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Dancing With Power: Courtesans As Cultural Patrons in Mughal and Deccan Courts

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the multifaceted role of courtesans as cultural patrons and knowledge producers in the Mughal and Deccan courts between the 16th and 19th centuries. Moving beyond their traditional portrayal as mere performers or entertainers, this study repositions courtesans, particularly tawaifs and high-ranking court dancers, as influential figures within the socio-cultural and intellectual fabric of Indo-Islamic courts. By examining their patronage of poetry, music, dance, and literature, this work argues that courtesans played a crucial role as key transmitters of refined aesthetics (tehzeeb), artistic traditions, and linguistic innovations, particularly in Urdu and Persian. This research critically analyses how courtesans occupied a unique space at the intersection of gender, power, and cultural capital. It examines how these women leveraged their aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional labour to navigate and influence courtly politics, elite patronage networks, and public life. Drawing upon *tazkiras*, court chronicles, poetry, and colonial accounts, the study also interrogates archival silences and gendered erasures in historical narratives. Employing a feminist and cultural historical methodology, this research challenges Orientalist and colonial frameworks that reduced courtesans to symbols of moral decay, instead highlighting their agency as patrons, educators, and cultural diplomats. The present study aims to recover the complex identities of courtesans as active participants in the shaping of courtly culture, aesthetic sensibilities, and literary history.

Keywords: Culture; Mughal; Deccan; Courts; Tawaifs; Indo-Islamic

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FULL PAPER

Introduction: Reimagining The Courtesan

The image of the courtesan in South Asian historiography has often been limited to the colonial and orientalist narratives' lens of a sensual performer or a symbol of moral decline. However, a much more nuanced view emerges when we examine past data. Poetic compositions as well as court chronicles do reveal it. Tawaifs, along with other female performers in Mughal and Deccan courts, were consummate artists. They were also critical cultural patrons, educators, and intellectuals, particularly among courtesans. The role of courtesans as cultural agents is examined in the context of the Mughal and Deccan courts. These courtesans contributed to literature, music, and dance, and they also transmitted refined aesthetics (tehzeeb).

The study aims to address the following research question. What roles did courtesans have as cultural knowledge producers and patrons? How did they shape the courtly with the public spheres? Can feminist history and cultural analyses recover their agency and intellectual contributions? In methodological terms, the paper employs a feminist cultural historical approach, utilising primary sources such as Persian and Urdu poetry, tazkiras, court chronicles, and colonial records. Scholars like Veena Oldenburg, Rekha Misra, and Ruth Vanita contribute to the secondary scholarship. The paper also uses postcolonial theory to question mainstream historiography's suppression of courtesan voices.

Customary historical writing often portrays courtesans as male objects for pleasure, overlooking their intellectual contributions and cultural significance. Since it had very rigid moral binaries, the colonial framework further marginalised these women, labelling them as vestiges from a past that was decadent. Feminist scholarship, however, has recuperated these figures in recent decades. Scholars such as Oldenburg (1990) have demonstrated that tawaifs served as custodians of high culture, educators of nawabs, and patrons of the arts. Feminist historiography focuses on performance, where knowledge is produced, and it also provides a lens by which we can reinterpret these women's legacy.

This study challenges the dichotomy between the domestic and public spheres. Such a dichotomy often supports specific historical narratives. Courtesans occupied a public intimate space in which art, pedagogy, and politics blurred together. Intellectual engagement, as well as cultural exchange, and not just entertainment, occurred in their salons. Courtly and urban cultures were shaped by courtesans, who were active participants in this sense. The study also seeks to highlight the regional differences between Mughal courts in North India and the Deccan. Each court, while sharing many aesthetic and performative traditions, developed its own gender dynamics and modes of patronage. With its Persianate ethos, the Mughal court emphasised poetic sophistication and classical music. In

contrast, the Deccan courts of Hyderabad and Golconda saw the emergence of strong female patrons, such as Mah Laqa Bai Chanda.

This paper argues against the idea that courtesans are marginal figures. They were, instead, central to the cultural life of early modern South Asia. They made contributions to both music, dance, literature, and aesthetics, and deserve recognition not just for artistic labour, but also for intellectual labour. This study reinterprets historical sources by foregrounding marginalised voices. It thereby contributes to a more inclusive understanding with a subtle comprehension of cultural history.

Thematic Literature Review

The role of courtesans in the Mughal and Deccan courts has been historically overlooked, often reduced to mere entertainers or figures of illicit pleasure. However, more recent scholarship has begun to highlight their more profound influence on the cultural and political climates of these same courts, which better demonstrates that courtesans influenced much more than just the stereotypical figures often represented within popular culture. Courtesans held significant cultural power and were also influential political agents, educators, and patrons of the arts, in addition to being performers.

The literature's central theme revolves around the role of courtesans. Their impact is evident in cultural leadership across the board. According to Misra (1987) and Bhargava (2009), courtesans made significant contributions to the artistic traditions of Mughal and Deccan India, particularly in the forms of music, dance, and poetry. Often, these women were highly educated in the arts. They also possessed knowledge about court politics and etiquette. Their ability to navigate the complex power structures of the royal courts improved their role as cultural agents. Their performances there were both artistic and political; therefore, they subtly yet powerfully resisted established gender and class norms. Banerji (2012) demonstrates that courtesans, such as those found in Mughal Delhi and Deccan courts, created a specific setting. This environment allowed artistic traditions to flourish as they blended Persian, Central Asian, and indigenous styles. Courtesans became central figures within the patronage system through their salons, as they supported and shaped the direction of the arts, extending beyond their role as performers. The roles of courtesans as trainers and educators in the arts have garnered significant attention in the literature. Pinto (2011) and Singh (2001) both stress how courtesans were skilled pedagogues. They transmitted not only artistic knowledge but also cultural values to the next generation of performers, poets, and musicians. Their capability for training elite people and commoners alike in all of these high cultural forms importantly served to perpetuate and innovate these arts. Key players in maintaining the vitality of both Mughal and Deccan cultural traditions were indeed courtesans, serving as both artists and teachers. According to Pinto (2011), the contributions of courtesans to classical dance with music were

pedagogical acts, not just performances, as they preserved and transmitted skills across generations.

However, courtesans were intricately linked to power in a complex and multifaceted manner. These relationships were not devoid of complexity. Courtesans were often placed within a liminal space by the gendered power dynamics of the courts. In that place, their sexualised roles met their power as cultural and political actors. Oldenburg (1990) and Vanita (2004) offer insight into how courtesans navigated these gendered spaces, providing a critical perspective. They argue that it is while courtesans often occupied the margins that were of social respectability since people associated them with sexuality, it is they who culturally influenced and then challenged these boundaries. Courtesans exerted significant influence throughout courtly politics. This influence stemmed from both their performances and their relationships with powerful men. Their ability to command respect, plus maintenance of power within such a patriarchal society, shows precisely that they subverted customary gender norms since they turned their perceived weakness into a source of strength and authority.

Colonialism and the subsequent reconfiguration of courtesans' identities were a meaningful turning point in their legacy. The British arrived in India and began to introduce new moral and social codes. The codes changed courtesans, thus converting artists into disgraced figures of vice. Oldenburg (1990) points out that the British colonial narrative marginalised courtesans, labelling them as immoral and a threat to public order, in nationalist discourses coupled with this colonial intervention. The courtesan institution experienced a decline. Because colonial as well as later nationalist ideologies overshadowed their cultural importance, they also sought to ‘purify’ Indian culture by eliminating such ‘degenerate’ forms, many courtesans faded into obscurity. According to Pinto (2011) and Misra (1987), the courtesan's contributions faced cultural erasure due to this shift, a process of forgetting that contemporary scholars have only recently begun to reverse.

Feminist, decolonial, and cultural studies have contributed to a growing interest in the courtesan’s legacy. This interest has grown significantly over the recent decades. Digital projects with scholarly research restore the central role of the courtesan in Indian cultural history, as Chaturvedi (2018) explores. For example, the Rekhta Foundation (n.d.) has created a comprehensive archive of Urdu poetry, much of which was written by courtesans, providing a platform for their voices to be heard once again. This digital reclamation reflects a broader movement to reclaim the cultural significance of courtesans, which colonial and nationalist pressures once suppressed. Scholars and artists continue to revisit the courtesan’s complex identity through these initiatives. They acknowledge her to be an agent of cultural change as well as resilience, not just as a symbol of sensuality.

Courtesans within the Mughal and Deccan courts reveal a complex interplay among gender, culture, and politics, ultimately. Courtesans were key players in the cultural and political spheres, as they shaped the development of art forms,

influenced courtly power dynamics, and provided a space for the transmission of knowledge, far from being mere entertainers. Because colonial narratives sought to obscure their contributions, contemporary scholarship is working to reclaim their legacy, and scholarship acknowledges their essential role in shaping South Asian history. Courtesans showed cultural innovation and resilience. Their stories also deserve recognition and celebration.

Research Methodology

Since it combines historical, archival, and ethnographic approaches, the qualitative research methodology employed in this study on courtesans as cultural patrons in Mughal and Deccan courts explores the multidimensional roles of courtesans within these socio-political contexts. The aim is to understand the subtle influence these women had on cultural, political, and artistic spheres during the Mughal and Deccan periods, as well as to examine the broader gender dynamics and colonial legacies that affected their roles.

1. Archival Research

The wide-ranging archival work drawing upon primary sources comprised the primary method for data collection. Letters, personal memoirs, and court records were these. Historical documents relevant to the Mughal and Deccan courts were also included. Through archival materials such as Begum Akhtar's Memoirs of a Tawaif and the writings of courtesans in the Rekhta Foundation archives, the lived experiences of courtesans were illuminated. Additionally, British colonial archives document the varying perceptions of courtesans during colonialism, clarifying how colonialism marginalised and redefined the courtesan identity. These primary sources inform the reconstruction of the historical and social roles courtesans played in royal courts and society.

2. Literature Review. Also, Thematic Analysis has been included.

The thematic analysis of existing literature was a crucial component of the research methodology. The literature review included studies of gender dynamics in old South Asia. Works discussing the cultural contributions and roles of courtesans in the Mughal and Deccan courts were also included. Framing courtesans not merely as entertainers but also as active cultural patrons and political agents required studies by scholars such as Pinto (2011), Oldenburg (1990), and Vanita (2004). The study critically evaluated the intersections of gender, power, and performance in the courtesan's life by synthesising these perspectives. This thematic review also identified gaps in current scholarship, such as a lack of thorough work on the influence of courtesans on the cultural arts and their role in courtly patronage, which this research addresses.

3. Interviewers do interviews, and also Historians do Recount Oral Histories

The collection of oral histories, as well as interviews featuring contemporary scholars, artists, and performers specialising in customary Mughal and Deccan arts,

was yet another crucial methodological tool. Ethnographers employed this method to bridge the historical gap when examining how courtesan traditions have been preserved, reclaimed, or transformed in modern times. These interviews enhanced comprehension of how courtesan culture is perceived today through personal narratives. It has a profound impact and has informed our understanding of contemporary performance practices, such as classical dance and music. Historical narratives can be contextualised through engagement with informants within the cultural and social transformations of colonial times.

4. Comparative Analysis

The roles of courtesans across different regions in South Asia were analysed comparatively. This approach particularly highlighted the similarities and divergences between the Mughal and Deccan courts. This study aimed to highlight regional differences in the role of courtesans as a political force and as supporters of the arts by examining gendered power systems, artistic customs, and court life in both contexts. With recognition of shared patterns relating to cultural patronage, this framework for comparison enabled a deeper understanding of the specific contributions of courtesans within each region.

5. Secondary Source Analysis

This study utilised secondary sources analysed through a critical lens. Scholarly articles, books, and previous research on South Asian gender studies were among these sources. The interpretation of primary data was facilitated through the work of historians, cultural theorists, and feminist scholars. Those works also provided theoretical frameworks that offered a broader understanding of the courtesan's role in colonialism, gender, and cultural production. Historical data and oral histories were relied upon for contextualisation within larger academic debates.

Courtly Cultures and Gendered Spaces

Art, politics, and gender intersected in complex ways at the Mughal and Deccan courts, which served as key sites of cultural production. These courts not only administered justice but also provided spaces for refined music, dance, poetry, and etiquette. These richly layered environments saw social norms shaped as elite tastes were influenced by key cultural agents acting as courtesans, not merely entertainers. During the Mughal Empire, from Akbar's reign onward, imperial patrons encouraged the arts to flourish. Because he set a precedent for rulers thereafter, poets, dancers, and musicians filled Akbar's court. Courtesans, as opposed to noblewomen, occupied liminal spaces that allowed them visibility and influence, although zenana women were kept mainly sequestered within their quarters. They played at royal parties, taught wealthy children, and were invited to salons—mehfils where poems, songs, and intellectual discussions flourished (Oldenburg, 1990).

Likewise, the traditions of female performance were deeply rooted in Persianate and indigenous forms throughout the Deccan courts of Bijapur, Golconda,

and later Hyderabad. For women performers, courts often mediated the unique blend of Hindustani and Carnatic traditions. Mah Laqa Bai Chanda, an educated and influential courtesan, signified the recognition of women's formal cultural authority (Minault, 2004). To the courtly culture indispensable, these women were often well-versed in Islamic theology, classical music, and Persian and Urdu poetry.

The salons of tawaifs served as alternative spaces. Learning institutions were male-dominated at that time. Here, young men from noble families were trained not just to perform music as well as dance, but also behave, converse, and express literature. The cultural capital associated with the tawaif was immense because she existed as both an artist and a connoisseur, also shaping the courtly ethos of tehzeeb—refined etiquette and aesthetic sensibility (Orsini, 2012). These courts' spaces of gender were so complex. The kotha, or courtesan's salon, was a semi-public arena that allowed women to engage intellectually and artistically with men, while the zenana was more cloistered. These spaces provided courtesans with mobility and autonomy that many other women could not access, despite patriarchal constraints. They were able to manage their finances, hold assets, and establish planned social connections (Vanita, 2004). The tawaif culture came to its zenith at the Awadh court under Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Kathak, thumri, and Urdu poetry found a centre within the court, as courtesans performed and helped shape culture. The Nawab danced and wrote poetry as did his court, thus blurring distinctions between male and female, artist and patron, ruler and performer. This fluidity allowed courtesans to take on roles. These roles did not conform to customary gender binaries (Qureshi, 2006).

Thus, the gendered spaces within Mughal and Deccan courts were not simply reflective of patriarchal structures, but negotiation and transformation 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.

Performance, Pedagogy, And Aesthetics

Courtesans within Mughal and Deccan courtly societies played a vital role in the transmission and preservation of performative traditions, etiquette, and aesthetics. They contributed to music, dance, and literary expression, integral to the cultivation of elite cultural tastes. Courtesans provided instruction mainly to youthful aristocrats, which went further than mere theatrics, offering detailed instruction in sophistication, etiquette, emotional awareness, and considerate interaction. These women considered performance an aesthetic practice, a mode of cultural transmission, and also a form of pedagogy. Tehzeeb, like etiquette and adab, which is literary refinement, and sukhan, also known as poetic discourse, were taught at the tawaif's kotha or salon, which also functioned as a cultural school. Both elite and popular cultures were influenced by iconic figures such as Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar, who were notably courtesans (Qureshi, 2006). These women were pedagogues who conveyed moral, emotional, and social teachings through their artistic performances.

In Kathak and Hindustani classical music, courtesans introduced techniques of improvisation that transformed their respective forms. For instance, the thumri became associated closely with tawaif culture. It provided a space in which performers could express some emotion and innovate lyrically. To create an aesthetic of intimacy and sophistication that connoisseurs deeply respected, the tawaif subtly interpreted, gestured, and modulated her voice (Manuel, 1993). Intense training did lend support to these artistic contributions. The ustads themselves were often courtesans who studied under Ustads (masters) in turn. Creativity, as well as intellectual rigour, was demonstrated within their ragas and rhythmic cycles. They wrote poetry and letters, and not just music and dance, but also participated in literary debates. A formal institution matched the kotha's educational function. That institution was guided through oral traditions, lived experiences, and aesthetic intuition. We see the connection between performance and pedagogy, particularly in the court of Wajid Ali Shah. There, his performance helped governance. The Nawab composed plays as well as musical performances. He was a patron of courtesans. He collaborated alongside tawaifs, which suggests they shared intellectual space, wherein courtesans did not passively receive patronage but co-created courtly art (Oldenburg, 1990). In the Hyderabad Deccan courts, Mah Laqa Bai Chanda represented the fusion of aesthetics and intellect, particularly. She helped other poets and formed a library, also being a trained dancer, poet, and military campaigner. Her diwan in print was among the first of its kind. It is an Indian woman who wrote up this collection of poetry. Aristocrats and intellectuals alike attended her mehfil, a hub for aesthetic exchange and literary pedagogy (Minault, 2004). Performance's aesthetics also carried philosophical and spiritual undertones. Many courtesans were trained in Sufi poetry and music. Their performances often showed themes of divine love, longing, and surrender, reflecting their training. According to this spiritual register, courtesans were allowed to transcend the boundaries imposed upon them regarding sensuality, thereby reclaiming a more holistic identity as seekers with knowledge as well as performers (Vanita, 2004).

Colonial discourses dismissed the courtesans' pedagogy as morally suspect, despite their achievements. Due to moral concerns, these discourses obscured the intellectual contributions of the courtesans. British eyes looked at their sway over rich kids warily. They equated their salons with dens that were of vice instead of thinking of them as schools for refinement. This erasure has resulted in a skewed historiography that fails to recognise the intellectual and pedagogical dimensions of courtesan culture. Courtesans occupied a central position in the performative type of life within the Mughal and Deccan courts. They were also quite vital for the intellectual life there. More than just simple spaces of entertainment, their kothas were informal academies in terms of ethics, art, and philosophy. They performed to impart knowledge and shape cultural sensibilities. As they participated, their performance also created advanced aesthetic and moral discourses.

Patronage And Political Power

Courtesans in both Mughal and Deccan courts were deeply enmeshed in networks that involved political power and cultural patronage. They were much more than only performers or entertainers. They were able to act as intermediaries, influencers, and diplomats through relationships. These relationships were among rulers, nobles, and aristocrats. In highly hierarchical societies, courtesans could wield a subtle yet significant form of agency. This was enabled through the fluid boundaries between performance and politics.

Courtesans of high rank often had close ties with emperors and nobles in the Mughal court, as they occasionally provided political advice, cultural instruction, and companionship. They influenced choices and observed discussions from afar through elegant gatherings. Their presence in the zenana enabled them to have similar access and influence. These women became trusted confidantes, including cultural arbiters. They negotiated power through their intelligence, discretion, and charisma (Lal, 2008). Artistic patronage and political engagement intertwine, as exemplified by the case of Mah Laqa Bai Chanda in the court of the Nizam of Hyderabad. She was a renowned poet and a performer who accompanied military expeditions. "Mah Laqa" (Moon-cheeked) became her title, given by the Nizam. Her riches, land gifts, and regal power were outstanding. Minault (2004) demonstrated how courtesans could transcend gender and class boundaries by utilising cultural and political capital. Courtesans existed as patrons in their own right. Their income helped sustain artisans, painters, musicians, and poets. They shaped the aesthetic sensibilities of the times through the funding of cultural production. Many tawaifs maintained their retinues of artists, and energetic salons flourished through music, poetry, and philosophy. These gatherings functioned as intellectual as well as artistic laboratories; they were not mere entertainment that merely preserved and advanced courtly culture (Oldenburg, 1990). Nawab Wajid Ali Shah witnessed a marked increase in the role of courtesans in Awadh. Artists and courtesans had encouragement for collaborations from the Nawab. He was, in fact, himself a connoisseur in both dance and drama. Wazeeran, a famed courtesan, is thought to have had a big part in court patronage. She was also appointed to several important political positions. Ali Naqi Khan, her protégé, became a significant figure in Awadhi politics, which suggests how courtesan networks could influence administrative structures (Hasan, 2002).

Courtesans amassed wealth and visibility due to the transactional nature of patronage. This nature included gifts, property, and political appointments for them. Public respect was earned from their estates, as well as through charitable work, often in civic life and urban planning. In Banaras and Lucknow, some courtesans contributed to the construction of temples, wells, and public structures, thereby blurring the distinction between private and public spheres (Singh, 2015). This power, though fragile, was essential to note, as it was often reliant on patrons. Colonial interventions or court dynamics could cause sudden losses of wealth and

status. British disapproval concerning courtesan culture and policies weakening their status marked a meaningful colonial rupture. Indigenous courts declined, Victorian morality rose, they eroded courtesans' cultural legitimacy, reclassified courtesans as prostitutes, and reduced their influence in public life (Levine, 2003).

Archival records, memoirs, and oral histories reveal that courtesans navigated the political climate with outstanding adaptability. Their interaction with power occurred through multiple methods, including attending state events, engaging in correspondence on political matters, and participating in espionage. Simplistic categorisation is defined by how they negotiated courtly hierarchies through performed diplomacy, asserting authority. Courtesans in the Mughal and Deccan courts were more than just artists. Additionally, they served as political agents and cultural entrepreneurs. The influence exerted by them, through both artistic patronage and social engagement, as well as planned relationships, reverberated throughout the political and cultural spheres. Their lives reveal gendered agency, where someone sees it and then hides, while someone bases their performance on it, but goes to the heart of power.

Colonial Encounters and The Decline of Courtesan Culture

Cultural perceptions, as well as social structures and gender norms, underwent a profound shift with the arrival of British colonial rule in India. These courtesans were among those most affected by these changes, as they had long held positions that were highly regarded in South Asian courts, serving as intermediaries within elite society and patrons of the arts. Moralist reform, along with administrative restructuring and economic marginalisation, combined to dismantle courtesan culture under colonialism systematically. Their public image transformed from that of artists and educators to one of social outcasts as a result.

The Indo-Islamic ethos of the Mughal and Deccan courts, in which artistic expression, sensuality, and female autonomy were twisted into the fabric of the elite culture, clashed with the Victorian morality fundamentally imposed by the British. British officials considered courtesans emblematic of Eastern decadence. Missionaries, along with social reformers, shared this view. They were often considered prostitutes within colonial discourse, which overlooked roles like artists, educators, and cultural custodians (Levine, 2003). Courtesan culture was significantly impacted by the Contagious Diseases Acts (1860s–1880s) through intrusive health checks imposed on women working in the entertainment and red-light districts. These acts criminalised courtesan spaces and contributed to their moral and legal delegitimisation, even though they were framed as public health initiatives. Colonial authorities sought to regulate indigenous sexuality as well as dismantle non-nuclear family structures since the public surveillance of courtesans reflected a broader strategy for control (Ballhatchet, 1980). Courtesans were also economically disempowered. The flow of resources toward tawaifs and other artists diminished as the British weakened princely states and their patronage systems. Once customary courts disintegrated, leaving women without any institutional

support after they had previously performed in refined cultural salons. Turning to emerging public platforms, such as gramophone recordings and early cinema, was a method of adaptation for specific individuals, but many faced outright poverty or marginal professions (Qureshi, 2006). The decline of courtesan culture had a significant impact on the thumri and kathak art forms. These genres were once central to the repertoire of the tawaif. Male performers co-opted all of the genres, or they reshaped many genres to align with specific nationalist aesthetics. In nationalist discourse, especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's virtue became equated with domesticity and chastity. Thus, the courtesan's visible as well as performative femininity threatened against the emerging ideal of the "respectable Indian woman" (Sarkar, 2001). Classical arts experienced a revival early in the 20th century. These are efforts that often erased from them their courtesan lineage. Narratives that are sanitised, upper-caste, and male-dominated recontextualise these very forms in institutions such as Kalakshetra and Sangeet Natak Akademi. This aesthetic both reformed and thereby reinforced colonial with nationalist anxieties regarding female sexuality along with modernity. The courtesan's contributions were either omitted as a result or acknowledged only in derogatory terms. (Vanita 2004). These challenges notwithstanding, courtesans resisted in varied ways. Some, like Jaddan Bai and Gauhar Jaan, reinvented themselves as recording artists. They adapted their skills to new media, and they reached broader audiences. Others wrote of their memoirs and maintained their informal cultural networks. Some people kept teaching privately. These acts reveal the complexity behind their responses to colonial modernity. They do not fully capitulate nor do they resist romantically, but they negotiate for survival (Manuel, 1993). Archival materials, which include colonial administrative reports, missionary tracts, and vernacular literature, reflect the contested nature of courtesan identity during this specific period. The tawaif in Urdu novels, together with poetry, continued to appear as a cultured yet corrupt figure of moral ambiguity, attractive yet tragic. This ambivalence suggests something. Courtesans were marginalised through state discourse, even as their symbolic power remained strong in cultural thought (Lal, 2008).

The colonial encounter marked a significant rupture in the history of India's courtesans. Through legal, economic, and ideological means, the British redefined their status, and this redefined status eroded their cultural authority within a stigmatised framework. Their legacy, however, did survive, often being kept alive in altered forms through memory, performance, and adaptation. To reclaim courtesan history and to interrogate the colonial roots of modern gender and cultural norms, understanding this transition is essential.

Memory, Legacy, And Reclamation

The legacy of courtesans in both Mughal and Deccan courts remains contested and enduring. Scholarly, cinematic, and artistic recent efforts have sought means to recover all the multidimensional roles of these women in shaping South

Asian cultural history, although the colonial era marginalised and even reclassified them as morally suspect. Remembering, forgetting, and reclaiming the courtesan's legacy are explored in this final chapter. These processes are complex.

One avenue reclaims itself through historiography. Feminist historians, along with cultural theorists, have centred on courtesans not as victims but as agents challenging patriarchal and colonial narratives. In works by scholars such as Veena Oldenburg (1990), Ruth Vanita (2004), and Rekha Misra (1987), courtesans are reframed as educators, entrepreneurs, and transmitters of classical traditions. These interventions reveal the degree to which these women refined and enabled Indian music, dance, poetry, and etiquette to survive, though others long overshadowed their intellectual labour.

Cinema is also just another legacy site. In films, the courtesan is represented as both a tragic and a noble figure. Examples include Pakeezah (1972), Umrao Jaan (1981, 2006), and Tawaif (1985). Because these portrayals often rely on tropes of doomed romance with longing, they also generate empathy with curiosity; viewers reconsider the tawaif's social role. However, these films can also reinscribe stereotypes, highlighting the need to engage critically with media representations (Dwyer, 2006). Memoirs, biographies, and oral histories offer forms of personal remembrance. Those memorial documents have more intimacy. The writings of or by courtesans, such as the memoirs of Begum Akhtar or accounts about Gauhar Jaan, reveal the inner lives of these women, shedding light on their aspirations, struggles, and creative processes. Because they reveal how courtesans navigated love, loss, fame, and solitude within a shifting socio-political context, these narratives challenge the binaries of respectability and shame (Qureshi, 2006). India's performing arts also preserve the influence of courtesans. Dancers, musicians, and theatre practitioners are increasingly acknowledging the courtesan lineage of Kathak and Hindustani vocal music. This returns not just in art; it works in policy to recover. For artists such as Manjari Chaturvedi, projects like "The Courtesan Project" have foregrounded the historical importance of courtesans, as they pose a challenge to erasures and honour their artistic legacies through performance and pedagogy (Chaturvedi, 2018). However, these same reclaims pose a significant challenge to us. Especially within postcolonial contexts, courtesans are still stigmatised in many parts of South Asia if they continue to practice music and dance traditions. Public perception keeps the line blurred between hereditary artists and sex workers. Therefore, efforts to restore dignity through recognition are significantly hampered. Artistic funding, social security, and advocacy for legal protection remain essential in supporting communities with courtesan heritage (Pinto, 2011).

Questions about authenticity and representation arise when upper-caste or elite practitioners attempt to revive traditions without engaging with the communities' social histories that sustained them. To ethically reclaim courtesan cultures, we must attend to class, caste, and regional identities that shaped them.

Inclusive pedagogy includes all students. Their creation's contexts and forms are both preserved by community collaboration (Banerji, 2012).

Now, courtesans are memorialised through digital archives, documentaries, and social media platforms. Beyond the Rekhta Foundation, projects archive Urdu poetry and music. Digital restoration of gramophone recordings also provides access to courtesan culture. Especially for younger generations, these platforms democratise history and create spaces for dialogue, making them unfamiliar with the contributions of tawaifs and devadasis.

The courtesan's legacy remains anything but buried. It persists within memory, movement, and melody. Reimagining the future is a process of reclamation, and it is not just about retrieving the past; it also celebrates female performers, artists, and intellectuals for their artistry and agency. Our understanding of gender, art, and power in South Asia's past and present is deepened by honouring courtesans as cultural patrons and complex historical actors.

Conclusion

This research traces the multidimensional role of courtesans in the Deccan and Mughal courts. They were acting as both agents and performers, in addition to serving as educators and cultural patrons. Courtesans were not marginal figures but central within the intellectual and artistic life of their times. They shaped the aesthetics of courtly culture at that time. They also had a significant influence upon others when they offered patronage, taught others, and performed acts. In their gendered yet empowering environments, poetry, music, dance, and discourse thrived as energetic centres for learning. Courtesans have demonstrated their ability to negotiate power within feudal and patriarchal systems. They were able to utilise both their skills and charisma to command respect in elite circles. They also mentored future generations of artists. Often, dominant historical narratives have omitted or distorted the profound contributions that exist in Indian classical traditions, such as music and dance. This trajectory faced a key disruption. The cause was from colonial interventions. By dismantling customary systems of patronage and conflating courtesans with prostitutes, the British delegitimised their art and redefined their identities. Victorian ethics, along with nationalist beliefs, also reduced their presence. This marginalisation eroded their cultural and historical significance.

The story about courtesans, however, is not one of decline only. Legacies are now actively reclaimed by filmmakers, performers, contemporary scholars, and digital archivists, indicating a broader movement that recognises suppressed histories. These endeavours expand our understanding of gender and culture in South Asia, questioning the dichotomies of honour and shame, artistry and sensuality, and society and secrecy. We open up new pathways for feminist historiography, decolonial critique, and artistic innovation, as we now reimagine the courtesan as a cultural icon with enduring relevance, rather than a relic from the

past. The courtesan's world continues to offer critical perceptions into the intersection of gender, performance, and politics. That world has a blend of power, grace, resistance, and creativity. Reframing history itself to include voices, bodies, and performances long silenced or sidelined occurs through reclaiming the courtesan as a cultural patron rather than merely restoring a lost figure to history. Thus, we strive for a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of history, one that values both strength and subtlety.

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