



## Tawa'ifs And Courtesans Of Awadh: Tale Of Rising To Summit To Being Suppressed

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the story of Tawaifs and Courtesans in the state of Awadh from 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. It tries to bring out the role, influence and status held by them under the Nawabs, the categories in which they were divided, their interference into the state politics through their royal and rich patrons like Governors and Ministers, their rich and lavish lifestyle which they maintained with great skill even without any fixed assignment of jagirs with, their attempt to rule out the norms of the patriarchal society and achieving a separate identity of their own. Their role in shaping, preserving, polishing and popularising the culture of Awadh throughout India, their national awakening and the attempt to contribute to the Independence Movement by registering active presence initially in the revolt of 1857 and later on, by being the part of Congress Meetings and the Movements led by Gandhi. In the later part, the paper highlights their sad downfall, loss of patronage with the coming of the Britishers as a political power and annexation of Awadh, the cruel treatment done by the them, assimilating and merging the dignified Courtesans and Tawaifs into the category of Prostitutes and using them for the pleasure of their soldiers, apart from the role of Britishers, their dignity was also lowered by the changing norms of the society and definition of purity, which was now attached to marriage and veil. Thus, in the changing times i.e. after the downfall of Nawabs and with the coming of the Britishers, Courtesans and Tawaifs always lived on the margins of the cultured society.

### Research Methodology-

This research paper is based on analysis of the secondary literature hence research methodology it uses is Analytical, Qualitative and structural.

### Keywords

Dereydar, Khandani, Khanjari, Monsem.

Awadh known as Oudh, Avadh located in the North Eastern part of the Uttar Pradesh which is the heart of Indo- Gangetic plain. The origin of its name is traced back to Ayodhya<sup>1</sup> the capital of ancient kingdom of Kosala<sup>2</sup> Muslims occupied the region in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and it became the part of Mughal empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The state of Awadh of was established by Mir Muhammad Amin, an Iranian Shia. He was appointed as the governor of Awadh on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1722 by Mughal emperor where he established an independent dynasty gradually under mughal sovereignty and adopted the title of Sa'adat Khan Bahadur. He established capital of his state at Faizabad <sup>3</sup> but later capital was shifted to Lucknow<sup>4</sup>

### INSTITUTION OF TAWAIFES AND COURTSEANS

The word tawaif is used to designate the female performers and entertainers of 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century Awadh.

1. Kosala was an ancient kingdom. Covering area of the modern state of Awadh, in the late Vedic period.
2. Naumana Kiran, "Stratification and the Role of Elite Muslim Women in the state of Awadh" p.270.
3. Faizabad, known as Fyzabad during British colonial rule, was the first capital of the state of Awadh. It is situated on river bank of Ghaghara (also known as Saryu River).
4. It is currently the capital of Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It is located near Gomti River.
5. Tanya Burman "Looking beyond the glorious past, Re-examining the category of Tawaif in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Awadh" p. 121.

There are various terms prevalent like Dereydar, Khandani (hereditary) designation for those women who were elite performers, terms like Veshyas<sup>6</sup> Khanjari, Randi (denote those women who provided sexual pleasures and were considered lowest, this suggest highly stratified society of women performers).

The upper elite section was associated with court or upper hierarchy. Other categories comprised Thakahi, Randi belonged to the lower section<sup>7</sup>. The influence of this section of women was visible during the reign of Shuja-Ud- Daulah for sexual pleasures. He always kept the group of tawaifs with him. Thus, the rise of Courtesans and tawaifs can be attributed to Nawabi regime in Awadh. This institution describes the lifestyle of Awadh. They were influential female elite section of the society adorning not only the court of Awadh but all Hindu and Muslim courts of the pre- colonial India.<sup>8</sup> “They like many other courts of medieval India were concerned with the royal courtiers.”

They lived in the urban areas and had connections and influence over courtiers’, nobles, kings, merchants and royal family. They manipulated men and means for their own social and political end.<sup>9</sup>

Tawaifs and Courtesans in Nawabi society were an influential lot in matters of politics, administration, finance as well as literature and fashion.<sup>10</sup>

### **POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF TAWAIFS AND COURTESANS**

Abdul Haleem Sharaar brings out compelling role of Courtesans in court politics. A cultivated man like Hakim Mehdi Nazir (Prime Minister of Oudh) owed his success to one courtesan Piyaro, who offered him money to offer it to the emperor for his appointment as a Governor of province of Awadh .<sup>11</sup>

Mukhtar- Ud – Daulah, the Prime Minister of Asaf-Ud- Daulah was greatly under the influence of Tawaif named Jalalu and did whatever she said. It was only on her instigation that he created misunderstanding between Asaf-Ud-Daulah and Bahu Begum and later convinced Nawab to demand huge amount from Bahu begum.<sup>12</sup>

Later, Nawab Nasir-Ud-Daulah came heavily under the influence of tawaifs and courtesans that he began to walk, sit, talk and even dressed like a women. In the play celebrating the birth ceremony of Imam, he unhesitatingly played the role of pregnant women.<sup>13</sup>

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6.The term Veshyas or beshya finds mention in Vatsayanana Kamasutra and Bharatas Natyashastra ( Chandra 1973:81-143).

7.S.N Singh, “The kingdom of Awadh: Its history, polity and Administration” (New Delhi: A Mittal Publication 2003) p.30-31

8.Lata Singh, “Visibilising the Other’ in History: Courtesans and the Revolt,” Economic and political Weekly 42, no.19 (2007): p.1678.

9.Naumana Kiran,“Stratification and the Role of Elite Muslim Women in the state of Awadh”p.282.

10. Shirin Abbas, “Courtesans of Oudh and their misrepresentation in Literature Past and Present.”p.5.

11. Abdul Haleem Sharaar “The last Phase of oriental culture: The Lucknow Omnibus”. p.57.

12 Naumana Kiran,“Stratification and the Role of Elite Muslim Women in the state of Awadh”p.282.

13. ibid. p.2

Courtesans and Tawaifs political accumen can be judged by the number of conflicts which took place among the courtiers and respectable person because of them.

Chatterjee cites cases of the marriage between the rulers and dancing girls in Bengal and Oudh with later getting involved in decision making and wielding significant influence in matters of the state <sup>14</sup>. The courtesans were politically conscious and knew when to accept the commandments and when to reject and react. They were well connected with the local elite and had plenty of revenue by 1780<sup>15</sup>. They wholeheartedly supported the War of independence in 1857, and later on some of them became part and parcel of freedom activities.

Although they were not a respectable class in moral terminology, their resistance had value.<sup>16</sup> This group gained much power in the later period of the dynasty and at most occasion of women they indirectly interfered through the royal men with whom they had illicit relationship.

### **CULTURAL REPOSITORY OF AWADH**

The institution of courtesans meant to preserve the high culture norms of Lucknow and practically shaped the modern music dancing and singing.<sup>17</sup> Women esp. Courtesans and tawaifs had a great aesthetic sense. The other cultural centres around India followed the style introduced by courtesans of Awadh.<sup>18</sup>

Some of them were not merely singers, dancers but also the poetess like Jaddanbai, Zohra and Mushtari.<sup>19</sup> They introduced singing and dancing as a profession. Drama flourished during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah with the active involvement of skilful courtesans.<sup>20</sup> They were the mistress of tahzib(culture), tameez(manners), ada(airs), nakhra(coquetry), literature, music and fashion.<sup>21</sup>

They participated in the Shia Muslim faith which was practiced by Nawab. Eyewitness account of Abdul Halim Sharaar (1975) and Attia Hussain (1992) describes how Tawaif observed Muharram and performed within Imambara.

It was prevalent, till a man was not associated with courtesans was not considered a polished man.<sup>22</sup> Sharaar strongly brings out the opinion that the morals, manners and distinctiveness of Lucknow culture and society was sustained by courtesans.

14 Shankar Sahni "State of Affairs, Affairs of State - State Prostitute equation in India". p.117.

15. Naumana Kiran, "Stratification and the Role of Elite Muslim Women in the state of Awadh"p.283.

16. ibid .283

17. Jon Barlow and Laxmi Subramaniam "Music and the society in North India: From Mughal to Mutiny," Economic and political weekly42 no.19 (2007):1784.

18. Lata Singh, "Visibilising the other in history"p.1678.

19. Abdul Haleem Sharaar "The last Phase of oriental culture: The Lucknow Omnibus"p.48.

20. Syed Masood Hasan Rizvi, Adeeb, Ayesha Irfan-"The Royal Stage Of Lucknow, Indian literature" no..5(2010): p 112.

21. Tanya Burman "Looking beyond the glorious past, Re-examining the category of Tawa'if in 18 th and 19 th century Awadh.p.119.

22. Veena Talwar Oldenberg, "Life as a Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow)." Feminist Studies16, no.2(1990). p. 263



They lived in the lavish apartments in the chowk bazaar and Kaiser Bagh palace, and shaped the development of Hindustani music and kathak dance style.<sup>23</sup>

They commanded great respect in the court and society, association with them bestowed prestige to the people, who were invited to salons for cultural soirees, young sons of the nobles, rich merchants, royals were sent to the best salons for instruction of etiquettes, the art of conversation polite manners and appreciation of Urdu literature.<sup>24</sup> Courtesans and tawaifs were the women of high character as highlighted in the play "San Sattavan ka kissa" by Tripurari Sharma. In this play, once when British officer referred to the protagonist Azizunisa house as a brothel, full of lust and sin, she feels humiliated and reacts strongly to the official saying, such accusations are baseless, I am not a prostitute, I am dancer, I am artist, I do not wear veil, I am not public women, people in the city acknowledge and respect me as a courtesan, a poet, a lyricist, I am not a flesh and trade<sup>25</sup>

### **STRONG FINANCIAL POSITION**

Courtesans, the leading sections of tawaifs had a lot of financial wealth although they were not paid fixed salaries or were not allotted jagirs but amassed huge wealth skilfully. As men of royalty, rich class visited them and extensively paid them money, property and costly gifts.<sup>26</sup>

Some were even granted luxurious homes as Mahals to live in. They were the highest taxpayers with the heaviest income earners and property holders. Courtesans appeared in civic tax ledgers of 1858-77 classed under occupational category of "dancing and singing girls."<sup>27</sup> thus it is remarkable to find them in highest tax bracket with largest individual incomes other than anyone in the city, which is also visible with their names appearing on list of property consisting of houses, orchards, manufactures, retail establishment for food and luxury items) confiscated by the britishers for participation in the revolt of 1857.<sup>28</sup>

### **CHALLENGE TO THE GENDER NORMS IN THE PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY**

Tawaifs performance, tactics, play, acting, singing styles lyrics lifestyle posed a challenge to the gender norms, ridiculing the ideas of masculinity. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, in her extensive work on Courtesan Culture in Post independent Lucknow argued, within kothas, tawaifs were the decision makers, centres of power and the men of their family were merely appendages, their subordinate crudely saying their servants in waiting. property passed from mother to daughter, male children were deprived gender and entirely dependent on mother and sister. According to Sharma, running kothas and organizing the performance needs skill and operations at various levels.

<sup>23</sup>Peter Manuei "Courtesans and Hindustani Music" Asian Review 1( Spring 1987): p. 12-17. In this brief piece Manuei sketch the role of courtesans in enriching the musical tradition of India describes the development of thumri and ghazal semi classical genre of singing by courtesans of lucknow .

<sup>24</sup> Lata Singh, "Visibilising the "Other" in History: Courtesans and the Revolt," Economic and political Weekly 42, no.19 (2007): p.1678.

<sup>25</sup> ibid. p.1678

<sup>26</sup> Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Life as a Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow)." Feminist Studies 16, no.2 (1990).p.259

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.p.259

<sup>28</sup> Lata Singh, "Visibilising the "Other" in History: Courtesans and the Revolt," Economic and political Weekly 42, no.19 (2007): p.167

The courtesans have uniquely combined elements of struggle for their material needs with those of an ideological struggle against patriarchal values by hiding behind various masks.<sup>29</sup>

### **PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL FREEDOM MOVEMENT**

They whole heartedly supported the War of Independence in 1857<sup>30</sup> and later on some of them became part and parcel of freedom activities. Their participation in revolt of 1857 is also highlighted in a play “San Sattavan ka kissa” by Tripurari Sharma. Main protagonist is Azizunisa, a courtesan who dressed like a man and was very close to the sepoys of the Kanpur and rebel Samsuddin khan who repeatedly visited her, her palace became the meeting point of the sepoys and she was said to be the mastermind behind the massacre at the Kanpur, <sup>31</sup>her role was seen as messenger and informer this is even mentioned in the historical records. Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of the Nawab of Oudh was also a courtesan but her role in the revolt is celebrated in history, historical records also prove that these women had economically supported the wars when king needed the fund.

Their role was not just restricted to the revolt of 1857 but is very much visible later on in the national movement under congress and Gandhi, they used to say, times are fast changing and they should move with it.

Jaddan bai, a courtesan financially helped the left leaning progressive writer association.<sup>32</sup> In a mammoth meeting addressed by Gandhi during Non Cooperation Movement at Town Hall, was attended by a group of tawaifs led by Vidyadhari bai, she was so aroused by Gandhi’s talk that she started performing only on the nationalist songs in every mehfil, she renounced foreign made apparels and began wearing only Indian hand spun fabric.

Despite independent work it can be seen that, their loyalty to the king of Awadh regime underscores the position and privileges that were sine qua non of their existence.<sup>33</sup>

### **TALE OF WOE – BEING SUPPRESSED**

Post colonial academic scholarship around women performers in North India focused on tracing trajectory of downfall of tawaifs in backdrop of British racial and moral politics.

Initially the East India Company did continue the customary local practice of times including patronizing the courtesan / tawaif community but after the revolt of 1857 certain changes were visible.

29 Sohini Chanda, Archana Patanik, Suchita Kriplani Chatterjee, “The Courtesan Project and Tawaif Cultural Commons” International Journal of the Commons, 15(1)p. 19

30.Veena Talwar Oldenberg, “Life as a Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow).” Feminist Studies16, no.2 (1990).p. 3

31 Lata Singh, “Visibilising the “Other” in History: Courtesans and the Revolt” p.1677

32ibid. p.1678.

33Veena Talwar Oldenberg, “Life as a Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow).” Feminist Studies16, no.2 (1990).p. 131- 132

Veena Talwar Oldenberg study these changes in Lucknow political and social structure in the post mutiny period, she highlights the transformation of Nawabi Lucknow aftermath the mutiny of 1857, where the essential aspects of policy and legislation now were based on safety, sanitation and loyalty to the British authority. She also traces to some extent displacement of old courtesan by a new kind of prostitute who was meet the demand of new ruling elite.

With the annexation of Awadh, this group of women became powerless and degraded but even then they continued to potentially threaten the very roots of the empire.<sup>34</sup> They participated actively in the revolt of 1857, Britishers were aware, that their places acted as a meeting place of rebels and looked them as dens of political conspiracy, after the mutiny the strength of British increased, now they felt the need to control all elements in Awadh i.e. army and fallen women.

Also during the revolt, large number of soldiers died of venereal diseases which they contracted from tawaifs whom they visited, rather than fighting in the revolt, this was very embarrassing for the Britishers so as the revolt ended they began registering tawaifs /courtesans, as now with the lost of patronage large number of prostitutes were homeless, it became imperative for the Britishers to maintain safe distance between them and soldiers roving in the city.

Britishers exiled Wajid Ali Shah, the reigning Nawab at the time of revolt and also turned their fury against powerful elite of Lucknow i.e. Tawaifs and courtesans, list of property belonging to them was prepared to be confiscated, for their proven involvement in the siege and rebellion<sup>35</sup>, after confiscation of their performance arenas- the kothas (Oldenberg 2009) they lost their performance spaces. Though loss of patronage was compensated by the new ruling elite - Taluqdar but tawaifs lost the commanding position which they enjoyed in the older days. A large number of them no longer lived in royal households but were only visited by Nawabs who could no longer afford to maintain them, sons of the gentry were not sent to them anymore for lessons on etiquette, because the language more useful for them now was English. So, Tawaifs found themselves living in the same bazaar along with the prostitutes.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it led to decline in the cultural confinement cultivated for its sake.<sup>37</sup>

Umrao Jaan Ada, a novel written by Mirza Muhammad Hadi in 1899 translated by Khushwant Singh is based on the pre and post mutiny period in which protagonist Umrao notices changes being brought about in post mutiny era. Her friend Khurshid Jan, a publicly available tawaif taken by Raja Sahib from a fair, returned after 1857 revolt, although the reason is not specified.

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<sup>34</sup> Kokila Dang "Prostitute, Patrons and the state 19th century Awadh" p.174

<sup>35</sup> Veena Talwar Oldenberg, "Life as a Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow)." *Feminist Studies* 16, no.2 (1990).p. 259

<sup>36</sup> Kokila Dang "Prostitute, Patrons and the state 19th century Awadh." p.175.

<sup>37</sup> Shankar Sahni "State of Affairs, Affairs of State - State Prostitute equation in India" p.120

It is possible that Raja lost all his estates and it became difficult for him to maintain her. Umrao Jan herself did not return from Kanpur for the fear of being listed as a traitor for she was present at the time of rebel prince Birjis Qadr's coronation ceremony.<sup>38</sup>

Veena Talwar Oldenberg points out the profession more competing, tracing the decline of courtesan into a common prostitute<sup>39</sup> colonial presence and resulting changes had redefined this group of women in terms of their economic stability, patronizing agencies as well as their social status.<sup>40</sup> Regulation must have accelerated the changing relations of trust, sympathy and old age protection between patrons and courtesans.

Their changing position is highlighted in the novel, *Nashtar* written in 1790 by Hasim Shah<sup>41</sup> a resident of Kanpur- a story of dancing girl Khanum Jan who had to entertain though reluctantly to the English officers of East India Company.

Thus it is evident, that elements of freedom and independence replaced by those of fear and control. British rule distanced tawaifs and old Awadh elite.

The representative spaces of women in prostitution changed under colonial rule, the kothas, more lavish resident complexes were supplanted by *lal bazaars*, the brothel areas of the regimental bazaars were prohibited (Tambe, 2009:136).<sup>42</sup> However the tendency to isolate and spatially limit prostitution continued, <sup>43</sup> for the demands of the soldiers prostitution cannot be prohibited completely so it was regulated by a set of laws like IPC 1860 which criminalized activities like soliciting in public spaces, renting of premises specific regulations where tawaifs interacted with soldiers like the cantonment act, the contagious disease act ( according to which prostitutes and singing and dancing girls were to be medically inspected for venereal diseases and to be placed under far greater surveillance led to debasement of courtesans into prostitution),<sup>44</sup> provision of construction of the lock hospitals ( the condition of lock hospital was severe beyond description, infected tawaifs were forcibly confined in lock hospitals until they deemed disease free, 18 year widow committed suicide due to ill treatment meted out by police), section 269-270 dealt with the transmission of diseases through prostitution.

Veena Talwar Oldenberg on the basis of interview points out that women were abused insulted beaten by policemen and also there was increase in venereal disease among women after European soldiers began to visit them.<sup>43</sup> This further marginalised the tawaifs and created stigma around seeking their services due to associated medical examination.<sup>44</sup> The code was the transplantation of English law in India. <sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa "Umrao Jaan Ada" translated by Khushwant Singh and M.A Hussaini.

<sup>39</sup> Kokila Dang "Prostitute, Patrons and the state 19 th century Awadh" p.175

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* p. 176.

<sup>41</sup> Kokila Dang, "Prostitute, Patrons and the state 19 th century Awadh" p.177

<sup>42</sup> Shankar Sahni, "State of Affairs, Affairs of State – State Prostitute equation in India" p121.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Waheed, "Women of ill repute, ethics and Urdu literature in Colonial India" p. 994.

<sup>44</sup> Kokila Dang, "Prostitute, Patrons and the state 19 th century Awadh" p. 186.

<sup>45</sup> Shankar Sahni, "State of Affairs, Affairs of State – State Prostitute equation in India" p122-123.



Every registered prostitute had to pay a fee of 2 rupee per mensem whereas every brothel keeper paid a fee exceeding 5 rupees for the maintenance of lock hospitals.<sup>46</sup> Fines were imposed on person of this profession who did not register the birth of their children.<sup>47</sup> Though registered prostitutes were restricted from freely mixing with the general public, so non military clientele got severely restricted but soldiers have wider choices as diseases were spreading through unregistered prostitutes.<sup>48</sup> These registered tawaifs were under complete control of British regime, the less privileged public prostitutes although not under strict government control but even they were no longer independent enough their clients and income reduced.<sup>49</sup>

These laws enabled British writers to meet out atrocities against Tawaifs (high class women) and common prostitutes (lower class women).

Now understood as prostitute, Tawaifs and courtesans were no longer a person with trade and craft but a commodified body, in colonial ethnography, the courtesan culture depicted as tantamount to slavery and this was used to justify British legal intervention for customs formerly existent can hardly now escape punishment.<sup>50</sup>

Controlling fairs was another step taken by British on the pretext of sanitation as it was the place where Tawa'ifs dressed up to choose their clientele (it was highlighted in the novel Umraao Jan Ada). An annual fair at Guptar Ghat Faizabad was stopped in 1860-61 by commanding officer who feared health would suffer.<sup>51</sup>

Thus not only prostitute services in terms of social labour and condition of services were dictated by the colonizers but it also had control over their income.<sup>52</sup> Fines were also taken if the tawaifs did not attended European soldiers. Thus it can be inferred that extracting surplus from this group was to make them feel continually deprived and dependent.<sup>53</sup> By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century East India Company began to question the extravagant nautch parties hosted by the natives and cited them as evidence of inefficient and maladministration (Sachdeva 2005).

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46. Kokila Dang, "Prostitute, Patrons and the state 19<sup>th</sup> century Awadh" p 188. 47. Ibid.p.189.

48. ibid p.185.

49. ibid p.188.

50. WH Allen, "People of India" (1872) India Office Library.

51. Kokila Dang "Prostitute, Patrons and the state 19<sup>th</sup> century Awadh." p. 189.

52. ibid p.189.

53. Ibid.p.189.



Thus it can be said that the greatest harm done to the reputation of kothas was however by British political propaganda, as they overlooked the artistic and creative element of kothas and equated them with brothels.<sup>54</sup>

In interview with the older courtesans by Oldenberg it was highlighted“ it was the official British policy to malign the courtesans and the culture of salons in order to justify the British role as usurpers of the throne of Awadh in1856, they began to use these cultured women as prostitute for European garrison, they arbitrarily relocated them to the cantonment areas for convenience of European soldiers. This dehumanized the profession stripping it of its cultural function.<sup>55</sup>

But the courtesans and tawaifs responded aggressively to the British acts as there are evidences of bribing locals to avoid bodily inspections, to local policeman to avoid arrests for selling liquor to soldiers or refusing to pay taxes. These moral and medical boundaries which were established in early 19<sup>th</sup> century paved the way for later condemnation and criminalization and dramatically altered their social and legal status. <sup>56</sup>

After the assessment of huge role which British played in maligning the status of courtesans and tawaifs, complete blame for their suppression cannot be enforced on them solely, as there were many other factors playing strongly at that point of time:

- 1.As early as 1850 there had been calls for removal of tawaifs by class of men who were excluded from soirees by royal elite, such calls were related to the desire to destroy the other symbol of older order i.e. Tawa'ifs and courtesans. <sup>57</sup>
2. The commodification of courtesans and tawaifs also had to do with increasing commercialization of rural areas during late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>58</sup>
3. Due to the emergence of conservative sex politics of urban reformers and revivalist who saw courtesans and tawaifs turned prostitutes as threatening to a new moral order in which compassionate marriage had become a norm.<sup>59</sup>
4. Anti nautch campaigns by colonial missionaries and Indian social reformers around1882, this resulted in the banning of public performances, of which tawaifs were regular participant. According to Walker, “By the beginning of 1900, court performance era came to an end.”

54. Lata Singh, “Visibilising the other in history.”p.1679.

55. Veena Talwar Oldenberg, “Life as a Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow.” Feminist Studies16, no.2 (1990) p.264-265.

56. Sohini Chanda, Archana Patanik, Suchita Kriplani Chatterjee, “The Courtesan Project and Tawaif Cultural Commons”

International Journal of the Commons, 15(1) p.198.

57. Sanjay Joshi, Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle class in colonial North India (New Delhi Oxford University Press, 2000) p.64-65.

58. Waheed Sarah, “Women of ill repute, ethics and Urdu literature in Colonial India” p.995.

59. ibid p.995. As Charu Gupta has noted, prostitutes were increasingly held responsible for the increase in crime and the declining sanitary conditions of the cities. Furthermore, the views of colonial authorities meshed with those of Hindu publicists who were concerned about public order in the city, through by laws that regulated spaces of entertainment and shifting prostitutes to more remote areas . see. Charu Gupta, “Sexuality, obscenity, community: women, Muslim and the Hindu public in colonial India (New York: Palgrave Press 2001)

Census of 1921 show fall in the population of dancing girls in every province due to worsening of country general economic condition. Community performing art gradually stigmatized due to Victorian morality and newly emerging nationalist sentiment ( Walker 2019a ,2014b). Walker argued that classical revivalist identified tawaif as impurities in dance form of kathak whom they systematically eradicated to revive this form.

Crusade was led by one Rev J Murdoch launched series of publications on Indian social reform in which his main target was nautch girls whom he condemned in extremely harsh words.

Another publication entitled nautches appeal to educated Hindus emphasised the evil effects of nautches ranging from loss of money, bodily defects and ailments to injurious influence upon one's figure.

Punjab Purity Association started a pamphlet condemning Nautch by the eminent reformist Keshab Chandra Sen who characterised nautch girl as a hideous woman, hell in her eyes, in her breast is vast ocean of poison, smile is India's demise, and repeatedly made efforts to remove this evil practice on ground that it had no sanction of any faith.

5. There was increase call for returning to a tradition that was pure in Brown (2007 p11) significant decline was noted in legal and moral status, this had implications for the way courtesans were perceived by rising Hindu middle class, consequently these classes neutralized identity of tawaifs by shifting domain of kothas to public stage and by denying these women their identity and social status as performing community.<sup>60</sup>

6. Tawaifs and courtesans also faced the opposition from earlier admiring upper Muslim class called ashraf, as now they believed, that these women undermined the codes of moral conduct, for she was figure living outside the normative moral order of marriage occupied public space hence perceived as a chief source of fitna (social chaos) <sup>61</sup> . The word Tawaif conflated by ashraf and referred to wide range of disreputable women including courtesans female entertainers and prostitute.<sup>62</sup>

Newspaper reports of the period were replete with calls to local authority to remove prostitutes from the public view and out of city as they caused moral deprivation among respectable young men. Even sharing train compartments with the women was seen as a problem, testified by fears expressed in Nasim-i-hind 1896 about contamination with fallen women.<sup>63</sup>

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century Urdu novellas and chapbooks repeatedly warned readers to keep their distance from prostitute lest they will be drawn into the world of debt disease and disrepute <sup>64</sup> . Text warning readers moved like "kar Na chah tawaif ke liye bachao Jan-o-javani varz-e-khuda ke liye (do not love for a prostitute sake protect life and youth for god's sake.)<sup>65</sup>

The tawaif and courtesan remained very much a figure on margins of respectable society - a theme explicitly explored in Qazi Abdul Gaffar popular novella " Laila ke khatut" (laila letter), in this Laila responded with indignation for her social ostraciation, her cry against commodification of women, voices condemnation of social hypocrisy and aims to discipline male sexual desire.<sup>66</sup>

60. Sohini Chanda, Archana Patanik, Suchita Kriplani Chatterjee, "The Courtesan Project and Tawaif Cultural Commons" International Journal of the Commons, 15(1) p. 199.

61. Veena Talwar Oldenberg, "Lifestyle as a Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow." Feminist Studies 16, no.2 (1990).

62. Waheed Sarah, "Women of ill repute, ethics and Urdu literature in Colonial India" p. 992.

63. ibid. p. 993.

64. ibid. p. 99

65. Waheed Sarah , Women of ill repute, ethics and Urdu literature in Colonial India." p. 996.

66 ibid. p. 997.

She reserves harshest criticism for men who clothe themselves into the garb of religion and law, criticize prostitutes vices in harshest voice still pronounce epithet of love to me in private quarters.<sup>67</sup> Laila makes mockery of male leadership essentially social reformers as cowards and licentious who can achieve higher social and political status by blaming prostitutes for ills of society.<sup>68</sup>

Apart from criticism and suppression by the Britishers, Hindu and Muslim society, their participation in national movement was also seen with indignation e.g. Gauhar Jan: a singer was asked by respectable lady supporters to keep away from the Congress sessions.<sup>69</sup>

Even when Gandhi encountered their will to participate in the national movement in 1925, he declined to recognize them as Congress workers or even accept their donations unless they gave up unworthy profession which made them more dangerous than thieves while thieves steal material possession but these women steal virtue.<sup>70</sup>

Freedom Movement dominated by reform minded Indians who preached social purity and temperance then .One of them was Arya Samaj who accursed nautch girls profession saying it deserved no place in the polished society.

One would question why if courtesans / prostitution posed such threat were their establishment not shut down by the Britishers?

Ballhatchet points out “in satisfying soldiers, masculine needs, prostitutes are seen as playing a positive role, helping their clients to remain manly.”<sup>71</sup>

As a result there is no condemnation of prostitutes on moral grounds nor is there any attempts to persuade them to change their occupation, prostitutes were denounced as sinners but society permitted them no alternative occupation. Rehabilitation was precluded both by Indian realities and by British necessities.<sup>72</sup>

The paper also analyses the recent efforts to revive the Tawa'if community arts and reinstate their identity as professional performers which is done by launching Courtesan Project by Manjari Chaturvedi, a unique research and documentation exercise. The Project aims of recreating of tawaifs' distinctive arts and their aesthetic representation within a kotha – like performing space which has been received enthusiastically by the cultural connoisseurs, media, scholars and the general public, indicating a revival of interest in these art forms . Further, the project's endeavour to reconnect the tawaif community identity with their cultural commons by recreating their distinctive art forms is an instance of how neo revival projects can revive and preserve the dying arts of traditional performing communities.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> ibid. p. 997.

<sup>67</sup> ibid. p.1005.

<sup>68</sup> ibid. p.1005.

<sup>69</sup> Lata Singh, “Visibilising the “other” in history: Courtesans and the Revolt.”p.1678

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p.1678.

<sup>71</sup> Shirin Abbas, “Courtesans of Oudh and their misrepresentation in Literature Past and Present.”p.11.

<sup>72</sup> Chanda,S Patnaik,A and Chatterjee (2021) “The Courtesans Project and the Tawaifs Cultural Commons.” International Journal of the Commons, 15(1) p. 204-205.

<sup>73</sup> Shirin Abbas, “Courtesans of Oudh and their misrepresentation in Literature Past and Present.”p.12.



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