4. Katha-Nazakat: A Study of the Courtesan Culture in the Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

The mention of the Courtesan dates back to the Mughal era; these women were skilled in dance, music, poetry and literature, the legacies of which can still be found in most of India's culture, and even fashion. Because of this, the tawaifs enjoyed a paradoxical position in society, revered as artists but still marginalised. However, through time, they have been misrepresented and misunderstood. This paper aims to examine the position of the 'Courtesan' throughout the history of the Indian subcontinent and their relationship with both society and themselves.

Key words

- Feminist Historiography
- Colonial Morality
- Sexuality and Power
- Women's Cultural Labor

Introduction

The practice of courtesan culture dates back hundreds of years. The Indian subcontinent was not the only place to which this culture belonged; places like Japan, China, Russia and even some parts of Europe had similar practices. Tracing the etymology of the word, it refers to any woman who is associated with the court, i.e. a female courtier. The earliest traces of the *Oirans* were found in Japan during the Edo period (1600-1868). The *oiran* was "a woman of pleasure." They were courtesans who were trained in the traditional Japanese arts, calligraphy, tea ceremony and the shamisen (Japanese harp).

The practice of courtesan culture in Japan was much like that of India; they were the pioneers of many forms of the arts and fashion. Many socio-cultural anthropologists have traced the origins of the tawaifs to different regional communities, such as the Beria community of Uttar Pradesh—later started being referred to as Berin—who had taken up the profession of the public dancer, and then came to be known as *Baijis*. The term *tawaifs* is used mainly to refer to Muslim performers. As opposed to communities

whose performance had a Hindu underlying tone, the tawaifs enjoyed a comparatively secular position in the court and enjoyed their patronage (Purkayastha 100). They were the flag bearers of professional women entertainers all over the world (Sengupta 124). Although courtesans are most often associated with the Mughal period, they existed as early as ancient India. They had a different position in society as compared to other women, being free from the domesticity and prescribed duties that women were usually expected to follow. According to Mekhala Sengupta:

> "The domain of the courtesan is described as an oasis of refinement, pleasure and contentment that the wealthy gravitated to, while the rulers of native Indian states sent their sons to imbibe both etiquette and culture" (Sengupta 124).

They were not only celebrated for their knowledge of the performing arts and literature but also for their customs and distinct manners. They were much more influential than often thought to be. Along with being performers, courtesans had an influence over many powerful figures; they held both cultural and political power and possessed knowledge of how the court functioned. They could navigate dominant societal structures as their performances had both artistic and political undertones (Sharma 02).

> "Thus, the gendered spaces within Mughal and Deccan courts were not simply reflective of the patriarchal structures, but negotiations and transformations also occurred there. Courtesans operated within these structures and against them, carving out niches of power and influence that were both culturally and politically significant." (Ibid 07)

Even though the learning institutes of the time were male-dominated, courtesans also held the position of being teachers. Men from notable families came to learn tehzeeb (etiquette) and even got trained in music and dance. This was also the time when artistic mediums such as Kathak, Thumri and poetry in multiple languages like Urdu and Persian, were flourishing.

However, even though the tawaifs enjoyed a relatively elevated position as compared to other women, they were still marginalised in India's heavily patriarchal society; the concepts of honour and chastity tied the tawaifs into a limited space, one in which they enjoyed royal patronage, but their existence was isolated and solitary "alluring, yet infamous" (Ibid).

In colonial terms, they were referred to as "nautchgirls"---the word nautch is a distorted pronunciation of the word naach, which means "to dance." Nautch girls have found their references in numerous journals written by Europeans, many of whom talk about how "the sahib was captivated by their seductive charm."

Even though courtesan culture is not something that is unique to India, these European records and commentators tend to exoticise courtesans. Despite all this, the Europeans continued exoticising the "dancing girl". Edward Said, in Orientalism, narrates Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan, and what this interaction gave rise to was an ideal model of the "exotic woman", presenting the woman in need of a saviour that only a white man is capable of being.

After Awadh was annexed with the pretext of mis-governance by lord Dalhousie, the courtesans faced a sudden loss of patronage. Women who were the carriers of arts and enjoyed a higher social standing were now in a vulnerable position under the British (Sengupta 124).

A large number of properties were listed under the categories of singing and dancing girls. Women listed were not only the first women to pay taxes but also were under the highest bracket of taxpayers, signifying their large income and the patronage that they enjoyed. These properties were also seized by the British after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, after their proven active involvement in the mutiny and assisting the rebels (Oldenburg, 259). After the mutiny of 1857, the British government forbade any interactions between the British officials, soldiers, and the "nautch girls," the reason being that these women were perceived as a threat to colonial rule because of their feudal ties. However, it was in 1892-93 when the British government completely banned the "tawaifs" and came up with an official declaration. Their talents and knowledge were overlooked, and they came to be stigmatised and categorised as prostitutes.

Other colonial records mention the tawaifs in connection with a grave medical crisis. During the mutiny of 1857, most of the deaths that the European soldiers faced were caused by diseases rather than combat. It was discovered that every four European soldiers were affected by venereal disease; hence, it was evident that this needed to be controlled. Under Act XII of 1864, Britain's Contagious Diseases Act was passed; one of the clauses was the complete and periodic examinations of all "prostitutes" in the cantonments. Thus, marking the decline and giving rise to modern-day kothas.

There are a wide range of reasons motivating this choice of lifestyle, even though kidnapping was and is one of the biggest reasons. There are cases of women who chose this as an alternative path out of their own free will, seeing it as a way of removing themselves from society. Many ran away from home, among whom were many Rajput women who took Muslim names to escape from the wrath of their family, since taking up such a profession may also mean the loss of honour and family prestige. The reason most women left had to do with the abuse and misery from both their natal and conjugal homes. Many women were also widowed in their early teens; some were sold by their parents for the money, some were victims of rape and physical abuse, and

many chose this path as their way out of social mobility with the means to earn to make their living instead of depending on a father or husband. (Oldenburg 266)

In Lucknow, the courtesans belonged to a larger hierarchical system with a courtesan chief or "chaud-harayan", an older tawaif who managed the administration of the Kotha. Many tawaifs also trained other women and the daughters of the household. The Kotha thus, then became a space for subverting and resisting gender roles. One such example is the celebration of the birth of a girl child rather than a boy child, contrary to the larger society (Oldenburg 263). This inversion of society is a result of the rich history of the courtesans and the legacy that they stood for. The main focus of this resistance was the loss of their prestige since colonial rule.

Kothas, thus, became a symbol of this alternative lifestyle and for the women a homosocial space (James Baldwin). Although mainly used as a defining space inhabited by men and masculinity, the kotha also became a space facilitating the expression of both emotional and sexual desire. Although their work depended on the patronage of men, their most satisfying and closest emotional relationships were with other women. Monique Wittig, in her collection of essays "The Straight Mind", spoke of heterosexuality as a political regime which ultimately rests on the submission of women, and the only way to not submit to this is to run away and escape, just as these courtesans have done. In the space of the Kotha, women had terms for such relationships for themselves as chapatbaz or chipti. To them, there was no real distinction between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Urdu poetry Rekhti narrates such depictions of same-sex relationships, especially between females, and often speaks of unions like marriage. Although little known, this genre of poetry developed in the late nineteenth century, and all the major poets were Muslim. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, Rekhti poetry was sensitised and became less erotic and more didactic (Srivastava 965)
Oldenburg?? further goes ahead to say that their explanation for this was that love for them was gender free-

> "The lack of terminology or the scrambling of pronouns may also be interpreted as the ultimate disguise for it; if something cannot be named, it's easier to deny its existence. In Urdu poetry, ambiguity about gender is not uncommon; homosexual love often passes as heterosexual love" (Oldenberg 276).

Thus, Kothas then became a driving force behind this discourse and subversion of gender, facilitating friendship, emotional and intimate relationships (Ibid). Yet, towards the end of the 19th century, a deliberate shift from the lived histories to an imagined past (Benedict Anderson 1983) began. This shift was mostly done by the upper caste and elite Hindus, leading to the formation of Indian nationalism and the formation of a distinct Indian culture. This notion of a pure "Indian Culture" was constructed by and

from an upper-class and Brahmanical perspective. Culture and hegemony do not work independently of each other, as evidenced by the nationalist movement (Johar 36). This shift was brought about by the refinement of certain artistic practices, including Yoga, Kathak, Bharatnatyam, etc. Thus, very strategically and systematically, certain puritanical and moral values were associated with the practices.

The anti-nautch movement began in the Madras Presidency and quickly spread to other parts of the country, this movement was mostly dedicated to the abolishment of minor girls in the Hindu temples of India as devdasis, the movement was not only backed by the colonial government but also various Indian social reformers as well, the British justified it by saying that this practice of Devdasis was inherently immoral, their idea of morality being western started controlling gender norms in public sphere, thus, the Hindu intelligentsia was not hesitant to accompany the British to not only abolish this practice but also to eradicate the complete existence of the Devdasis from history. All to "purify" India's culture.

The modern definition of Kathak and its assimilation into one of "India's nine classical dance forms" is also the result of nationalisation and a collective imagined history. Originally, Kathak can be traced back to the north of India and is famously connected to cities like Benaras, Lucknow and Jaipur, which also mark the important Gharanas of Kathak. Unlike the other classical dance forms of India, it is the only one with strong Islamic roots, which is why it is difficult to fit it into the notions of "Indian Classical Dance forms", which were pre-defined by the nationalist movement, one which started in temples and had Hindu roots (Chakraborty 410).

Both Kathak and Hindustani classical music have been associated with the glorious past; the word Kathak originated from the word katha, which means storytelling. Today's narrative traces the history of the dance to Vaishnavism, and traces the origin back to 4000 years ago, during the Vedic age; however, these kathakars were said to have been wandering and disseminating Hindu mythology to the illiterate people (Walker 02). Regardless, this practice, although labelled as dance, was mostly in fact gestures accompanied by recitations.

Most of the elements of the dance form evolved as it moved to the Mughal court. According to Margaret Walker, it was these Kathakars who gained the patronage of the ruler. Another way in which this assimilation was achieved was by associating the dance with texts like the Natyashastra, whereas other treatises like sangita-ratnacara and natanirnaya have evidence of more Kathak-like elements. Moreover, Indo-Persian treatises like the Ghunyat-al-Muny, an integral part of Ain-i-Akbari, record the natas, which were another clan of singers and dancers. Even other documents like Muraqqa-yi-Delhi by Dargah Quli Khan do not mention the Kathak caste in the list of performers. Even though the courtly documents do not mention the term "Kathak", the described

dance form is the one that is similar to the dance form understood today. Thus, Kathak is not a single phenomenon but rather a result of an amalgamation of various dance forms from the pre-colonial period, which were clubbed together by first the colonial government (Chakraborty 415) and later the Hindu elitists in order to "sanctify" the dance.

Kathak, emerging as one of the “Indian classical dance forms,” is something which happened after independence, much like the concept of India; the ideologies which shaped what is now known as “Indian classical dance forms” are something that happened after Independence. The state thus completely appropriated the history of the dance, making it something “pure” and “sacred”. However, what resulted from this classification this the slow alienation of the artists who were the original pioneers of the dance forms. Thus, this became one of the key features of the nationalist movement, and the source of national pride started being attached to so-called markers of “Indian culture”, which included both dance and Hindustani classical music. Thus, the Kathak that emerged in the post-colonial state adhered to the nationalistic idea of shaping the modern state.

As it is evident, the portrayal of the courtesans as sensuous beings and as objects for male pleasure is very much a colonial perspective. The tawaifs were, in fact, among many things, artists pioneering multiple art forms in the subcontinent. Recent scholarship has attempted to rewrite the image of the tawaif as opposed to what it is generally constructed to be. Thus, even though the nationalist movement boasts of the reclamation of the dance form, it further resulted in the alienation of the actual performers and the carriers of the art form itself, the Courtesans.

Historically, dance has been used as a means of resistance by many communities globally. Dance, therefore, became a means of articulating and expressing identity. Today, the classical dances have found themselves in a new light, one which needs constant adaptation with the changing times.

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