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Peer reviewed

Political players: Courtesans of Hyderabad

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Important recent works on the Mughal state and women in the Indo-Muslim world have not considered courtesans or tawa'ifs, the singing and dancing women employed by Indo-Muslim states and nobles, to be significant participants in politics and society. Drawing on detailed archival data from late nineteenth century Hyderabad state and other historical materials, I argue that courtesans were often elite women, cultural standard-setters and wielders of political power. Women whose art and learning gained them properties and alliances with powerful men, they were political players in precolonial India and in the princely states. They successfully negotiated administrative reforms in princely states like Hyderabad, continuing to secure protection and patronage while in British India they began to be classified as prostitutes. Colonial and modern India have been less than kind to courtesans and their artistic traditions, and more research needs to be done on the history of courtesans and their communities.

Keywords: Courtesans, Hyderabad, tawa'ifs, precolonial, Mughal India, princely states, Indo-Muslim culture

Courtesans in South Asian Historiography

Recent major works on the Mughal state and on women in the Indo-Muslim world have not considered courtesans or *tawa'ifs*,¹ the singing and dancing women employed in Indo-Muslim state and noble household establishments, to be significant participants in politics and society. Christopher Bayly's 1996 comprehensive survey of imperial information and social communication in the late Mughal empire has few references to women and courtesans, and he usually characterises courtesans as 'of poor backgrounds', 'humbler' or 'lower down the social scale'.² Muzaffar Alam's and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's edited 1998 volume on the Mughal state focuses on Mughal authority, fiscal organisation and social structure, politics

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¹ Instead of accurate transliteration of Persian and Urdu words with superscripts indicating long vowels and subscripts differentiating among consonants, I use versions that have become customary in English, for example tawa'if and tawa'ifs for courtesan and courtesans (instead of *taa'ifa* and *tawaa'if*).

² Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 18–19, 62–63, 196, 209.

and trade, and resistance to the state. Their authoritative introduction compares the Mughals to the Safavids and the Ottomans and traces the dispersion of Indo-Muslim policies and practices, the adaptations of these policies and practices by regional powers in India from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Acknowledging their own focus, the authors say ‘Should we be content to reducing a complex political system to its agrarian fiscal aspects? Were there not other elements in the Mughal state (whether structural or processual) that might equally command our attention?’³ As if in answer to this, Gavin Hambly’s edited volume on women in the medieval Islamic world, also published in 1998, has five articles on women in Mughal and Indo-Muslim states, articles that examine social structures and processes centred on the royal households. These articles highlight the activities of royal women (the wives, daughters, sisters and wet nurses of rulers),⁴ but they sometimes hint at the significant roles played by courtesans.⁵

The research on courtesans or tawa’ifs in South Asia is quite scattered and uneven in its coverage of places and times. I draw much of it together in this first section to provide a historical background for the presentation, in the second section, of detailed findings from Persian records about courtesans in the former Hyderabad State in the late nineteenth century. A concluding section argues briefly that under British colonial rule and in modern India, the lifestyles and performance traditions of courtesans have been stereotyped, homogenised and criminalised, and that more research is needed on courtesans in the past.⁶

³ Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State*, p. 16.

⁴ Barnett, ‘Embattled Begams’; Blake, ‘Contributors to the Urban Landscape’; Fisher, ‘Women and the Feminine’; Hambly, ‘Armed Women Retainers’; Kozłowski, ‘Private Lives and Public Piety’. Ruby Lal’s *Domesticity and Power* offers rich details about royal women in the early Mughal world but nothing about courtesans.

⁵ Blake, ‘Contributors to the Urban Landscape’, analyses the nine women builders of Shahjahanabad who built bazaars, mosques, garden, streets, caravanserais, bathhouses and mansions. Seven were members of the royal family, one was the wife of a leading nobleman, and one was a ‘famous singer’, whom he describes as ‘from the lower reaches of the socio-economic order’. She built a mansion in which she entertained noblemen but also high-ranking women of the court, ‘a place of pleasure and diversion for the urban nobility’ (pp. 411–13, 424). Kozłowski, ‘Private Lives and Public Piety’, also comments on the importance of building mosques, temples and tombs and notes that women actively participated in factional conflicts at the court (p. 470). Hambly, ‘Armed Women Retainers’, mentions a late sixteenth century Rajput noble in the sultanate of Gujarat whose household maintained four bands of dancing girls (p. 436); his tendency to use ‘household’ and ‘zenana’ interchangeably leads to confusion at times. Fisher, ‘Women and the Feminine’, while arguing that Lucknow’s urban court culture and that of the rural landholders of Awadh was quite separate, nonetheless reports that a landholder Raja took a favoured courtesan of Lucknow, a woman who had been an intimate of the ruler of Awadh, as his second wife (p. 505). He discusses the world of the Lucknow courtesans, one in which women could function ‘relatively independently from men as owners of property, heads of households, and respected poets and/or artistic performers’ (taking a lead from Veena Oldenburg’s 1990 article, discussed below) (p. 507).

⁶ A longer version of this article, Leonard, ‘Courtesans of Hyderabad’, draws on two famous novels featuring courtesans in early modern times and other literary sources to explore courtesans’ relations with each other, with ‘respectable’ women, and with men in more detail. The novels are *The Nautch Girl*, an

Much of the literature about tawa'ifs is superficial. It focuses upon their singing and dancing performances for Mughal, British or other nobles and administrators; photos and paintings and prints of them abound. *Ganikas* (courtesans in early Sanskrit texts), *Nautch* girls (from *naacna*, to dance), *devadasis* (Hindu temple dancers), *naikins* (Goanese singing and dancing girls)—women in courts and temples in very diverse regional settings and time periods have been lumped into a single category of women skilled in poetry, song and dance who also served their male patrons sexually.⁷ Analysing the paintings and portraits, and particularly the *carte-de-visite* picture postcards of courtesans produced from the 1860s, Joachim Bautze remarks 'What do we know about all these courtesans called "tawa'ifs" shown here? Next to nothing'.⁸

The glimpses we do have of courtesans in Indo-Muslim, primarily North Indian, culture, bring them into closer focus. In the Mughal imperial capital, Delhi, and in Hyderabad and Lucknow, capitals of princely states once part of the Mughal empire, courtesans primarily functioned within the Mughlai administrations rather than as independent entrepreneurs. Katherine Schofield identifies courtesans in Mughal India as female performers 'attached to the court'. Pointing out that female performers before British colonial rule have been little researched, she tries to distinguish among various categories of dancers, singers and musicians, objecting to 'courtesan' as a blanket term. She looks at whether women performed in female space (the *haram*), both male and female spaces, or only in the male space, but her evidence sometimes contradicts her statements about the sacrosanct separation of male and female spaces and the impermissibility of courtiers marrying courtesans (as does other evidence discussed below). Her 'courtesan tales' are primarily concerned with male courtiers and their downfall, with men's perceptions of courtesans' lives. Schofield states that in later writing about courtesans, the male protagonist rather than the courtesan 'has disappeared from the story'.⁹

Ramya Sreenivasan, writing about slave performers (drudges, dancing girls, concubines) in the establishments of Rajput rulers between 1500 and 1850, had difficulties similar to Schofield's in sorting out the designations and functions of female performers. She places the Rajput chiefs and rulers in the context of Mughal overlordship, with the Mughal emperor becoming arbiter of conflicts among Rajput rulers and the Mughal court influencing regional household administrative

autobiographical novel, and *The Courtesan of Lucknow*, based on a known courtesan's life story. Hasan Shah's 1790 Persian novel, *Nashtar* (*Surgeon's Knife*, referring to the pain of separation) was translated by Qurratulain Hyder and published as *The Nautch Girl: A Novel*, in 1992. Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa's 1905 Urdu novel, *The Courtesan of Lucknow: Umrao Jan Ada*, was translated by Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini and published in 1961.

⁷ Neville, *Nautch Girls of India*, is a typical popular account; it has no footnotes but many fine reproductions of paintings and photographs.

⁸ Bautze, 'Umrao Jan Ada', p. 142.

⁹ Schofield, 'The Courtesan Tale', pp. 152, 165.

and record-keeping practices. Mentioning the ‘houses of *patars* [performers]’ or ‘houses of melody’ owned by the state as well as by individual Rajput queens, she draws attention to the investment of time, labour and resources embodied in skilled female performers, investments that spoke of the wealth and prestige of their ‘holders’.¹⁰

Anshu Malhotra writes about the strange case of the courtesan Piro, during the rule of the Sikh Maharajah Ranjit Singh (*d.* 1839) in the Punjab. Piro seems to have been a Muslim dancing girl who left her ‘professional colleagues and guardians’ to become the disciple and consort of Gulab Das, a Udasi Sikh guru, reminding us of the Mughal court culture’s influence on Sikh gurus and Sufi saints as well. Influenced by colonial and post-colonial classifications, Malhotra most often refers to Piro as a prostitute, but she was clearly a courtesan, and her career reflects the fluid religious, social and political interactions characteristic of precolonial times.¹¹

Like Sreenivasan, Alam and Subrahmanyam trace the regional impacts of Mughal policies and practices as the empire expanded, and they give some attention to the Indo-Persian pre-Mughal states of the Deccan as well. They focus, however, on fiscal and revenue matters, although implicit in their discussions is the spread of the Persian language and Indo-Muslim court culture.¹² Interestingly, they discuss almost the same regions through which Davesh Soneji traces the impact of Indo-Muslim musical and dance performances on South Indian *devadasis*.¹³ Soneji’s research on devadasis challenges the stereotype that they performed primarily in Hindu temples;¹⁴ preferring to term them courtesans, he maintains that their *melams*, troupes or households, performed primarily in salons. Like Sreenivasan, he emphasises the control of courtesans by court authorities, in Tanjore and Baroda. Unlike most other writers on tawa’ifs and devadasis, he challenges the assumed division between North and South Indian courtesans. Suggesting that the salon-style culture in South India stems from the movement of musicians and dancers from the Mughals to Maharashtra and Tanjore, he documents the influence of North

¹⁰ Sreenivasan, ‘Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines’, especially pp. 137, 142. For the ‘houses’, she refers to Varsha Joshi, *Polygamy and Purdah: Women and Society among Rajputs*, p. 134.

¹¹ Malhotra, ‘Bhakti and the Gendered Self’, quote from p. 1513. See also Fenech, *Darbar of the Sikh Gurus*, and Green, *Making Space*, the latter for references to dancing girls performing at Sufi shrines.

¹² Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State*, discuss ‘regionally oriented sub-states’ in which fiscal policies ‘tended to gravitate little by little toward a perceived Mughal style’ (pp. 33–39, 64–68; quote p. 35). They write that ‘the regional identities that were formed in the eighteenth century were themselves the product of a complex interaction between region and empire. Both came to be redefined in this process’ (p. 68).

¹³ Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal State*, discuss the Maratha rulers, including those in Tanjore from the 1670s, and post-Mughal rulers in Hyderabad, Arcot, Awadh, the Punjab and Bihar; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, discusses the courts of the Peshwas in Maharashtra and of the princely states of Baroda, Gwalior and Tanjore.

¹⁴ Marglin, *Wives of the God-King*, about devadasis in Puri, Orissa, assumes temples, not the royal court, to be the major employers of courtesans. Heavily influenced by the work of Louis Dumont, she nevertheless provides ethnographic details of great interest in the context of Soneji’s work.

Indian or Hindustani music and dance and the presence of Muslim as well as Hindu courtesans in South India.¹⁵

A source often cited for North Indian courtesans is the pioneering 1990 article by Veena Oldenburg about the courtesans of Lucknow.¹⁶ She proposed a new way of looking at courtesans, challenging conventional wisdom about them and analysing their lifestyles as resistance to patriarchal values. While some might not construe the struggles of courtesans as 'real' resistance, she quoted James Scott effectively to buttress her view that they struggled for material needs and against patriarchal values while outwardly conforming to behaviours in harmony with male power and sexuality.¹⁷ Her qualitative interview material from the 1970s and 1980s is invaluable, but the context for the material is, first, British colonial India, after the conquest of the princely state of Awadh by the East India Company, and, second, modern India in the 1970s and 1980s. Stressing colonial control and classification of courtesans at the expense of pre-colonial patterns of control and classification, Oldenburg viewed courtesans as independent entrepreneurs rather than salaried employees of states and households. She was surprised to find courtesans in the tax ledgers and on lists of property holders in Lucknow and as correspondents of British officials there after 1858; she found the lists of courtesans' possessions 'remarkable', their jewels and numerous luxury items 'eloquently evocative of a privileged existence'.¹⁸ Seen in the context of earlier historical materials, however, such as those below from Hyderabad, the courtesans' wealth and prominence is not at all surprising.

The prevailing view that courtesans and 'respectable women' (begums or wives) came from and remained in separate social worlds needs brief discussion before presenting the Hyderabad case studies.¹⁹ Doris Srinivasan opened her essay on precolonial courtesans by posing two options for power available to Indian women: 'that of the sexually liberated and educated courtesan or the pure, sexually controlled, uneducated wife'. She went on to discuss 'The Wife/Courtesan Dichotomy'.²⁰ These two kinds of women lived in 'competing social spheres,' according to Carla Petievich, a scholar of Indo-Muslim poetry and

¹⁵ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, pp. 36–37, 50–52, 70.

¹⁶ Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle'.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 280–81. A fuller version appears in Haynes and Prakash, eds, *Contesting Power, Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, pp. 23–61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–60.

¹⁹ In my longer article (Leonard, 'Courtesans of Hyderabad'), careful comparison of Veena Oldenburg's interview materials, the Hyderabad court cases, and other literary and ethnographic materials allows consideration or reconsideration of three significant issues: the character and quality of the relationships among courtesans in their business establishments, the relationship between courtesans and 'respectable women' in Indian society, and sexual relations between women and between women and men. Here only a brief discussion of the second issue can be included.

²⁰ Srinivasan, 'Royalty's Courtesans and God's Mortal Wives', p. 161. She concludes that social reform and artistic movements eclipsed the power of courtesans and concentrated power in wives, the new keepers of both culture and pure lineages in modern India (pp. 177–8).

culture.²¹ The ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi also contrasts courtesans and respectable women. ‘Traditional kinship studies suggest that the viability of these “non-wives” was predicated on the seclusion of respectable elite women to maintain reproductive control over feudal property’, she writes, and further:²²

In contrast to the patron’s wife, her [a courtesan’s] role is reproductively irrelevant and the gendered space she occupies lies on the margins of the patrilineal system of reproduction that is controlled through female seclusion within a propertied patron’s family, leading to a de facto functional separation between the reproductive and the social and musical heterosexuality of wife and courtesan respectively.

Few have tried to look behind the surface, to investigate life stories of tawa’ifs (or begums for that matter). Oldenburg did collect life stories, and she learned that some married women who observed *purdah* rented rooms in the courtesans’ quarters, coming there to conduct clandestine liaisons.²³ Yet Oldenburg also clearly viewed the world of the courtesans as quite separate from that of wives and far more empowering for women.²⁴ Taking a different tack about courtesans and begums in Lucknow, Zainab Cheema shows that the begums frequently employed courtesans for festive and ritual occasions. Both men and women sponsored public and private entertainments featuring courtesans, and Cheema posits a ‘dynamic relationality between begum and courtesan that came to be written out of reformist Indian literature’.²⁵ Ruth Vanita delineates the rich cosmopolitan culture of pre-1857 Lucknow, tracing it back to Mughal Delhi. Relying on Urdu poetry for her primary sources, she too shows ‘dynamic relationality’ among courtesans and others in that precolonial society.²⁶

Courtesans in Hyderabad

Historical material about courtesans in Hyderabad significantly expands our knowledge of courtesans in early modern India. Courtesans had played leading roles in Hyderabad’s history even before the Nizam, Mughal governor of the Deccan province, established his autonomous dynasty there in the mid eighteenth century. Courtesans are linked to the earlier Shia or Irani rulers of the Qutb Shahi sultanate, one of five sultanates succeeding the Bahmani dynasty in the Deccan.

²¹ Petievich, ‘Innovations Pious and Impious’, note 33, pp. 117–18. Schofield, ‘The Courtesan Tale’ and Sreenivasan, ‘Drudges, Dancing Girls, Concubines’, also appear to take this division seriously.

²² She extends her earlier ‘adaptation of a Marxist mode-of-production perspective on the feudally based music-making nexus of male hereditary professional musicians’ to her work on courtesans: Qureshi, ‘Female Agency’, pp. 312, 324.

²³ Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle as Resistance’, p. 264.

²⁴ A satire enacted for Oldenburg mocked the life of married women. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

²⁵ Cheema, ‘Representing the Tawaif and her City’.

²⁶ Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City*, notably explores homosocial and homosexual relationships.

In the late sixteenth and mid seventeenth centuries, when the Qutb Shahi sultans ruled from Golconda Fort, three Hindu courtesans became legendary. According to popular belief, it was because of one, Bhagmati, that Hyderabad city was founded in 1590–91. The prince Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, who became the fifth Qutb Shahi ruler, had been crossing the river Musi to visit his beloved Bhagmati, who lived south of the river. Founding a city there, he named it Bhagyanagar. When Bhagmati became his queen and took the name Hyder Mahal, he renamed the city Hyderabad. Then under the seventh Qutb Shahi ruler, Abdullah Qutb Shah (r. 1625–72), Taramati and Pemamati (possibly sisters) were the favourite performers at the court. Taramati constructed a caravanserai that still stands, and; it is used today for cultural performances. The tombs of these Hindu courtesans lie among the royal Qutb Shahi tombs near Golconda Fort. We know more about the courtesan and literary figure Chanda Bai or Bibi, to whom the second Nizam, Nizam Ali Khan, gave the court title Mah Laqa Bai. She lived from 1768 to 1824–25 and built tombs for her mother and herself at the foot of Moula Ali Hill, a sacred site just outside the city that includes buildings erected by both Hindu and Muslim nobles.²⁷ Still other courtesans founded and patronised Hindu temples in and around Hyderabad.²⁸

Court cases from Hyderabad State in the 1870s contain fascinating material about the lifestyles of Hyderabad's nineteenth-century courtesans. These women had access to leading political figures and exercised considerable financial and social independence. Living and working in close proximity to state bureaucrats and nobles, they clearly were intimate participants in urban life and political affairs, sometimes as powerful figures in court, sometimes as property owners, and always as confidants, gatherers and dispensers of information. The Hyderabad courtesans earned for themselves but also for others. They were regulated in important ways, first by their own establishment heads or 'mothers' and then by officials and employees of the Nizam's household administration and the state judicial system, including the Diwan or Prime Minister himself.

Hyderabad, a princely state never incorporated into British India, followed a system of household administration modelled on that of the Mughal empire. The household administration was composed of various *karkhanahs* (units) headed by *sar-rishtahdars* (recordkeepers) and *darogahs* (managers). These Mughlai

²⁷ Her family, she claimed, was descended from Sayyids on both sides; her grandmother was in Ahmedabad in Gujarat but was forced to migrate to the Deccan. Her mother and elder stepsister (fathered by a Rajput prince) became dancing girls and then became honourable through concubinage and marriage to important nobles in Hyderabad. (Mah Laqa Bai's elder stepsister reportedly became the third wife of the Diwan Ruknuddaula, whose tomb is near that of Mah Laqa Bai and her mother). An oral history claims she was born a Hindu in the Bogulkunta/Nagula Chinta area where Bhagmati lived. See Kugle, 'Mah Laqa Bai', and Leonard, 'Hindu Temples', for more details.

²⁸ See Leonard, 'Hindu Temples', especially about the temple in Keshovgiri. Chenna, alleged to be mistress to the father of Vikar-ul Umra, one of the Paigah nobles, granted the main garden; other names for the locality are Chanarai ghat or Chandryanaguda. Chenna's *samadhi* is said to be there. The twa'if Venkata gave a mango garden; and another twa'if, Padagala Mutam, gave a garden.

(Mughal style) karkhanahs included stores and supplies, animals, factories and production, and court life and household administration. One section in the court and household administrative unit was the *Arbab-i Nishat* or Department of Enjoyment. It included tawa'ifs, usually translated as courtesans or dancing and singing girls, *qawwalayan* (musicians) and *bhands* or *bahrupiyas* (mimics, buffoons). This karkhanah was in the *Sarf-i Khas*, the Nizam's private estate; it was not part of the Diwani administration modelled on that of British India being gradually established in the state under the Diwan Salar Jung (from 1853). However, the Diwan was also the Regent after 1869, as the sixth Nizam Mahbub Ali Khan came to the throne then as a boy of three and gained full powers only in 1884. Thus Salar Jung presided over the *Sarf-i Khas* as well as the evolving modern administration. For the Diwani administration, Salar Jung imported non-*mulkis* (outsiders, as opposed to *mulkis* or countrymen) from British India. His was a balancing act, as he tried to preserve the older Mughlai administration and its personnel while setting up a new Diwani one with new personnel, and he slowly began to implement changes in the Mughlai *Sarf-i Khas* before his death in 1883.²⁹ The tawa'ifs adapted themselves to the changing administrative policies and practices, utilizing both old and new systems and personnel as they continued to play prominent roles in court and urban politics.

There were three kinds of tawa'ifs: *derahdari* (tent dwellers), mobile and elite women who performed for Nawabs and others highly placed in the court; *chakladari* (fixed place), women in houses in a locality, for middle class patrons including performances at weddings in their residences; and *bazari* (in the bazars). Just as military men and Mughlai officials in the Deccan and south India could move from place to place, tawa'ifs could move from place to place, sometimes of their own accord,³⁰ sometimes to perform for a ruler as he moved about his kingdom, and sometimes sent by one ruler to another. For example, in the early nineteenth century the Nawab of Arcot requested the Nizam of Hyderabad to send some dancing girls from Hyderabad to his court in Madras, since dancing girls of a high calibre were unavailable in Madras.³¹

The *Arbab-i Nishat* Persian records in Hyderabad concern primarily the second, *chakladari*, category, tawa'ifs residing in houses presided over by senior courtesans, usually termed 'mothers' in these records (see Figure 1). Thus '*Ilaqah* Pyaraji Bakhsh' denoted the house of those dependent on, and possibly related to, Pyaraji Bakhsh. The 'daughters' were paid salaries, *mamulat* or annual salaries, and sometimes payments for specific events.³² The dancing girls gave receipts to the darogah or his agent when they received their dues, and there were

²⁹ Leonard, 'Hyderabad', for details.

³⁰ Kugle, 'Mah Laqa Bai'.

³¹ Arcot Diwani Records, 'Persian correspondence on behalf of the Nawabs of Arcot with the Hyderabad Vakils', Madras, India, consulted in the 1970s.

³² For late nineteenth century photos of dancing girls in Hyderabad, see Khan, *Images of Hyderabad*, pp. 73–75.

Figure 1
Nautch Dancers, Hyderabad, 1860s



Source: Photo taken by Hooper and Western, from the Archaeological Survey of India Collections. Courtesy of the British Library.

mutasaddis, accountants or clerks, keeping those records. The courtesans earned by their skills but also generated income for others, from their ‘mothers’ to the managers and accountants employed by and paid primarily by the state. The Arbab-i Nishat employees, in the old system, frequently earned commissions from the tawa’ifs’ performances. These employees’ positions were coveted ones and seem to have been hereditary; at least, managers and clerks claimed the right to appoint their successors.

Hyderabad State’s Arbab-i Nishat records include case files of numerous disputes involving courtesans and other performers and their managers and record-keepers. These cases were resolved by various officials, courts and committees, not only by Sarf-i Khas officials but sometimes by the Diwan himself, the Prime Minister of Hyderabad. The changing policies and practices in the late nineteenth century provide tantalizing glimpses of the lives of courtesans and also of those supervising, paying, employing and sometimes marrying them.

How were disputes resolved in early nineteenth century in Hyderabad, before the changes initiated by successive Diwans, most especially by Salar Jung in the

1870s? Judicial powers in the rural areas had rested with the *subahdars* (provincial governors) or sometimes with *qazis* (Muslim clerics) and *panchayats* (Hindu caste elders) if decisions involved Islamic or Hindu civil law. In the city, the *kotwal* or chief of police maintained order and called upon *qazis* or the headmen of various communities to adjudicate disputes. Judgements were issued verbally, and enforcement could be evaded by taking refuge in the residence of a powerful noble patron. Many disputes were submitted directly to the Diwan and were decided by him.³³ As courts were established (the Diwan Munir-ul Mulk established an Adalat Diwani Buzurg in 1821–22) and procedures extended to new areas and classes of people, people thought it an insult to resort to the courts and continued to submit cases to the Diwan directly, leading the Diwan Siraj-ul Mulk to establish a court at his palace in 1846–47. This was first termed the Chini Khanah (for the room in which it met) and later the Adalat Diwani Khurd (small causes, in contrast to *buzurg* or causes involving higher monetary claims).³⁴ When Salar Jung, Siraj-ul Mulk's nephew, became Diwan in 1853, he set up an elaborate Diwani civil and criminal judicial system and ordered all to comply with the decisions of the courts, removing himself from judicial decision-making.³⁵ Munir-ul Mulk, Siraj-ul Mulk and Salar Jung were all members of the leading Shia noble family in Hyderabad, a family that had earlier served the Adil Shahi sultan of Bijapur.

One bundle of records in section R1 of the Andhra Pradesh Archives, *basta* 122, with files of 1288 Hijri through 1301 Hijri (1871–85), documents changing practices and recurring conflicts within the Department of Enjoyment. Many of the disputes were resolved by the Diwan as well as by various courts, including the Majlis Daryaft, or Inquiry Committee, established especially for the Arbab-i Nishat after Diwani reforms began to have an impact on the older administration. The sarishtahdar of the Arbab-i Nishat in the late nineteenth century was Durga Parshad, a Kayasth (of the Bhatnagar subcaste) in the old city of Hyderabad, whose palace was just south of Mahbub ki Mehndi, the locality where most Muslim dancing girls resided in the nineteenth century.³⁶ Several darogahs reported to him, including the

³³ Rao, *Bustan-i Asafiyah* I, pp. 263–64.

³⁴ In 1231 Fasli (1821–22), Munir-ul Mulk established the Adalat-i Buzurg, in Hyderabad city. In 1247 Fasli (1838), Raja Chandu Lal set up another court for criminal cases, appointing Moulvi Karamat Ali from the British Indian United Provinces as judge. Karamat Ali prepared a code for judicial procedures for Hyderabad that directed cases from magistrates to the Prime Minister for a final decision. In 1256 Fasli (1847), Siraj-ul Mulk extended judicial appointments in the districts and also the powers of the city civil courts, putting magistrates on salary for both civil and criminal cases. His regulations prohibited the amputation of hands and the practice of *sati* and limited the payment of interest to 1 per cent. Rao, *Bustan* I, pp. 265–67; also Muttalib, *Administration of Justice*, pp. 53, 62–63, 113–14, 121–22, 152–53, 189–90.

³⁵ For the Diwani judicial system (especially from the 1880s and 1890s), see Muttalib, *Administration of Justice* (but he barely mentions the judicial systems of the Nizam's Sarf-i Khas and those of the leading nobles, *jagirdars* and *samasthan* rulers, the latter being Hindu feudals from earlier times).

³⁶ Hindu dancing girls had dominated an earlier centre in Nagulachinta, further south and east by Shahalibanda.

darogan Mama Sharifa, and they traditionally got a share of the rewards given to musicians and dancing girls. However, from about 1288 Hijri (1871–72), this and other customary practices were being challenged as the Diwan tried to change the old Mughlai practices. While removing himself from the Diwani judicial system, we will see that the Diwan continued to play a major role in adjudication of disputes within the Sarf-i Khas Arbab-i Nishat.

The residential proximity of the courtesans to leading state officials and nobles in Hyderabad's old walled city, to those interacting with them in the Arbab-i Nishat records, is quite striking. Locating the residences and offices of these leading figures in the old city reinforces the sense of interconnection and intimacy among them, Muslim and Hindu, Sunni and Shia, bureaucrats and performers in various departments of the Mughlai Sarf-i Khas administration. Figure 2, based on the guide to a set of invaluable old city maps,³⁷ illustrates this. The Nizam's palace, Chau Mohalla, was just west of the Mecca Masjid and south of the Ladh Bazar (Bangles Bazar) that ran from Char Minar, the centre of the old city, to the Masjid Chowk and on to the Purana Pul, the old bridge to Golconda Fort. Mahbub ki Mehndi, the dancing girls' locality (named for Nizam Mahbub Ali Khan, who enjoyed visiting it), was north of that road toward the Musi River, and Mama Sharifa, *darogan* in the Arbab-i Nishat, built a prominent *ashurkhanah* (shrine for Shia relics) just north of Purana Pul Road in Husaini Alam between the palaces of two Muslim Nawabs (Nasib Uddaula and Shahamat Jang). The Diwan Salar Jung's palace and properties were located just south of the Musi river and east of Mahbub ki Mehndi. The palace of the sar-rishtahdar of the Arbab-i Nishat Raja Durga Parshad Bhatnagar was just south of Mahbub ki Mehndi. Bhands or bahrupiyas resided slightly west of Mahbub ki Mehndi along Bahrupiya Lane and Bahrupiya Kacchi Street. The Malwala Palace, home to Rajas Indarjit, Prithvi Raj and Shiv Raj of the Mathur Kayasth noble family,³⁸ men who often headed up inquiries into Arbab-i Nishat disputes, was south of the Diwan's establishment, in close proximity to it, and other Bhatnagar Kayasth employees of the Arbab-i Nishat resided there too, along Chowk Maidan Khan. Temples, durgahs, ashurkhanas, mosques, and cemeteries were scattered throughout the old city, and a few major ones appear in Figure 2.³⁹

Policies and practices in the Nizam's Sarf-i Khas changed slowly from 1869 on, but the residential proximity of those involved helped administrators and employees alike to learn about and adapt to the reforms.⁴⁰ Figure 2 reflects political relations in the Mughlai administration, before the shifting of Diwani administrative offices to the new city of Hyderabad developing north of the Musi river in the late

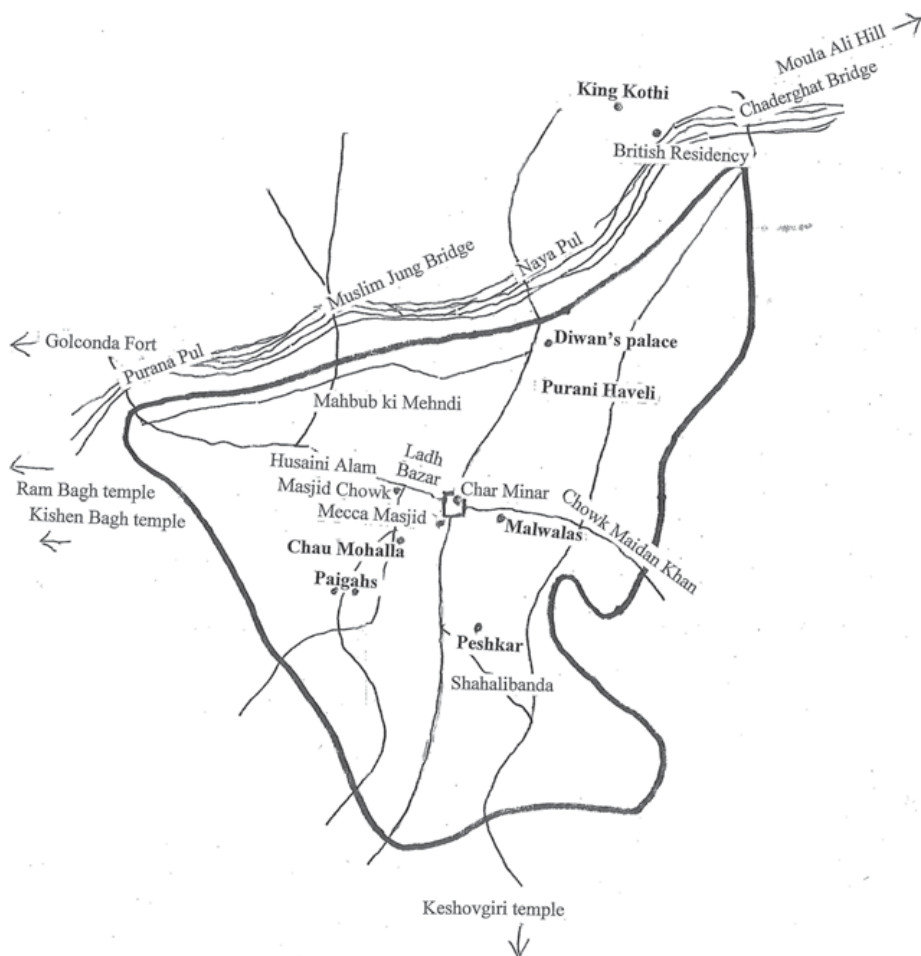
³⁷ Munn, *Hyderabad Municipal Survey*.

³⁸ See Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste*, for this leading noble family in Hyderabad. The Malwalas kept the revenue records for the eastern half of the state, while another Hindu noble family, the Maharashtrian Brahmin Rae Rayans, kept the revenue records for the western half.

³⁹ For more on old city neighbourhoods, see Leonard, 'Indo-Muslim Culture in Hyderabad'.

⁴⁰ See Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste*, pp. 138–40, for more details.

Figure 2
Key localities, residences, and buildings in Hyderabad's old city



Source: Adapted from Leonard Munn, *Hyderabad Municipal Survey, Hyderabad (1911–13)* index to city area sheets 1–128.

nineteenth century. The British Residency, built north of the Musi in 1803–06, and the building of new bridges across the Musi in 1839 and 1857⁴¹ began to reorient and diffuse personal and political relationships, especially since the numerous non-mulki Diwani officials all settled in the new city. Yet the Diwan remained in the old city and continued to be accessible to the largely hereditary employees of the Sarf-i Khas, including the courtesans. The Diwans who succeeded Salar Jung

⁴¹ The Chaderghat bridge linked Dabirpura to the Residency in 1839, the Naya Pul bridge linked the Char Minar to Afzal Ganj in 1857, and the Muslim Jung bridge linked Mahub ki Mehndi to Begum Bazar in 1897: all reflected the growth of the city to the north and the pull of Secunderabad, the British cantonment town: Alam, *Hyderabad-Secunderabad*, p. 10.

included his own son and members of the Paigah and Peshkar noble families,⁴² families that also resided in the old city, in Shah Gunj/Dud Baoli and Shahalibanda. The sixth Nizam, Mahbub Ali Khan (r. 1869–1911), after whom Mahbub ki Mehndi was named, built a new palace, Purani Haveli, just south of the Diwan's establishment, and the seventh Nizam, Osman Ali Khan (r. 1911–48) moved to King Kothi palace, near the Residency, only in 1912.

Change and the Arbab-i Nishat as Mediator and Protector

Given the close connections among those clustered in the old walled city, political access and influence continued to empower courtesans and others working within the Sarf-i Khas well into the twentieth century. Changes were occurring, however. Several Arbab-i Nishat cases concerned rights to positions and the power to appoint people, from performers to managers to accountants. In 1871, the darogah Sarfaraz Ali reported that darogah Ghulam Rasul and darogah Mama Sharifa were giving payments not to the musicians actually entitled to them, but to others. Sarfaraz Ali asked Durga Parshad, the sar-rishtahdar, for the official lists of the musicians (although musicians and dancers usually worked together, this case involved only the musicians). Durga Parshad failed to send official lists, but the matter was referred to Raja Indarjit, the Malwala Kayasth nobleman in charge of the Majlis Daryaft of the Sarf-i Khas. The two offenders were ordered to repay the sums involved, and they had to sell some of their property to do so.⁴³

Another case involved a clerk in Sarfaraz Ali's office, one Ganesh Parshad (a Kayasth, like the sar-rishtahdar). He wrote from Lucknow in 1872, asking that his salary be sent by *hundi* (long distance credit instrument), as promised by the office of the Taqsim-i Mohallat, so that his marriage could be completed and he could return to duty. His gold-speckled sealed letter addressed to the Diwan was sent via Raja Indarjit (above). Some five years later Raja Prithvi Raj, relative of and successor to Raja Indarjit as head of the Majlis Daryaft, was queried by the Diwan's secretary about Ganesh Parshad. The reply identified him as a clerk under Mama Sharifa in the Toshakhanah (bedding, fabrics, clothing) who had been earning 100 rupees a month. However, according to the Diwan Salar Jung's orders in 1869–70, a large reduction of palace salaries (of 2,958 rupees) meant that Ganesh Parshad's whole salary should have been stopped, i.e., his job had been lost.⁴⁴ Yet another set of papers reported that after the ousting of *naib* or deputy darogah Ghulam Rasul and Ganesh Parshad, Mata Parshad started an audit and inquiry

⁴² These were the Sunni Muslim Paigahs Sir Asman Jah, 1887–94, and Sir Vikar-ul Umra, 1894–1901, and the Hindu Khatri Peshkars Maharaja Narinder Parshad, 1883–84, and Maharajah Kishen Parshad, 1901–12.

⁴³ Arbab-i Nishat, *basta* (bundle) 122, section R 1 in the Andhra Pradesh State Archives (APSA), Hyderabad, India, file dated 1288 H./1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1289 H./1 and 2.

and appointed Ram Sahai as clerk. The same Mata Parshad then sent a memorandum to Shiv Raj, son of the Malwala Raja Indarjit and then presiding over the Adalat Diwani Khurd in the Diwan's residence, claiming that Mama Sharifa had refused to pay his salary of 300 rupees.⁴⁵ These cases tell us that the Diwan was making changes, asking for official records of employees and payments, but that his orders were slow to be implemented in the Sarf-i Khas. We also note that a high-ranking Kayasth noble family controlled the Majlis Daryaft and was influential with the Diwan; the leaders of this family likely interceded on behalf of other Kayasths in the old city as administrative changes began to impact the Mughlai administration there.

Whereas previously the darogahs in the Arbab-i Nishat could assign work and pay people as they wished, without officially recording their names or duties, new rules and procedures were instituted in about 1874. According to a case involving five employees working for Mama Sharifa from 1867 but ousted by Durga Parshad in 1874, the new rules meant that even darogahs had to be named and collect their own salaries. The five ousted employees, clerks and attendants, wanted to give their jobs to certain others, but according to the new rules it was the sar-rishtahdar's decision to appoint and pay all employees, and employees had to be named in official records. The five ousted men claimed back wages ranging from five rupees four annas to thirteen rupees twelve annas, and they pressed their cases to the Majlis Daryaft presided over by Prithvi Raj. The Madar-ul Moham's secretary Syed Abdul Razzak corresponded with Prithvi Raj about this case, and in 1877 the Diwan approved of the oustings and of new appointments made to two of the positions involved. The contested cases took three years to resolve.⁴⁶

Money was an issue in almost every case and the tawa'ifs themselves were most often the petitioners. Courtesans could, at least in some instances, take their cases directly to the Diwan, appealing to him as the initiator of new practices and benefiting from them. A striking instance concerned the dancing girl Miraji from Pyaraji Bakhsh's house who petitioned the Madar-ul Moham (Diwan) in 1876–77. Miraji wrote:

Previously the darogah was Ghulam Rasul, and on dancing occasions he required me to give him some share of my pay. I presented myself in your office and you ordered me not to give that amount. Then Riza Ali, the next darogah, tried to use the same old system, but by your order I didn't give him any share. I attended some Id occasions and expected to be paid, an amount of 38 rupees and 8 annas, but Riza Ali didn't pay me, saying that the amount was equal to his share. I want my money and I want the demands to be stopped.

A year later the Diwan responded, writing to Riza Ali Beg: 'When there is no procedure for taxes from tawa'ifs, according to Ghulam Rasul who also stopped

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1290 H./3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1293 H./7.

this, why have you taken her salary as customary mamulat? It is not necessary. Pay her and send the receipt you take from her to me.⁴⁷

Many cases were filed by tawa'ifs in the Arbab-i Nishat's Majlis Daryaft. Most of them were filed by 'mothers' whose tawa'ifs ran away with or were taken away by men employed by the state, and in case after case those men's salaries were docked to reimburse the 'mother'. For example, in 1876 the Madar-ul Moham himself ordered the pay of the Postmaster of Hyderabad, Ahmadullah Beg, to be docked seven rupees a month and the money sent to the petitioning mother.⁴⁸ One file summarised the details of 11 pending cases in 1875–76, summarised in Appendix I. The list was sent by the darogah Riza Ali Beg to the Arbab-i Nishat office and the Majlis Daryaft, giving the date of initiation, the names of the parties involved, the nature of the case, and its resolution.⁴⁹ While other texts or oral histories are not available to contextualise these cases further, even the few details provided allow important generalisations, and a few of the people in these cases show up in the two more fully documented case files discussed below.

Strikingly, in the Appendix I cases, tawa'ifs, especially those who were mothers, claimed rights and had their claims honoured in a systematic and fairly efficient manner. The cases almost all view tawa'ifs as property, investments for whose loss the mothers (and in one instance a father) should be compensated. The mothers filed claims not just for the return of their daughters but also for the jewels the women took with them. The daughters were never ordered to return, and the men taking them seemed to be respectable, sons and grandsons of well-known figures in the city and salaried officials from whom compensations could be sought. The compensations ranged from 60 to 72 rupees a month and the jewels were consistently valued at 5000 rupees. Since the periods for which monthly payments were assessed were not indicated, the jewels seem to have been the larger monetary loss. The heads of the houses, the mothers, sometimes met together to decide a case, and both they and their house residents were expected to maintain certain standards (Cases 7 and 9). In Case 10, a man had loaned money to a courtesan but was entitled to its return (and he pressed his case in the Diwani Court, in the evolving modern, not the Sarf-i Khas, administration). In eight of the 11 cases, the Majlis Daryaft of the Sarf-i Khas made the decisions, with the Prime Minister making one decision and expected to make another (Cases 1 and 4, involving relatives of high-ranking individuals). Without comparison to earlier case records one cannot be sure of earlier practices and outcomes, but certainly tawa'ifs actively utilised the new Majlis Daryaft, seeking and achieving beneficial outcomes.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1293 H./9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1293 H./8.

⁴⁹ The darogah remarked in his covering letter that some cases were still pending and some final decisions were being appealed. Those appealing argued that the Majlis was not competent to decide cases, but Riza Ali stated that the decisions had been reached after thorough consultation and there should be no further delay in their implementation. *Ibid.*, 1293 H./6.

Two complicated cases produced voluminous records and fuller details about the lives of courtesans, their employers, and their lovers. Following up Case 2, Prithvi Raj of the Majlis Daryaft conducted a lengthy inquiry into Phandaji's loss of her daughter Salar Bakhsh to Mohammed Karimuddin.⁵⁰ Mohammed Karimuddin signed an agreement dated in 1874 to purchase the *tift* (child) Salar Bakhsh, daughter of Phandaji, for 60 rupees monthly and a stipend for clothes and other things to her mother. This agreement was also signed by four men working in the Arbab-i Nishat office, and it included Mohammed's promise to have her dance only and not before others save his father. Two years later Phandaji pressed for the 5000 rupees 'as agreed', and the following year Salar Bakhsh appealed, seeking not to give the 5000 rupees. There followed a long letter from Mohammed Alimuddin, father of Mohammed Karimuddin, explaining this affair.⁵¹

In about 1871–72, my son Mohammed Karimuddin fell in love with Salar Bakhsh. I advised against this and told them to stop; further, I sent word to Phandaji that my son was not financially competent to take money, loans, from others. But they continued. Salar Bakhsh took my son and hid him in the Amberpet house of her old wet nurse, and after some time I sent for the police and disowned my son; he went and lived in Nampally with her. I sent word to her mother that I had disowned him and that for the good of my son and her daughter she should stop them. Then Salar Bakhsh had a baby, and on its *chilla* (40th day ceremony), another person and Phandaji brought jewels from the *chobdar* [attendant] of the Arbab-i Nishat, and my son also brought a golden *pazeb* [foot ornament] from someone. When these jewels were in their hands, they wouldn't return them but asked for a written agreement for 7,400 rupees. The agreement was negotiated down to 5000 rupees and signed and she came and lived with my son again, returning most of the jewels. When I came to know of this I went to Riza Ali Beg, asking how such an agreement had been signed without my knowledge. He couldn't answer but offered to dispose of it if even two or three thousand rupees were given to her [Phandaji]. I asked Phandaji how she did this, having earlier agreed not to ask for money, and she said that for the sake of her daughter and the baby's future we are doing it now. I want to comment that my son is her *dashtah* [keep], not the usual pattern but vice versa. Now, having some disagreement, they have separated but they still press the case, how is that possible?

In the final papers in this file, Mohammed Karimuddin wrote that Salar Bakhsh had not appeared to give evidence for nine months, so could the case please be

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1291 H./4. The darogan Mama Sharifa assisted with the inquiry.

⁵¹ The father, Alimuddin, had retained two vakils or lawyers to represent him in this matter, as presumably he was being pressed to pay the money on behalf of his son. Alimuddin is further identified as 'ilaqah Mandozi, possibly meaning he was employed by the prominent Mandozai Afghan family in Hyderabad.

dropped. Phandaji and Salar Bakhsh protested that they had not filed this case, they themselves had never claimed 5000 rupees, other people had filed it in their names. The last paper stated that because the girl did not give evidence the case was dropped in 1889. Seemingly the son had returned to the father and the daughter to the mother by the end of this case, but we see Arbab-i Nishat officials centrally involved in its conduct, attempting to safeguard the interests of the young courtesan as well as the interests of her mother. It is also clear that decisions by the Majlis Daryaft did matter and could be enforced.

The last case discussed here concerns inheritance among *tawa'ifs* and again shows the role of the Arbab-i Nishat as mediator and protector. Some of the actors come from Case 9 in Appendix I, but their claims to property highlight particular courtesan lineages, for want of a better term, and disputed lines of descent or affiliation within the lineages.⁵² The case opens in 1876 with papers from Roshen Bakhsh and others terming themselves protégés of Amir Bakhsh and complaining about Imtiaz Bakhsh, their current guardian.⁵³ They say that Imtiaz Bakhsh has a *maqta* (grant) in Aurangabad and other properties, shops and a *haveli* (residence), but that she had mortgaged them all 'while they were in her charge', implying that they were the property of the collective. She beat them and threatened to shoot them and guarded them so they could not petition the head of the Arbab-i Nishat (but see Case 9); she was keeping them in a rundown palace. The implication is that they, who should be heirs to Amir Bakhsh's property, want to protect it from Imtiaz Bakhsh. A letter from one Afzal Bakhsh followed. She called herself a resident of Amir Bakhsh's house, the house in which Imtiaz Bakhsh was currently living. Imtiaz Bakhsh had ordered her to leave the house but Afzal Bakhsh wanted to stay there, contending that although Mukkadam Jung gave her 300 rupees a month for 14 years,⁵⁴ she gave all that to Amir Bakhsh, her then guardian (mother, in other cases).

Roshen Bakhsh and the others wrote again in 1877 to the Prime Minister himself:

Afzal Bakhsh lived in the house of her own lover in the time of Amir Bakhsh and now wants to return to Amir Bakhsh's house. Although the *biradari ahil tawa'ifs* [the brotherhood of the *tawa'ifs*] said no, it was impossible for her to return, you, the Prime Minister, ordered me to give Afzal Bakhsh a room in Amir Bakhsh's house. Instead, I gave Afzal Bakhsh a whole empty house, although that was not the custom of our community. Afzal Bakhsh had been given her

⁵² See Leonard, 'From Goswami Rajas', on Goswami ascetics and their *maths* or monasteries, where successors can similarly be either biological or adopted/bought.

⁵³ Arbab-i Nishat, *basta* 122, APSA, 1293 H./5.

⁵⁴ The Arab Mukkadam Jang's *makbarah* (tomb) and *kabristan* (graveyard) appear on Fateh Darwaza Road, while his palace and two separate *zanana* buildings are adjacent to it along a street named at its southern end Mukkadam Jang Topkhana Street and at its northern end Mukkadam Jang Deorhi Street: Munn, *Municipal Survey*, city area sheets no. 90 and 75.

own house with the late Mukkadam Jung in Fateh Darwaza, and she keeps a person in Baiji's house [presumably Amir Bakhsh's house] and lives near the Deorhi of Nawab Mutahavar Jung. Why does she need our house? And she is building a wall there too, she may rent it out. I gave her a whole house, while you ordered only one room. Lenders are pressing me to repay loans, why have you issued such orders?

Afzal Bakhsh's counter letter in that same year threw further light on these conflicting claims as she told the history of the house:

Amir Bakhsh was first in the house, gaining fame in the city, and then she died. Second came Pyaraji, who after the death of the fifth Nizam [1869] married Syed Abdur Razzaq [secretary to the Prime Minister, see above] and took to him the carpets and other furnishings of the house. In the presence of Imtiaz Bakhsh also but against her will, he lived here in the house too, and she, Pyaraji, was famous. The third girl, Imtiaz Bakhsh, also lived in the same house but then married Abdulla Bakhshi and went and lived in his house. But then Roshen Bakhsh, with the help of the office of the Arbab-i Nishat, conspired against me, taking a blank paper with stamps of mine and Roshen Bakhsh and saying there that the property was Pyaraji's. But it was mine. I asked, if the property was Pyaraji's, why was it left to me until now, but they didn't listen, there was corruption. Thousands of rupees of my salary I gave to the first two named, but now I have lost the house....

The subsequent papers take the case down to 1881–82. Although many 'facts' are disputed, it appears that after the death of Amir Bakhsh, Imtiaz Bakhsh took out a loan of 7000 rupees and also mortgaged the house for 6000 rupees and built shops by Char Minar; then Imtiaz Bakhsh married Abdulla Bakhshi and left the mortgaged house and the loan repayments to Roshen Bakhsh, who asserts that Imtiaz Bakhsh's maqta in Aurangabad and her building in Husaini Alam were also mortgaged. Afzal Bakhsh at one point found a *hukm zabanee* or verbal order from the 'Kanchan Kacheri' insufficient and requested a written order from the Majlis Daryaft or other competent authority from the Arbab-i Nishat.⁵⁵ Later Afzal Bakhsh wrote that she now had half the portion of the house and that Roshen Bakhsh was

⁵⁵ The Kanchan Kacheri was a 'unique court' dealing with civil and criminal cases involving the prostitutes of the city; apparently these were bazari or street prostitutes, from whom the chaklahdari courtesans would have distanced themselves. Muttalib, *Administration of Justice*, pp. 315–316, states that it was presided over by a woman *mohtimima* or superintendent and employed a *jamadar* or policeman, four clerks and some *harkaras* (messengers) and *jawans* (constables). Those accused could defend themselves and produce witnesses, and the decisions of the Kacheri were binding. The official Kacheri language was Persian, and the court ceased functioning in the early twentieth century. Muttalib cites Mir Basit Ali Khan, *Tarikh-e-Adalat-e-Asafi*, pp. 305–06, and Abdul Haleem Nasarullah Khan, *Tarikh-e-Deccan*.

trying to saddle her with half the mortgage and loan repayments, whereas she had only one-fourth of the other shares (the four sharers are Pyaraji Bakhsh, Imtiaz Bakhsh, Roshen Bakhsh and Afzal Bakhsh, with the first two married and living elsewhere). Afzal Bakhsh argued that if she was to be responsible for half the debts, she wanted half the shares, including half of the girls in the house. Then Roshen Bakhsh complained that she was being asked to be responsible for the shops by Char Minar that Imtiaz Bakhsh had mortgaged but that Afzal Bakhsh, who now had at least half of Amir Bakhsh's house, wanted to claim as well. Roshen Bakhsh, unable to afford the repayment of loans or mortgages on the shops, asked Shiv Raj (the Malwala nobleman again), heading the Majlis Daryaft which had become involved in the case along with *vakils* (lawyers) representing the various claimants, to give the shops to Afzal Bakhsh. However, the Prime Minister then asked for a new statement from the Arbab-i Nishat about the dates of the mortgages and sales deeds and details about those named in them. Afzal Bakhsh was also pressing for this information from the Taqsim-i Tankhwah Mohallat Mubarak, and she wrote to the Kotwal of the city and to Shiv Raj asking that certain very expensive jewels be returned to her, ending the latter request with a poem (courtesans often wrote their own poems and songs). The final paper was a plea from Roshen Bakhsh. She wrote that creditors were pressing her, that details were with the Arbab-i Nishat, and that since Afzal Bakhsh had been given the three shops, her income was not sufficient for her children or dependents. She begged that her house be unmortgaged and Imtiaz Bakhsh be required to repay the outstanding loans.

In these nineteenth-century Hyderabad cases, we see that a mother could acquire considerable property in addition to her house, obtaining loans and mortgages and investing in commercial properties. Marriages and/or affairs could temporarily or permanently threaten a protégé's or daughter's claims to property, and marriages were not uncommon. Tawa'ifs evidently could become begums, contrary to the assertions of many scholars. Sometimes courtesans found security in marriages or long-term relationships, but a courtesan could leave debts behind that fell upon her successors. These successors fought each other to gain the properties (including other tawa'ifs living in a house) or fought to shed the properties and escape from debts. Again a decision made by the mothers as a group was invoked, and again and again the officials of the Sarf-i Khas and the Prime Minister himself played roles attempting to mediate the conflicts. Showing political astuteness in adapting to the changing practices as Diwani administrative practices replace the former Mughlai karkhanah ones, one courtesan (Afzal Baksh) turned away a once-authoritative verbal order and demanded an official written notice. Strikingly, the Prime Minister's secretary, Syed Abdul Razzak, married another leading courtesan in this last case.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Sayad Abd-ur-Razzak Sahib's large residence was just off Khokawari Street south of Mehabub ki Mehndi: Munn, *Municipal Survey*, city area sheet no. 44.

Hyderabad's Arbab-i Nishat records, in fact, show that a boundary between courtesans and begums was far from rigid or impermeable. They featured several tawa'ifs who became wives and many instances of women running away with lovers; in the latter cases we do not learn if they become wives or concubines. In the complicated case of succession to property in Hyderabad (Amir Bakhsh, Pyaraji Bakhsh, Imtiaz Bakhsh, Roshen Bakhsh and Afzal Bakhsh), two women moved out of the house into marriages and one into a long-term relationship, yet they retained close connections to the house and other tawa'ifs, one even successfully reclaiming financial interests in the properties.

All of the details in the many cases discussed above and in Appendix I convey a sense of how closely the world of the courtesans intersected with those of the Diwani as well as the Mughlai officials of the state. Tawa'ifs and officials at all levels in both older and newer administrations knew each other intimately and negotiated conflicts as the older Mughlai policies and practices began to be replaced by policies and practices introduced from the Diwani administration. In Hyderabad, the Mughal state's cosmopolitan bureaucratic culture lived on, continuing to integrate diverse individuals and groups into the life of the court and the city.

Conclusion

We can now distinguish among the different ways the Mughal and Indo-Muslim states, the British colonial state, and the modern Indian state have related to courtesans, who still have a distinctive presence in Indian society. The Hyderabad cases concerning courtesans expand our knowledge of courtesans in early modern India in important ways. We see that precolonial Indian princely states, those governed by Mughal emperors, nizams and nawabs, Rajput and Maharashtrian and Punjabi maharajas and rajas, featured courtesans working primarily within state bureaucracies. Courtesans were significant participants in court life and state politics, political players along with other members of the elite. Under British colonial rule and in modern independent India, courtesans have been understood as prostitutes, their lifestyles and performance traditions stereotyped, homogenised and criminalised.

When the courtesans of Lucknow came under British rule, Oldenburg wrote:⁵⁷

Women, who had once consorted with kings and courtiers, enjoyed a fabulously opulent living, manipulated men and means for their own social and political ends, been the custodians of culture and the setters of fashion trends, were left in an extremely dubious and vulnerable position under the British. 'Singing and dancing girls' was the classification invented to describe them in the civic tax ledgers....

As the Hyderabad records remind us, this was not a new or invented classification—it was an existing Mughlai (and probably much earlier) administrative category.

⁵⁷ Oldenburg, 'Lifestyles', p. 260.

In Lucknow, the equivalent of Hyderabad's Arbab-i Nishat was called the Nishatkhanah,⁵⁸ and similar departments of enjoyment or pleasure existed in many Mughal and post-Mughal Persianate administrations.⁵⁹ Courtesans worked within state bureaucracies but usually under the direct control of courtesan 'mothers', with predominantly male administrators supervising their payments and state-appointed courts and officials arbitrating disputes involving them. Details about the workings of Lucknow's Nishatkhanah were not reflected in Oldenburg's interviews conducted in the late twentieth century,⁶⁰ although Vanita, working with precolonial literary materials on Lucknow, comments that *randi*, a term commonly used for courtesans, meant simply 'unmarried woman' before the late nineteenth century, when it became used to mean prostitute.⁶¹

Under British colonial rule, the position of courtesans changed dramatically, as summarised here. The British and British Indian Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 interpreted courtesans as prostitutes and subjected them to medical inspection and regulation. These were followed by the Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1868, various Cantonment Regulations, and the first Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1923, all of them attempts to regulate prostitution that continued to define courtesans as prostitutes. Scholars of British India have studied disciplinary institutions and practices based on that classification.⁶² The colonial state's efforts coincided with the growing interest of bourgeois leaders of India's nationalist movement in 'devadasi reform' and urban upper caste appropriation of dancing and musical cultural traditions, especially in South India.⁶³

Patronage of cultural performers by princely states followed a different genealogy.⁶⁴ Oldenburg's chief and oldest courtesan informant, Gulbadan, testified that as

⁵⁸ Oldenburg, email communication, 9 April 2012.

⁵⁹ Devidayal, *The Music Room*, pp. 130–31, comments on the book of rules for court performers used in the kingdom of Sajirao Gaekwad of Baroda; this *Kalavana Khatyache Niyam* slotted artistes into categories which determined their salaries, their costumes, when they could take leave, and what they were to perform. The rules were probably modelled on Mughlai or earlier pre-Mughal ones, but Devidayal seems to attribute them to British influence. Neuman, *The Life of Music*, p. 89, wrote that 'female singers were employed like men, at royal courts with a regular salary'.

⁶⁰ Oldenburg gives a good description of the place of courtesans in Lucknow just prior to the British takeover: *The Making of Colonial Lucknow*, pp. 134–38.

⁶¹ Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City*, p. 19.

⁶² Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow*, and Dang, 'Prostitutes, Patrons and the State', pay much attention to the British and British Indian Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864. Legg, 'Stimulation, Segregation and Scandal', discusses later Acts and efforts. Pinch, 'Prostituting the Mutiny', follows his British official sources for North India from the 1850s and classifies most women deposed and arrested as prostitutes.

⁶³ This shift from South Indian devadasis to 'respectable' Bharatanatyam dancers has been shown by Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, among many others.

⁶⁴ In Leonard, 'Courtesans of Hyderabad', I analyse two books that show this and also the shift to patronage by Bombay textile barons who became a 'new breed of maharajas' (Devidayal, *The Music Room*, p. 227). Sampath, *My Name is Gauhar Jaan!* is a biography of Gauhar Jan (1873–1930), a

the standards of the business and particularly of customers declined in Lucknow, she and the famous Akhtari Bai were invited by the Nizam of Hyderabad; Gulbadan also entertained at parties in the Nawab of Rampur's palace.⁶⁵ However, the ethnomusicologists Regula Qureshi and Amelia Macisewski discuss the decline of princely patronage of music and dance (a decline especially severe, and as late as 1971 when the privy purses of the former rulers of the princely states were disallowed or severely cut, breaking agreements made following India's independence in 1947). They discuss the rise of patronage by commercial and industrial magnates and rural feudals, and, most recently, the ambivalent patronage by government institutions and a largely middle-class public.⁶⁶ Qureshi provides a concise overview of the changed circumstances of courtesans since India's independence in 1947. The nationalist reform movement culminated in a ban on salons enforced by police raids, princely states were abolished in 1952, and 'All India Radio, which had consciously taken over musical patronage from the princes, banished all (women) performers "whose private life is a public scandal"'.⁶⁷ The question of Indian state patronage, possible for the hereditary male musicians, was thus resolved soon after 1947 and against customary or hereditary courtesans; 'respectable' women took up singing and dancing traditions.⁶⁸

In the princely state of Hyderabad the tawa'ifs remained prominent well beyond the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁹ Furthermore, despite the presence of a military garrison nearby in Secunderabad, Hyderabad's twin city developed under British military administration, I have found no literature about classification of tawa'ifs as prostitutes and carriers of venereal diseases in Hyderabad. But after Hyderabad's incorporation into India in 1948 and its subsequent merging with the Telugu-speaking portion of formerly British Indian Tamil Nadu in 1956 to form the new state of Andhra Pradesh, that new state amended the Madras Anti-Devadasi Act

courtesan of mixed Indian and European parentage in north India who became the reigning diva among tawa'ifs in Calcutta in the early twentieth century; Gauhar Jan's was almost the first Indian voice to be recorded on the gramophone. Devidayal's *The Music Room*, a semi-autobiographical novel, portrays the world of classical Indian musicians in later twentieth-century India and is a tribute to her teacher, Dhondutai Kulkarni. Kulkarni came from a courtesan community and studied with Alladiya Khan, the late nineteenth century founder of the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana or musical lineage, and with Kesarbai Kerkar (1892–1977), one of India's greatest classical singers.

⁶⁵ Gulbadan was referring to the early or mid twentieth century, not earlier, but Oldenburg found an 1869 article from the *Oudh Akhbar* stating that 'bawds...now...go into Independent states'. Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow*, p. 141.

⁶⁶ Qureshi, 'Female Agency'; Maciszewski, 'Tawa'if, Tourism, and Tales'.

⁶⁷ Qureshi, 'Female Agency', p. 312.

⁶⁸ In Sri Lanka, even traditional male dancers from low caste communities lost out to 'respectable' Kandyan dancers: Reed, *Dance and the Nation*.

⁶⁹ In 1967, friends were going to take me and my husband to see Sartaj, the reigning courtesan of the day in Mahbub ki Mehndi, but her senior musician died and we left Hyderabad before the mourning period ended. A Kayasth friend, Dr Mahender Raj Suxena, advised me against going, saying 'Madame, the art has come down so since the days of the Mughals'.

of 1947. The amended Act criminalised performances by women from ‘hereditary courtesan communities’ at marriages and private social events. As Soneji points out, men associated with these communities could and did claim property and performance rights after the passage of these Acts.⁷⁰

What is the situation of courtesans and their communities in India today?⁷¹ Oldenburg wrote, in the late 1980s, ‘I would argue that these women, even today, are independent and consciously involved in the covert subversion of a male-dominated world; they celebrate womanhood in the privacy of their apartments by resisting and inverting the rules of gender of the larger society of which they are part’.⁷² Unfortunately, recent scholarly work shows a less happy situation, perhaps of independence but of embattled independence and of forced adaptation to new working conditions imposed by the modern Indian state and its cultural apparatus.⁷³

Much remains to be done to capture the histories and voices of India’s courtesans, who struggle today to preserve and practice their arts. The wealth of material from the Hyderabad Arbab-i Nishat records confirms that courtesans were significant participants in that princely state. Members of a non-caste community and part of a cosmopolitan Mughlai bureaucracy, they were women whose art and learning gained them properties and alliances with powerful men. Other findings strengthen the argument that courtesans played significant roles in state and society in pre-colonial times and in other princely states. Certainly colonial and modern India have been less than kind to them and their artistic traditions, but just as certainly we still know too little about courtesans in the past. The recordings of famous courtesans that exist⁷⁴ remind us that their voices still carry far, requesting more attention, more love, less separation from India’s valued artistic traditions.

Appendix I: Summaries of Eleven Pending Cases 1875

1. 1873, Roshenji of ‘ilaqah Navrangji asks Syed Rifai son of Hakim Mir Qurban Ali to return her daughter Omdah Bakhsh and her jewels. Suspended in 1875, the case started again after appeal to the Madar-ul-Moham; the decision was to stop the man’s salary and remit part of it to Roshenji.
2. 1874, Phandaji asks for the salary of Mohammed Karimuddin and for the jewels of Salar Bakhsh, her daughter. Case not yet concluded but an agreement for 5000 rupees and 60 rupees a month has been tentatively reached [a thick separate file is discussed below].

⁷⁰ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, particularly, pp. 111, 154–55.

⁷¹ Leonard, ‘Courtesans of Hyderabad’, briefly discusses the nature of courtesans’ communities today.

⁷² Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle’, p. 261.

⁷³ Qureshi, ‘Female Agency’; Maciszewski, ‘Tawa’if, Tourism, and Tales’.

⁷⁴ CDs accompany two recent books, one featuring Gauhar Jan (Sampath, *My Name is Gauhar Jaan!*) and one with tracks by Begum Akhtar, Zarina Parveen, Chandni and Aruna Devi (as discussed in Qureshi, ‘Female Agency’, and Maciszewski, ‘Tawa’if, Tourism, and Tales’).

3. 1874, Mohanji of 'ilaqah Budaji, asks Ikram Khan, son of the brother of Hamid Khan, to return her daughter Mehtabji and her jewels. The Qazi's office produced a *nikah* (marriage) certificate; the mother accepted the marriage but still claimed 5000 rupees for the jewels. The serrishtahdar Rae Sukh Lal was ordered to stop the man's salary, but Mohanji is still waiting for the money.
4. 1877, Kaminiji, asks Fiaz Ali Khan Bahadur to return her daughter Ilahi Bakhsh and her jewels. But the man is related to Bari Begum Sahib Dilavarunnisa Begum (the Nizam's wife), so the Madar-ul-Moham has been appealed to but without a result yet.
5. n.d., Papaji, asks Ali Hussein, son of Faiziuddaulah, to return Imtiaz Bakhsh and her jewels. The Majlis decided to pay Papaji 72 rupees a month but the decision is being resisted as unreasonable and no money has been turned over yet.
6. n.d., Amumiyan Sahib asks Husamuddin, grandson of Moulvi Akbar Sahib, to return the jewels and the salary of his daughter Madanji. The Majlis decided that the jewels and five months salary should be paid, and this was given by Husamuddin, but it is still in the custody of the Majlis as the father has not come for it yet.
7. 1876, Baguji and other children of Mehtabji of 'ilaqah Chandaji request accommodation. By decision of all the head tawa'ifs (collectively), accommodation was refused, but then an agreement was made to put the petitioners and their salaries in the house of Chandaji if they signed a surety bond regarding their jewels and characters. So far the petitioners have not presented this bond.
8. 1875, Madar Bakhsh requests Ahmed Ullah Baig, Munshi Sadr Topakhanah, to return her daughter Mumin Bakhsh. The decision in 1876 was that he should pay 60 rupees a month to Madar Bakhsh; he signed a statement to do so with his own brothers as witnesses but has not paid.
9. 1875, Roshen Bakhsh and other girls of Imtiaz Bakhsh's house complain of beatings and insufficient food. The Majlis got a written agreement from Imtiaz Bakhsh not to beat them and to give food and announced a penalty of 200 rupees if the agreement was not kept. Since the mistreatment continues, new arrangements must be made.
10. 1873, Zia Ali Saduddin demands that the dancing girl Dilaramji repay the loans he made to her. The Diwani Court decided on repayments of 75 rupees a month but she has not presented herself to make the payments.
11. n.d., Vazir Bakhsh of 'ilaqah Chandaji, Mahbubjiwali [resident of Mahbub ki Mehndi, the dancing girl locality] against her daughter Amir Bakhsh, wanting her to return. The daughter had a pain and was sent to the *kacheri* (office) of the Arbab-i Nishat against her mother's wishes. She was kept there for three or four days and sent home, so there is no case.

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