians, it arrived always already as a form of aesthetic imperialism. Meenakshi Mukherjee has argued that due to the various socio-political changes in urban-life the new educated Indian elite was familiar with the British novel but in the absence of developments like imperial expansion and the industrial revolution which provide individuals a chance to transgress rigid social hierarchies and explore individual potential, the “Indian authors’ minds [underwent] a change which is not reflected in the social circumstances” (Mukherjee, 98). At the same time, “...in spite of the basic incompatibilities...the novel in India which began under the English tutelage soon began to acquire its own distinctive characters” (Mukherjee 18). Through the development of genres such as the social reformist novel and the historical romance, realist conventions came to be adapted to varying degrees in the emerging space of print culture in the various Indian languages. In popular culture, there was re-combination of realist elements with others. At the same time, as the subsequent discussion will demonstrate, the realist intervention was constitutive in redistributing the hierarchy of literary forms in the public sphere in various vernacular languages.

In *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski argues that with modernity, “reading comes to assume a new and formative role in the shaping of selfhood” (Felski 19) and that “texts...are unable to act directly on the world, but only via the intercession of those who read them” (Felski 18). This is relevant for realist literary texts as well. As Felski points out, “...aesthetic pleasure is

never unmediated or intrinsic, that even our most inchoate and seemingly ineffable responses are shaped by disposition transmitted through education and culture” (Felski 15).

Neil Larsen’s *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies* (1990) engages with the politics of realism within the specific context of Latin American literature. Theorising the social effectivity of cultural representation, Larsen argues, “Culture in itself becomes the naturalizing and dehistoricising containment of what is otherwise potentially an emergence of a particular counter-rationality directly opposed to that of the absent state mediation” (Larsen 64). In the case of a text that has a narrative voice, the metalanguage of the text might or might not coincide with the dominant cultural discourse. Hierarchies both within the domain of culture and outside it nevertheless limit these voices. In his study of Juan Rulfo, Larsen shows the national realist aesthetic, despite its differences from the classical European text, is the literary-ideological articulation of bourgeois hegemony. Larsen is thus able to theorise the politics of realism in historical contexts where its conventions have undergone re-combination with aspects of folk culture and other non-European traditions.

Madhava Prasad, in his book *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (1998), points out that “the realist aesthetic occupies a privileged place in the western imagination... (and an) equation of realism with democratic, anti-fascist ideologies while popular forms were described as escapist and corrupting” (Prasad 58). Each of the texts taken up in this chapter draws on different elements from both realist aesthetic conventions as well as a number of other popular indigenous literary forms. Our analysis thus attempts to challenge the political assumptions that underlie the distinction between high-art and the popular. Rather, the imperative to engage with realism that each of the texts foregrounds is itself symptomatic of a desire for modernity that is characteristic of the colonial modern public sphere. Through these texts we try to engage with the reading



publics that are anticipated therein. These texts are significant as performative inscriptions of the courtesan in popular discourse.

### **3.2 Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb***

*The Potter's Thumb* revolves around the social circles of the colonial officers and their women, in the desolate 'old city' of Hodinuggur, a symbolic remnant of Mughal rule in India, surviving on the 'benevolence' of the Englishmen ("by virtue of an Englishman's signature on a piece of Parchment" (Steel 3), and the fashionable hill-station Shimla. The novel explores a range of racial and gender relationships through a plot of intrigue and misadventures. Chândni, the resident courtesan stands out in her mobility and her access to the interior spaces of colonial officials as well as local nobility and is considered both vile and clever. Various colonial anxieties about the seductive, hypersexual, obscene native women are framed around her body. We will, however, situate Steel's novel within a political and literary context before we take up the text in some detail.

Flora Annie Steel was a British journalist, suffragist and member of the Women Writer's Club, founded in 1892. She was a regular contributor to the "heavily illustrated, heavily commercialized" (Ledbetter 55) *The Lady's Realm*, a popular women's journal. *The Lady's Realm* focused on "a woman reader who is decidedly enlightened about women's issues (such as education, athletics and health, emigration and employment), and comfortable with the New Woman ideals then transforming traditional notions of femininity during the 1880s and 90s" (Ledbetter 56). In her non-fiction writings like *The Modern Marriage Market* (1898)—which she co-authored with three other women writers and first appeared in *The Lady's Realm*—Steel propagates that the duty towards the British nation was the ultimate aim of a woman's life. Steel's, however, is only one among many views on issues pertinent to women of the time.

Steel is strongly critical of ideas of love as women, in her view, should aspire to achieve a higher ideal: "...what ethical difference there is in selling yourself for love or for money, if mere personal pleasure lies at the bottom of the bargain...The girl who gives herself for exchange in pure passion is quite as mercenary as the one who sells herself for gold" (Corelli 102). Idealising the East—with which she is acquainted given her status as a colonial *memsahib*—she advocates an idea of marriage that is "not purely a personal matter, as it is with us, (but) it is a duty to the *race*" (Corelli 119). Steel clearly points out that she is not advocating the Indian system, which has problems like child marriage, female infanticide, and *sati* but believes that consciousness of one's duty towards their race is the reason for "rational happiness derived from wifedom and motherhood" for Indian women. In Steel's view responsibility of parenthood is the "highest function of humanity" (Corelli 131) and in line with one's duty towards the nation. During this time, motherhood becomes a productive activity. Simultaneously, intrigues of love/romance/suspense in the colony form the plot of many of her fictional works besides *The Potter's Thumb* like *Voices in the Night* (1900), *Tales of the Punjab* (1894), *On the Face of the Water* (1896) etc. She is also known to have co-authored the successful guidebook, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1902), for the benefit of European women living in India.

Steel's *The Potter's Thumb* engages with some of these ideas. Through the characters of the Colonel's daughter Rose Tweedie, the widowed Mrs. Boynton who is living off her pension and is a social butterfly, the English army officers Dan Fitzgerald and George Keene, Colonel Tweedie, and his secretary Lewis Gordon, the novel engages with topical ideas about marriage and model 'modern' relationships. Flirtatious Mrs Boynton enamours every male character in the novel, and is herself in love with Dan. Dan is killed in an accident a day before

their wedding, and she eventually marries the respectable English officer and widower, Colonel Tweedie, who is devoted to the cause of the Empire. Further, Rose's nuptial with Lewis Gordon, leads her into a life of childbearing along with an opportunity to form her own "opinions" and a chance to get involved with girl's education, thus being circumvented within her duties towards the Empire. To the likes of older women like Mrs. Boynton, she represents the archetypal New Woman who is often seen as "un-ladylike," or "like a boy."

While the main plot of the novel revolves around the British characters, the native characters form a subplot with intrigues regarding the sluice gates that control the supply of water to the city, and is a sticking point between the 'natives' and the colonial administration. The social life of the English characters—their gatherings, dinner balls, parties and race tracks—offers her readers in England a glimpse of life in India, much like earlier forms of writing such as travelogues. This effect is further heightened by Steel's frequent use of native expressions—which are translated into English in an attached glossary, for her English reader—phrases like *budmarsh* ("evil walker") and expressions like 'seeing it is better than having the yellow-trouserred ones' ("the police"). The idiom and syntax of the language of natives and the Englishmen and women are marked as different. Dalel Beg, in his "offensively European costume and manner," (Steel 43) greets George Keene by saying, "Aha! Keene, old chappie...you sleep after *burra khana* (big dinner) with the mem. By Jove, you keep it up late! (sic)" (Steel 43). The colonial officers as well as the women despise him. Also, the native servant's linguistic follies are caricatured for comic effect—"Shall I tell him the *mem sahiba* is going to eat the air in her carriage?" (Steel 101).

The Indian characters are coded as types much like a "comedy of manners". There is the foppish Muslim noble Dalel Beg who "imitates" European manners and style to comical

effect; the senile chess-playing figurehead Diwan Zubr-ul-Zaman; the heir apparent Kush-hal Beg, a “mountain of flesh” whose throne is a “cane-bottomed chair, set on a filthy striped carpet” (Steel 5); the wives in the *zenana*; and the seductive courtesan Chândni. The Potter and his granddaughter Azizan together symbolise the superstitious/surreal and erotic/artistic appeal of the colony and will be discussed in some detail at the end of this section.

The narrative voice in *The Potter's Thumb* is not gendered, and claims to comment authoritatively on social, political and administrative arrangements, geographical terrain and ways of life in Britain and in India. The “reality” of the colony is constructed through the narrative voice with details ranging from the seasonal peculiarities of monsoon and drought (Steel 147); tips on tackling the Indian summer (Steel 104); do's and don'ts in a cholera epidemic (Steel 122); the social gatherings of English *sahiblogues* at the racetracks in Shimla (Steel 121), partridge hunting and waltzes<sup>2</sup> (Steel 93), and the hierarchies operative within the English households in India and without. There are elaborate descriptions of scenery, social etiquettes in the colony and even “descriptions” of the *zenana*—“...women's apartments where life was so empty of novelty and where a crowded squabbling glimpse, from some lattice, of arrival or departure was all inmates could hope for, beyond of course to the ceremonial visit the English ladies paid to the circle of selected wives” (Steel 84). References to mid- to late-nineteenth century journals such as the *Scientific American*, *Saturday Review* and *Nineteenth Century* enhance the realistic effect. The ‘neutral’ voice of the narrator also explicates reasons and motivations behind various actions throughout the novel for the benefit of the reader.

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<sup>2</sup> The rich social life of the colonial officers and their women is also widely reported in local newspapers, even in the domain of the Nizam in Hyderabad. “Festivities of the week opened with a grand dinner party given on Monday evening by H.E the Vikar-ul-Umra, in honour of the departing Welsh Regiment....and everyone who had not had the pleasure of dining at Falaknuma, were charmed with the entertainment and the beauties of the palace. The crowing delight of the evening was the *dance* after dinner, which gave great pleasure to everyone, as the music was good and the floor all that could be desired”--‘Ladies Column’ *Deccan Post* (italics mine, 20<sup>th</sup> Nov, 1986).

Through the metalanguage, which becomes the voice of Reason with respect to the text, two kinds of gazes are naturalised—the coloniser’s and the native’s—which in turn reinforces the status quo of colonial discourse. The former is evident in statements like, “He (George Keene) was determined to consider the natives as automata, until personal experience in each case made him agree reluctantly that they were not” (Steel 31); or, “It must be awful to be a native” (Steel 59); and, “Even in our kindness we treat these people as we would like to be treated ourselves...Why, we might as well give a child who has disobeyed his mother the right to appeal against her in court. What chance would the child have to begin with, and then what good would it do?” (Steel 205), says Dan of the justice system in India. The subservience of the local people is textually justified by their “own” attitudes towards the colonial officers and women. Both the Potter and Azizan refer to them as “our mother and father” (Steel 33), the Potter also refers to himself as “(your) slave” (Steel 106). Also, “...the *sahib-logue*, being barely human, must not be judged by ordinary human standards. As likely as not, their women were not women at all” (Steel 84). Beyond the ‘inherent’ subservience, there are a few moments in the text when village women mock the ways of the white women. The “wide-eyed villagers” are watching a game of tennis between Dan and Rose, about whom a “deep bosomed mother of many” says, “That one in the short skirt is a *budmârsh*. Her man will need his hands,” (Steel 47) inducing chuckles amongst other women present. Later in the story, when Rose returns to Hodinuggur with her husband Lewis, the women see her pregnant and say, “‘Tis for sure she who played bat and ball last year like a boy. Wah! that is over; she knows her work now” (Steel 231). Their ‘mockery,’ however, only reinforces the prudish modesty and backwardness of the native women.

Besides racial interactions, male/female relationships are explored at length in the novel. Both male and female characters expound on ideas of marriage and gender roles within the colony and in English society. It is significant to note that while in the world of colonial *mems* and *sahibs*, the intrigues of relationships and marriage feature heavily, the only ‘native’ couple in the novel is Dalel Beg and his half-European, child bride Beatrice Norma Elflida D’eremo. The couple is ill-matched to say the least. She eventually enlists Chândni’s help to control Dalel’s ways. Thus, while women like Mrs. Boynton “view mankind chiefly from matrimonial point of view, and seek to guide variety to the question by importing into it all their women friends” (Steel 41), the native women have no such occupations. Steel’s advocacy of the ideal marriage in *Modern Marriage Market*—that the highest ideal of marriage is in the service of the Empire, rather than personal pleasure—is reproduced in the novel too. Both the women protagonists settle down in marriages with characters who represent the old and new faces of the British Empire—Colonel Tweedie and Lewis Gordon.

The character of Chândni seems to run contrary to the racial and gender binaries set up in the novel. The “daughter of the bazaars” (Steel 44) has no thought for marriage—“Chândni the courtesan hath no need to keep a man in a leash; she hath no need to have the nikka read, my little pigeon, as thou hast,” (Steel 172) in her own words. Further, “she was not going to marry a fool in order to wear a veil and live with a lot of women” (Steel 169).

Chândni along with the old Diwan are seen to be the remnants of an ‘old world’ order—“Every atom of her blood came from the veins of those who for centuries had woven a still finer net of women’s wit around the intrigues of their protectors” (Steel 194). Most of the characters in the novel, including her patrons, both fear and despise her. Dan says of her, “That sort of woman doesn't belong to our civilised age; and we are absolutely at a disadvantage before

her... one feels helpless at times when one stands face to face with that old world” (Steel, 195). Chândni is the mastermind behind the various intrigues which add new twists in the plot—the plan to first ‘bribe’ George and then Mrs Boynton with the Hodinuggur pearls and jewels hidden in the Ayodhya pot, as well as the bid to make Mrs Boynton pass on the keys of the sluice gates to gain control of the waters. The text, however, makes it difficult to see Chândni as a revolutionary figure<sup>3</sup>, and her vendetta against the colonial officers and their women has more to do with staying in the favour of her patrons, the Diwan and his family. As the narrative voice tells us, “ People of her trade know what to expect when they are attached to petty intriguing courts , where one ruler’s meat is invariably the next ruler’s poison” (Steel 168).

Chândni’s opportunism becomes clearer when at the end of the novel she becomes Norma’s advisor on how to control Dalel. In the course of the novel Chândni is variously threatened by both ‘native’ and English characters—both Azizan and Rose try to strangle her on different occasions, Dalel Beg calls her “the filth of the bazaar”, “cutting with his whip towards Chândni as one cuts at a dog to frighten it away from the room” (Steel 175). The intrigue with the opening of sluice gates which is a potentially rebellious act, does not cause any major upsets because the administration itself grants permission to open them, and any further threats from her are neutralised by the intervention of Dan Fitzgerald and Lewis Gordon who procure a “written declaration signed by Chândni, stating that she herself had stolen the key (to the sluice gates)” (Steel 206).

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<sup>3</sup> Charan Kamal Kaul Jagpal in her thesis *I Mean to Win: The Nautch Girl and Imperial Feminism at the ‘Fin de Siècle’* talks of the revolutionary and emancipatory potential of the courtesan/*nautch* girl for British women writers like Flora Annie Steel. She sees the engagement with courtesans and their practices as a subversion of the tenets of British feminism and its implicit understanding that white women are inherently superior to their native counterparts. While this seems like a retrospective superimposition of political categories like British feminism, it is also problematic to look at isolated popular, fictional texts of a writer as political criticism and resistance.

Chândni's seamless mobility between the worlds of the colonial *mems* and *sahibs* and the older world order of the nobility and their *zenana* is an important facet of her character—a mobility that is denied to all other characters in the novel. She uses the anonymity of the “burka” to her utmost advantage—“The burka...is of all disguises the most complete, since it blots out form, colour, expression, even movement” (Steel 73). The only other character in the novel who wears the burka for similar reasons is Azizan, but that too is on Chândni's bidding. One significant difference between Chândni and other Indian characters is that she “seemed to know the ways and the thoughts of white people” (Steel 115). She is the only one who parodies the English ways (unlike Dalel Beg who becomes a parody in his imitation of them), for the entertainment women of the *zenana*—“The whisper ran through the airless, squalid rooms, causing a flutter among the *caged* inhabitants...watch(ing) Chândni give a spirited imitation of the way the *mem-sahibs* waltzed with the *sahib-logue*. It was not an edifying spectacle, but it afforded infinite satisfaction to the audience... The young women tittered, the old ones called Heaven to witness their horror, and then they all sat without winking an eye while the courtesan sang the songs of her profession” (italics mine, Steel 26). The women of the *zenana* are the oppressed Other of the colonial *memsahibs*, like Steel, and this validates the ongoing colonial reform projects for their education and upliftment.<sup>4</sup>

Her traditional function as a performer is invoked in a few minor instances when she sings on her balcony or for the Diwan and Dalel in a private audience to the accompaniment of a *sutara*. Interestingly, the presumed sexual prowess of the courtesan is not called upon in the

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<sup>4</sup> Various colonial *memsahibs* in India took up efforts to reform and uplift the oppressed women of the *zenana*, much like Rose Tweedie in the novel. These are widely reported in the newspapers of the time. For example, an article on “The Victoria Scholarship Fund” in *The Advocate of India*, 19<sup>th</sup> March 1901 reports, “Mrs. Barr wife of the British Resident, held the most successful meeting yesterday afternoon of purdah ladies at Chudderghat Residency, to raise subscriptions for the Victoria Scholarship Fund started by Lady Curzon. There were large number of ladies present and the subscriptions collected amounted to Rs. 8,700. In addition to this, the Nizam's mother has subscribed Rs. 28,000. It is anticipated that about one lakh will be eventually collected.”



narrative, except obliquely implied in the hold that she has over some native men. At one point she says to Azizan, “I will teach you how to have lovers and to spare” (Steel 115). The frameworks of desire around the courtesan are conspicuous in their absence. Moreover, the British men who do come in contact with her, despise her—Dan says, “...smells and abominations of the bazaar are enough to kill me” (Steel 191). But within the narrative voice Chândni is still framed as an exotic object—“But in all this world there was nothing worth a look, apparently, save Chândni, the courtesan, swinging her silver anklets over the edge of a *dhooli*; to judge at any rate by those human eyes” (Steel 170).

Mrs Boynton’s desire to “go native”<sup>5</sup> is a superficial role-play for her amusement. Bedecked in her native dress, “creamy muslin (which) suited her in its careless folds” (Steel, 69) Mrs Boynton enraptures the men in “gratifying admiration” (Steel 70) and “play(s) the ‘Light of the Harem’<sup>6</sup> to perfection” (Steel 94). She feels, “everything is delightful; simply fascinating! In spite of what Mr Keene said this morning, I begin to wish I were a native” (Steel 70). The desire however is not reiterated elsewhere in the text, and hence seems intended to exoticise the native and romanticise the colony, rather than a matter of transgression of the racial divide. The relation between the ‘native’ and coloniser is best encapsulated in an exchange between Azizan, the potter’s grand-daughter and George Keene, who makes a painting of her,

Azizan: “The *Huzoor* must really think me pretty?”

George: “I think you would make a pretty picture”

(Steel 31)

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<sup>5</sup> A recurrent theme in Steel’s fiction also present in *Voices in the Night* and most clearly in *Face on the Waters*. Jagpal sees this as an evidence of the emancipatory potential of the courtesan/nautch girl for the white woman. This question in itself needs to be complicated more. In *The Potters Thumb*, the dress-up is only a way to pass the time and is not pursued in the text enough to warrant a detailed discussion.

<sup>6</sup> *Light of the Harem* is a painting by Frederick Leighton, completed in 1880 (Medium: Oil Painting). The painting features a young servant holding up a mirror so the exquisitely beautiful maiden may see herself as she wraps her lavish silken headdress. The work is said to combine rich elements of Orientalism with a thoroughly western model, Dorothy Dene.

The objects of the Orient hold sway over the colonial imagination in the novel—in their beauty and mystery—but the real world is elsewhere. Within the “dream” (Steel 199) narrative is the dream-like, mist-covered, crumbling Hodinuggur, with its servile inhabitants belonging to an old world order, their fate governed by incidents like a flash flood of Biblical proportions that washes away the old Diwan. The narrative hinges on the binary of the mystical and mysterious colony, filtered through the Rational colonial gaze. This ‘surreal’ nature of the colony is consolidated through two main characters—the bright-eyed Potter, “a crazy irresponsible creator” (Steel 152) and Azizan, who displays a “savage delight in her inheritance of witchcraft” when she realises that she is the potter’s granddaughter (Steel 113). The legend of the Potter, the mark of whose thumb on a pot at his wheel is believed by the villagers to cause the death of newborns—which gives the novel its name—encapsulates the colony steeped in superstition and eerie legends.

In this context, instead of looking at the courtesan as an ‘emancipated other’ (as Jagpal does) of the British woman, it is more relevant to consider the framework within which this affinity is mapped by the author. While for the Englishwomen in India at the turn of the nineteenth century, the courtesan, ostensibly outside the bonds of marriage and gender roles, may hold an attraction, within the text Steel squarely places the courtesan in a network of power, decay, deceit, degeneracy and fantasy. She is conceited and sexualised but has little significance in the larger concerns of the novel. Mrs Boynton’s desire to ‘go native’ or ‘go nautch’ is then a representation within the text of the promise it offer it readers.

### **3.3 Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa’s *Umrao Jan Ada* and *Junun-i-Intezar***

Written by Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa, *Umrao Jan Ada* (first published in March 1899, Urdu) claims to be the “life story” of a ‘real’ courtesan of Lucknow, as narrated to the author by

the “courtesan herself.” The conversational form of the meta-narrative flows from *shairi* to prose, and the story is presented as the printed record of the courtesan’s words. “When she was relating her story to us, I secretly took down everything, and when I finished writing it up, I showed her a draft. At first she was very angry, but could do nothing much about it...I...have no doubts that all she told us was one hundred percent correct” (Ruswa, *Umrao* xxxvii).

The story is the journey of young Ameeran, kidnapped from her house by Dilavar Khan, sold at Khanum’s *kotha* and inducted into the life of a high class courtesan as Umrao Jan *Ada* (non de plume, roughly translates as ‘coquetry’)—her rise and fall, her growth through experience, her philosophical musings and poetry, and her many loves and heartbreaks. The narrative voice of the author, Ruswa—which roughly translates to “disgraced”—vouches for the authenticity of the story and introduces Umrao Jan. The author also intervenes as a meta-narrative voice on occasions—“I have a principle in life, and that is treat any good woman, whatever her religion or caste, as I would treat my own mother or sister...and I believe that people who lead them astray should be shot. However, to enjoy the bounty offered by a bountiful lady is not, in my opinion, a sin!” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 165). He is also an intermittent commentator and passes judgments on the incidents narrated by Umrao Jan, “From what you have said, it seems to me that you have always considered your life as wrong and bad, even though you had no alternative...However, his deceitful words and your greed for money cast a veil over your eyes. That is a pity, because if you had been aware of human psychology, you would have never fallen into his trap” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 104-05). To this she responds, “Very well. If you can lend me a book on it, I will try to read it up” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 105).

The text may be read as an indigenous experimentation with the Western realist novel form. However, such is the reality effect constructed in the novel, that the descriptions of place

and time through which the narrative is woven are granted a degree of historical accuracy. Even Veena Oldenburg regards the novel as virtually a historical document: "...the single most important source of information on the courtesan of Lucknow, and by extension, the entire profession as it was practiced in the nineteenth century, in North India" (Oldenburg, *Memoirs* 136-154). This reality effect, however, must be situated within the cultural politics of the emergent Urdu public sphere of the time. Traditionally, a *sharif* Muslim man was someone who had, "...a dignified temperament, self-confident but not overly aggressive, appreciative of good literature, music and art, but not flamboyant, familiar with mystical experience but hardly immersed in it" (Lelyveld, *Aligarh* 30). Also, "the favourite pleasures were those of the *mahfil*...though they tended to be idealized as glory of an irretrievable past...(included) amateur performances of the sharif and the professional singing and dancing of the leading courtesans of the city" (Lelyveld, *Aligarh* 55). However, with the consolidation of colonial governmental practices as well as Hindu/Hindi social/political nation space the "established forms of *sharif* upbringing" are under threat (Lelyveld, *Aligarh* 101). According to Lelyveld, the reasons include, "Widespread British antagonism to Muslims as authors of 1857 Revolt...efforts to encourage English educational prerequisites for office...and a new kind of organized political campaign for Hindi as the language of the courts' (Lelyveld, *Aligarh* 101).

The novel plays out these constitutive anxieties of the emerging Urdu public sphere in many ways. The *kotha* establishment comes to bear a dual significance. On the one hand, it becomes the site where a community of women is constructed. Present in the novel are different types of courtesan women—the matriarch Khanum who runs a flourishing establishment that is wrecked in the Mutiny, maternal Bua Husaini who is a foil for Khanum's character, Bega Jaan who excels in music, Khurshid who is a dancer, Bismillah Jan whose sole asset is her body, and

Umrao Jan who is a singer and dancer in addition to being an accomplished poet. We are shown a community of women who are self-reliant, and offered a close look at the kind of interpersonal relationships that they share. Umrao herself finds solace and comfort in the company of the women: “Bua Husaini was a really kind-hearted lady and she was so good to me that within a few days I completely forgot about my home” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 20).

On the other hand, Khanum’s “house of infamy” is also the point of convergence of the various kinds of men—“the urbane Nawab Mahmud Ali Khan, the dashing Nawab Chabban, the loyalist Raja, the small town parvenu Rashid Ali alias Rakhan Mia, the wily Nawab Mahmud Ali Khan, the highway robber Faiz Ali, the sanctimonious lawyer’s attorney Akbar Ali Khan, maulvi Saheb and the old Nawab who is the butt of Bismillah Jan’s ridicule” (Asaduddin 138). Khanum’s house then is a common vantage point from which various ills of urban Lucknow society, around 1857, which is the periodic frame of the narrative, become visible.

In addition to the reality effect described above, Ruswa’s novel makes abundant use of prevalent conventions of poetry and prose, and combines various literary genres in his work. This situates the novel at a critical juncture in the development of the Urdu literary sphere, when realist literary conventions were being recombined with high-cultural verse forms to produce new aesthetic effects. Umrao Jan herself is a metaphorical embodiment of a lost social order—of high Muslim, literary culture and manners. Ruswa sets himself up as an interlocutor between the now ‘pre-modern’ world of the courtesan and the modern literary public sphere, as he ‘rescues’ her from oblivion. He is the agency that brings her into the fold of the modern, by framing her spontaneous speech through the novel form.

This play between author and novelistic subject is rendered more complex in Ruswa's *Junun-i-Intezar*<sup>7</sup> [*Madness of Waiting*], a lesser known sequel of Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada*. Published just a month after the first Urdu edition of *Umrao Jan Ada*, it is Umrao Jan's "revenge on her creator," Ruswa—affected through a narration of *his* life story. Ostensibly written by Umrao Jan, the novel further complicates binaries of author/character and real/fiction. It is possible to see these texts exhibiting influence of serialised, fictional publications, which were a popular genre in periodicals in both Britain and India.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, it is an instance of experimentation with the realist form. "Mirza Sahib, don't be too pleased with yourself for having ruined my reputation, I wonder what you will do if my tongue is loosened?" threatens Umrao Jan at the beginning of the novel (Ruswa, *Junun* 41). She vows to "reveal a few secrets to the world" (Ruswa, *Junun* 41). She also adds, "I am sure Mirza Ruswa is not very happy about this, but what could I have done?" (Ruswa, *Junun* 42).

The subject of the novel, the exposè—the cause behind Ruswa's "bouts of insanity" (Ruswa, *Junun* 43) is the 'scandal' of Ruswa's torrid love affair with the French woman Sofia, or Miss Sahiba as she is called in the narrative, who ultimately abandons him to return to France. At the end of the novel, Ruswa receives a telegram from her informing him of her return—on a ship called 'Utopia' (Ruswa, *Junun* 86)—which is but a mirage and she never reaches him. The novel constructs *him* as a tragic hero waiting for his beloved, who has potentially died in a shipwreck or more likely led him on and left him astray ("but it is not appropriate to write of it" –Ruswa, *Junun* 87). "Fifteen years have passed since that day, but his passion for her remains unchanged. He is fine the whole day, but in the evening he gets an attack of madness and is unable to stay

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<sup>7</sup> "The first edition of *Umrao Jan Ada* advertises *Junun-i-Intezar* on the back cover and claims that the novella is penned by Umrao Jan herself. Since it was released on April 1, 1899, All Fools' Day, it suggests that the novella was a prank. (Ruswa, *Junun* p 23).

<sup>8</sup> Umrao Jan also makes a small appearance in *Afsha-e-raz* (*The Revelation of Secrets*), first published in 1896, as a minor character. (Ruswa, *Junun* 23).

himself. May god take pity on his condition” (Ruswa, *Junun* 87). Even as the novel is Umrao’s version of the story, it is more a biographical account of Ruswa himself. This raises the question of what is accomplished by Ruswa’s use of courtesan Umrao Jan’s voice as the narrative voice of his ‘biographical’ account?

The text of the novel is a combination of prose and a *masnavi*<sup>9</sup> titled *Nala-e-Ruswa* [*Lament of Ruswa*] that Umrao Jan ostensibly finds at Ruswa’s house when she is spying on him with the help of one of his servants. The novel tries to corroborate their separate ‘real’ identities—for instance the two translations of Sofia’s (his lover) letter, one by Umrao Jan the other by Ruswa.

The narrative voice of Umrao Jan also expounds on the various merits of Ruswa in the course of the novel—“There is much charm in Mirza Ruswa’s dignified comportment and eloquent speech, for both men and women are drawn to him” (Ruswa, *Junun* 43) or “His conduct is dignified, splendid and valorous. Although he has pride, authority and gravity, when required he also behaves with humility” (Ruswa, *Junun* 47). She further sympathises with Ruswa’s plight. “Why for God’s sake do you die for love and that too love of an unfaithful beloved?...What can be gained from your unreasonable waiting for her return?” (Ruswa, *Junun* 45). Between the two of them, Umrao Jan calls herself the “practical one” (Ruswa, *Junun* 46) and advises Ruswa to forget about his long lost love, but at the same time she exalts their “pure love” (Ruswa, *Junun* 57) as being above the petty concerns of everyday life. “He was a Muslim and she was a Christian, but there were no misgivings in their heart. They were not aware of religious prejudice and they refused to believe in such things” (Ruswa, *Junun* 57).

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<sup>9</sup> *Masnavi* is a form of verse in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Turkish. It is a long poem which usually narrates a story. It is written in internally rhyming couplets, which all have the same metre. (Ruswa, *Junun* 10).

Ruswa's *Junun-i-Intezar* facilitates a re-entry of the old domain of the *masnavi* form and romantic love in the modern novel through the figure of the courtesan. She brings the tragic hero of conventional literary forms into the Urdu novel. The narrative betrays anxieties related to modern identity politics—linguistic, literary and gender. The already noted association of *sharif* Muslim culture with the courtesan in both these Ruswa novels has two effects—it projects the courtesan as a product of a cultural heritage, which is endangered in the modern literary public sphere, while at the same time, it reveals the public sphere itself as producing a gendered hierarchy. For instance, we may take up the depiction of the *mushaira*<sup>10</sup>—an informal poetry gathering, with compositions and recitations by all present—which becomes the setting of the narration. It is significant that when Umrao Jan Ada recites her first verse, one of the audience members deems it “rather masculine in tone” (Ruswa xx). Umrao Jan then responds, “Why, Khan Sahib! Should I then have adopted the language of women?” The phrase “idiom of women”—*begamati zuban*—in Urdu poetry is refers to *rekhti* poetry. Umrao Jan Ada, however, is a *rekhta* poet<sup>11</sup> of significant renown in the novel, trained in classical Persian and Arabic texts gained under the tutelage of the *maulvi*, and is familiar with books such as *Gulistan* and *Bustan* of the thirteenth-century Persian poet Saadi, which are part of the classical upbringing of *sharif* Muslim children (Lelyveld, 1978). Indigenous traditions of education, especially in Urdu, become associated with an old world order, both within the colonial discourse and the

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<sup>10</sup> *Umrao Jan Ada* (tr. By Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini, 1976) does not include the section of the *Mushaira*. Conjecturally, this is significant for two reasons—first, that it possibly signals towards the relative rigidity of realist novel form in 1970s and given its predominantly poetic forms, the *mushaira* is not seen as a part of the novel or its plot. Second, the translation re-constructs the narrative of the novel as a historical document, complete with a map of India representing the area covered in the events of the novel, the *mushaira* in this context doesn't add to the text of the novel/the story of the courtesan and is mentioned only in the Translator's Preface. The preface of the *mushaira* also constructs Umrao Jan as an exceptional poet/performer, whose lifestyle is very different from “other ladies of easy virtue” (Ruswa, *Umrao* xvi) thus constricting its possible value as a historical document representing the lives of courtesan women.

<sup>11</sup> *Rekhta* refers to the standard register for Urdu poetry in which poets irrespective of their gender, adopt a male persona to express desire for a beloved who can be male or female...Serious Urdu poets, both male and female, from eighteenth century onwards composed only in *rekhta* (Ruswa, 2012, p 20).



burgeoning Hindi public sphere<sup>12</sup> in late colonial period. In the *mushaira* her skills are applauded. Ruswa tells us, “Umrao’s own style of speech was extremely refined, and this was only natural. First, she had been brought up in the company of well-read, high class courtesans; then she had enjoyed the company of princes and sons of Nawabs, and she had even gained access to the royal court. She had seen things with her eyes that most people never heard of” (Ruswa, *Umrao* xxxvi). The text holds certain voyeuristic promises for the reader. In a time when “*sweet poesy has lost its reputation*” (Ruswa, *Umrao* xxix) and “artificiality and pomposity is found in works of most novelists” (Ruswa, *Umrao* xxxvi), Umrao Jan’s “elegant speech,” interspersed with her “pearl-like” verse (Ruswa, *Umrao* xxxvi), offers new delights.

The emphasis on Umrao Jan’s poetic prowess is what makes her exceptional, and a suitable subject of one of the earliest Urdu novels. Umrao’s self-deprecating manner, “What pleasure can you possibly find in someone so unfortunate as me? The account of one so unlucky, so aimless; someone who lost her home and brought disgrace on her family...and damned in both this world and next?” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 1) The *bildungsroman* narrative espouses the value of modesty and humility and the power of fate, and advocates for women a life of virtue and devotion to men. The fate of courtesans like Umrao Jan, who have been reduced to a life of

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<sup>12</sup> Even the more progressive writers on the language question reproduce this construction of Urdu as a medium of bygone aristocratic culture. Significant Hindi/Urdu writer of realist fiction, Premchand’s article titled *Urdu, Hindi aur Hindustani*, albeit published in 1934, helps us understand some of the major viewpoints in the linguistic-nationalist debate. He engages with the appropriate style of speech for promotion as a national language. Premchand followed the Gandhian ideal of a middle-of-the-road Hindustani vernacular, as against the more specialised style of Hindi and Urdu; but he did not always follow his own prescriptions for the avoidance of a heavily Sanskritised register. The passage begins by presenting the views of those who favour a *laissez-faire* attitude to the separate development of Hindi and Urdu respectively.

Premchand condones such a view when the languages are considered at the regional level, on par with other vernaculars such as Bengali and Marathi; but he draws a distinction between this function of Hindi/Urdu and the function of a national language, which he says must be a compromise free from an excessive reliance on either Sanskrit or Perso-Arabic loanwords. His main argument is a ‘practical’ one — that a national language must be accessible and widely comprehensible, and that pedantic etymological considerations have no place in this discussion. By totally ignoring the vital role played by cultural affinities in the choice of linguistic register, Premchand ingenuously arrives at the simplistic conclusion that ‘Hindustani’ should be adopted for the national role; and he recommends that the name of this language might just as well be ‘Hindi’.

penury and relative insignificance, are lessons in virtue and restraint for women. Others, according to the novel, fare much worse—like the beautiful Abadi Jan, who started “running after men, she went crazy and forced herself on them” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 166) and eventually fell prey to syphilis—“...she has lost her looks and has gone black as the bottom of a frying pan. She has got every blemish under the sun, and is now on the point of death” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 166). In the words of Umrao Jan herself, “There can...be no such thing as love with prostitutes. No sensible man could give his heart to a whore, because she knows that she can never belong to anyone or return his love” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 192). Further, “only the virtuous, who see one face and never turn to another, will have the pleasure of true love. You women of the street, will never find such a blessing from God” (Ruswa, *Umrao* 200).

In Ruswa’s text, unlike Steel’s, the courtesan is implicated in various ‘romantic’ relationships and is desired by many. Ruswa’s *Umrao Jan Ada* is not a romantic story but meditations on love and human frailty abound in the text. However, Umrao Jan’s doomed pursuit of true love lends itself to the paradigms of a tragic narrative. This becomes the primary axis across which later film productions of the novel are produced, namely Muzaffar Ali’s (1981) and J.P. Dutta’s (2006). The politics of her being a *rekhta* poet in the *mushaira* are re-arranged into *mehfils* of choreographed dance and music sequences. This creates a nostalgic historical or “period” narrative particularly in the case of Ali, who depicts the courtesan as a ‘sexualised’/seductive performer and a tragic heroine. The language of the film and the characters is Urdu in both cases—but for Dutta it seemingly only ‘enriches’ the historic grounding of the film and not much attention is given to linguistic accuracy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This idea is derived based on similarities with M Madhava Prasad’s discussion on the use of the use of Dakhani Urdu in the film *Ankur* by Shyam Benegal (“The Developmental Aesthetic”, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 195).

In Ali's film there is no narrator, and the position of the courtesan subject is mediated, by the 'invisible' place of the camera. The film starts with the engagement ceremony of a young Ameeran, with a song playing in the background "Why did my friend get married off to a distant place, O father" (*"kahe ko byaahi videsh re sakhi babul mori"*). Not unlike *Ruswa*, Ali's film invokes the courtesan in a spirit of nostalgia for the world of aristocracy and nobility, tragic in its passing. At the same time, the narrative displaces the world of the bygone nobility onto a longing for a lost ideal of love. As Bua Husaini says, "Is there true love in this world? There were true lovers in our times...either make someone yours or become someone else's. (*"Is zamaane mein bhi koi sachcha ishq karta hai? Ashiq to hamaare zamaane mein hote the...ya kisi ke ho gaye, ya kisi ko apna kar liya"*).

Traditional themes of romantic love as seen in conventional forms like *masnavis*, *dastaans* and *fasaanas* recur in newer configurations of literature and Hindi films (Prasad 111). Dutta's film is pre-occupied with narrating the fate of a heroine misunderstood and shunned by a jealous hero, before whom she is unable to prove her chastity, incidentally reminds one of Sita's *agnipariksha* and Ram's desertion of Sita thereafter. The figure of the courtesan is here seen battling with questions of romance and fidelity, which did not seem relevant in the earlier projects, thus 'reconfiguring' the courtesan within the paradigms of monogamous romance narrative. In the Dutta movie, monogamy is a demand that the Nawab Sultan places on Umrao, as an inherent gesture of romantic love. The Nawab tells her that he is in love with Ameeran (invoking her 'purity' of the time before she became a courtesan). He questions Umrao about her faithfulness: "That you are mine and only mine?" (*"ki aap hamari aur sirf hamari hai?"* ) Correspondingly, Umrao Jan says, "I am not like other courtesans...I am still Ameeran I was" (*"hum aur tawaifon ki tarah nahi hai... hum Ameeran the aur Ameeran hai"*). The purity of the

heroine is contrasted with the ‘other’ courtesans who are not like her. Though variously configured in the above versions, the courtesan Umrao Jan, is a sustained metaphor of a ‘rescued’ past world order which nevertheless acquires increasingly tragic connotations in its associations within the framework of romantic, heterosexual love<sup>14</sup>.

### 3.4 Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Jiban*

Binodini Dasi, in her autobiography *Amar Jiban* [*My Life*] (1912) and the unfinished *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* [*My Life as an Actress*], engages with gender biases of the sphere of modern theatre in Bengal in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century articulating herself as a ‘fallen woman’.

Binodini Dasi is a stage actress by profession, but constantly refers to herself in the text as a “prostitute”, “fallen woman.” She refers to herself variously as *patita* (fallen woman), *abhagini* (unfortunate woman), *ghrinita* (despised and despicable), *papi* (sinner), *adhama nari* (lowly woman), *barnari* (prostitute) while also detailing the material facts of her life—extreme poverty, death of her brother, her mother’s temporary madness etc. Theatre, like music (*see* Chapter 4) and dance, is itself implicated in processes of modern reform. Rimli Bhattacharya in the Introduction of her translation of *Amar Jiban*, points out that “most of them (actresses) were recruited from the prostitute quarters, since no *bhadramahila* could be found to perform...the stage actresses were already read as ‘fallen women’ and outside the nineteenth century projects being constructed for women” (Dasi, Introduction 5). As women began to appear on stage in Bengali theatres from the early 1900s, many of the early stage actresses came from courtesan

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion on love and the novel form *See* Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* (P 98). According to Mukherjee another prominent change that takes place in Britain at this time is in the relationships between sexes, where romantic love is beginning to displace courtly love, marriage is now a matter of individual choice. In contrast, in India with significantly high instances of child marriages, marital relations are still a social obligation. Subsequently she says that romantic love in the Indian context could be depicted in historical novels or in contemporary setting romantic love could only be illicit involving either a courtesan or a widow, since these are two kinds of women without legal, male proprietors and also seemingly embody a certain amount of unharnessed sexual energy. These women lie outside the structured society and this kind of love is destined to end in disappointment.

communities. Since the earnings from the stage were often erratic, many of them resorted to relationships of patronage/co-habitation for sustenance. In her autobiography, Binodini's earliest memories of associations with performance culture come from the courtesan Gangabai, who lives in the same quarters and teaches her elementary music.

*Amar Jiban*, in its loosely epistolary form, constructs for itself a 'sympathetic' reader—the letters are addressed to "Mahashoy" (a formal as well as dramatic address), implicating both her patron as well as her presumed *bhadralok* reader. "I shall be grateful to you...unburdening my heart before a noble person such as yourself would lighten too in some measure, the burden of my heart" (Dasi 60), says Binodini. Her self-referentiality as a 'fallen woman' is part of her narrative persona. It creates a hierarchy between the supposed reader and herself. At the end of the narrative for instance she says, "...just as people take the name of Ram or Shiv or Durga or turn away their faces to say Hari when they come upon some ill-omened thing, then they call on whosoever they believe in, and wipe away forever the sinful words of this sinner. This is the only prayer of this destitute woman" (Dasi 114).

We argue that through the performative citation of the courtesan/prostitute, Binodini Dasi achieves two things. At the level of the narrative, written as an epistolary account, the autobiography becomes a self-deprecating, personal, confessional narrative that pre-empts a sympathetic listener/reader, to the '*bedona-gatha*'<sup>15</sup> of a fallen woman. Second, within the text, the 'fallen woman', through her various roles in bhakti plays like *Chaitnayalila*, is redeemed by the blessing of Ramakrishna Paramhansa himself, the *bhakti* saint—"...(he) granted me refuge at this feet" (Dasi 95). There are conjectures that Binodini Dasi quit the stage in the heydays of her career, because of her encounter with Ramakrishna, she herself does not make any indications towards such 'reform'. She in fact says that, there were many reasons for her retiring from the

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<sup>15</sup> Literally "a story of personal pain", written in high literary style.

stage, "...the chief one of these many reasons was that I was extremely hurt by the deceptions practiced on me" (Dasi 106). In the structure of the narrative it is significant that it is only after "her body that is dedicated to the theatre had been truly blessed (by Paramhansa)" (Dasi 95) can she address the society that holds her in contempt. "A prostitute's life is certainly tainted and despicable; but where does the pollution come from?...Those unfortunate women who having been deceived (by a man) have made their own lives into an everlasting cremation ground, a *shamshan*, only they know how painful is the prostitute's life" (Dasi 105). There is an equivalence through experience charted between deceived 'women', fallen or otherwise, a *bedona* which cuts through these distinctions.

She espouses the educational agenda of modern reform, and criticises the logic of respectable spaces which excludes the children of 'fallen women' from these avenues—"Thanks to the morality of these leaders of society, the hapless children are obliged to take a path of evil in order to earn their livelihood and thenceforth look at the world with hate filled eyes" (Dasi 106). Also incriminated is the gender bias of 'respectable' society, "nothing is lost for a man even if a hundred mistakes are made but, 'a woman is doomed if her step but falter one bit'" (Dasi 106).

Some prominent theatre personalities of the time advocated the integration of prostitutes in theatre culture as a mode of reform. For instance, Dasi's mentor/co-actor Girishchandra Ghosh, found it to be a way for them to "expend *their* despicable birth." Acting in the theatre was akin to a form of service to society, a form of redemption: "Those who are unfortunate like Binodini and having no option take up a *disgusting* path for their livelihood...they too can commit themselves to the theatre with body and soul...(in) service of society". It is thus important to note that at the time Binodini Dasi was writing her autobiography her career in

acting had been long over, and she was living as a co-wife with her *hridoydebata*, who remains anonymous in the text (his name is “Ranga babu” in Bhattacharya’s preface, and called “Mr Sinha” in some other articles like Chattopadhyay, 2011). Respectability, she confesses, still eludes her.

For the likes of Girishchandra, the possibility of redemption that the theatre provides to women like Binodini Dasi is one of the central themes of the text. She provides vivid details of her various characters in plays like ‘Bankim-babu’s’ (Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay) *Mrinalini*, *Durgeshnandani*, *Bishbriksha*, mythological *Meghnad Badh*, *Sati ki Kalankini*, *geetnatikas* like *Agomoni* and *bhakti* plays especially *Chaitanyalila* where Paramhansa “granted (her) grace” (Dasi 95). This episode becomes the enactment of the ‘redemption’ that theatre promises but at the same time it is the ‘redemption’ of the theatre itself. She says, “It is certain that Lord is kind: no living creature is denied His grace, however lowly maybe his place...granted his hapless sinner a comforting place of refuge” (Dasi 95). Binodini claims that playing lofty characters like Sati and Chaitanya on stage is itself uplifting. “Acting was no mere fun in a playhouse, but something to be learnt and to be initiated into, as a dharma...acting meant combining the heart and the mind...I tried with my heart and soul to uphold the honour of lofty characters I played on stage” (Dasi 91).

Such an understanding of the politics of theatre neatly aligns with the attempts to consolidate Bengali theatre into a socially conscious space under directors like Brahmo leader Keshub Sen, Saratchandra Ghosh, Madhusudan Dutt, Umeshchandra Dutt and Pandit Satyabrata (Dasi, Introduction, 9). Bhattacharya tells us, “Most of the periodicals from the time appeared to be participating in a project of rehabilitation of the actress, and through her seeking to establish the legitimacy of theatre as an artistic, moral and educational temple to society” (Dasi,

Introduction, 22). And this is also why, in spite of his initial reservations about the narrative being too personal, “expressing the anguish of the heart” (Dasi 211), does Girishchandra agree to write a preface for it. He explains to Binodini that “no one who is ordinary is capable of such work” (Dasi 57). Additionally, “as Chaitanya in *Chaitanyalila* you have aroused devotional fervour in the hearts of many and have earned the blessing of many a Vaishnav” (Dasi 57). Both through performance and its professed politics, theatre then envisions the redemption and reform of the ‘fallen woman’, which in turn frames its own respectability.

In Binodini’s *bedona gatha*, however, the promise of redemption falls short. After retiring from the stage, she lives as a co-wife of Ranga babu, for about thirty years, until his death. He often said to her, “I will leave this world before you. I will never let you go before I do. But only be present at my death bed—there is something that I shall tell you” (Dasi 53). But he leaves her in a “sea of torment” with an unfulfilled promise. Additionally, he assured her, “If I have the least a bit of faith in and devotion to God, if I have indeed been born into a worthy family, then you will never be dependent on anyone’s mercy...you will not be denied in your last years” (Dasi 53). Binodini, however, loses her position and her home soon after his death. Besides the death of her *hridaydebata* there is also the loss of her daughter—for whom she has aspirations beyond marriage, i.e. of education and social mobility which remain unfulfilled. Loss, both personal and professional, forms the major theme in the text.

At the end of her life, upliftment and respectability through theatre eludes Binodini. Through the figure of the fallen woman then, she critically frames the “redemptive” claims of modern theatre space in Bengal in particular, and ideas of prevalent ideas of respectability and reform in general. Girishchandra disavows the politics of Binodini’s Dasi’s text, finding it too personal and anguished a narrative, and thinks it valuable only as a lesson to other “fallen



women.” He also advises Binodini on the perils of autobiography form, telling her that even great writers like Dickens have to resort to narrative strategies like using fiction or devices like conversation between friends or letters, for the fear of ridicule (Dasi 211). He himself “has been unable to take up a work of this nature”, he confesses (Dasi 210). Binodini, on the other hand, tells the reader, “I have written this, no matter how laughable people may find my inner pain...because I have no more fear of being ridiculed by the people” (Dasi 107). She undertakes the task of narrating, in ‘*sadhu basha*’ (high literary language) and *gatha* form, the plight of a ‘fallen woman’, in a loose, non-chronological format, which subverts many of the contemporary literary injunctions. Partha Chatterjee in *Nation and its Fragments* (1994) notes that the language of women autobiographies is expected to be simple and document changing time, customs and values (Chatterjee, “Women...” 138) which effect women’s lives, and a “careful examination of the development of her personality” (Chatterjee, “Women...” 139). Binodini’s autobiography undermines these parameters but her reiterative performance of her ‘debasedness’ and her ‘redemption’ occasioned by the stage situate her in the topical discourses of reform.

Having discussed how Dasi uses the her identity as a ‘fallen woman’ as a figure to enact her “redemption” but also her pain and her loss—material as well as personal—we will extend our analysis to consider a similar performative citation of conventions of visual culture, through photographs of Binodini and Mr. Sinha. Emerging as a visual complement to the “fallen woman”, the photographs offer a performance of conjugality, which is part of new performative possibilities of the courtesan in popular visual culture (*see* Chapter 5).

### **3.5 Shyam Benegal’s *Mandi*: New Dispensations**

Shyam Benegal’s *Mandi* (1983) is a product of the New Cinema wave in India, of which he is considered to be the foremost proponent (Prasad 1998). It is the story of a brothel, run by the

matriarch Rukmini Devi/Bai (Shabana Azmi), where many different kinds of *vaishyas* live—some of them are singers, dancers, some both. While some sleep with different men, others have a permanent lover like Ila Arun’s character who is the policeman’s keep and has three children, Tungrus (Naseeruddin Shah) is a devoted, drunk hanger-on, who serves as a handyman in the settlement, and the only one who stays with Rukmini till the end. The star of the brothel is Zeenat *jaan* (Smita Patil) who is a star singer, and the ‘virgin’ whose ‘purity’ is zealously guarded by Rukmini Devi.

At the beginning of the film, the brothel is located in a busy city street (the city conjecturally is Hyderabad because of reference to locations like Maula Ali, and Telugu slogans on the walls). Conflict between the brothel and the ‘city’ emerges when a deaf-dumb girl, Phoolmati, is sold at the brothel, and the news spreads that she is being kept there forcefully. The news, we learn is leaked by “Mr Gupta,” a property dealer who has recently acquired the land on which the brothel is built. Agarwal Saheb and Shanti Devi are the representatives of the postcolonial state’s developmentalist ideology. While the former is the chairman of the Municipality and the “father of the city”—who we later learn is bankrupt and has old associations with Rukmini Devi’s establishment—the latter is the head of Nari Niketan, a local group of women activists. As part of a campaign by Nari Niketan posters saying “*shahar bachao, vaishya hatao*” (“Save the City, Remove the Prostitute”) are plastered all over the locality. The ‘rescue’ of Phoolmati, becomes a reason for Nari Niketan representatives to invade the brothel. There is a farcical scene, where feminist Shanti Devi addresses the gathered crowd standing on a chair, informing them of their plan. While the women from inside the brothel question her, “*tumhare saath jayenge to roti kaise kayenge?*” (“If we go with you, how will we eat?”), to which she replies, “*roti hi to sab kuch nai hota*” (“Food is not everything”). The rescue

mission is foiled by Rukmini Devi and her people. Eventually Phoolmati tries to commit suicide and is hospitalised, and all residents of the brothel are arrested. The women become the embodiment of ‘filth’ (*gandagi*) for projects of reform like those headed by Shanti Devi, and their imprisonment is a solution to the problem, as expressed by her in the meeting of the Municipal board. Eventually they are bailed out of prison by Agarwal Saheb. The board votes to have the courtesans removed from the city. The doctor, played by Anu Kapoor, who treats and inspects the *vaishyas* on multiple occasions, is their only advocate, who insists that, an alternate residence be provided for them.

It is significant that Rukmini Devi and the other women of her establishment insist on their identities as *kalakaars* (artists) who have fallen into disrepute. The narrative of the film fetishises the ‘courtesan’ and her associations with the old world order and the only way to sustain this fascination is to move the brothel out of the city space. The old world associations of the courtesan, however, also have a folk dimension, dramatised through Rukmini Devi’s episodes with the mystic, played by Amrish Puri. The spectator predicated by the narrative is the modern ‘other’ of the ‘feudal’ courtesan. So while at the beginning of the narrative, through her various travails, the spectator sympathised with the endangered courtesan and was critical of corrupt capitalist and bureaucratic machinery, her pre-modern nature as revealed in the narrative, ruptures this bond.

Zeenat (literally, ornament), the *chirag* (lamp) of the brothel, becomes the site where some of these conflicts are worked out. Zeenat is beyond the reach of all the male visitors of the brothel, quite literally. Her room is on top of the building, and a place for her *riyaaz*. Agarwal Saheb’s son Sushil, he falls head over heels in love with Zeenat after her performance during his engagement ceremony with Mr Gupta’s daughter. Zeenat encourages him, making fun of him,

but never showing much interest. The relationship eventually becomes serious, especially after Zeenat sees Rukmini Devi flirting with Mr Gupta. The promise of love however deflates when Zeenat learns that Sushil is her brother, because she is actually Agarwal Saheb's daughter. She still runs away from the brothel with him, with Rukmini Devi and Agarwal Saheb chasing after them. The pivotal scene of the *dénouement* is when Zeenat makes a decision to desert Sushil. In a desolate location, surrounded by low-lying hills, while Sushil is tinkering around with the bike's wheels, Zeenat looks into the distance—the camera is placed behind her and we see a water body surrounded by lush greenery. We anticipate the moment when she decides to run away—towards the promise of a 'modern' tomorrow, which the spectators already inhabit.

The narrative then jumps to the final scene where Phoolmati, the deaf-dumb woman rescued from the brothel earlier in the film, runs away from the hospital and returns to Rukmini Devi, who by this time has been rendered homeless, by the younger residents of the brothel. Tungrus, however, is still with her, and she is still screaming orders at him. The grand courtesan that the film began with has lost her authority, but she becomes the figure around whom the voiceless and powerless converge at the end of the film. It is significant then that they are all homeless in the modern state.

This transition from the Zeenat narrative to the concluding scene is the point where the film interpellates the spectator as a subject of the ideology of the modern, developmentalist state. The jump cut here becomes a formal device that disrupts the reality effect of the narrative. Through this disruption, the camera situates the spectator in *both* places—the modern state, with its promise of the rule of law, becomes the meta-narrative position from where it is possible to view both Zeenat's escape as well as the collective of the homeless that forms around Rukmini Devi. The state here becomes both the agent of destruction of non-modern social formations

(represented by the brothel, and its demolition) as well as the saviour of those escaping from this order (such as Zeenat). It is through the intervention of the disruptive jump-cut that the citizenly spectator is able to identify with *both* aspects of this narrative. The camera comes to legitimise, on the one hand, the state's promise of citizenship and rule of law; while on the other, it allows identification with the remnants of the "old order" like Rukmini Devi, stripped of their authority and reconstituted as a representative of other similarly excluded, "broken" subjects of the state. The construction of the courtesan as a signifier of a pre-modern formation thus remains consistent, even as Benegal offers a critical account of the violence of the modern state.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century literary texts discussed above all produce different meanings of 'courtesan', which draw from the 'realities' within the text—the spy/exotic native in Flora Annie Steel's world of colonial officers and women in *The Potter's Thumb*, the erstwhile old world performer/artist/poet of cultural gatherings of *Umrao Jan Ada* and *Junun-i-Intezar* and newer configurations of performance culture and the 'fallen woman' in Binodini Dasi's autobiography *Amar Jiban*. The act of authorship involves displacement of older discursive practices in the new domain of culture, which in turn produces newer meanings. It is interesting to note that in all these texts, the disreputable nature of the courtesan is a common aspect. We propose thus that the axis of demarcation between respectable/fallen or disreputable spaces and communities (especially 'sexualised' communities) is an essential component of identity politics of colonial modernity. Even in the post-colonial moment, these engagements continue to persist in literary as well as film narratives. In some mainstream constructions, courtesans embody 'hypersexual' or decadent, disreputable remnants of the 'old world order'

like in *Mandi*, where the ‘respectable’ spaces are framed as well as consolidated through the exclusion of such elements.

In conclusion, deployments of the realistic techniques of representation in modern cultural practices like literature and films continue to engage with the courtesan even in the late-twentieth century. While the administrative and morality discourses seems to fix the meaning of the courtesan in her sexual function, this seems to be conspicuously absent or underplayed in the realist literary texts of the time. This separation is necessary for engaging with the courtesan in popular discourse, whose audience at the time largely comprises of the ‘respectable’ educated middle class in India. The sexuality of the courtesan comes to be re-signified under other concerns of the texts like the social life of colonial population, the nostalgia for a lost pre-colonial world order and a story of redemption of a courtesan (and Bengali theatre). Interestingly, in *Mandi*, it re-emerges. The sexuality of courtesans/prostitutes and their consequent ostracisation becomes a trope in the film to reveal the ‘hypocrisy’ of the respectable nation-space.

In the next chapter, we will critically engage with the consolidation of the modern Classical music in India in view of the ‘marginalisation’ of courtesans in public performances of music and the new associations between courtesan singers and technologies of sound production and circulation like gramophone and later radio.

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## Chapter 4

### From the *Mehfil* to the Drawing Room: Music, Courtesans, and

#### Constructions of the Classical

Historians of music in India sometimes make anecdotal references to a device called a ‘neck-puller.’ A contraption used in the early phases of gramophone recordings in India, it was essentially tied to the head/hair of the “inexperienced” singers, and pulled her back every time she went too close to the recording horn or her chin sunk too low. The neck-puller was employed to maintain optimum distance between the singer and the recording horn. This was required to ensure good sound quality and also higher pitches and voice projections, which were essential for these early recordings. The “inexperienced” singers referred to here are for the most part the early courtesan singers who began appearing on gramophone recordings as early as 1902 (Kinnear 1994). While the existence of this device is conjectural, the neck-puller becomes an important icon for us as an apparatus through which the singer is put through the rigours of a bodily discipline appropriate to the demands of music as commodity. At the same time, it flags the complex intersections that characterise this key moment in the twentieth-century history of music in India. And finally, as we argue in this chapter, it marks a critical blind spot in contemporary cultural-historical perspectives on the transformations of musical practices in the shadow of a distinctly colonial modernity. While there have been a number of studies on the development of “classical” music from the nineteenth century onwards, there has been relatively little work on the significance of mass-produced media such as gramophone in the same. Through a study of the engagement of courtesan singers in the early years of the gramophone industry, we argue that the relative neglect of the gramophone medium in general, and the courtesan singers in particular has led to an unproblematised reproduction of critical ideological assumptions regarding the aesthetics of music in India.

In the previous chapters we have established that while the administrative and morality discourses seek to visibilise, homogenise and control the ‘diseased’ and ‘obscene’ courtesan, there is a simultaneous plurality of meanings that emerges in popular print culture, where various socio-political discourses converge on the courtesan. In this chapter we focus on another aspect of popular culture—music. It denotes the consolidation of the listening audiences around new technologies of mass culture like the gramophone and later radio, which produce a range of musical fare, including nursery rhymes, recordings of theatre plays, *bhajans*, *ghazals*, love songs, songs for particular festivals like Holi and other kinds of religious, and later, patriotic music. This domain is offset by the high-classical music tradition, which was being consolidated at this time and sprouting in spaces of public performance like concert halls and community halls. The separation between these two domains is foregrounded by the idea that a lot of established classical singers, especially male, are wary of the gramophone (Das Gupta 2005).

Performing arts in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are invested with attention from reformers both religious and social, musicologists, anthropologists, travel writers, oriental scholars and historians. Music, and later dance, become important modernised cultural components of projects of nation building and they both need to be ‘rescued’ from the disrepute they have fallen into and invested with values of the divine and spiritual. Lalita Du Perron, in her book *Hindi Poetry in a Musical Genre* (2007) points out, “...music itself gradually became accepted as a signifier of India’s great heritage” (Du Perron 52-53). Focusing on the narrative of consolidation of a distinctive “Indian” classical music tradition by reformers like Bhatkhande and Paluskar, we seek to question the self-evident nature of the formation of this domain. We problematise the homogenised categories that this consolidation works on, and the multiple trajectories through which musical practice was “modernised” in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Through an engagement with the work of Janaki Bakhle and Amanda Weidman, we try to tease out the collateral naturalisations that such historicizations function upon. Specifically, we will engage with Bakhle's account of the transference of music performance from *bais*<sup>1</sup> (courtesan singers) to *tais* ( "elder sister" in Marathi, it referred to respectable women singers). We argue that the courtesan comes to be simultaneously included and excluded in the emergent modern public sphere through new technologies of culture like the gramophone, on a reconstituted basis and through new disciplinary practices. Finally, we analyse a selection of publicity material associated with the popular courtesan singer Janki Bai to show the complex relationships that emerge at the time between courtesan singers' performance on the gramophone and the newly "reformed" listening sensibilities of the middle-class listener.

#### **4.1 Towards an Indian Music: Constructing the Classical**

Historians argue that musical practices underwent a significant transformation in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century in India. In the second half of the nineteenth century, music was patronised by wealthy and aristocratic patrons, and there were a wide variety of performers and genres, from the devotional to the ribald. Two men, Vishnu Narayan Bhattachande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar played a large part in giving "classical" music its shape and identity, and asserting its place as a respectable form of cultural practice. Both were engaged in a colonial modern project of "recovering" an authentic Indian musical tradition whose disappearance was imminent. Bakhle states, "Its recovery hinged on what Indian music lacked namely connected history, a systematic and orderly pedagogy, and respectability" (Bakhle 8). Bakhle traces the modernisation of Indian music, through their proposed reforms. She also shows us how the earlier colonial expositions on 'Hindoostani' music were embedded in this transformation.

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<sup>1</sup>Conjecturally, the women with the suffix *bai* are singers while those with *Jan* were both singers and dancers.

Among the early colonial writings on “Indian” music, the Orientalist William Jones brought out his *On the Musical Modes of the Hindus*. Written in 1784, it was regarded as a major contribution by subsequent writers, both European as well as Indian. The history of “Hindoo” music was, for Jones, “the history of theory, not performance” (Bakhle 9). He regarded the authority of the *Vedas* as basis of all Indian knowledge including music and accorded beauty and importance to ancient practices, which according to him, had been “wholly lost” (Bakhle 9). The connection between music and religion for Jones was all but natural, as the paradigm of Western religious music was applied in this instance as well. While Jones looked at Indian music as an object of study, later colonial writers like Day also advocated adoption of the model of Western music to rescue Indian music from the decay that it had fallen in. According to them, Indian music needed three things to become classical—“...nation, notation and religion” (Bakhle 10). For Indian writers at the time, the testimonial of no less a figure than the “great Orientalist Sir William Jones gave legitimacy to their claims of the beauty and scientific antiquity of Indian music...” (Bakhle 10). They also appropriated the term “Hindoo” to solidify connections between Hindu religion and music in the early cultural politics of Hindu nationalism.

The two major reformers Bhatkhande and Paluskar reacted to the western demands for classicisation in very different ways. Distancing themselves from the ‘debasedness’ of Indian music laid on by colonial writers, and differentiating it from the heritage of the Muslim *gharana* musicians and the low-class, courtesan singers become urgent tasks for them. While Bhatkhande moves away from the authority of *Vedas* and their value for current musicians he still stresses on the need to write a “historical account of contemporary music” (Bakhle 12). He undermines the importance placed on the connection between music and religion and instead advocated the need of a notation system as an essential requirement for the standardisation, reproduction, and hence, dissemination of Indian classical music.

Paluskar, on the other hand, accorded less value to notation and more to the *Vedas*, Hindu religion, the connection between music and devotion, and seeking a new respectability for music in the new Hindu nation.

According to Bakhle, Bhatkhande's insistence on the need of a scientific notation system was an attempt to democratise and secularise the teachings of music. He was critical of practicing, 'sectarian' *gharana* musicians who had no sense of belonging to a larger tradition of music and/or didn't/couldn't have access to Sanskrit writings on music in India. "Music in order to be nationalized had to be institutionalized, centralized and standardized. It had to be put into a national academy to which everyone could have access" (Bakhle 98). A notational system would help document a corpus of standardised, classical music in India, which could then be recreated, taught, and disseminated. Bakhle also mentions that Bhatkhande had low regard for women performers (disreputable *tawaifs*) and Muslim musicians (*gharana* tradition) as he believed that "he could not learn anything from them...given the conditions of music at the time" (Bakhle 103). Nevertheless, Bhatkhande believed in a secular future as far as the dissemination of music is concerned. Through a notation system, music practices could be standardised and widely taught in a properly institutionalised setup. Paluskar's efforts focused more on creating a sanctified space for music in the nationalist public sphere validated through its grounding in the authority of the *Vedas* and alignment with the religious organisations like the Arya Samaj. His idea was to consolidate a Hindu music for a Hindu nation. "The religious nature of culture, operating under the sign of national secularism and emblemized in a figure like Paluskar, was integral to Hindu self-fashioning" (Bakhle 178).

Both Bhatkhande and Paluskar's reform projects looked to "modernise" music practice and pedagogy even as they made a claim for an indigenous national culture. As Bakhle notes, "for Bhatkhande, modernity was an intellectual project, for Paluskar it was an

institutional one” (Bakhle 177). Both attempted to return to the authenticity of pre-colonial through the use of the objective instruments of modern knowledge. Bakhle argues, “the intertwining of music and dance with the divine... (is) seen as a determined move against colonial assertions of Western, national superiority...through a pre-colonial sense of music and religion” (Bakhle 137). At the same time, Bhatkhande as well as Paluskar felt that music ought to be “adopted as a cause by the nationalists” (Bakhle 176) and “classicization...went hand in hand with nationalization” (Bakhle 124). They both advocate the necessity of a cultural and spiritual investment in the consolidation of the ‘modern state’. Bakhle explores how these ideas of reformation and transformation affected the practitioners of music and theatre, both men and women—in the spaces, practices and content of performance and a new kind of responsibility and accountability towards an audience.

Women singers, in Paluskar’s scheme of things had a strategic role. His “students included women, who were crucial to his program, especially through their responsibility to initiate their offspring into a religious understanding of music” (Bakhle 138). Paluskar, unlike Bhatkhande, had no secular pretensions—the work of propagating Indian classical music was intimately tied with the task of fortifying the national community. In the private domain, music was an important tool in the hands of women. “Women were trained not as performing and professional musicians but as carriers of religious ideology and upholders of truth” (Bakhle 171). The widespread amateur practice of music, then, becomes a significant aspect of the new Hindu/Indian woman’s duty to preserve the “inner domain of spiritual purity “and national heritage (Chatterjee 1994).

Paluskar stressed the role of music in a harmonious household. He “...wanted women to embrace the ideal of companionate marriage, an ideal under threat from prostitutes and courtesans he perceived as having commandeered the knowledge of music” (Bakhle 71). The new Western-educated woman would be expected to embrace the new ideal. “Musical

education was one of the key components of this overall female education, since it could be used to link women with both purity and antiquity, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other” (Bakhle 62). Weidman, in the context of Karnatic classical music says, that the new conventions of classical performance are “established in the moment when upper-caste ‘respectable’, ‘family women,’ who previously did not perform in public, began to sing on the concert stage and make gramophone recordings” (Weidman 18). This “domestication of music” entails the new associations of music with “family values” and an “interiorization of music” (Weidman 18) and its spiritual/divine elements. There is an idea of the “natural” (Weidman 19) voice, which in turn is associated with chaste, female body.

Bakhle’s history of the construction of Indian classical music thus institutes a departure from the paradigmatic approach of situating in antagonistic opposition the ideas of Bhatkhande and Paluskar. Rather, Bakhle shows the antagonism between these two men as producing dual sites of modernisation of musical practice itself. Bakhle’s work, however, demonstrates limitations in other respects. The identities and oppositions that frame her argument are self-contained in their definition, and her account of the modernist reform of music under the sign of national remains simplistic in its representation of a process that was complex in its articulation and far broader in scope.

We argue that Bakhle’s account of the mobilisation of women in the project of music reform remains somewhat simplistic in its description of the politics of gender, sexuality and cultural practice that was operative at the time. It is problematic in two aspects, in particular. While the role of Bhatkhande and Paluskar in classicising music practice cannot be denied, Bakhle’s account nevertheless leaves little scope for understanding the specificity of other sites where this work of “modernising” music repertoires was being played out. Alongside the activities of the two reformers, the gramophone market simultaneously emerged as an important site for the dissemination and popularisation of raga-based music. At the same



time, the specific technical and economic limitations of the gramophone medium led to a process of adapting available compositional forms and genres, which followed a trajectory that was semi-autonomous in relation to the changes described by Bakhle. Even as these two sites produce two different strategies of modernising music, they are not independent of each other and intersect at critical conjunctures. Additionally, her account of the “mobilisation of women” as an instance of the new democratisation of music practice seems to assume the domain as male-dominated, and subsequently integrating women. This, we argue, has the effect of rendering invisible the trajectories of already existing traditions of women singers and performers and reiterating existing gendered hierarchies of music culture.

As a point of departure, we argue that the domain of music also comes to be implicated along with other cultural practices in the reproduction of the identities and oppositions between ‘respectable’ and ‘non-respectable’ women. The polarities between the courtesans/prostitutes/public women and respectable women are heightened, for instance, through the propagation of the ideal of the “companionate marriage,” albeit with “suitable” Indian modifications. As already discussed in preceding chapters (*see* Chapters 1 and 2), the projects of nationalist social reform produce an image of the ideal, respectable Indian/Hindu woman as modest, virtuous, chaste and devoted. In each of these instances, the unity of the national community is secured through the construction of the courtesan as Other, with her disease, loose morals and devious sexuality. Such efforts at reform, however, were precarious in their implementation, and disrupted in their effectivity. In the remainder of this chapter, we will look at the ways in which the courtesan comes to be implicated in the project of nationalising and modernising music in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century. We will discuss, on the one hand, the rise of the gramophone as an object of drawing room entertainment and novelty amongst indigenous middle-class cultural elites in the major cities, and popularity of performances by courtesan singers. On the other hand, the courtesan figure

allows us to complicate Bakhle's narrative of the transition from the culture of the courtesan *bai* singers to the *tai*s popular amongst the new middle-class audiences.

#### **4.2 The Exclusions of Respectability: from the *bai* to the *tai***

The transition of Indian music into a classical tradition, Bakhle points out, involved the transference of musical practices from *bai(s)* to *tai(s)*. This for Bakhle implies a production of space of performance for 'respectable' middle class women (*tai*), a result of the newly consolidated 'respectability' of music and spaces of performance and their disassociation from the disreputable singers like courtesans (*bais*). As part of the project of reform, devotional music and non-flamboyant renditions on stage were encouraged. Public performances became 'respectable'. We argue that the induction of the new class of *women* performers is incumbent on the simultaneous 'exclusion' of the 'obscene' practices of earlier (women) courtesan performers.

The increase in the number of 'respectable' women singers is not unrelated with the attempts to mobilise women in middle-class music pedagogy and performance in the domestic space in consonance with emerging ideas of respectability, modesty, honour. Local music schools become similar to finishing schools for girls, and a familiarity with appropriate songs is encouraged, especially for better marriage prospects. "Both music and women turned traditional under the aegis of modernity" (Bakhle 72).

At the same time, Bakhle argues that "the contradictions and unintended consequences of modernizing projects, couched in terms of *bhakti* and religion, made it possible for *women* performers to be recognized as musicians" (italics mine, Bakhle 254). She seems to suggest that it was only through the intercession of the modernisers of Indian music that women were recognised as musicians. Bakhle's text while delineating the exclusionary nature of the classical musical tradition vis-à-vis the largely Muslim *gharana* tradition, advances the reformist, classicist and nationalist efforts with respect to women

singers, which brought music into a sphere of respectability. She reproduces the ideological justifications of classical music as a domain of modern, democratised participation.

From Bakhle's account, the journey of music from *bais* to *tais* seems like a neat transfer of the means of access and performance in the pursuit of democratisation and nationalisation of the cultural sphere and bestowing respectability upon women performers. However, it involves displacement and replacement of one kind of earlier women performers with another kind, those who belong to the respectable middle class. The exclusion of the *bais* from the newly constituted domain of respectable classical music performance and practice, however, does not lead to their disappearance, as Bakhle account seems to imply. Rather, they continue to perform on the gramophone record or still existing patronage-based networks of performance. It is imperative, then, to problematise the seemingly self-evident nature of categories and the ideological positions that they reiterate and reproduce. The use of categories (like *bais* and *tais*) and the role they play in the consolidation of various ideological formations acquire significance in the context of feminist studies. The categories of "respectable" and "disreputable" women are far from homogenous. Further, notions of what is respectable are subject to change with time and performance contexts, and are themselves implicated in various social and political discourses. Bakhle's account, we argue offers a simplistic presentation of the constitutive instability of these categories and the discursive formations that they are embedded within.

Bakhle's account simultaneously delegitimises the spaces of women performers and reproduces the middle-class' self-description of its project of modernisation and nationalisation of music. Her historical construction excludes the courtesan performer, rendering them as a vanishing mediator through which an ideological representation achieves an effect of "transition" from one moment into another. Bakhle's account has the effect of mapping the journey of Indian music from infamy into respectability on to the body of the

woman singer through a dramatic play between the *bais* and *tais*. However, before we return to a more detailed discussion on this “transition”, we will look at another aspect of the uncritical reproduction of the gendered constructions of the discourse of classical music.

#### **4.3 The Courtesan’s *Thumri***

The tendency to render invisible the historical specificity of courtesans as music performers is reproduced in other ways as well. Academic discussions around the *thumri* form, for instance demonstrate a similar ideological strategy, whereby courtesan singers are simultaneously included as well as excluded from the history of modern Indian music.

The *thumri* is considered to be a primary component of a courtesan’s repertoire. The main features of a *thumri*, according to Lalita Du Perron are—“in its original function it is a vehicle for dance... (its) emphasis on emotional expression and music is accessible, and ‘its language is sweet’” (Du Perron 2). The association of the *thumri* with the courtesan is seen as all but natural: “...the desire expressed by *thumri*’s lyrical heroine could readily be enacted by the *tawaif* in relationship to her prospective client” (Du Perron 3).

The ‘transition’ of *thumri* into respectability involves formulating a new frame of *bol banav thumri*, where the stress is on ‘melodic elaborations,’ unlike the earlier *bandis thumri* which was primarily rhythmic and more suitable for dance narratives and the dominant emotion is of *viraha* (“yearning”) instead of romantic love (Du Perron 39). Earlier expressions of female desire in these compositions are configured into new frameworks of “devotional interpretation” (Du Perron 3) where the singer takes on a female persona with respect to a male God, mainly Krishna.

*Thumris*, owing to their lyricism and simple form, acquire popularity as interludes between or after classical *dhrupad/khayal* performances. In its sanitised and devotional form, *thumri* is sung by a number of male singers. Du Perron quotes a musician who says, “...everybody loves a *thumri*” (Du Perron 2). She proposes in the context of stage

performances that “the conspicuous romanticism of *thumri* does not carry the same meaning when expressed on a raised stage through a tangle of wires and microphones as it would have done in the very intimate surroundings of the courtesan’s salon” (Du Perron 19), further interlinking respectable spaces of performance and the new respectability of music. The very context of performance thus contributes to the disassociation of *thumri* from the courtesan. For Du Perron *thumri*’s transition is commendable—“It is testament to *thumri*’s integrity as an art form that in spite of its original context it has survived the transition to modernity” (Du Perron 2) but at the same time laments that to an extent “low associations of the *thumri* continue to haunt its present” (Du Perron 30). This begets the question if the repeated and persisting association of *thumri* with the courtesan is less of a ‘haunting’ and more likely that this invocation/citation in turn contribute to the re-materialisation of the project of respectability of classical forms.

Du Perron surmises that the “*thumri* has ‘performance’ as well as ‘femaleness’ woven into its basic structure” and further, “one of the reasons why *thumri* has been considered the courtesan’s genre *par excellence* is related to the consistent presence of a female speaker in its lyrics” (Du Perron 27). This definition of *thumri* in itself precludes the possibility that male performers could sing of “feminine feelings” or through a “feminine persona”<sup>2</sup> or of ‘lost’ *thumris* about ‘feelings of men’.

Vidya Rao, in her essay, ‘Thumri: As a Feminine Voice’ (1990) proposes that “*Thumri* is the limited space of women in the world of Indian classical music which they have enriched...” (Rao WS-31). She writes, “Our notions regarding *thumri* echo our ambivalence regarding the erotic and regarding the aspects of our history and culture that have been seen as problematic” (Rao WS-31). Rao comments that *thumri* “play(s) with

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<sup>2</sup>Geeta Patel, *Lyrical Movements Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji’s Urdu Poetry* a biographical study of Miraji, the Urdu poet, who writes rekhti poetry, of the feminine voice, and considered ‘obscure’ and “deviant’ within modern Urdu assessments. Also, Ruswa’s Umrao Jan is a *rekhta* poet. We dwell on possibilities of similar exclusions of such ‘aberrant’ examples in musical practices.

ambiguities through its poetic text, (and) this play is even greater in the musical 'text'" (Rao WS 35). *Thumri*, which she likens to a female body in its openness, besides reflecting the feminine experience through its lyrics and form, also represents domain of experimentation in style. "The margins, dangerous, liminal points, the extremities of the human/musical body from where pollution can enter. Where one *raga* can enter another, where meanings can be collided and blurred, these are welcomed in the *thumri*" (Rao WS-37). According to Rao, the *thumri* challenges the stringent formulations of 'higher' forms like *khayal* and *dhrupad* through its flexibility. It embodies the feminine experience in its lyrics and structure and is an effective metaphor for the position of the feminine subject herself. Rao's text provides new possibilities for associations between feminist studies and *thumri* form, which is labelled as "semi-classical" (Du Perron 1) within the sphere of Indian classical music, hence retrieving the courtesan and her musical practice, within the frame of mainstream feminist evaluations.

Through the feminine *thumri* and the masculine *dhrupad* and *khayal* the gendered hierarchies of the classical music sphere are activated. Moreover, it is through the narrative of the low associations of the *thumri* that the modern reform project of classical music is established and re-enacted, albeit in an inverted form that privileges these associations rather than disparage them. However, even essays like Rao's, which seek to acknowledge the *thumri* for its 'feminine' value, lay stress on the established associations between courtesan singers and the *thumri*, and how they inform each other's identity—once again, the courtesan is fixed as the singer of erotic *thumris*.

Having looked at the discourse of disavowal of the 'old' as well as 'low' associations with courtesans in the classical music tradition, and an understanding of the aspirational ideals of colonial modernity, we will now assess the relationship that emerges between the modern gramophone technology and the courtesan singer and its implications in popular discourse of music.

#### 4.4 The Courtesan Singer, Rehabilitated

The impression of a history of radical disjuncture between the *bai* and *tai* moments is reiterated in Bakhle's discussion on the rise to fame of Hirabai Barodekar, the daughter of Abdul Karim Khan, a *gharana* musician. A woman singer, whose career itself was a trajectory from her "pre-modern" *gharana* lineage to her modern, respectable persona as a public performer, is cited by Bakhle as being the epitome of the new respectability of music. For us it is significant that there are women who successfully traverse from one group of performers to the other, through among other things, overt adoption of external signifiers related to Marathi middle-class women like way of dress and manners as well as the choice of music and non-flamboyant performance style. According to Bakhle, "she became the icon of Marathi, married, middle-class women who pursued a career in music without compromising hearth and home" (Bakhle 241). Marathi *bhajans* formed an important part of her repertoire, and her image was aligned with what Paluskar imagined as the ideal middle-class Hindu woman. Bakhle notes, "she always dressed in a sari with its *padar* wrapped around her, wore pearl earrings and bangles that were the trademark of upper-caste Marathi women, tied her hair in a sedate bun, and sang calmly, without flamboyance or hand gestures" (Bakhle 250). The markers of middle class respectability thus become a critical dimension of the classical woman singers' performance. And importantly they are only markers. Other things like her association with Abdul Karim Khan and the nature of her involvement with Marathi theatre contribute to her successful career significantly but her persona creates visible associations with the middle-class audiences. Respectability in this sense becomes a performative category with certain formal and visual markers.<sup>3</sup> She is also known to have recorded for the gramophone since the early stages of her career. In 1923-26, she recorded 19 discs for HMV

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<sup>3</sup>This idea will be taken up in some detail in Chapter 5 in combination with discussions on visual culture.

Black Label Records, which included a wide range of songs in various *ragas*, *ghazals*, *khamaj*, etc.<sup>4</sup>

We argue that the narrative of modern, classical tradition of music in India, articulates its modern reform by emphasising the disreputable, past associations with courtesan singers, much like the *gharana* musicians identified by Bakhle. It is against the “disreputable” past that the respectable modern differentiates itself. Weidman points out, “In order to perform its authority, modernity must constantly oppose itself to what it conceives as non-modern” (Weidman 2). It is through convergence of networks of institutionalisation, regulation of performative practices and content, and nationalisation of the project of classical music that the ‘new’ tradition emerges. Moreover, in this process “reformed” women with a disreputable past become the visible symbol of the success of this project of creating a new, national music tradition, and inducting new members into the national community.

For Bakhle, Hirabai Barodekar’s musical career and her transformation into a respectable woman singer from her origins related to a *gharana* musician family is an allegory of the transformation of Indian classical music, where the complex discursive negotiations of the domain are mapped onto the body of the woman singer. We have asserted that this in turn naturalises the discourse of classicisation the grounds itself in ‘respectability’ and ‘high-art’. In contrast, Weidman in her book attempts a different approach that is able to reveal not only the hybrid modern aspirations of classical Karnatic music but how the career of M.S. Subbulakshmi (“MS” hereafter), the world-renowned, ideal classical singer of the tradition, is itself a product of complex convergences of modern material, technological, ideological and circumstantial factors. Weidman shows us that even though there are adventitious circumstances like her marriage into a Brahmin family and her husband’s dextrous handling of her career, public image and persona, the most important catalyst is

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<sup>4</sup>Indian Music of 78 rpm era, Hirabai Barodekar.  
<https://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellpatke/Miscellany/hirabai.htm>. Rajeev Patke Homepage. June 18, 2012.  
Web. April 2016.



ostensibly the microphone, which becomes an indispensable part of such new stage performances. Weidman's is "a study of musical sound and practice as productive of particular subject positions, rather than merely reflective of social structures or expressive of identities" (Weidman 13) and to "bring classical music within the purview of anthropology" (Weidman 24).

MS's reception in the music press emphasised the severing of her old disreputable connections with traditions of *devadasis*. For some "...if music can be said to have a form it is M.S. herself...her life is the history of music" (cited by Weidman 113) while others found her songs to be "replete with metaphors of bodiless-ness or dissolution of the body" (Weidman 127). Further, it is extolled as a "pure voice from within, a voice deeply contained *within* the body, but neither connected to nor manifested on its surface" (Weidman 129). Weidman, instead of reproducing this history of her journey into 'respectability,' focuses on the new technology of the microphone that enables the rise of a new type of singer as well as singing voice, epitomised by MS. The microphone became a part of musical performances in south India in the 1930s (Weidman 126). It allowed singers to focus "less on projecting volume and more on shifts in dynamics and speed" (Weidman 126). This was especially relevant for women singers and large audiences as it brought about a shift from high-pitched singing voices (like those in early gramophone recordings) to a "lower pitched more introspective style" (Weidman 126). Further, since the singer has to be close to the microphone during the performance, it restricts the bodily movements of the singers as well, and 'intimacy' between the singer and the microphone is projected onto the spectators/listeners. This is transferred onto the experience of listening to her voice on gramophone records, which is further accentuated by pleasure of repeated listening (Weidman 127).

While some critics perceive the role of the microphone as capturing the “multifaceted voice” of MS (Weidman 126), Weidman argues that the “multifaceted voice” itself is produced through the microphone—“...as the microphone makes these nuances audible in a physical sense, it also makes them available on an aesthetic discourse about music” (Weidman 126). Classical music practices in this sense are deeply entrenched in technologies of colonial modernity.

Weidman also points out that even though Karnatic classical Music constructs itself as an exclusive domain, new media like “cassettes, radio, Tamil Cinema” (Weidman 22), make it more available to a wider public—“ as a sign of culture, tradition and conservative values” (Weidman 22). Modern technologies in this way become increasingly enmeshed in the propagation of the ‘classical’ arts, more so in the current context. In its early tradition building efforts, classical music played an important part in nationalist consolidation of culture, and remains pertinent in the present. As Weidman proposes, it “... serves the needs of a generation of South Indians who have migrated to the West” (Weidman 22), hence its continued relevance today.

Friedrich Kittler in his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986) reiterates the importance of the gramophone as instituting a radical break in the historical experience of sound. Through the mechanical reproduction of sound, the gramophone establishes a new understanding of the relationship between the voice and the body, as well as between the phonograph/gramophone and the listener. Kittler reiterates the importance of the image of “the canine obedience...that became the trademark of Berliner's gramophone company in 1902...Nipper, the dog that started sniffing at the bell-mouth of the phonograph upon hearing its dead master's voice”<sup>5</sup> (Kittler 69) (Fig. 5).

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<sup>5</sup>The image, originally a painting titled *His Master's Voice* was used by various recording companies and their associated brands: Victor Talking Machine Company, His Master's Voice, HMV, EMI, RCA, RCA Victor, Victrola, Electrolo, Blue Bird, Zonophone, JVC and DeutscheGrammophon.[“Nipper”. *Wikipedia: The Free*

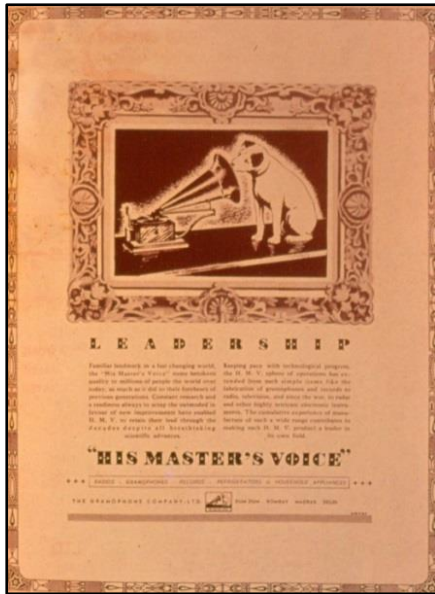


Fig. 5: *His Master's Voice Advertisement*, Gramophone Co. Ltd. Dumdum. All India Exhibition 1948, Eden Gardens, Calcutta.

In case of recorded music, the element of entertainment adds another dimension to the enjoyment of the recorded voice. However, as Kittler points out, the voice is only “a partial object” (Kittler 69), a “disappearance of being in the act of being” (Kittler 69). Modern voice recording technology effects a kind of split between the body and the voice.<sup>6</sup> The voice of the courtesan, disassociated from her body, re-emerges in newer spaces and domains of practice. Disassociated from her body, and through a fetishisation of the courtesan’s singing voice, the music is rendered ‘safe’ for consumption. It is this dissociation of voice and body—an effect

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Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation Inc. 28 Jan 2016. Web. 17 May 2016. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nipper>

<sup>6</sup>For Kittler the most important point of phonographic aesthetics is that “the talking machine can only grant artistic satisfaction to musical people.” (Kittler 45-46). For instance, to enjoy the theatre one has to partake in the ‘reality’ of the illusion, so is the case with the gramophone. The illusory capacity of the gramophone becomes significant in what Kittler deems as “the new constellation of eroticism, literature, and phonography” (Kittler 59).

Kittler cites Salomo Friedlaender’s short story, *Goethe Speaks into the Phonograph* (1916), the voice of Goethe from the past is captured through a receptor which is modelled on his larynx, and even in its characteristic nature as a ‘partial object’, because of its effects on his girlfriend Anna Pomke, becomes a ‘rival’ for Professor Pschorr, the central character. “For all the power Classical authors had over their female readers rested in the erection of that organ,” (Kittler 69) and the story ends with Pschorr throwing the apparatus under the train and the consequent wedding announcement of the couple. The only road to matrimonial harmony is paved by the destruction of ‘technology’ which poses a threat by being a ‘competitor’ for the affections of the lover. It is obviously ironical that the owner of the voice is long gone and in no way an actual threat. But the metaphor brings forth frameworks of desire built around the ‘voice’ which become especially relevant when the voice belongs to a ‘disreputable’ woman singer.

of gramophone technology as such—that opens up the space for the rise of courtesan singers on the gramophone. It makes it possible for a woman singer to distance herself from her *bai/devadasi* past and become a voice symbolising purity and divine inspiration for her middle-class audiences.

Even as Kittler's insights into the dissociation of voice and body effected by the gramophone are particularly productive in understanding the transformations in music practice in India, Weidman's extension of his argument remains problematic. Weidman's discussion about MS's rise to fame and public persona seems to unproblematically reproduce at the level of cultural practice what is effectively a technological effect of the gramophone/microphone apparatus. In doing this, she privileges the technological as the level of determination, while negating the question of the signification of these effects in culture, and the political effects of the same. Even as she delineates the cultural effects of gramophone technology, Weidman's account does not take into account the hierarchy of cultural practices within which various products of this gramophone market are being located. The influence of gramophone and microphone technology on the development of Karnatic music notwithstanding, she does not account for the politics of disavowing this relationship that is simultaneously at work.

This, we argue, takes the form of a distinction between “authentic” and “artistic” stage performance of classical music, and time-bound adaptations for the gramophone that were more an object of novelty and leisure. While Bakhle, Weidman and others have discussed the former in much detail, the latter remains unexplored, and the connection between them untheorised. The specificity of courtesan singers shows that there is at work a more complex intersection of cultural politics, technology and commodity culture. We argue that the exclusion of the courtesan from the domain of the classical only results in pushing her into the domain of popular culture that is existing side by side. At the same time, there is

a hierarchy between them, set in motion by the classical drive itself. It is only once such a hierarchy has been put in place that the possibility of a middle-class narrative of rescue and rehabilitation emerges. Moreover, as the subsequent discussion will demonstrate, the relations between these two domains, and the courtesan singers between them, is far more variegated as well as unstable. As we argue in the following sections, the disembodied gramophone voice itself takes on different political significations.

#### **4.5 Songs in the Drawing Room**

In the new commodity culture, there was a linking of the emerging ideal of the companionate marriage and the role of music in securing the same. For instance, a print advertisement for Calcutta based retailer Dwarkin & Son (Fig. 6). The advertisement depicts the role of music in a congenial household, a happy couple playing musical instruments—violin and piano are both foreign instruments, of which they are importers—under the benevolent eyes of the father. A synthesis of both traditional and modern ideas of family life as well as music, for advertising as well as in terms of new commodities (musical instruments/gramophone) emerges here. One of the largest music dealers in Calcutta, Dwarkin & Son were also sellers of gramophone records. They advertised the availability of “Phonograph records of songs by Lal Chand Boral, Peary Saheb, Ramzan Khan, Kusum Kumari and others” (Kinnear 36). Fig. 7 is an example of a Columbia Portable Gramophone advertisement. While the advertisement constructs the modern ideal of a companionate relationship, the product itself becomes “a constant companion” of the couple.

Describing the consolidation of a new audience alongside the process of music reform, Bakhle argues that “an audience was increasingly becoming a part of the musical milieu of the future” (Bakhle 53). It was through “publications, schools, and music appreciation societies that a new midlevel, musically knowledgeable population had emerged” (Bakhle 231). The new audience was derived largely from the educated middle

class. “An emerging middle-class audience was beginning to come into its own and was showing signs of becoming invested in the whole process of naming, categorising, and identifying. *Gharana*, *raga*, and *tala* all became part of the expanding vocabulary of music appreciation. It was no longer enough to claim to have heard a tremendous performance by a maestro of music” (Bakhle 232).



Fig. 6: An advertisement for musical instruments retailer called Dwarkin & Son. *Anand Bazar Patrika*. 24th August 1936, 8th Bhadra (1343 B.S.)

We argue that along with the role of the print media in the form the various publications mentioned by Bakhle in the propagation of musical education, modern technologies like the gramophone played an important role in the circulation of music. Moreover, this popularisation of the gramophone was itself linked in complex ways to the new audience for classical music. Early gramophones and phonographs arrive in India through live demonstrations and they feature in the activities of early music appreciation societies. As record plants get set up in India and costs go down, gramophones become an important drawing room feature in many ‘modern’, middle class households. Michael

Kinnear points out, “With the increase in competition for record sales in which about a dozen companies were active in India, the retail price of discs was constantly being reduced” (Kinnear 68).

Gramophone recordings are more than just another mode of performance. They change the nature of music and act of listening. Amlan Das Gupta points out, “Now



Fig. 7: Gramophone Advertisement, n.d. CSSC Archive, Calcutta.

purchasable as a commodity, music associated with definite and specially value-laden loci—like the *darbar*, the *mehfil*, the *kotha*, the theatre—can be transferred to the confines of domestic privacy, and acquires a near-miraculous power of reproducibility...thus crossing over from the domain of *representation* to the domain of *repetition*”<sup>7</sup> (Das Gupta 465). Listening to gramophone records becomes a private activity. Listening to music becomes a time of relaxation.

Besides being an aspirational commodity for the middle classes and connected to ideas of domestic harmony and companionship, many gramophone companies aligned

<sup>7</sup>Das Gupta derives this idea from J. Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1985.

themselves to the cause of the Swadeshi movement, hence expanding their appeal. For instance, in 1908 the print advertisement for The Gramophone Co. Ltd.'s said, "Our Indian, Burmese and Ceylonese records are now made at our Calcutta factory—using *Indian* materials and made by *Indian* workmen." (italics mine, Kinnear 31). Also, "The increased popularity of Indian songs had led to a demand of recordings of "Swadeshi Sangeet" and the few recordings of this type of songs that were available were constantly being played by theatres, and talking machine dealers to encourage public interest and sales" (Kinnear 62). But eventually, as Kinnear points out, such public gatherings around the playing and singing of nationalist songs came under the scrutiny of the police because of their seditious potential and they "took strong repressive action" (Kinnear 62). An HMV records poster even uses the trope of a policeman cracking down on a gathering listening to a gramophone recording, except that here he looks to ensure that they are listening to the "wonderful voice" of HMV records (Fig. 8).<sup>8</sup>

Some proprietors like Hemendra Mohan Bose and Sharma Charan Das of Calcutta, who were "staunch supporters" (Kinnear 62) of Swadeshi had to undergo police investigation and Bose's recording business had to be shut down in 1915, after his death in the same year (Ghosh 55). An advertisement with the slogan "Gramophone—a home entertainer" (Fig. 9) is invested with values of modernity and nationalism simultaneously which hold sway amongst new middle class public. It is possible to say that the consolidation of markets of modern musical instruments/equipment and practices was invested with a nationalist politics of culture, and becomes significant as a site where the problematic of domesticity, conjugal harmony and desire come to be played out in complex ways.

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<sup>8</sup>While the label that has been applied by the CSSS Archive, Calcutta for Fig. 7 suggests that the policeman in the image is chasing away the people who were listening to the HMV record which would be reminiscent of the crackdown on such gathering which Kinnear mentions in his book, we believe, in conjunction with the text "Stop the Noise, For the Wonderful Voice, Now make sure of your choice", the poster also conveys our reading.



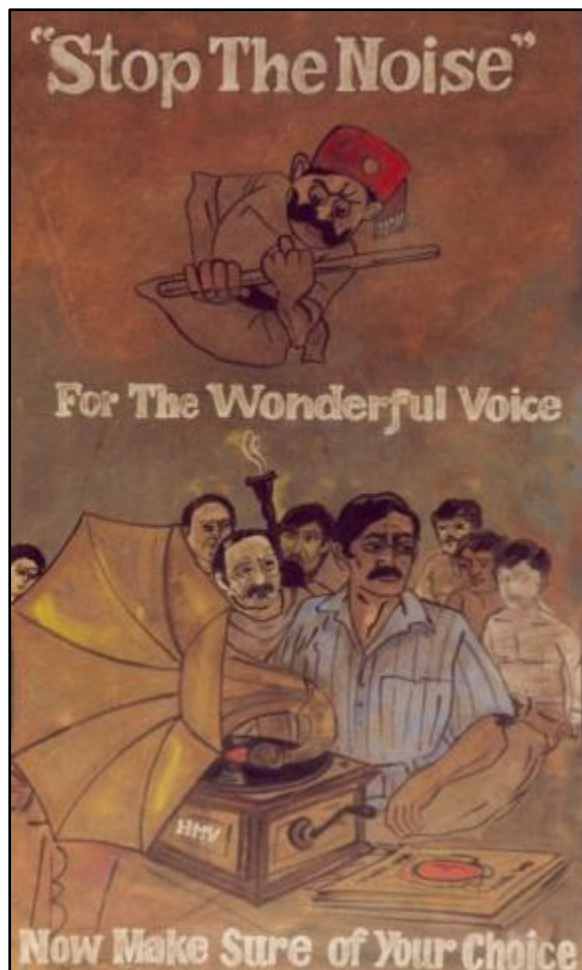


Fig. 8 Basu, Binoy Krishna (1894-1959). *Lal Pagri Police chasing the people who were listening to HMV Record* (Poster). Watercolour



Fig. 9: *Early gramophone advertisement*. India. n.d.

[The text on the poster reads “Gramophone- a home entertainer”]

#### 4.6 Courtesan Singers on the Gramophone

The burgeoning popularity and affordability of gramophone records doubtless contributed to the practice of listening to classical music on the gramophone, which came to be a part of “decent” middle-class culture, with all its attendant moral and aesthetic sensibilities. However, this transference of sensibilities into the domain of gramophone records could not effect a similar task of reforming the practice and appreciation of classical music, and nor could it police as effectively the exclusions through which the domain of “authentic” Indian classical music had been secured.

It is important to reflect on the contribution of the gramophone in forming new overlaps between courtesan singers and music.<sup>9</sup> Besides being the earliest artists a number of courtesans feature regularly on gramophone recordings under various record labels and have prolific recording careers, we learn through Kinnear’s work on early gramophone recordings in India in its early phase—Gauhar Jan, Janki Bai being the biggest stars—“...*classical artists* such as Miss Gauhar Jan...Miss Kali Jan and others, were to become mainstays of The Gramophone Company Ltd.’s vernacular catalogues” (italics mine, Kinnear 23). By the third recording tour led by William Conrad Gaisberg (1906-07), Gauhar Jan had achieved a “considerable reputation as a gramophone celebrity” (Kinnear 28). Gaisberg also took “the first recordings of Miss Janki Bai of Allahabad, a *reformed courtesan* also formerly known as Chappan Churi<sup>10</sup>...an exceptionally talented vocalist who was able to command a fee of 3,000 rupees for her recording sessions” (italics mine, Kinnear 28). Miss Oomda Jan who was a popular courtesan singer on the gramophone, recorded songs of different types from *dhrupad*, *khayal*, *sargam-sangeet*, *tappa* in addition to *horis*, *thumris* and *ghazals* (Das Gupta

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<sup>9</sup>It is important to note here that in spite of mainstream disavowals and ‘exclusions’, we also find evidence of older performance culture of courtesans in social gatherings and functions like weddings, Saraswati Puja, Karthik Puja, rice-feeding ceremonies for infants in this period in Calcutta (Source: *Indoobala’s Scrapbook*, 1902, Calcutta). These will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup>The name *Chappan Churi*, which literally means ‘fifty-six knives’ comes with a story that one of her thwarted lovers slashed her face fifty six times.

467). Das Gupta points out, “In Oomda Jan’s<sup>11</sup> case—and many others too—the space afforded by recording technology becomes a way of recasting musical identities” (Das Gupta 467). Gauhar Jan is reputed to have recorded around 600 songs that sold well throughout the country and abroad (Das Gupta 467).

An important dimension of the gramophone recordings, according to Das Gupta, was the stylistic experimentation that was in part necessitated by the formal and technical limitations of the gramophone medium. He argues, “...presumably for the first time in history different kinds of traditional musical compositions were being sung in a particular timed format...the new determinacy allows new approaches to style” (Das Gupta 466). Gauhar Jan was one of the first singers to master the new three-minute format for 78 rpm, but male *gharana* musicians were more wary of the new technology. In addition, when the male artists did start recording for the gramophone, they also had to learn the light classical music forms that were widely popular and sung by many courtesan singers (Das Gupta 467). To reiterate, courtesans recorded for the gramophone various kinds of compositions, in both ‘classical’ and ‘semi-classical’ genres, and the space of the gramophone led to stylistic innovations in these forms as well.

At the same time, there is a whole range of new performing practices that the technology brings with it, which effect a new regime of bodily discipline amongst the courtesan singers. Much like the later microphone (Weidman 2006), new techniques of voice projection and body positioning vis-à-vis the recording apparatus need to be learnt by singers. The anecdote about the ‘neckpuller’, irrespective of its historical veracity, remains even today an effective metaphor for the new forms of ‘control’ and disciplining of the singer’s body.

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<sup>11</sup>“In the course of the Gramophone Company’s recording tour of 1906-06, William Gaisberg and George Dillnut recorded the songs of Miss Oomda Jan, a well-known singer of Hyderabad...She recorded 14 songs...What distinguishes Miss Oomda Jan’s efforts is that she appears of have recorded songs of many types—3 dhrupads, 3 khayals, a sargam sangeet, a *tappa*, in addition to *horis*, *thumris*, and a *ghazal*” (Das Gupta 467).

After the initial musical recording tours for the gramophone, there begins to exist a sizeable body of Indian (classical) music in vernaculars on records, which were in circulation not only among the gramophone listeners in India but also abroad. The choice of music recorded at least in the initial period depended to a large extent on the availability of singers who were at this stage mostly derived from “public women, as the better class of respected female vocalists would not engage in such an activity as record making, which they generally concerned to be quite demeaning” (Kinnear 28). Eventually, saleability and demand played a significant role in successful recording careers and the popularity of the courtesan singers on the gramophone.

The records of courtesan singers generated high sales. “For Will(iam) Gaisberg there was no doubt that women artists were the most appreciated: the male artists were not great favourites...the only truly popular male artist he knew was Peara Saheb, and he had a voice like a woman’s.” (Das Gupta 468). With the increasing success of the record industry and with better recording technology more and more male singers divert towards the gramophone, and “came to set new norms of taste in recorded music” (Das Gupta 469).

#### **4.7 Listening to the Courtesan**

Having described in some detail the courtesan singers’ efforts to adapt to the technical and market demands of the new conjuncture of culture, technology and economics, we must also take up the question: “what kind of association exists between the listener and the singer on the gramophone records?” This becomes especially relevant in case of courtesan singers who are widely criticised on moral and technical grounds by social and music reformers but turn out to be extremely popular in gramophone recordings.

That Janki Bai had an immensely successful career as a singer on the gramophone as has been mentioned. By 1910, she had “emerged as a gramophone celebrity” (*The Record News* 2). So much so that Gramophone Co. Ltd. wanted to retain her on an exclusive contract

while a rival Pathephone and Cinema Co., Calcutta had offered her Rs 4,000 to sign her exclusively as a recording artist (*The Record News* 2). Janki Bai, however, declined these offers and wanted to retain her independent status as a gramophone performer. Besides the companies mentioned above, she also recorded songs for labels like Hague, Modde and Co., Zonophone Record, HMV etc. In 1920s, she was also a regular live performer, and commanded a hefty fee of as much as Rs 2,000 for performances./ Her patrons were equally illustrious, and “included performing for various Maharajas, Nawabs and Zamindars” (*The Record News* 3).

We argue that through an understanding of the wide range of (classical) music compositions sung by the courtesans on gramophone recordings, it becomes possible to understand new connections between the modern publics and courtesan singers and their voice. In this section, we will take up some selected publicity material about recordings of the courtesan singer, Janki Bai.

# 1.

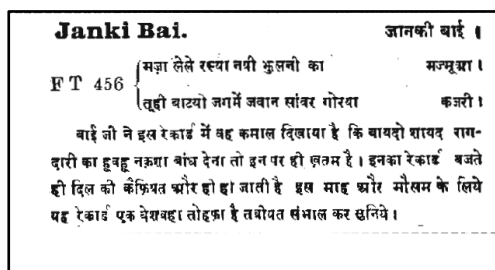


Fig. 10 No. FT 435. Janki Bai, *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 30.

A recording of two songs, *Mazaa lele rasiya nayi jhulni ka* (majmua) and *Tuhi batyo jag mein jawan saanwar gorya* (kajri), the record is said to “alter the condition of the heart” with its emotional appeal. Moreover, it is advertised to be a perfect gift for the month and the season, presumably spring, the mythical season of love. The first song invites the lover to enjoy the new rope-swing, which is often associated with the coming of spring. The listeners are advised to literally keep a hold of themselves when listening to the record.

2.

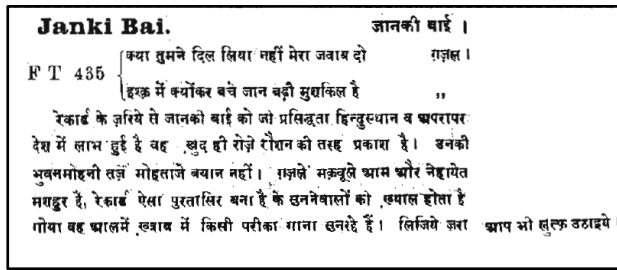


Fig. 11 No. FT 435. Janki Bai, *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 32.

Two ghazals, *Kya tumne dil liya nahi mera jawab do* and *Ishq mein kyu kar bache jaan badi mushkil hai*, sung by Janki Bai who has become a singer of ‘great renown’ in India and abroad, who doesn’t need any introduction. The ghazals themselves are said to be famous. “To the listeners it seems like they are in a dream and listening to an angel singing. You should listen for yourself.”

3.

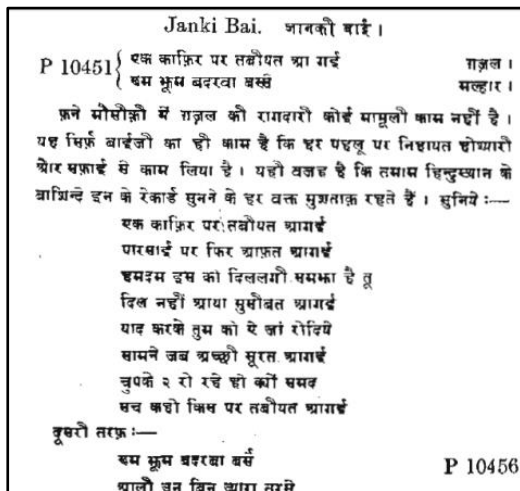


Fig. 12 No. P 10451. Janki Bai, *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 36.

For a ghazal, *Ek kaafir par tabiyat aagayi* and a malhar *Jhoom jhoom badarwa barse* the write-up reads “In the art of music the importance of a ghazal cannot be underestimated”. Moreover, it is because of her (Janki Bai’s) great dexterity and skill that “...all natives of India always want to listen to her”. The extended write-up also includes the complete lyrics of the songs

4.

Janki Bai. जानकी बाई ।

P 10456 { कष्टो कृष्ण २ बन्वारी भजन ।  
धन तुमरी व्योहार कधो भैरवी ।

ग्रामोफोन हितकारियों के लिये बाईजी ने इस रेकार्ड को एक आदर्श बना दिया है । कृष्ण भगवान का करुण करने की हिदायत और सब को अनमन लौला का वर्णन करके दिलों का स्वच्छ बना दिया । आवाज़ ऐसी पुरझोर और सुश्रुत है कि सुनकर बिली दमता सुकरी हो जायें । अलाप ऐसा कि दिल मस्त हुए गौर नहीं रह सकता । कहाँ तक इस रेकार्ड के गुण लिखें आप खुद सुनकर देख लीजिये :—

कष्टो कृष्ण २ बन्वारी - - - - -  
मिल लई है आन सुनारी - - - - -  
उन की घड़ा है न्यारी  
कष्टो - - - - -

दूसरी तरफ :—  
धन तुमरी व्योहार कधो - - - - -  
आन कठायन बहुर समायत

Fig. 13 No. P 10456. Janki Bai, *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 36.

Another recording of a bhajan *Kaho Krishna Krishna banwaari* and a bhairavi *Dhan tumri vyoha arudhi* conveys that for the gramophone listeners, *baiji* has created an ideal in this record. By advising people to remember Krishna she has ‘cleansed people’s hearts’. The music will intoxicate the heart and mind of the listener. It cannot be praised enough, and must be listened to for oneself.

5.

Janki Bai. जानकी बाई ।

P 10443 { राम करके सोरे हाथ कंगनवा राधरा ।  
जम्हा निकस चलो खिड़किन से कजली ।

इसमे मौसीजी का कमाल और आला रियाज़ का नमूना इस रेकार्ड में निहायत समझी से दिखलाया गया है । बाईजी के रेकार्ड ज्यादा तारीफ़ के मुहताज नहीं । जिन्ना भी उन के रेकार्डों को सुनो सब ही सुरज बढ़ता जाता है । इस रेकार्ड में राधरा और कजरी भरकर रेखा पुर ताबौर बना दिया है कि सुननेवालों को खयाल होता है गोया वह आलसे ध्राव में है । कदरदानों से कदरदानों की उम्मीद है ।

राम करके सोरे हाथ कंगनवा  
राम करके सोरे - - -  
एक तो करके हाथ कंगनवा  
बूजे करके जोबन्वा - - -

दूसरी तरफ :—  
जम्हा निकस चलो खिड़किन से तुमका हवा खिलीये ना  
तुहू पेड़ा बाखूसाही ठिकी तुम्हें खिलीयेन - - -  
तोशक तका लाल पलंगया तुम्हें सुलीयेन - - -

Fig. 14 No. P 10443. Janki Bai, *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 40.

This record contains a dadra *Ram karke more haath kanganwa* and a kajli *Jamya nikal chalo khidkin se*. “The greatness of the ‘art of music and great training’ is evident in this record’s uniqueness”. “The more you listen to her records, the more entertaining it is”. There is a dream like quality to the mood created by the songs. “We expect appreciation from connoisseurs,” says the write-up.

6.

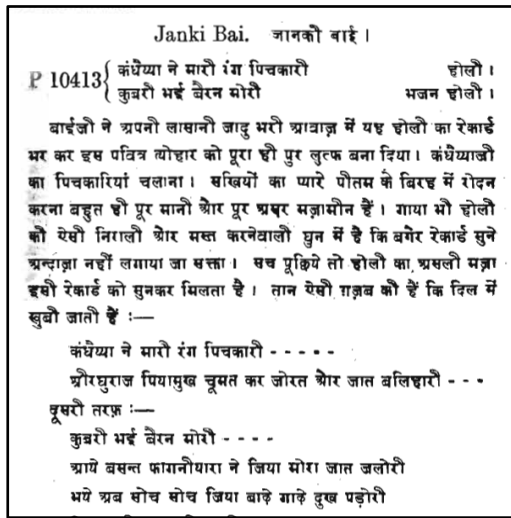


Fig. 15 No. P 10413. Janki Bai, *The Record News*, Vol. 14, Apr 1994, 43.

The songs in the recording are: a Holi song *Kanahiya ne maari rang pichkaari* and a Holi bhajan *Kubri bhai baren mori*. The record is directed towards the festival of Holi and says to the audience that—Janki Bai’s “magical” voice has made the festival of “purity”, “filled with enjoyment”. It praises the unique and “intoxicating” tune of the record whose “real pleasure can be appreciated only upon listening to it.”

One of the songs is about Krishna spraying his colour-filled *pichkari* on the *gopis* and kissing them and playing his usual pranks on them, while the other ones sing of the despair at having been separated from Krishna. The previous releases also noted at the bottom of the write-up (not included in the image) include a *durbari kannda*, a *ramkali*, a *holi*, a *bhajan holi*, *daag* and *kajli*.



7.

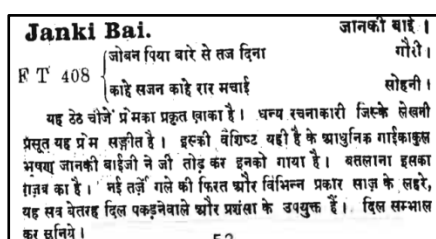


Fig. 16 No. FT 408. Janki Bai, *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 52.

Another record which contains romantic songs (“prem sangeet”): a gauri, *Joban piya bare se taj deena* and a sohni, *Kahe sajan kahe raar machai*. The songs are advertised to be important because they have been sung in the “modern” style of singing and Janki Bai has sung her heart out for these songs. The songs are assessed to have great poetical narrative, varied “waves of instruments”, they will “capture (the listener’s) heart” and “deserve to be praised”. The listeners are advised to “keep a hold on your heart.”

From the write-ups, it is clear that Janki Bai had a wide repertoire, beyond the *thumri* that was ascribed to courtesan singers. Beyond the *thumri*, her recorded discography included love songs, *bhajans*, *malhars*, *kajli*, *daag*, *dadra* etc. Moreover, as a singer, her voice is not limited to a classical or semi-classical repertoire—she also sings folk songs, such as the one on Holi. The breadth of her repertoire does not follow the rationalisation of forms and genres being attempted by the likes of Bhatkhande and Paluskar. Insofar as she does not adhere to the limits of “respectable” musical practice, her persona is not ascribed the aura of divinity and spiritual purity that is associated with MS for instance.

The language of the blurbs note the “intoxicating” effect the songs can have and the listeners are advised to “keep a hold of (their) hearts”. The write-ups are predicated on an intimate exercise of listening, a sensory pleasure, where the courtesan sounds like an “angel” in a “dream-world”. At the same time, this intimate experience is mediated through the language of “purity,” and references to the “heart-cleansing” (Fig. 13 and Fig. 15) quality of

the songs. The songs then seek to participate in the larger framework of “divine” music, and the courtesan also becomes a singer of “bhajans” (and not just *thumris*). Given that some of the songs are directed towards specific events/occasions/festivals like Holi or the coming of spring or themes like love, which are relevant themes in popular culture, the gramophone is set to become, with its range of courtesan songs, a part of people’s private spaces and everyday lives. The song reviews here become significant, as they attempt to render the courtesans roving voice “safe” for consumption by middle-class listeners. This also manifested itself as a prohibitive stricture on early recording artists. As Du Perron points out “artists like Gauhar Jan and Janki Bai...insisted that the word ‘amateur’ was included in their record label for the sake of their reputation” (Du Perron 61). Through this split, courtesans negotiated the new visibilities in the sphere of performance culture. In this sense, the “entry” of the courtesan singers into the drawing rooms of the indigenous middle-class was conditional, and the inclusion of her voice was predicated on the exclusion of her “bodily” identity’s association with the same.

The reviews extolled Janki Bai’s “great training” and dexterity (Fig. 14), presumably an attempt to differentiate her voice from the others on the market by invoking the difference between the ‘classical’ singer with proper training, and the ‘courtesan’ singer with her idiosyncrasies inherited from the *gharanas*. It is also significant that the full lyrics of the songs are included in these write-ups, along with notes regarding the *raga* for the song. This is presumably geared towards what Bakhle calls the “knowledgeable” audience of classical music. In addition to the practical uses of such song lyrics—the listener can sing along, learn it for amateur performance or just engage more with the song lyrics—this practice, we argue, also has a performative aspect. It invokes the authority of musical notation to legitimise the interpretations of the song being offered in the reviews. The invocation of the written here is an enactment of the “modernity” of classical music. The gramophone, in its “documentary”

capacity—based on its ability of “repetition” (Das Gupta)—performs its modernity against the largely oral *gharana* traditions through the notation of the lyrics<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, it also becomes clear the attraction of the gramophone record as commodity was not sustained solely through the mediation of the written word. The romantic songs (Fig. 16) seem to draw more praise for their “modern” form and “varied instrumentation” rather than their ‘emotional’ content.

Thus, even as the language of purity and divine inspiration is invoked in describing her songs, Janki Bai is no MS. Her persona does not approximate to the almost spiritual disembodied-ness of MS. This is not to say that the splitting of voice and body described by Kittler is not operative here. We argue that this splitting is a technical effect of the gramophone, which is ascribed cultural meaning in ways that are different from the trajectory traced by Weidman in the case of MS. In the case of Janki Bai as well, the voice comes to be split from the body. However, this produces a gramophone voice whose repertoire is not limited to genre-based separations. It is embedded in a mode of cultural consumption that does not attribute the disembodied voice a spiritualised essence, as in the case of respectable singers. Rather, it is enjoyed in its sheer variety.

Alongside the gramophone records that circulate in the new music market, the images of courtesans also begin to make an appearance on cheap trinkets like matchboxes, postcards and the like. At the peak of their success, singers like Gauhar Jan, Hira Jan and others are put on objects like snuff boxes, match boxes, playing cards, etc. Turning up in bazaars from India to Austria (Heath 2010), these trinkets expanded the modes of circulation of courtesans in the modern public sphere. Additionally, such a circuit of circulation of the courtesan singer’s celebrity is not to be found in the case of MS. The public persona of the courtesan singer on

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<sup>12</sup>The full lyrics have not been included in the above images as lyrical analysis is not within the scope of the present study.

the gramophone, we argue, is not invested with the values of purity and authenticity that adheres to the “reformed” singers of classical music.



Fig. 17: Gauhar Jan. Matchbox, Made in Austria.



Fig. 18: Hirajan. Matchbox, Made in Austria.

#### 4.8 Conclusion

Studies like Bakhle, Du Perron signal towards a new kind of public sphere where certain questions regarding the exclusionary nature of nationalism with respect to Muslims *gharana* musicians can be raised, while certain things like notions of respectability, reformation and differentiations of categories of *bais* and *tais* are naturalised. It also signals towards a need to consolidate, and reinforce a classical tradition even in the post-colonial context, especially with the increasing ‘Western’, ‘modern’ influences in our everyday life. As mentioned earlier it is important to look at the frameworks of ‘respectability’ and ‘modesty’ and ‘nation-building’ as well as technical aspects of classicisation like a notation system for music, that are involved in the project of classical music in India, to be directly or indirectly derived from the encounter with colonial modernity.

Further, technological innovations that arrive in India as a result of the colonial encounter, like the gramophone, have been variously invoked and appropriated within larger social and political discourses. Moreover, the listening publics as well as the retailers and distributors of music instruments and records are themselves implicated in and invested in these discursive practices. Gramophone records and music becomes a commodity, to be recorded, produced, exported/distributed etc. and becomes directly related to the demand of the audience. The popularity of courtesan singers on the gramophone, unequivocally supports the idea that they continue to be associated with musical practices in late colonial India, apart from the still existing older structures of social performances.

The category of “classical” has been shown to be a non-unified category. There are a number of courtesans recording ‘classical’ songs on the gramophone and even the ‘sub-classical’ *thumri* assumes classical associations in popular imagination (this is especially true for present day audiences), in comparison with popular/folk and later film music. Nevertheless, periodic use of categories like the classical especially in case of Indian music points towards a continued relevance of the discourse of the Indian classical music (and culture) vis-à-vis western/global influences and its continued role in constructing the same as national heritage.

We avoid looking at *bai* (or *tai*) (Bakhle’s categories) singers as uniform categories, as Joan Scott suggests in her essay ‘Fantasy Echo’ (2001)<sup>13</sup>, which have been excluded from mainstream Indian classical music. As we have seen, associations of the ‘obscene’ with the old musical/performance culture of courtesans holds validity within nationalist as well as colonial discourses, as that from which the ‘classical’ must distance itself. However, as we have demonstrated, there is a simultaneous plurality of the courtesan and her musical

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<sup>13</sup>Scott says, “identities don’t pre-exist their strategic political invocations, that categories of identity we take for granted as rooted in our physical bodies (gender and race) or our cultural (ethnic, religious) heritages are, in fact, retrospectively linked to those roots; they don’t follow predictably or naturally from them” (Scott 285).

practices, which are engaged in a complex relationship with the widespread deployment of these categories.

Moreover, we look at classical music as a domain that is in a state of change, whose boundaries need to be constantly negotiated against new forms and practices, many of which heavily feature courtesan singers in this period. Consequently, even though histories of classical/respectable music performances work on the preclusion of such public women, they are confronted with their disavowal in the domain of mass-produced gramophone music. .

As later as the 1950s, new decrees are generated: the mandate of All India Radio (AIR) launched under the guidance of Vallabhai Patel and B.R. Keshkar, banned women singers “whose private lives are a public scandal” (Das Gupta 472). They, along with Muslim musicians, were seen responsible for the “decay of music” (Das Gupta 471). Women singers for the radio “were sought to be recruited from music schools or from ‘respectable’ families” (Das Gupta 472). Keshkar himself, “...was among the new generation of Maharashtrian Brahmins that Bhatkhande and Paluskar had ushered into the study of music as a requisite of a good education” (Lelyveld, *Upon the* 117). New state owned technologies like the AIR serve the cause of consolidation of national, classical music with its claims to subjective notions like ‘respectability’. Further, the national project is an on-going project with changing strategies in the face of changing cultural modes of production.

Conversely, the only way the domain of the classical can be consistent is by disavowing its own modernity. The naturalised construction and performance of tradition has a configuration within power structures and serves certain ends—for instance, the intellectuals who first theorised classical music accord a certain role to particular women singers and exclude certain others based on their “respectability.” These exclusions acquire naturalised status through repeated invocations over time of the category of ‘classical’ as an absolute tradition which forms an integral part of our cultural heritage and its divine values.

We have however, problematised this idea of transference and reformation of musical practices as an unambiguous process, homogenising intent of the categories this narrative is hinged upon, and performative aspects of tradition building, through courtesan singers.



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## Chapter 5

### Plural Visibilities: Courtesans and Photography

In the discussion about the film *Mandi* (1983), in chapter 3, we mapped out the various relationships that courtesans have with the ‘respectable’ elements of the modern nation. Another aspect of courtesan’s life, which is largely only a side narrative in the film, is the nexus between the courtesan (Neena Gupta) and the photographer (Om Puri). We see nothing of the photographer outside the brothel, and inside he spends most of his time trying to take ‘dirty’ photos of the women who live in the brothel, while in a state of undress or while they are taking a bath. He spends most of his time with Gupta’s character, persuading her to let him take photographs of her, besides making promises about taking her to Mumbai and getting her work in films—which interests her. In the course of the film, he stands by the women in the brothel in their time of need—when Shanti Devi comes to the brothel to ‘rescue’ Phoolmani for instance. Their nexus, in all its sexual, utilitarian, ‘obscene’ connotations is one that is profitable for both. Associations with sexuality and immorality are manifested around them. It is relevant for the purposes of history writing, of both the courtesans as well as photography in India, to look into how these associations come about. In this chapter, looking at the early photographs of courtesans, we first assess how the plurality that has emerged in other forms of mass culture is translated herein. Secondly, what are the conditions of emergence, literally of the bodies of courtesans variously invisibilised in technologies of the gramophone or made hyper-visible as ‘obscene’/ ‘diseased’ in administrative and morality discourses in late colonial India?

Through the interface of traditional/modern ideas, practices and technological change emerge new codes of knowledge production, distribution and hence, power. The participation of courtesans in several mass-mediated cultural practices like gramophone recordings, theatre,

radio, films, print—at the level of practitioners as well as objects makes them visible in popular imagination in their multiplicity. These appearances coexist with administrative and nationalist constructions of courtesans as a sexualised, deviant identity. A photograph in its initial perception seems to be different from a written narrative or a painting, which are by definition subjective interpretations.

As Susan Sontag points out in her book *On Photography*, “Photographed images don’t seem to be statements about the world, as much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire” (Sontag 2). They “furnish evidence” and hence command an authority of veracity. However, photography in its commercial aspect, according to Sontag, is as much influenced by the discourse of “taste and conscience” (Sontag 4) as any other form of art, and in fact “the very passivity and ubiquity of the photographic record is photography’s ‘message’, its aggression” (Sontag 4). Hence, the “reality” of photographic image is a constructed effect. Such an inquiry becomes increasingly relevant in an image saturated context like our own. Moreover, the photograph is an artefact which makes a person into an object which can be acquired and possessed and abet desire (Sontag 10). At the same time, the photograph denotes the absence of the person herself, especially in historical photos, engendering a kind of nostalgia for all that is lost. In this sense, there is a complex interface of desire, nostalgia and interest that we approach these photos.

The space of the *zenana* and the custom of *pardah* were part of many upper and even middle class households in the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century (Weinstein 2010), and regulated the visibility of women in public as well as private spaces. Through both colonial as well as nationalist reform interventions, and the increasing roles for women in the public space, new practices of ‘control’ came to be consolidated. This is especially evident when thinking of

photographs, as they claim to directly embody the photographed subject. With the popularisation of photography, new regimes of visibility around women's bodies, encode respectable, gendered identities. In its documentary<sup>1</sup> capacity, the camera provides new ways of seeing the courtesan; operative is an intimacy with the subject, an emergence of her body in the public gaze. Along with this new intimacy vis-à-vis the courtesan's body, the photographic frame also brings with it a historicist signification. A photograph opens up the space for subjects to wear a costume and perform a character, complete with a set and props.

Through these and other framing and compositional devices, the courtesan's image becomes the point through which the viewing subject *becomes subject to* the historical present. In this chapter, we will attempt to trace some representational paradigms of visibility through which the courtesan is constructed as a photographed body caught between a physical intimacy and historical distance. As Barthes says of photographs and viewership, "the type of consciousness that the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of *being-there* of the thing (that any copy would provoke) but an awareness of it *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between here now and there then" (Barthes 159).

Courtesans were women who lived outside the *purdah*, and their 'public' lives in likelihood enabled their becoming subjects of early photography in India. Laura Weinstein in her essay 'Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in Purdah' (2010) tells us, "Experiments in representing individual Indian women of middle or high status

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<sup>1</sup> The word documentary is used in this context as used by John Tagg, *Disciplinary Frame and Photographic Truth*: "The appeal of the documentary, as the appeal of the paternal state, as an appeal to the real and the true, is at once, a call to order and a call to identification; a call to community, to communion, and to communication...signals a new politics of the imaginary" (xxxiii).

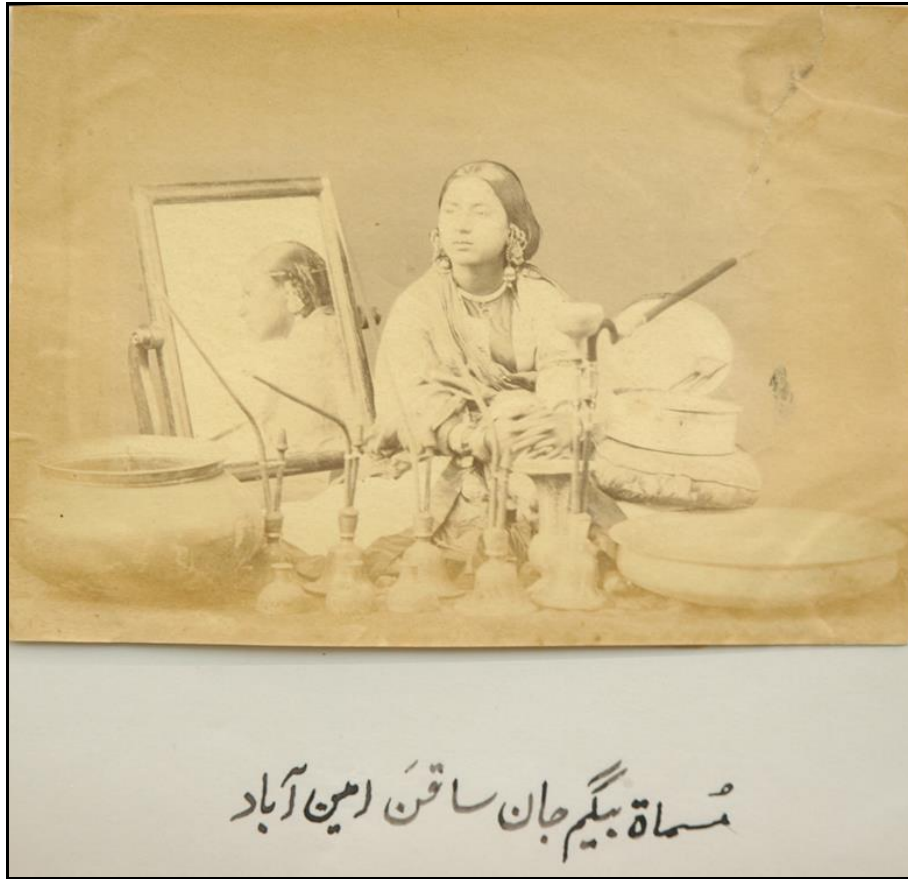


Fig. 19: Ali, Darogha Abbas. *A Seated Lady* from *The Beauties of Lucknow*. 1870.  
Alkazi Collection of Photography, New Delhi.

through photography began...with women who were not in *purdah*, such as courtesans and dancing girls” (Weinstein 11). An early example of women portraiture in India in 1860s is Abbas Ali and Mushoor-ud-Dowlah’s series of portraits of courtesans that were compiled in an 1874 album called *The Beauties of Lucknow*. These women were photographed “not as portraits of individuals but as representatives of a type of high-class courtesan who leads a life of luxury, sensuality and idleness” (Weinstein 11). They are often photographed with objects of repose, informal postures with intoxicants like *hookahs* (Fig. 19) and betel nuts.

Photographs are to be viewed as artefacts that are visual representations within a larger history, and engender meanings within the context of viewership as well as the context of

production. These meanings can be variously generated through the text of the photograph and through social practices built around these photographs. The latter is the focus of Christopher Pinney's seminal text *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (1997). Representations of courtesans are premised on their status as public women, but the differences in representational forms gain semiotic significance. We will read the photographs thematically, symbolically and through the relationship that emerges between the camera/viewer and the subject/object of the photograph. This is not necessarily a subjective reading of the photographs but an interpretation of the symbols and icons used, and what it adds to our understanding of courtesans. These significations acquire importance in their contexts of circulations in the public sphere and consequently in popular imagination.

### **5.1 The Courtesan in Early Colonial Photography**

Photography came to India in the 1840s and was put to use first by colonial administrators for the purpose of in ethnographic documentation of the local population. Colonial publications like *The People of India* (1868-1875) and *An Account of Primitive Tribes and Monuments of Nilagiris* (1873) draw implicitly on the indexical significations of photographic technology, where individuals become types and markers of their community/caste/regional identities. Pinney suggests that in these photos there is implicit a desire to 'salvage' an "authentic primitivism from imminent extinction" as in the case of fragile tribal communities. Alongside this, there is also at work the "detective paradigm," which was more commonly manifested in response to "more vital caste societies" (Pinney 46), which would help govern them better. In the case of the courtesan, we see an overlap of desires to salvage, castigate as well as exoticise and eroticise the photographic subject.

Courtesans, also referred to as the “bazaar women,” appear in the catalogue of *The People of India*. Zahore Begum, is an example (Fig. 20). The description of the photograph in the book is as following: “...a Cashmere Mussalmani, and follow the profession of courtesan (sic). As maybe supposed her character is not very respectable...” (noted in Weinstein 12). The ‘indignity’ of a courtesan’s life becomes an ethnographic, visible marker in the colonial definition. Weinstein points out that even when the courtesan is not photographed with any

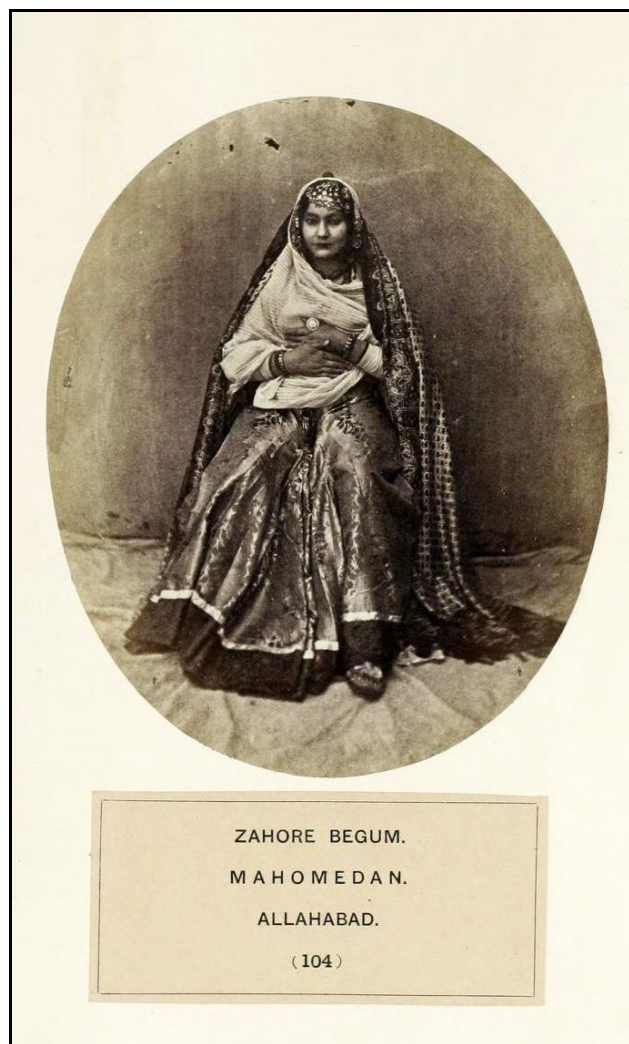


Fig. 20: Photographer Unknown. *Zahore Begum, Mohamedan, Allahabad.* 1860s. *The People of India*, Vol 2.



suggestive *harem*-esque poses, the accompanying text marks her as “disreputable.” By extension, the ethnographic definition becomes a fixture in itself, and comes to be attached to the photograph to give it meaning.

In naming the subject of the photograph as a “courtesan”, she is situated outside the domain of the respectable. Further, by coding her attire and accessories, markers such as the Cashmere shawl are retroactively signified through their association with the courtesan, as they are situated within a world of Oriental decadence, symbolised by the woman as well as her dressing. The courtesans in photographs such as the one above thus condense the figure of the sexual savagery of the Orient, as well as its despotic decadence. Through these representations of “bazaar women,” there is a reiteration of the colonial imagination of the courtesan as a diseased body threatening social health and order. Through its deployment in policing and surveillance, the ethnographic paradigm comes to be naturalised as a mode of visibilising the courtesan. For instance, in 1862, there were calls for courtesans to carry certificates with photographs detailing presence or absence of venereal diseases, in cities like Lucknow (Oldenburg 139).

## **5.2 Courtesans and *Zenana* Women**

From its early stages, there were overlaps between the aristocratic social spaces and photography of women in colonial India. Sontag observes that when the camera first came up in France and England only “inventors and buffs” were interested in them, and “taking photographs had no clear social use” (Sontag 5). In India, apart from the colonial administration, royal patrons of princely states were amongst the earliest to take to photography. Two prominent examples are Raja Sawai Singh’s photos of the women of his *zenana* and those sanctioned by Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad. Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur—generally considered an “enlightened,” westernized ruler (Weinstein 6)—was an avid photographer himself, took a series of photographs

of his *zenana* women in the 1860s and 70s. Weinstein points out that “Ram Singh found a new mode of visual representation of women in *purdah*...which emphasized *dignity* and *propriety*...he formulated an alternative to pervasive and largely negative colonial conceptions of *zenana* life” (italics mine, Weinstein 14). At the same time, it must be noted that the women in the *zenana* were becoming potential objects of reform for both British administration as well as indigenous elites, as has been discussed elsewhere (Chapter 3).

Ram Singh’s portraits of his women derive influences from Europeanised portraiture. The portraits, however, “are neither erotic objects or ethnic or professional types, but embodiments of feminine virtues of sacrifice, nurturance and maternal being” (Weinstein 14). The women in the photographs are depicted as “decorous and healthful specimens of femininity” (Weinstein 8), sitting upright, enrobed in fineries and bedecked in traditional jewellery. Weinstein suggests that these photographs are significant in that they “do not mirror Orientalized conceptions of Indian domestic life” in the *zenana*. (Weinstein 8). The pictures are directed less towards the reform of the *zenana* space and more towards legitimising the traditional structures using the modern technology of photography and to dispel notions that the women of the *zenana* are “idle, sexually deviant and oppressed” (Weinstein 3). At the same time, it must be noted that in none of the photographs does Ram Singh appear himself. Rather, he situates his agency as the man behind the camera, as the authoritative interpreter of this staging of modernity and tradition.

Even as the women of the *zenana* appear as respectable subjects, the signifiers of laziness and decadent luxury come to be mapped on to bodies of courtesans instead. In the Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad’s photographs of his *zenana* women from 1915, there are some similarities in construction in terms of the stature, propriety and display of wealth, especially in relation to his six wives. There is, however, an important difference, in the presence of eroticised portrayals

of women's bodies. Gianna M. Carotuneto says, "conventional family photos (are) laced with Orientalist harem references...(and) reflected the cosmopolitan diversity of the Indian courtly culture" (Carotuneto 41). Some examples of harem references include "the notorious lounging 'odalisque' popularized in European Orientalist paintings" (Carotuneto 45), alcohol, and the Nizam, who poses as the "harem lord" (Carotuneto 46). However, he appears in only 16 of the 130 images, which only serve to "accentuate his masculinity and indicate how the *zenana* bolstered his credibility as a powerful ruler" (Carotuneto 47).

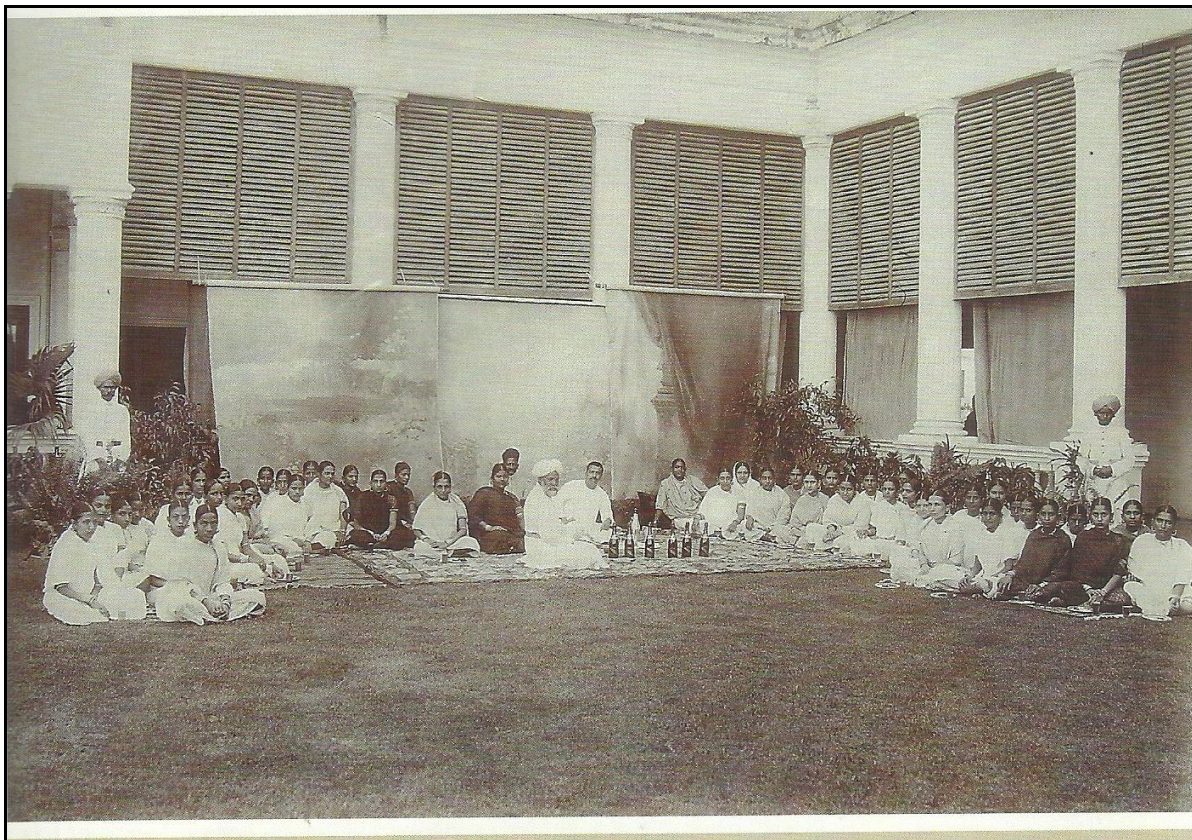


Fig. 21: Deen Dayal & Sons. *Osman Ali Khan, The Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad, and 46 Women of His Zenana*. 1915. Hyderabad

In one of the photographs (Fig. 21), 46 women, sit in hierarchical organisation framing the Nizam, with six bottles of liquor in the forefront. Carotuneto says, "in displaying his

polygamous household, the Nizam flaunts his masculinity, his sexuality and traditional power” (Carotuneto 49). Carotuneto stresses that the photographs of these women give us an idea of the intricate hierarchy of the *zenana* and the power wielded by these women, often even outside the boundaries of the *zenana*, through their roles of wives, mother, queen etc. For our purposes it is significant to note that their ties to the Nizam, and his power over them, are the definitive relationship in these photos, through which the other identities emerge. In similarly staged photos women portrayed in seductive odalisque poses are not the wives of the Nizam but the concubines. Through the transference of suggestive sexuality on to other women, the respectability of the Nizam’s wives, in austere poses, is reiterated visually. The paradigm that has emerged through the thesis, of the attempted erasure of the sexuality of ‘respectable’ women is reiterated in visual terms in these photographs. The Nizam is at the centre and/or elevated (like sitting in a chair), the women are seated on the floor, with the courtesan women in reclining poses generates a visual hierarchy based on status and roles within the *zenana*.

To contrast, there is a lesser known collection of *zenana* photos, that Weinstein mentions in her essay—those of Maharaja Nasir-ud-Daula, the Iranian Shah who was an amateur photographer himself (Weinstein 13). The women of his *zenana* are photographed “in the same stereotyping manner that we see in images of similar subjects produced by Europeans” (Weinstein 13)—thus, “self orientalizing” (Ali Behdad’s phrase). In a photo, one of his wives is photographed, in a “semi-odalisque position, her legs exposed to her knees” with her “side-long glance as a bored gaze suggestive of the monotony of harem life...inviting the (male) viewer to fantasize about an erotic encounter with her” (Weinstein 13). The eroticisation of the women of the *zenana*, irrespective of their roles as wives or concubines, produces a more uniform gendered dynamic, between the Maharaja and his women.

Through external markers like jewellery, clothing and bodily posture and gestures, meanings regarding women bodies and spaces are generated in *zenana* photography and these ‘representations’ are informed by discourses beyond the space of the *zenana*, and the boundary between the “domestic” and the “public.” These photographs produced under the patronage of different rulers, have underlying political undertones and hybrid modern-traditional aspirations, which are mapped onto the bodies of women photographic subjects. However, it must be kept in mind that these photographs are not intended for public circulation or consumption in their conception, hence their relevance in popular culture needs to be mitigated. In academic readings of aristocratic *zenana* photographs, we see that women’s identities are often defined through or against the Oriental accounts of the ‘sexualised native’. In their studies focused on the *zenana* women and the multiplicity of the identities within the *zenana*, both Weinstein and Carotuneto, problematically confer homogeneity to the antithetical space of the *harem* and the ‘odalisques’ that live therein. Our effort here is to problematize such accounts through the plurality in photographic representations of courtesans in this period—through markers and tropes which are mapped onto these early photographic subjects in popular culture a varied range of contexts and meanings emerges around the courtesan’s body. We also seek to deconstruct the now naturalised ‘exclusions’ of courtesans from performance culture and spaces of ‘respectability’ through a study of photographs which were in circulation in the public sphere.

### **5.3 A Community of Performers**

Courtesan’s relations with performance culture, in their ethnographic signification, appear in postcards, made by British as well as Indian photographers and studios. Pinney tells us that first photo-type postcards appeared in 1899, made by firms such as Bourne and Shepherd in Calcutta and Higginbotham and Co. in Madras as well as smaller Indian concerns like Moorli Dhur and

Sons in Ambala, Gobind and Oodey Ram of Jaipur and S. Mahadeo and Sons of Belgaum (Pinney 57). They often appear as hierarchised troupes, the men customarily holding/playing accompanying instruments like *sarangi*, *tabla*, harmonium, and women with ankle-bells

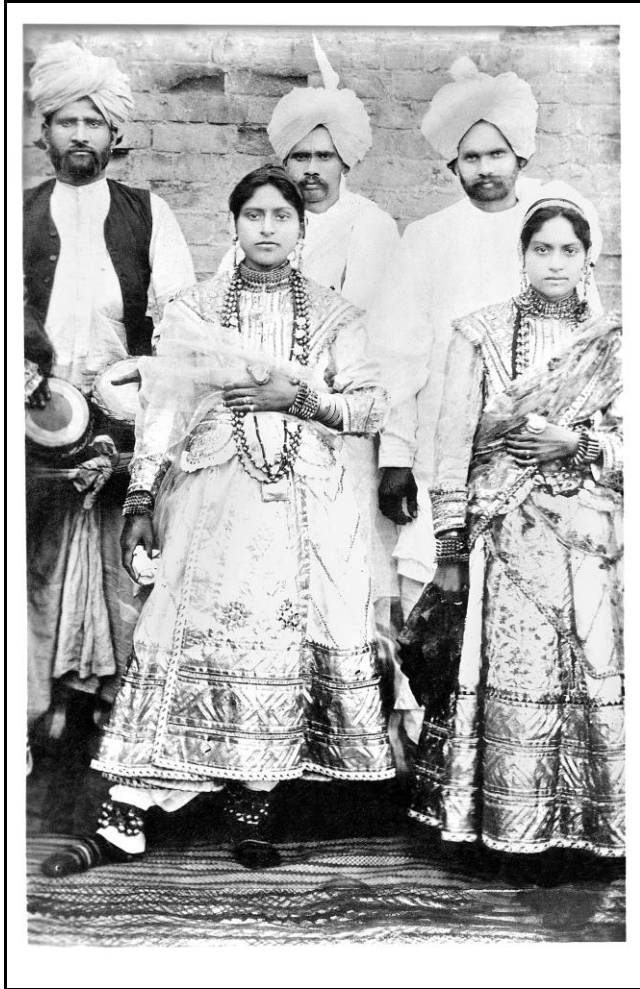


Fig. 22: K.C. Mehra and Sons. *Dancing Girls of Peshawar Ready for Dance*. Peshawar. 1930. Postcard.

(Fig. 22), in dance poses (Fig. 23), often identified by their regional identities in the descriptions. The subjects of the postcard photos are adorned with varying amounts of jewellery and other fineries, suggesting the variances in economic circumstances of the groups. The depictions may be situated within the ethnographic paradigm concretised in books like *The People of India*, and



participates in the creation of a catalogue of identification of various communities. As Pinney suggests, “Postcards connect their traditional, occupational markers to new colonial artefacts” (Pinney 57). A postcard by definition is a ‘microcosm’ of a destination and contributes to the

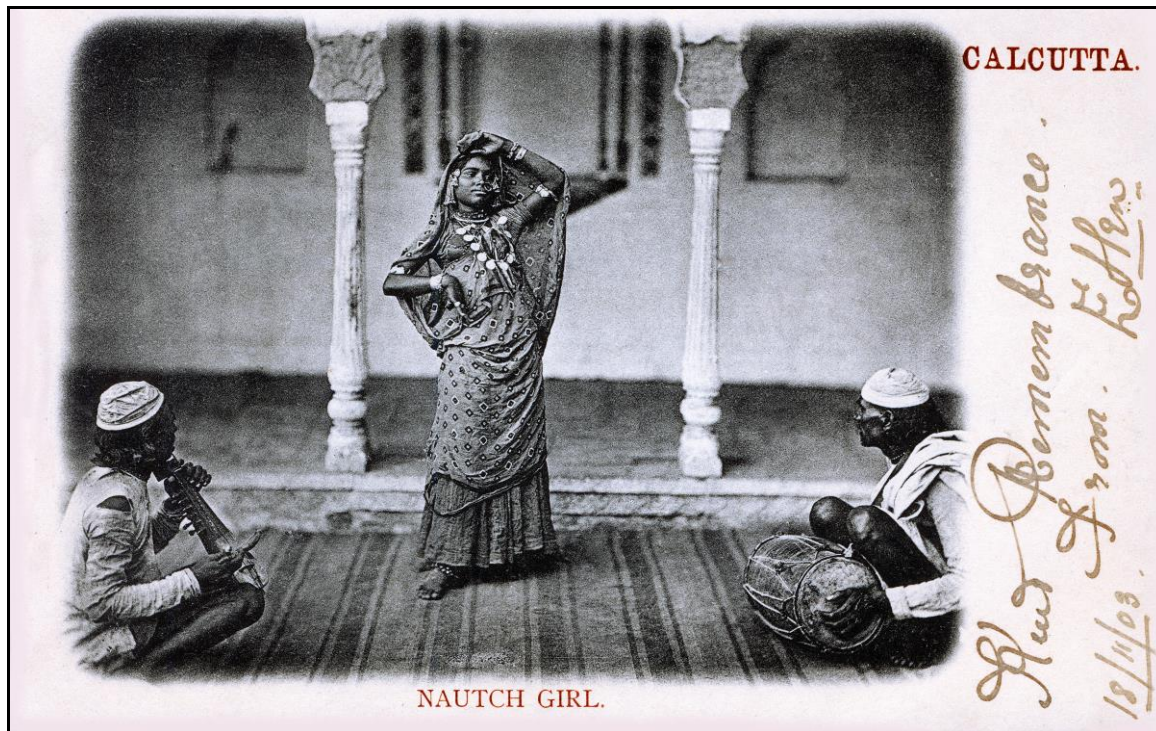


Fig. 23: W. Roessler & Co. *Nautch Girl, Calcutta.* 1903. Postcard.

conception in the mind of the viewer of the postcard, of the place itself. The camera in its documentary capacity is invoked in and through these postcards.

Nautch gatherings centred on the courtesan appear in travel accounts and publications from late eighteenth century (Chapter 3). The painting below (Fig. 24) depicts a nautch in progress. The full view of the dancing girls, who are the objects of the painting, forms the centre of the scene, while the crowd is loosely gathered around them. Not all the audience members are looking at the dancing girls. There is a certain ‘interiority’ in the image, reminiscent of Pinney’s discussion on Ravi Verma’s early paintings in his essay ‘Piercing the Skin of the Idol’ (1991)

“The hold of absorption and history painting was tenuous and reached its apogee in the works of Raja Ravi Verma...his canonized works are those which look past the beholder...Diderot’s command: ‘think no more of the beholder as if he did not exist’...It is this which his imperial patrons so admired” (Pinney, *Beyond* 159).

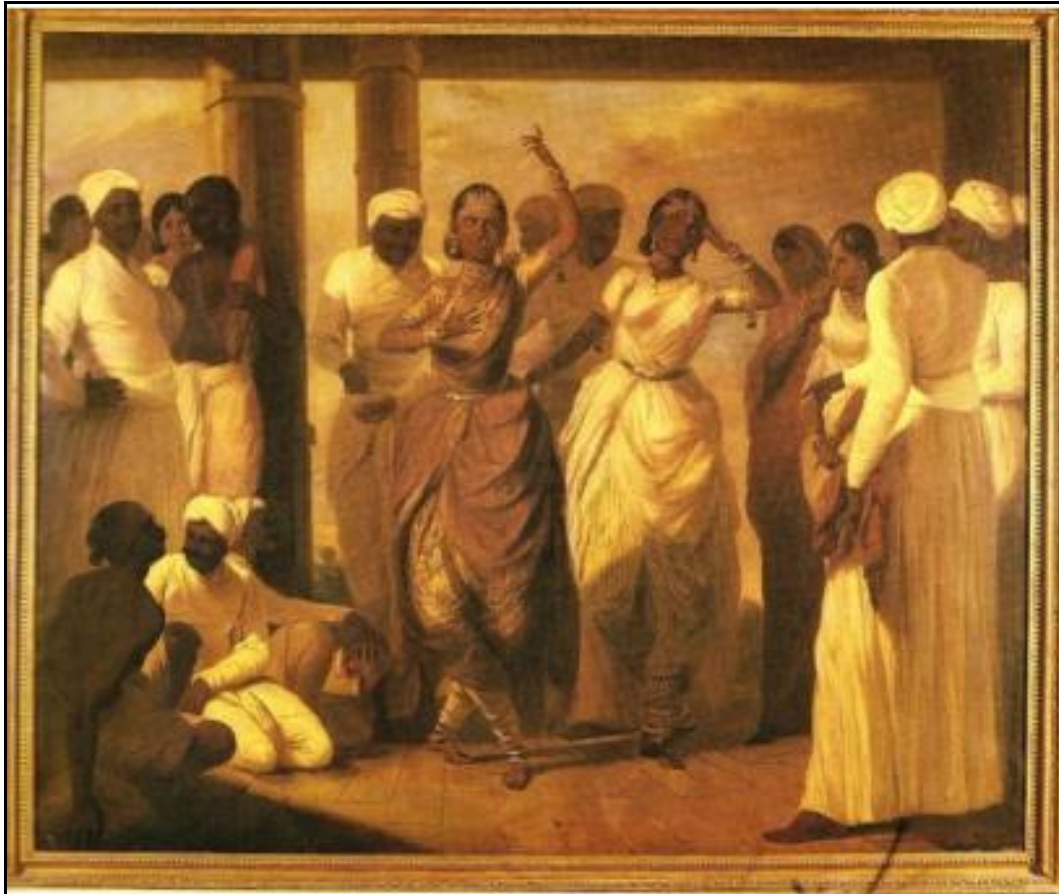


Fig. 24: Kettle, Tilly. *Devadasis or Dancing Girls*. 1770. Drawing.

The figures in the painting are all dark-skinned some with distinguishing headgear and hairstyles that correspond to a communal construction of identities, and women with and without *purdah*. Thus, the painting overlays the ethnographic details/aspirations with stereotypical depictions of the seductive, objectified, sexualised natives, who are at the centre of the painting.





Fig. 25: Bourne, Samuel. *Native Nautch at Delhi from India, Calcutta etc.* 1860.  
Alkazi Collection of Photography, New Delhi. Albumen Print.

Conversely, the indexicality of the photographs allows the invocation of a documentary value, as they are an evidence of things “having-been-there” (Barthes). The photo of the nautch captures a “real” nautch performance from 1860 (Fig. 25). It “salvages” the space of the nautch. The spectacle of the nautch, framed in by the ornate arches, is “saved” from imminent extinction (Pinney 1997). The nautch party comprises of both men and women who are at the centre of a rough circle defined by the back of the heads of the people nearest to the camera. The gaze of the public is directed towards the performers. The camera is not acknowledged by the subjects of the photograph and appears like a voyeur, “unveiling” the scene, frozen in time. The photo provides spatial configurations and popular value to our ideas of the nautch. An interesting dimension of

the voyeuristic gaze of the camera that emerges in this photo is the *zenana* women visible in the balcony, behind the curtain. There is a blurring of lines between the public and the private lives and spaces of women as they both become part of photographic frame. At the same time, there is a reaffirmation of the differences between the spaces they occupy, one behind the *purdah* and one outside it, and the different nature of their public-ness. The courtesan is the only object of the public gaze within the photo, while the new public viewing the photograph has access to a wider spectacle of the scene, through the voyeuristic gaze of the camera.

#### 5.4 Private Encounters



Fig. 26: Nestor Gianclis Ltd. *Nautch Girl at Her Toilet*. 1910.  
*Images of Asia*, n.p. Postcard.

A different dynamic of voyeurism comes into play, when we look at photos of the ‘private’ spaces of courtesan women. The camera finds the photographic subject in the interior spaces of

the courtesan's lives—but the availability of this access is contingent on the public-ness of the courtesan. *A Nautch Girl at her Toilet*, is also a postcard (Fig. 26), and we see a nautch girl, absorbed in her own image, combing her hair, while another woman sits at her feet, looking at her, and holding up the mirror. The interiority of the image assures us the voyeuristic camera has chanced upon this scene and captured it, and underplays its constructed nature. The scene of the photograph—the *dupatta* thrown carelessly across her blouse while she fixes her hair—shows us the nautch girl in the state of undress, shows us her life beyond the space of performance, her private spaces, which are nevertheless open to the camera as well the viewer of the photograph.



Fig. 27: Photographer Unknown. *Hira Jan, Meerut*. 1910. Images of Asia. Postcard.

Similar private tête-à-têtes are arranged around the bodies of famous courtesan singers who appear in informal poses, both on *cartes de visites* and postcards, which probably had value as souvenirs, memorabilia and as material for publicity. This conjecture is strengthened by the courtesans being identified by their names and place of residence. Fig. 27 is a postcard of *Hira Jan, Meerut* (1910) who appears in a relaxed pose, but dressed in full jewellery and her grand layered skirt spread out around her. The image preserves her public persona but at the same time is animated by a sense of a private encounter with the famous courtesan singer.

### **5.5 The Courtesan and Studio Portraiture**

Sontag proposes that photography undergoes a change of character with industrialisation, and “comes into its own as an art” (Sontag 5). Further, in its practice it is less an art and more “...a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power” (Sontag 5). In addition, after industrialisation, it becomes increasingly aligned with a “realistic” mode of representation. It gains importance as “...touchstones and confirmations of that reductive approach to reality which is considered realistic” (Sontag 16). In Pinney’s analysis the indexicality of photographs gave them an increased relevance in the colonial imagination (Pinney 20), but outside its official usage, photography’s “relation to art was subject to constant debate and negotiation” (Pinney 76-77). For instance, the production of painted photographs was central to many early studios in India while in the West, painting represents lower iconic order than a photograph and these painted-photographs invert that hierarchy (Pinney 79). A related idea is the conception of the photographer as a *kalakaar* that acquires currency in India. An emergence of new forms of visuality is linked by Pinney to a “historical conjunction of different media” (Pinney 98), instead of seeing this as an evidence of an essentialised ‘Indian’ character.

Indian photo studios first came up in 1850s in Calcutta and Bombay, and early Indian photography was different from the ‘anthropometric’/ethnographic usage of Orientalist representation. Like the gramophone, the camera evoked a range of responses amongst Indian people in its early phase, ranging from fears that it would steal your soul to that photographs could be used for identification and later execution by the direct order of the Queen. British photographer anthropologists like Thurston were “mistaken for a recruiting agent for replacements in the Boer Wars” (Pinney 64), which evoked fear amongst the potential photographic subjects. Notwithstanding the deeply Orientalising overtones of these narratives, they do nevertheless point to the effects of introduction of photographic technology in colonial social contexts.

The specific social realities posed novel challenges to the adoption of photography as a popular form, especially with regard to women—“the problem of taking pictures of women who lived behind the *purdah* hidden from the disrespectful glances of commoners.” (S. Ghosh 1). Ghosh in his essay ‘Zenana Studio: Early Women Photographers of Bengal, from Taking Pictures: The Practice of Photography by Bengalis’ (2014) recounts details of the complex task of taking these photos. The photographer would place the plate in the camera and leave the room, instruct a young girl to open the lens, and the picture would be taken, timed with the lifting of the veil in front of the woman. The photographer would enter again, change the plate, leave the room for a second photograph to be taken (S. Ghosh 1). This problem was resolved in some sense by the opening of *zenana* studios run by women, who also went to women’s houses to take photos of them (Weinstein 14). In late nineteenth century Calcutta, Chanchalabala Dasi, was one of the first Indian woman to have a photo studio, which was located in the red-light district of the city, and besides *purdah* women she also catered to a lot of actresses and courtesans. The latter often



had photographs taken for professional as well as administrative purposes, besides personal use. For instance, cinema actresses often hung enlargements of themselves with their patrons on the walls of their establishment (Chattopadhyay 16). Images of respectable, upper and middle class women when taken were not intended for public display, much like the women from the *zenana*. G. Thomas in his essay 'Indian Courtesans in *Cartes-de-Visite*' (1984) tells us that "if...such a picture did find a place on the wall, there was always a discreet curtain of silk hanging over it" (Thomas 83). Popular photographic form, in this sense, becomes a site where the discourses of respectability, decency centred on women's bodies become effective.



Fig.28: *Najirjan Baijee of Suhranpur*. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
CSSS Archive, Calcutta. Pamphlet.

While respectable women are often photographed with their husbands or other male members of their family, photographs of courtesans with men are coded somewhat differently.

They are framed as objects of male desire rather than in their social roles as wives or mothers (Fig. 28). Their space outside matrimonial and familial representations allows depictions of courtesans' sexuality in certain public contexts. In courtesan photos then is enacted the fantasy of the sexualised women of the Orient. Is it suitable to say that the courtesan is the erotic other of the *zenana/purdah* women in visual representations?

Within the context of increasing popularity of studio photography late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, which allows photography to be embedded in and circulated amongst the 'respectable' publics, and the reconstitution of the *zenana* and *purdah* practices, along what lines are debates of 'respectability' framed with respect to women's bodies in visual culture? How do we reconcile the 'respectable' aspirations in the public sphere of the photographic medium and its often 'disreputable' subjects? How is the courtesan—the 'sexualised', public woman negotiated in these frames? Looking at photographs of courtesans produced between 1860s to 1940s, which are directed towards public circulation, newer possibilities of courtesan conducts emerge, through visuals.

## **5.6 Structures of Intimacy**

Much like their aristocratic *zenana* counterparts, many early studio photographs of 'respectable' women, when they are first photographed, depict them standing erect, next to pedestals or high stools, or sitting in high-backed chairs with their hands placed on their thighs or crossed in front of them, all of which convey a sense of moral uprightness and modesty. The gaze of the expressionless faces, seen prominently in postcards for instance, stares back at the camera or into the distance outside the frame.

These photographs, however, stand out in one respect. Courtesans in certain photographs appear in performative gestures which depict coquetry, coyness, like the images below.

Exaggerated and performative expressions of coyness are conventionalised components of the courtesan interactions in various later filmic depictions too. Veena Oldenburg's essay 'Lifestyle as Resistance...' (1990) adds to our understanding of the connection between courtesans and *nakhra*. "*Nakhra* or pretense, which courtesans have to master in order to spare no opportunity of coaxing money out of their patrons and his friends. Their avowed and unabashed purpose is to amass a tidy fortune as early in their careers as possible" (Oldenburg 274). At the same time, we would add that the performative, rather than the functional, aspect of these gestures and conventions must be emphasised.

A new kind of intimacy is predicated between the camera/viewer of the image and the subject of the photograph—gestures like sneaking a look from under the veil as in Fig. 29 or gestures of coyness like in Fig. 30, predicate new structures of desire and/or seduction. While the direct gaze of the photographed subject is usually understood to signify unmediated intimacy, here the courtesan's refusal to meet the eye itself becomes the point of subjectivation. The averted gaze stages for the viewer the pleasures of the *nakhra*. At the same time, the framing of the same within the performative space of the photographic image makes it "safe" for consumption. This representational device thus renders the threat of the courtesan's hypersexuality as object of desire, and the practice of viewing it as a pleasurable aesthetic experience. This representational paradigm marks a shift in the visual register of the courtesan. Where the ethnographic paradigm framed the courtesan as a subject of surveillance, these photographs transform her into an object of desire that may, moreover, be consumed in the form of the photograph itself. Unlike the *zenana* photographs, this style of photographic courtesans had far wider currency in popular culture, and soon became a conventionalised mode of representing courtesans as such. For this reason, this particular representational mode is important as it makes



the courtesan properly “consumable,” as an image circulated in the form of mass-produced photographs. For instance, in Chapter 4 we discussed some images of courtesan singers Gauhar Jan and Hira Jan that were printed on matchbox, made in Austria. Here, we may return to those images to observe that they also invoke the conventions described above, albeit in different re-combinations. The Gauhar Jan image (Fig. 17) looks back directly at the viewer, but shows her hands held in a pose. On the other hand, the image of Hira Jan shows her seated erect on a chair by a table, looking out of the frame of the image (Fig. 18).



Fig. 29: Photographer Unknown. *A Mohamedan Dancing Girl in Attitude*. 1905. n.p. Postcard.



Fig. 30: P.D. Kapoor & Sons. *Dancing Girl of U.P.* 1930. Postcard.

## 5.7 Tradition, Modernity and the Culture Commodity

“Chamber of dreams” (Pinney 1997), is an apt metaphor for the space of the photographic studio.

We see symbols of modern life incorporated in the photos below: shoes, styles of hair and dress,

wrist watches, books and modern furnishings. The courtesans and other women who are photographed with these props<sup>2</sup>, become sites on to which these signifiers of modernity are mapped and they are building blocks of new identities in photographic representations. This identity in turn needs to be contextualised in the ideas on the Indian nation which gather momentum in early twentieth century. Practitioners of photography, and later films, were enmeshed in the formation of a “modern traditional”.<sup>3</sup> Ashish Rajadhyaksha quotes Phalke’s vision of Indian film-making, “...could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see (sic) Indian images on screen? It meant, for him, the need to set up an *Indian* industry, in line with the nationalist call for *Swadeshi*” (Rajadhyaksha 48). Pinney describes a 1931 advertisement for Vanguard Photographic Studios in Bombay. It “combined an emphasis on artistry with a declaration of their nationalist credentials...its services as certified by nationalists such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose and K.M. Munshi” (Pinney 77). Not unlike the emergent gramophone market, photography as a modern form of art/documentation was implicated in the new ideological and economic discourses in late colonial India.

We have discussed in detail the connections between courtesan careers in music and the burgeoning gramophone industry in India (Chapter 4). These connections are layered further through photographic practices, where the various media in popular culture inform each other. In the case of famous gramophone singers like Gauhar Jan (Fig. 31) these photographs work in two ways. They make visible the body/face of the courtesan singer whose voice is a popular commodity in recordings while at the same time it reaffirms the association and creates an

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that that these women could not have used these things in real life, but the term comes from the idea that one would customarily ‘dress up’ to get photographed. And also that given their presence in the frame of the photograph creates the environment of the photo.

<sup>3</sup> Seen from both sides, the “modern traditional” would imply both, interpreting modern experience in ‘traditional’ terms and of the traditional forms themselves in terms of modern genre (Rajadhyaksha 51).

equation between courtesan performers' and the gramophone's configuration in popular culture, and in fact draws on this association. Gauhar Jan's playful pose, and her sitting on the same table where the gramophone is placed, marks them both as commodities of entertainment.



Fig. 31: Photographer Unknown. *Indur Mar Gauharjan*. n.d. CSSS Archive, Calcutta. Pamphlet.

Other photographs of women posing with a gramophone (Fig. 32) however, could depict a symbolic link with modernity and its technologies. It is possible to conjecture that circumstances of modern life are envisioned and incorporated in photography of the period. At the same time, to get photographed too is a 'modern' experience.



Fig. 32: Photographer Unknown. *Lady Posing with a Gramophone*. 1900.  
Alkazi Collection of Photography. Gelatin Albumin Print.

Concurrently, older forms of artistic production in India made significant contributions to innovations like coloured chromolithographs. Also visible within these photographs are symbolic associations which can be linked with motifs in older paintings of artists like Raja Ravi Verma. Considering the influence Ravi Verma had on portrayals, especially portrayal of women's bodies these influences are not unlikely. In the photos below, Fig. 33 and Fig. 34 the woman standing next to the swan on the pedestal is reminiscent of *Princess Damayanthi talking with Royal Swan about Nala* by Raja Ravi Verma (1899). Of Verma's aesthetics, says Rajadhyaksha, "In defining traditional subject matter as the 'past', establishing the famed genre of mythological...(he)



aligned several motifs from this redefined subject matter with others specifically from the contemporary (Rajadhyaksha 63). In context of early photography in India, Pinney posits that, “It is plausible that the retraining of court painters as photographers and the relatively closed aesthetics of many courts led to direct overlaps between painterly and photographic practices and imagery” (Pinney 95).



Fig. 33: Photographer Unknown. *Miss Santoshkumari*. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Calcutta. Print Pub.



Fig. 34: Photographer Unknown. *Miss Shibrani*. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Calcutta. Print Publication.

It is noteworthy that two aspects of the photographs signal towards their modernity—the individual’s portrait is identified by her name and she is addressed with the English title “Miss”—which makes her a “modern” subject, and also distances her from her identity as a performer. This piecing together of reality, through traditional and modern motifs and meanings is a part of the framing of early photographs, and can be traced through examples of courtesan

photographs of the period, which are decidedly animated by engagements with the complexities of modern identity politics.

In the modern public sphere courtesan women gather visibility in newer modes of popular culture as actresses, singers, while at the same time their sexualised identity continues to subsist. The photo below (Fig. 35), *A Courtesan Reclining on the Bed*, depicts the courtesan in an informal, seductive, odalisque posture with the bare arm tucked under her cheek, with a conventional sari without a blouse draped around her. The fact that she is not wearing a blouse



Fig. 35: Unknown Photographer. *A Courtesan Reclining on a Bed*. 1910. Alkazi Collection of Photography. Gelatin Silver Print.

adds to her “non-modern,” sexual identity. On the wall behind her, two hazy photographic group portraits are visible. With photography gaining popularity, such frames would ostensibly be visible in households. The photograph juxtaposes the two, the non-modern and the modern, and

is a metaphor of a hybrid identity, like the ‘modern-traditional’, where old metaphors acquire new meanings.

### 5.8 Metaphor of Transformation



Fig. 36: Photographer Unknown. *Lady Standing next to a Table*, 1900. Alkazi. Gelatin Albumin Print.



Fig. 37: Photographer Unknown. *Lady with a Book*. 1900. Alkazi. Gelatin Albumin Print.

An attractive aspect of early photography was its transformative potential, especially with the increasing popularity of studio photography and “industrialization of photography” (Sontag 1977). Suryanandini Narayana, in ‘Photographing the Feminine’ (2011), cites an example where the same woman poses as a dancer in one photograph and as a representative female ‘type’ from the Rajput community in another for souvenir postcards (Narayana 32). This implies that new identities can be acquired through visual markers. Pinney says, “...the photographer’s studio becomes a space in which a visual record of an elevated and intensified identity could be

acquired” (Pinney 74). The studio spaces with their Europeanised backdrops and modern furniture are recurring.

The above photographs *Lady Standing next to a Table* (Fig. 36) and *Lady with a book* (Fig. 37) from 1900 are both pictures of the same woman, in the same studio, in two different personas. The first one shows a more defiant pose in modern dress, with puffed sleeves on her blouse and fashionable shoes and book lies open on the table next to her; while the second is a composed, seated woman wearing the style of sari popular with respectable *bhadramahilas*, with a book in front of her, which she has supposedly just looked up from. Both these photographs thus embody the ‘modern’/ ‘respectable’ woman—in terms of her dress and the presence of the book in the frames. At the same time, there is no way to clearly determine whether the woman in the photo is a *bhadramahila* or a ‘public woman’. Given the period when the photograph was taken the chances of latter are quite high, but the tropes in the photograph render it ambiguous. This ambiguity, however, is productive—visual identities are no longer supported by the guarantee of “real” identities, and become properly performative. It thus becomes possible for the photographed subject, within the photographic frame, to performatively acquire the markers of social identity.

This idea becomes clearer when we look at Fig. 37. Binodini Dasi’s life story *Amar Katha* (1912) has been discussed in some detail in Chapter 3. The story of a distraught “fallen woman” told in high literary style can be posed as an intervention in assigned gendered roles and literary identities in the period. Her autobiography was first published by *Roop-O-Rang*, a theatre journal in Calcutta, accompanied by some photographs, a few depicting her in characters she played on stage like Motibibi, while some like Cleopatra that she is not known to have enacted.



The personas of the characters are intermeshed with the persona of the actor in these photographs. The lines between real and artifice are somewhat blurred.

There is another set of photographs—of Binodini with “Mr Sinha”, her *ashroydata* with whom she lived for almost 30 years, but after whose death she was cast away by his family—which adds another dimension to our understanding of the performative nature of photography. In these photographs, the couple achieve a portrait of harmonious conjugality, with Binodini



Fig. 38: Photographer Unknown. *Binodini and Mr. Sinha*. n.d.  
CSSS Archive. Calcutta.

in a *bhadramahila* sari, performing respectable domesticity. Swati Chattopadhyaya, in her essay ‘Photographic Representations of Binodini Dasi’ (2011) says of this image (Fig. 38), “(it) is still confined within the photographic conventions of late-nineteenth century modern Bengali conjugality” (Chattopadhyaya 26)— Mr. Sinha standing with one leg on the chair gazing at Binodini, while she sits on the arm of the chair and gazes past him. She further tells us that these performative gestures of love—like Binodini posing with her arms around his neck, in another photograph—draw influences from Kalighat paintings, which in turn draw on the “cue of moral-visual discourse from contemporary plays, and gestures and visual codes passed between these two modes of popular culture” (Chattopadhyaya 28). Purportedly, these photos in their performative aspects blur the distinctions between Binodini “in character” and her private life, but it also makes visible the performative nature of the “reality” of the photograph. In the space of the photographic frame, a “fallen woman” acquires the domestic respectability and conjugality that has eluded her.

### **5.9 Indoobala’s Scrapbook: Contexts of Respectability**

Indoobala, a courtesan from Calcutta, is said to have first sung on the second day of the radio company’s broadcasting in India in 1927, and continued to sing for many years after. She had a considerable recording career and recorded around 280 songs, including about 240 classical songs and others from films. Indoobala’s Scrapbook<sup>4</sup>, is a personal collection of mainly seasonal greeting and invitation cards, and includes a few pages of a collection of playing cards and a cut-out of a hair curler advert among other things. The greeting cards, mostly New Year and Christmas wishes, have been sent to her by several foreigners, presumably, living in/around Calcutta, or who knew her through her performances outside Calcutta—Francis Ridley Havergal,

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<sup>4</sup> Archived at CSSS, Calcutta.

Adela Wilkins, E.D. Reynolds, A.L. Salmon, F.F. Brooks to name a few. The invitation cards, for a range of social as well religious events like weddings, rice-eating ceremony for infants (*annaprashan*), theatre inaugurations, plays, Saraswati puja, Radha Krishna Jayanti, Kali Puja and Karthik Puja, which is considered to be especially important occasion for “prostitutes”, abound in the scrapbook.

The invitations are dated from 1908 to 1945, and while most of them are invitations for performances, some of them are sent by other courtesans like Sushilasundari Dasi or Angoorbala Dasi or theatre invitations, requesting her presence. Most cards are press printed, and sent from various parts of Calcutta—Rambagan, Roopgachi, Bhavanipur, Grey Street, Chandanagar, Durgacharan Mitra Street etc. Some of them—only a couple—have hand written messages inside. One of the Saraswati Puja invites is addressed to “Dearest of my heart”, while a Christmas card from G.N. Ghosh (Bombay) reads:

“Didimoni, How are you? I believe you are ill. Get well soon. Give my regards to your mother. Lots of love from all of us”,

--signed G.N. Ghosh

(translated from Bengali)

Incidentally, Indoobala appeared on the cover of *Vetar Jagat* (April 1946), an early journal published by All India Radio. With her head covered in style of a *bhadramahila*, a *bindi* and genially smiling at the camera, she is portrayed in a close up shot, which ‘unveils’ the face behind the voice, which was quite popular on the radio. The choice of the photo, which is not a full body portrait, is significant in itself. It firmly disassociates her music from her body, and accords a ‘respectable’ persona to the courtesan, and at the same time is a proof of it ‘having-been-there’. The photograph becomes both a performance and an evidence of the courtesan’s

‘respectability’. Given the nationalist credentials of AIR, the magazine would undoubtedly have a target audience in the ‘respectable’, upwardly mobile social circles, hence affirming the visibility, literally, of courtesan in these spaces.

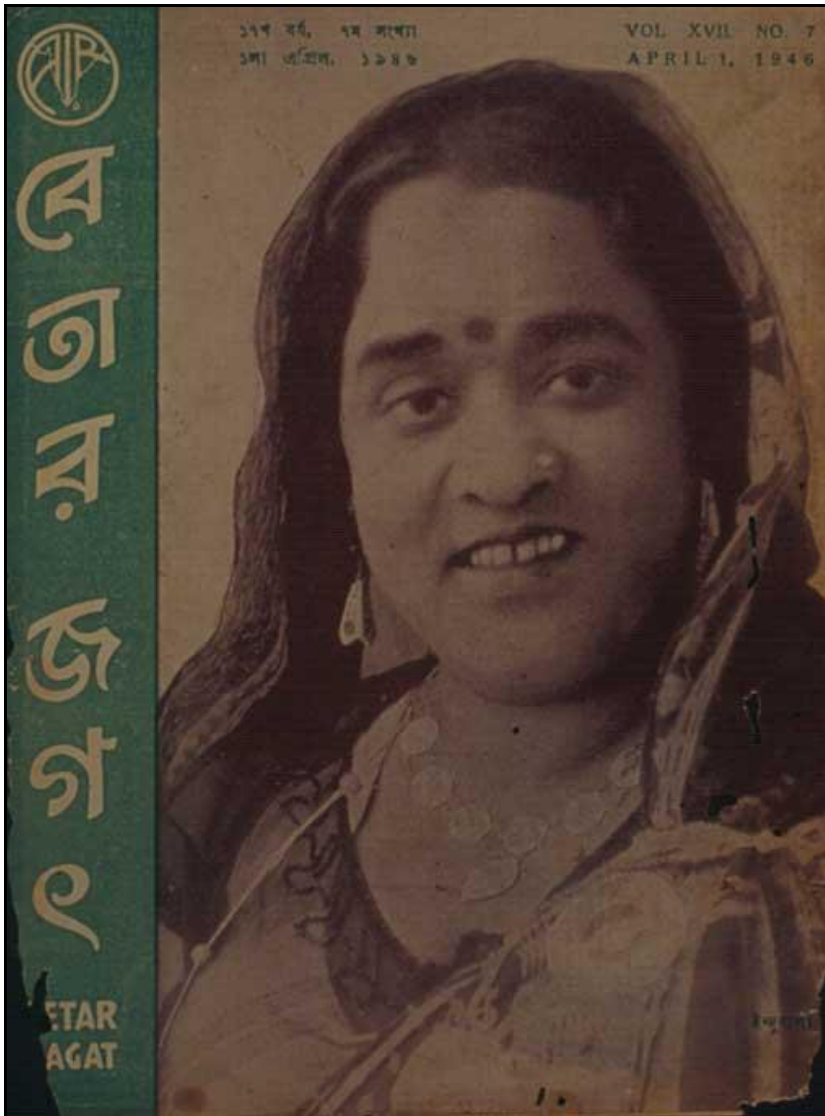


Fig. 39: Photographer Unknown. *Indoobala*.  
*Vetar Jagat*. 1st April 1946. Calcutta.

The scrapbook, which is a personal archive of memorabilia, gives us an insight into the social and professional life of a courtesan, besides a glimpse of her personal relationships—

beyond her professional identity as a singer. We can also draw from it that apart from the rising career that Indoobala had on the gramophone and the radio, she was also a live performer, popular with both British as well as Indian audiences, visible in social rituals and ceremonies. There is also evident a significant overlap between both these aspects of her career. Her photographs, another example Fig. 39, captioned, *Miss Indoobala (Gayika) [Singer]*, embody the subsisting relationship between the courtesan and performance culture, staking a space in the new space of the modern national culture, of which she becomes a part, through new technologies like the gramophone, radio and photography as well as older structures of public performance.



Fig. 40: Photographer Unknown. *Miss Indoobala*. Early 20th century.  
Calcutta. Print Publication



## 5.10 Conclusion

In the photographic material analysed in this chapter no unified history of the courtesan emerges. Courtesans are photographed variously as performers, entertainers, erotic, modern and traditional subjects, and sometimes a combination of representational practices overlap in the photographic frame. It alters our understanding of the binaries of public/private, traditional/modern especially related to women subjects in the period. Within some of these depictions which are in circulation in the public sphere, for instance in the *naaz nakhra* of the courtesan or voyeuristic portrayals of her space, are implicit a kind of intimacy between the object and the camera that is not visible in the early photos of 'respectable' women. This intimacy can in turn lead to subsequent projections of the 'erotic' association between the courtesan and the camera/ photographer, as we noted in the film *Mandi*.

This eroticisation of the relationship between the camera and the courtesan has come to be historically inscribed in a certain way. In the face of the vast spread of a visual culture of photography, we think of how the camera's respectability is in turn negotiated through the photographic subjects. The camera, in its claim to arrest a visual representation of the real courtesan, becomes the agency that can salvage or redeem the courtesan from herself, as it were. In the process, around the body of the courtesan emerges a "visuality of respectability"—markers which denote respectability when affixed around women's bodies—through markers of a veil, attire, posture, gaze to the camera etc. Courtesan women appear to perform both respectable and sexualised/erotic identities in the photographs. The point is not to claim that the courtesan had 'agency' over the subject/themes of these photos or that they aspired to gain respectable public identities. Rather it reveals through evidence, the performative aspect of identities in the context of visual representation. In the domain of popular visual culture, then, lines between

‘respectable’ and ‘obscene’, which are articulated in public discourse, become blurred, and are often traversed, by the courtesans.

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## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Re-framing the Courtesan: A Summation and Some Further Questions**

It is through the separation of the domains of the ‘other’—courtesans in the context of our study—that the ‘respectable’ spaces of national culture are imagined. We have tried to confound the naturalisation of these separations in two ways: first, by locating in the courtesan a plurality of meanings, thus undercutting ideas of homogenisation; and second, by studying the overlaps between the respectable spaces and courtesans through the new technologies of mass culture. Instead of studying these as instances of “resistance” we lay emphasis on contexts in which these binaries become difficult to sustain. Patriarchal formations of governmental power and nation space function through assignment of gendered roles, as has been identified variously by theorists like Partha Chatterjee (1994), Mrinalini Sinha (1997) and Charu Gupta (2005). They talk of how the nation defines, controls and/or confines the conduct of its women (and men) subjects/citizens, through converging discursive practices and ideals which reinforce patriarchal forms of power. These studies are incumbent on an understanding of power as essentially repressive. In popular and academic discourse about courtesans, this has led to the writing of histories like those of Vikram Sampath (2010), Pran Neville (2009) and Moti Chandra (1976) which produce courtesans as either victims or tragic figures to be recovered in their ‘lost glory.’ Such histories, in their narrative impulse towards a ‘mode of recovery,’ frame the courtesan variously through her fall-ness, her erstwhile cultural function, her subsequent dehumanisation through descent into prostitution—all of which in one way or another, reiterate the binaries of the courtesan and respectable women. Even more nuanced engagements, such as Oldenburg’s, are

also dependent on the binary where the courtesan is an excluded other of the domesticated housewife.

In the course of this dissertation we are able to access the specificities of form of functioning of governmental power through the courtesan subject, which works through generation of a zone of ‘precarious control’, a zone of insecurity that is inhabited by subjects such as courtesans. The body/sexuality of the courtesan poses a threat to the patriarchal order—the threat of venereal disease for the colonial army, and the threat of dismantling of family units and distraction of the youth, for nationalists and social reformers. Through legislative measures and frameworks of shared morality relations of power are secured (Chapter 2).

However, the constant *threat* of action is also a mode of control albeit ‘precarious’—which generates a domain not of isolation/exclusion but selective inclusion which produces new possibilities of managing the conduct of courtesans in the late colonial period. It is an indeterminate mode of exercising power, and productively *allows* for slippages like those identified by Oldenburg among courtesans who elude bodily inspections and taxes through bribery and duplicitous bookkeeping. These modes of control also contribute in disassociating the courtesans from their cultural roles in the pre- and early-colonial period. In the current context similar formations are being framed around bar girls, where their practices are deemed vulgar, obscene and their spaces of performance need to be sanitised and regulated. It is important to note that these legislations seek to re-organise such ‘errant’ identity categories, make them amenable to mainstream discourses. An instrument that makes this feasible is the use of the charges of ‘obscenity’—as we have seen both in the case of courtesans and bar girls. Such obscene practices are off-set against state-sponsored notion of a national tradition of art. New decrees are issued: the mandate of All India Radio (AIR) as late as the 1950s, for instance. New

state owned broadcast media like AIR only serve to reproduce the idea of a consolidated and standardised national tradition of classical music, reproducing in the process all its claims to propriety and ‘respectability’.

An important characteristic of the late colonial period is the emergence of technologies of mass culture. There are re-presentations, re-insertions of newer meanings in popular culture, which feature prominently in the emergent “modern” publics. This period holds particular significance for this study, as it presents an interface of innovations in modern, traditional, pre/colonial, national, technological ideas and practices. We discover a proliferation of representational plurality of courtesans in these media and also their participation as practitioners, be it as singers on the gramophone or as models in early studio photography. However, this re-emergence is seemingly contingent on the disassociation of these practices from the courtesan’s body/sexuality through which these new configurations are rendered “safe” for consumption of the emergent modern publics. This becomes critical for any engagement between the courtesan in popular discourse and her audience, largely comprised of the ‘respectable’ educated middle class in India. The sexuality of the courtesan is displaced on to other concerns of the texts like the social life of the colonial population, the nostalgia for a lost pre-colonial world order, and the redemption of modern cultural spaces such as the Bengali theatre as well. This disassociation is variously realised through the split between the body and voice in gramophone recordings, the fetishisation of the image in photography, standardisation and sanitisation of live music and dance performances and other such practices. They are incumbent on “safeguards” which are generated by the ever-widening field of governmental networks, which includes measures of censorship and valuations of taste, public morality, conscience, ideas of gender/ community and belonging, and nationalism.

A significant aspect of the internal organisation of the domain of popular culture is identified by Morcom. One of the reasons why Bollywood dance, “neither restrained, nor de-eroticised” (Morcom 123) is different from “illicit” dance practices like dance bars is that “the mind/body spirituality and the emphasis on fitness...enables the Bollywood dance world to wholeheartedly endorse fun and enjoyment without being superficial, illicit or ‘cheap’” (Morcom 123). Additionally focus of “spirituality and higher purpose...strongly parallels the reinvention of classical dance” (Morcom 123) and within dance institutions create a sanctified space for Bollywood dance amongst middle class, especially women. These are manifestations of new alignments with respectability within popular culture.

Mechanisms of control function variously through logics of standardisation and shared beliefs (Chapter 2). While with the administrative and morality discourses, there seems to be an attempt to fix the meaning of the courtesan to her *sexual function*, that seems to be conspicuously absent in the literary texts of the time. The “fallen-ness” of the courtesan, as has been mentioned, is a recurrent image in all the texts we have looked at in Chapter 3. The courtesan emerges as a metaphorical figure through which the anxieties of colonial modernity are simultaneously named as well as displaced—in Ruswa’s *Umrao Jan*, the courtesan becomes a metaphor to invoke nostalgia for pre-colonial, aristocratic world of refined high-culture. In the case of Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Jiban*, the figure of fallen-ness becomes a performative category that complicates her narrative of redemption. The text embodies an enactment of the possibility of redemption through the space of theatre itself and hence allows for the text being included in the ‘history’ of Bengali theatre, which itself is vying for a space amongst respectable audiences. The late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century literary texts discussed in the chapter all produce different meanings of ‘courtesan’, meanings which draw from the ‘realities’ within the text.

We suggest that the axis of demarcation between the respectable and the disreputable that orders the governing of both space as well as communities (especially hyper-sexualised communities) is an essential component of identity construction in colonial modernity. Even in the post-colonial moment, these engagements continue to persist in literary as well as film narratives. As we saw in our reading of *Mandi*, courtesans continue to embody hypersexual, decadent and disreputable remnants of the 'old order' which must nonetheless be 'included' on the fringes of the modern public sphere, as that against which the modern 'respectable' spaces and subjects are envisioned. The sexuality of courtesans/prostitutes and their consequent ostracisation becomes a trope in the film to reveal the hypocrisy of the respectable nation-space. Modern cultural practices like literature and films and modes of realism which are in turn implicated in modern identity politics, continue to engage with the courtesan even in late twentieth century.

The naturalised construction and performance of tradition has a configuration within relations of power and produces certain effects. For instance, in Chapter 4 we described in some detail the strategies through which figures like Bhatkhande and Paluskar looked to mobilise women as the agents of their projects of musical reform. However, this also brought about a concurrent exclusion of existing communities of women performers based on their 'disreputable' associations as courtesans, and these exclusions came to be naturalised through reiteration. This exclusion is structural to the securing of the category of the classical as an absolute tradition that forms an integral part of ancient Indian cultural heritage, with its attendant notions of religiosity, purity and divine genius.

We have however, problematised this idea of transference and reformation of 'musical practices' as an unambiguous process, and the homogenising effects of the categories this

narrative is hinged upon. We demonstrated the ways in which the conventions of this new classicism were rendered performative by courtesan singers in their engagements with the emerging market of gramophone records.

This space of tradition too must be understood as dynamic in its construction, and ambiguous in its demarcation. As the work of Bakhle (2005), Du Perron (2007) and others has shown, the drive towards the classicisation of music was also accompanied by the exclusionary tendencies of nationalism with respect to Muslims *gharana* musicians, through the emergent discourse of respectability and reform. At the same time, we argued that their accounts also reproduce some problematic categories that serve to reinforce a strict separation between the domain of classical and non-classical practice. Bakhle's account of the "transition" from the *bais* to the *tais* was shown to be problematic precisely because it rendered invisible the re-emergence of the *bais* in the domain of gramophone music.

It is important to look at the frameworks of 'respectability' and 'modesty' and 'nation-building' as well as technical aspects of classicisation like a notation system for music, that are involved in the project of classical music in India, to be directly or indirectly emerging from the encounter with colonial modernity. Technological innovations that arrive in India as a result of the colonial encounter, like the gramophone, have been variously invoked and appropriated within larger social and political discourses, both national and otherwise. The listening publics as well as the retailers and distributors of the gramophone instruments and recordings are themselves understood to be implicated in, and invested in, these discursive practices. Gramophone records and music becomes a commodity, to be recorded, produced, exported/distributed etc. and becomes directly related to the 'demand' of the audience. The

popularity of courtesan singers on the gramophone, supports the idea that they continue to be associated with musical practices in late colonial India, albeit in largely reconstituted conditions.

As we argued, there were a number of courtesans recording ‘classical’ songs on the gramophone and even the ‘sub-classical’ *thumri* assumes classical associations in popular imagination (this is especially true for present day audiences), in comparison with popular/folk and later film music. Nevertheless, periodic use of categories like classical especially in case of Indian music points towards a continued relevance of the discourse of the Indian classical music (and culture) vis-à-vis western/global influences and its continued role in shaping of the heritage of the nation (Weidman 2006). So much so, the only way the domain of the classical can be consistent is by disavowing its own modernity. However, Weidman argues in the context of M.S. Subbulakshmi, the microphone becomes reason for the emergence of the ‘nuanced’ and ‘interiorised’ voice as well as new disciplinary codes of performance related to body movements, dress, etc. In an attempt to provide a more detailed account of the intersection of gramophone technology with cultural practice, we contested the one-to-one relationship between the new ideal voice in classical music and microphone technology, we took up the inter-textual practices through which the persona of the courtesan singers on the gramophone was constructed. Beginning with the implicit question—are all women able to acquire MS’s performative persona with equal facility—we took up a range of recordings, publicity materials, photographs in public circulation, mainstream ideas about courtesans, as well as ephemera like matchboxes and snuff boxes etc. We argued that even as courtesan singers on the gramophone, disrupted the idea of a unified body of classical music, and generated new overlaps between respectable audiences and courtesans, the persona of the courtesan singer that was constructed in the process produced different relations of consumption and public persona, vis-à-vis ‘respectable’ singers like MS.



In our study of colonial photography, we argued that body poses, gestures, clothing, ornaments, props etc. were used to denote courtesan identity in its colonial, ethnographic aesthetic. Simultaneous with the ‘industrialization of photography’, and the rise of photographic studios, there emerged a space in photography to “dress up”—and acquire *new* identities (Pinney 1997)—which rendered these representations far from transparent. These representations made the fixities of symbolic order unstable. It is through these images in mass culture, in conjunction with mainstream discourses, that we see the courtesans’ transition from older communities of women entertainers, often integrated in systems of cultural patronage, to a new regime governmental control of courtesan conducts.

Significantly, around the body of the courtesan emerges a ‘visuality of respectability’ (Chapter 5)—markers which denote respectability when affixed around women’s bodies—through markers of the veil, their attire, posture, gaze of the camera etc. Courtesan women appear to perform both respectable and sexualised/erotic identities in the photographs, which have diverse contexts of circulation in the public sphere. The point is not to claim that the courtesan had ‘agency’ over the subject/themes of these photos, or that they aspired to gain respectable public identities—but that it reveals the performative aspect of identities in the context of visual representation. This effectively problematises claims of naturalness or fixedness of social identities and norms of respectability. No unitary history of the courtesan emerges.

Courtesans are photographed variously as performers, entertainers, erotic, modern and traditional subjects, and sometimes a combination of discursive practices overlap in the photographic frame. It alters our understanding of the binaries of the public/private and the traditional/modern especially related to women subjects in the period. At the same, especially in the face of the burgeoning popularity of the photographic apparatus and the spaces of

photographic studios, we think of how the camera's respectability is in turn negotiated through the 'respectability' of the photographic subjects. In the domain of popular visual culture then, the categories of the 'respectable' and 'obscene', which are fortified in mainstream morality discourses, re-emerge as blurred, and are often traversed, in the photographs of courtesans. Popular culture is thus the domain where the fantasies of middle-class culture are enacted, but also a space where identities may be displaced through a strategic, performative citation of conventions of visual representation.

Through a study of courtesans' emergence in this variegated space of the modern, popular culture in late colonial India, our study attempted two interventions. First, we tried to critically engage with the partial as well as dynamic nature of the means of control and regulation of both colonial government and morality discourses among indigenous elites to argue that the two constitute an inter-weaving network of power, which may be termed as a mode of "colonial governmentality." Second, we are able to engage critically with the project of colonial modernity, with its hybrid traditional-modern character through its modes of regulation of women's bodies and sexuality. Courtesan's re-emergence and reconstitution through the modes of colonial modernity produces new meanings. Of these, the associations between courtesan and technology are particularly revealing. Paradoxically, it is through their associations with courtesans that modes like photography and films and gramophone acquire mass circulation, but it is also through these associations, among other things, that within the project of early nationalism and classicisation, that a suspicion against the "moral impact" of these new forms is created. Eventually, these modes are variously appropriated with the national movement as well. There are gramophone recordings of religious songs (some of which are also sung by courtesans), patriotic songs and so on. Even in its initial phases the gramophone companies and

their proprietors were invested in the values of *Swadeshi*, as has been explored in Chapter 4. How the movements for ‘respectability’ of forms of entertainment for middle classes and modes of censorship play out in India in 1930s and after are questions to be explored in future research.

In this dissertation, we have sought to move away from the construction of the courtesan as an empirically existing social category, preferring to delineate the simultaneous construction of “courtesan” as bodies to be managed, and as loci of enunciation. In doing this, we have argued for an understanding of the plurality of sites where the “courtesan” speaks and is spoken about. We find this plurality of sites of enunciation to be productive, in that it allows us to engage with the complex power relations of colonial modern patriarchy. This approach marks our departure from existing accounts of “silenced” subjects such as the courtesan have until now been studied as repressed/subaltern communities, that situate them in simplistic relations of oppression, exclusion or its inverse, resistance. It is also possible, after all, to conceive of contexts like in the case of Chhote Miyan of Oldenburg’s essay ‘Lifestyle as Resistance...’, who are dependent on the women for their livelihood or of male prostitutes, where courtesans/ prostitutes acquire hegemonic dimensions.

The courtesan community becomes the site of convergence of various discourses of colonial modernity. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century marks a period of establishment of modern governmental practices in India as well as emergence of an Indian modernity. Using Foucault’s notion of power/knowledge and governmentality, and Butler’s idea of performativity, we engaged in a more complex understanding of how subjects are produced within modern governmental formations. While the older structures of patronage were reconstituted through external intervention of colonial enterprise, the courtesan women are re-inserted into colonial modernity through new modes of mass entertainment and representations.

Categories otherwise homogenised for purposes of governmental control, in their studied plurality and overlaps, produce contexts where questions to deconstruct the overarching, naturalised, gendered identity discourses can be raised.

The ‘relatively unregulated’ domain of popular culture, with its new relations of commodities, has been identified as a vantage point from where questions about plurality and desire of courtesans are raised. A sustained analysis of each of these forms is sure to yield more complicated overlaps, which are beyond the scope of this research in its current form. That being said, we have successfully identified critical areas in print, gramophone and photographic representations that problematise any simplistic recovery of “excluded” women communities like courtesans, either as victims of violence or as vanguards of resistance.

Further, the question of plurality of the courtesan community can also be projected along the axis of consolidation of a community of women from different backgrounds, and complexities of internal hierarchisation therein. Srivastava’s article (*The Hindu*, 27 March 2016) reveals that a significant section of the bar dancer community, for instance, “hailed from tribes of traditional dancers.” This question can also be projected backwards. Oldenburg’s ‘Lifestyle of Resistance...’ points towards the likelihood of similarly heterogeneous derivations in the courtesan community (*see* Chapter 1, discussion on Rasoolan Bai). Hence, directions for future research can be mapped in two distinct directions—one towards the internal organisation of different forms of popular culture and second towards the performers themselves. This, we feel, offers scope for new research questions that will offer a new historicization of the courtesan that does not render them as silent victims or cunning manipulators.

## Appendix I

### List of Illustrations

Fig. 1: *The Courtesan and her Sheepish babu*. 1865-70. Kalighat Painting, Bengal, India.

*Indiaartnews.com*. 2007. Web. October 2014.

Fig. 2: *Courtesan and Lover*. n.d. Kalighat Painting. Bengal India. *Indiaartnews.com*.

2007. Web. 12. October 2014.

Fig. 3: Ghosh, Kali Charan. *Courtesan dressing her Hair*. 1900. Kalighat painting. Bengal, India.

*Indiaartnews.com*. 2007. Web. 12 October 2014.

Fig. 4: *Courtesan with Peacock*. n.d. Kalighat Painting. Bengal, India. *Indiaartnews.com*.

2007. Web. 12 October 2014.

Fig. 5 *His Master's Voice Advertisement, Gramophone Co. Ltd. Dumdum*, All India Exhibition

1948, Eden Gardens, Calcutta. Courtesy: Nirban Ash. CSSC Archive, Calcutta.

Fig 6. *An advertisement of the musical instruments shop called Dwarkin & Son*, 11

Esplanade, Calcutta. *Anand Bazar Patrika*. 24th August 1936, 8th Bhadra (1343 B.S.).

Size: Original: 7X 4.5". Photograph: 17X12 cm. CSSC Archive, Calcutta.

Fig. 7: *Gramophone Advertisement*, Date unknown. CSSC Archive, Calcutta.

Fig 8. Basu, Binoy Krishna (1894-1959). *Lal Pagri Police chasing the people who were listening*

*to HMV Record* (Poster). Watercolor. Size: (21"X12"). CSSS Archive, Calcutta.

Fig 9. *Early Gramophone Advertisement in India*. n.d. Web.

<http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/indcent.htm> . 21 February, 2016.

Fig. 10 No. FT 435. Janki Bai, *The Record News: The Journal of Society of Record Collectors*.

Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 30.

Fig. 11 No. FT 435. Janki Bai, *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 32.

Fig. 12: No. P 10451. Janki Bai. *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 36.

Fig. 13: No. P 10456. Janki Bai. *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 36.

Fig. 14: No. P 10443. Janki Bai. *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 40.

Fig. 15: No. P 10413. Janki Bai. *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 43.

Fig. 16: No. FT 408. Janki Bai. *The Record News*. Vol. 14. Apr 1994. 52

Fig 17: *Gauhar Jan, Matchbox*. Made in Austria. SEPHIS Advertisement Project, Colored

Transparencies of Match Box labels, Soumen Paul Collection. CSSC Archive, Calcutta.

Fig 18: *Hira Jan, Matchbox*. Made in Austria. SEPHIS Advertisement Project, Colored

Transparencies of Match Box labels, Soumen Paul Collection. CSSC Archive, Calcutta.

Fig. 19: Ali, Darogha Abbas. *A Seated Lady* from *The Beauties of Lucknow*. 1870. Alkazi

Collection of Photography, New Delhi. Albumen Print.

Fig. 20: Photographer Unknown. *Zahore Begum, Mohamedan, Allahabad*. 1860s. *The People of*

India, Vol 2. *Old Indian Photos*. Web. 3 Jan. 2016.

Fig. 21: Raja Deen Dayal & Sons. *Osman Ali Khan, The Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad, and 46*

*Women of His Zenana*. 1915. Hyderabad. *Marg: A Magazine of Arts*. Vol. 62. No. 4

2011: 48. Print.

Fig. 22: K.C.Mehra and Sons. *Dancing Girls of Peshawar Ready for Dance*. Peshawar. 1930.

*Images of Asia*. Web. January 2016. Postcard.

Fig. 23: W. Roessler & Co. *Nautch Girl, Calcutta*. 1903. *Images of Asia*. Web. 12 January 2016.

Postcard.

Fig. 24: Kettle,Tilly. *Devadasis or Dancing Girls*. 1770. Drawing. *Nautch Girls of India:*

*Dancers, Singers and Playmates*. Paris: Ravi Kumar, 1996. 23. Print.

Fig. 25: Bourne, Samuel. *Native Nautch at Delhi* from *India, Calcutta etc*. 1860. Alkazi

Collection of Photography, New Delhi. Albumen Print.

Fig. 26: Nestor Gianclis Ltd. *Nautch Girl at Her Toilet*. 1910. *Images of Asia*. Web. 12 January

2016. Postcard.

- Fig. 27: Photographer Unknown. *Hira Jan, Meerut*. 1910. *Images of Asia*. Web. 12 January 2016. Postcard.
- Fig. 28: *Najirjan Baijee of Suhranpur*. Early 20th century. Photographs of Musicians (Baijees) from the Parimal Ray Collection, CSSS Archive, Calcutta. Pamphlet.
- Fig. 29: Photographer Unknown. *A Mohamedan Dancing Girl in Attitude*. 1905. *Images of Asia*. Web. January 2016. Postcard.
- Fig. 30: P.D. Kapoor & Sons. *A Dancing Girl of U.P. (India)*. 1930. *Images of Asia*. Web. 12 January 2016. Postcard.
- Fig. 31: Photographer Unknown. *Indur Mar Gauharjan*. Photographers of Musicians (Baijees) from the Parimal Ray Collection, CSSS Archive, Calcutta. Pamphlet.
- Fig. 32: Photographer Unknown. *Lady Posing with a Gramophone*. 1900. Alkazi Collection of Photography. Gelatin Silver Print.
- Fig. 33: Photographer Unknown. *Miss Santoshkumari*. Early 20th century. Calcutta. Personal Archive, Pallabi Chakravorty. Print Publication.
- Fig. 34: Photographer Unknown. *Miss Shibrani*. Early 20th century. Calcutta. Personal Archive, Pallabi Chakravarty. Print Publication.
- Fig. 35: Unknown Photographer. *Courtesan Reclining on a Bed*. 1910. Alkazi Collection of Photography, New Delhi. Gelatin Silver Print.
- Fig. 36: Photographer Unknown. *Lady Standing Next to a Table*. 1900. Alkazi Collection of Photography, New Delhi. Gelatin Silver Print.
- Fig. 37: Photographer Unknown. *Lady with a Book*. 1900. Alkazi Collection of Photography, New Delhi. Gelatin Silver Print.
- Fig. 38: Photographer Unknown. *Benodini and Mr. Sinha*. n.d. CSSS, Calcutta. Marg: *A Magazine of Arts*. Comp. Vol. 62. No. 4 N, 2011: 26. Print.
- Fig. 39: Photographer Unknown. *Indoobala, 1st April 1946*. Portraits of A.I.R. Personalities in 1940s, from *Vetar Jagat* (A Fortnightly Bengali Magazine of A.I.R- 1940-49). CSSS Archive, Calcutta.

Fig.40: Photographer Unknown. *Miss Indoobala*. Early 20th century. Calcutta. Personal Archive,  
Pallabi Chakravarty. Print Publication.



## Appendix II

### Glossary of Hindi/Urdu Terms\*

(In Alphabetical Order)

<i>Apsaras</i>	Celestial Nymph
<i>Bazaar</i>	Market
<i>Bhajan</i>	Form of popular devotional music
<i>Bhakti</i>	Devotion
<i>Bindi</i>	Vermillion Dot worn by women on their forehead
<i>Chândni</i>	“Silvery” and “moonshine” (from, Steel 4)
<i>Dastaans</i>	Story
<i>Devadasi</i>	Community of Temple Dancers in India
<i>Dhooli</i>	Palanquin
<i>Diwan</i>	Collection of Poetry
<i>Durbar</i>	A Royal Court
<i>Dhrupad</i>	The oldest surviving vocal genre in Hindustani music. It is considered to be a high classical form, sung traditionally by male singers
<i>Fasaanas</i>	A tale of Fictional Romance
<i>Gharana</i>	Tradition/Lineage of a music family; a stylistic school
<i>Ghazals</i>	Urdu or Persian poetic genre; expresses romantic/spiritual love
<i>Gopis</i>	Milkmaid. Krishna’s playmates.
<i>Hori</i>	A vocal genre whose lyrics are about love pranks between Krishna and Radha, during holi
<i>Hookah</i>	A type of smoking pipe
<i>Huzoor</i>	Your Majesty or Highness
<i>Kajli</i>	Folk song from Uttar Pradesh

<i>Kamashastra</i>	<i>also</i> Kamasutra. Ancient Indian treatise on human sexual behavior
<i>Khayal</i>	Classical Hindustani musical form. Literally, Imagination or Creative thought
<i>Kotha</i>	House of a prostitute
<i>Mandi</i>	Market place
<i>Masnavi</i>	Book of poetry in the Sufi tradition, about how to love God
<i>Mujra</i>	An erotic dance by a woman for an audience
<i>Mushairas</i>	A social gathering where Urdu poetry is read
<i>Mehfils</i>	An intimate gathering of poetry, music and/or dance
<i>Naaz</i>	Amorous playfulness
<i>Nautch</i>	A traditional dance performed by dancing girls
<i>Nakhra</i>	Feminine airs or blandishments
<i>Nikah</i>	Muslim marriage ceremony
<i>Papad</i>	Thin, crisps made of rice or flour, homemade as well as pre-packaged
<i>Pativrata</i>	Virtuous wife
<i>Pichkari</i>	Water gun
<i>Purdah</i>	Literally veil. A practice of screening women from men outside immediate family.
<i>Raga</i>	A tonal framework in Indian music for composition and improvisation
<i>Ramkali</i>	An early morning Raga in Indian classical music
<i>Riyaaz</i>	Music practice
<i>Sargam-sangeet</i>	A composition which uses the names of the notes
<i>Sarangi</i>	Bowed, short-necked string instrument

<i>Shairi</i>	The art or practice of poetry
<i>Sharafat/Sharif</i>	Being noble/noble person
<i>Smritis</i>	Remembered, written tradition in Hinduism. It is a vast corpus of derivative work, includes epics like Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Dharmashastras.
<i>Sutara</i>	One-stringed instrument
<i>Tala</i>	A rhythmic/metric system
<i>Tappa</i>	A type of song, related to Khyal, featuring rapid and complex vocal movements
<i>Vaishya</i>	A prostitute

(\*The list contains only those terms which have not already been explained in the text. The meanings have been drawn from [www.rekhta.org](http://www.rekhta.org), [www.swarganga.org](http://www.swarganga.org), Glossary of Indian classical Music ([www.p-sarkar.com](http://www.p-sarkar.com)) and Wikipedia.org )

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Synopsis of the thesis

PRECARIOUS CONTROL, ANXIOUS DESIRE:  
COURTESANS AND EMERGING PUBLICS IN LATE  
COLONIAL INDIA

Submitted by  
Meenal Tula

For the award of the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Women's Studies

Under the Supervision of  
Prof. Rekha Pande



CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

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TELANGANA, INDIA.

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## Synopsis

In this thesis titled *Precarious Control, Anxious Desire: Courtesans and Emerging Publics in Late Colonial India*, we look at the how courtesans are ‘constructed’ in the late colonial period through networks of “knowledge, discourses and domains of objects” (Foucault, *The Essential* 306). Instead of tracing through the courtesan a teleology of modernity, we attempt instead to write a genealogy of the courtesan in late colonial India, to understand how processes of ‘exclusion’ are given effect on the ground through a range of discursive practices, which are inherently unstable and never quite complete. At the same time, we also look at formations and representations in popular culture that expand our understanding of overlaps between courtesans and modern publics.

Where Foucault’s theorisation of power allows us to describe the nexus of institutions, practices and knowledge production in producing the courtesan as subject of government, Butler’s notion of performativity opens up the possibility of the political in the constitutive gap between “courtesan” as body/object of control, and as name/identity. The courtesan emerges as subject and object of a wide range of popular cultural practices—the sign “courtesan” is opened up to a dense network of citational practices that simultaneously sustain and undermine the materialisation of the courtesan as disciplined body.

We argue that the domain of mass-produced culture commodities effects intersections between ‘respectable’ and ‘disreputable’ cultural practices. A renewed focus on this idea is important for us to write a history of the courtesan that moves beyond narratives of victimhood and oppression. The figure of the courtesan itself is not homogenous and singular. Rather it splits into a plurality of articulations, which are often discontinuous with each other.

Fredric Jameson argues that such a proliferation of meaning is a symptom of mass culture. A similar effect may be noted in the context of courtesans in the domain of popular culture. Desires that are disavowed in mainstream discourses re-emerge in reconstituted forms in alternate discourses, which are in turn deemed ‘sub-classical’, ‘popular’ or even ‘obscene’. Courtesans, we argue become the site where the disavowed anxieties of cultural nationalism—and its notions of authenticity—return in utopian fantasy constructions.

The work of Gupta (2005), Sarkar (2001), Chatterjee (1994) and Sinha (1995) is useful in understanding the reconstitution of the notion of the middle-class Hindu woman, but it is limited in its scope. For even as they describe the relations between middle-class Hindu men and women, they do not take up in detail the reconstituted relations between them and ‘other’ women. Even as they recognise the limits of such analysis by marking the exclusions that constitute the domain of the national, it leaves undisturbed the question of how to write a history of such “excluded” subjects, such as the courtesan. As we argue in subsequent discussions, the nationalists’ campaign against “immoral” practices and “persons” is not simply an attempt to police public morality and the conduct of women. Rather, they are part of a far broader network of signs and practices in the domain of mass-produced popular culture, presenting a complicated understanding of the logic of exclusion/inclusion through which the space of the nation is constructed and reproduced.

The historical references in this thesis have been supplemented by archival material from The Telangana State Archives and Research Institute, Hyderabad. The *Reports on Civil and Medical and Sanitary Departments (1924 to 1939)* and *Report on Administration on Hyderabad District Police for the year 1344 F. (1934-35)* have been used to gather data regarding venereal diseases and surveillance in the dominion of the Seventh Nizam of Hyderabad. We have also

looked at articles from newspapers from this period—*The Deccan Post* (1896) and *The Advocate of India* (1901). Data regarding colonial legislations and details of their implementation have been sourced through other studies. These have been studied in detail by Arondekar, Heath, Levine as well as Ramanna. For responses to the Contagious Disease Act we have referred to *The British Medical Journal* (v1, 1939).

The material from popular culture includes a personal archive of Indoobala, a courtesan from Bengal active in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is currently archived at CSSS, Kolkata. We discuss in detail in Chapter 4 *Indoobala's Scrapbook*, from 1902, which is a collection of personal greeting cards, invitations for and of performances for social and religious occasions in and around Calcutta, as well as pages of collected pop art (playing cards). We also look at memorabilia featuring courtesans, like matchboxes and postcards. We analyse four literary texts from the late colonial period which all feature courtesans: Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb* (1900), Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan* (March 1899) and its lesser known sequel *Junun-i-Intezar* (April 1899) and Binodini Dasi's *Amar Jiban [My Life]* (1912) along with some journalistic writings of the period in Chapter 3. Also analysed in this chapter are film adaptations of *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006) as well as the 1983 film *Mandi*. We have looked at gramophone recordings as well as covers, publicity materials and catalogues of recording companies like HMV, Odeon, Gramophone Company of India Ltd., Columbia Records, Hindustan Records, etc. *The Record News*, published by Society of Indian Record Collectors have been used for information on gramophone production in the first two decades of the twentieth century, which have been analysed in some detail in Chapter 4. Digital audio versions of gramophone recordings were accessed through the School of Cultural Texts and Records at Jadavpur University. A number of these songs are also easily available on YouTube. Visual

material which includes photographs, magazine covers/pages, and other print publications, Kalighat paintings, advertisements, posters have been accessed through Alkazi Images Archive (Delhi), the archive at the Centre for the Study of Social Sciences, Calcutta (Kolkata), online archive Images of Asia and *Marg* (62.4).

In Chapter 1 we have surveyed some selected historical literature on courtesans and defined our own theoretical approach through Foucault's notions of productive power and governmentality, and Butler's performativity. Drawing on Adorno, Jameson and Mazzarella, we identified popular culture as a domain of representations where hegemonic ideology looks to administer a regime of censorship, even as they are undermined by the constitutive instability of the sign in mass-mediated cultural forms. We look at courtesans not as a fixed category, community or identity with fixed boundaries that can be recovered but as a site mapped out through means of governmental and social 'control' as well as through the 'desire she foregrounds', which emerge in popular culture—an 'internal outsider' (Morcom 22).

In Chapter 2, "Governing Obscenity: Courtesan, Legality and Morality," we look at the specificities of intention, implementation and reception of certain colonial legislations, their framing of courtesan bodies as "diseased, obscene and hypersexual," as well as strategies of exclusion from the "respectable", "progressive", space of the modern nation space. We will also consider the simultaneous frameworks of anxieties built around the courtesan as seen in Kalighat paintings (popular art form from Bengal), which predicate the idea that these exclusions are not impermeable. We critically examine how these discourses figure within contemporary racial, gender and sexual politics of colonial modernity. Through a study of the text of *The Judgment, Supreme Court of India (Civil Appellate Jurisdiction)* Civil Appeal No. 5504 of 2013 as well as recent newspaper articles about the current 'controversies' and legislative debates around bar

girls, we consider how ideas of ‘obscenity’ in popular culture continue to be framed around ‘public’ women communities. In this chapter we also trace the possibilities of emergence of desire in technologies of mass culture and lay out objectives for subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 3 “‘Real’ Courtesans in Fictive Worlds: Narratives of Literature and Films”, we map the representations of courtesans in English and vernacular realist texts written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as later representations in films. The texts include an English colonial novel, two Urdu novels, a Bengali autobiography of an early theatre actress in Calcutta. The actress Binodini Dasi is not a ‘courtesan’, but the text has been included here for a number of reasons. Proscenium theatres became a new avenue of public performance in the late nineteenth century, and a number of stage actresses in early theatre were traditional courtesans, ‘dancing girls’ and ‘public women’, as Rimli Bhattacharya suggests. Moreover, these theatres were dependent on patronage from local connoisseurs and native elites, which would often involve the actresses in intimate relationships with them, as we see in Binodini’s text. Binodini in her early life received singing lessons from a courtesan, indicating further overlaps between these communities that shaped the new public theatre. Finally, she constantly refers to herself as a ‘fallen woman’ and ‘prostitute,’ thereby introducing a performative citation of courtesan identity into her writing. Her text itself enacts a symbolic redemption, that tries to re-signify her public persona as an actress, in the process rendering her re-insertion into a fantasy narrative unstable.

In Chapter 4 “From the *Mehfil* to the Drawing Room: Music, Courtesans, and Constructions of the Classical”, we look at the specificities of the classicisation of musical practices and their framing within discourses of nationalism, national heritage and respectability of female performers. Janaki Bakhle’s work on the reconstitution of Hindustani classical music



tradition by cultural nationalists such as V.N. Bhatkhande and V.D. Paluskar brings to light the naturalisation of exclusionary attitudes towards Muslim *gharana* musicians. At the same time, we argue, she reproduces the discourse of transition of music into ‘respectability’ through her narrative of the ‘transference of musical practices’ from *bai* (courtesan) singers to *tai* (elder sister, respectable women) in Maharashtra, in turn contributing to its naturalisation. Amanda Weidman provides a history of Karnatic music through the politics of voice. She sees the microphone as producing a nuanced, interiorised singing voice, of which M.S. Subbulakshmi is the prime example. We look at the introduction and popularisation of gramophone records and new practices of listening that develop around such technologies in early twentieth century. The participation of courtesan singers in these early forms of mass culture, can be seen to produce new connections between the popular imagination and courtesan singers. Also analysed are samples of publicity write-ups for gramophone record releases which show interesting examples of how courtesan singers are advertised to be within the new guidelines of ‘respectability’ and classical training within musical practices and everyday lives her new audiences. We discover a plurality in the repertoire of courtesan singers as well emergence of new forms and disciplinary practices of modern forms of musical performances of the courtesan as well as respectable women singers. Mediated through the same technologies, for the same audiences, we consider how differently the persona of the ‘entertainer’ courtesan and the ‘divine’ MS are consolidated.

Chapter 5, “Pluralities in the ‘New’ Visual Culture: Courtesan and Photography” focuses on photographic images, from private collections to those in public circulation in magazines, print publications, postcards and courtesan *cartes-de-visite*. We look at the associations that emerge between courtesan bodies and the camera, and new modes of the visibility of women’s bodies. What are the new ways of seeing the courtesan that are articulated through the camera?

What are the conditions of re-emergence of courtesan bodies in the public sphere? And most importantly, what significance do we accord to the ‘visuality of respectability’ that emerges around the bodies of courtesans and other ‘public women’ who become subjects of early women’s photographs in India, which were intended/permissible to circulate amongst the modern publics.

In Chapter 6, the conclusion, “Re-framing the Courtesan: Summations and Some Further Questions” we reflect on the implications of networks of productive power that emerge through the thesis and the pluralities of the performative and citational category ‘courtesan’ that materialises in the domain of popular culture, and how they two overlap and intersect. The internal organisation and hierarchisation of popular culture acquires significance in our attempt to understand how traditions of popular culture are reclaimed/excluded in cultural discourse. Social categories, especially ‘deviant’/othered categories, like courtesan women otherwise homogenised for purposes of governmental control, in their studied plurality and overlaps with the respectable domain produce contexts where questions to deconstruct the overarching, naturalised, gendered identity discourses can be raised. The relevance of these questions is echoed in the current attempts to ‘discipline’ the bar-dancers and women public performers.

**Keywords:** Courtesans, Women’s History, Colonial India, Popular Culture, Performing Arts in India