



The Courtesan Project and the Tawa'ifs' Cultural Commons

SOHINI CHANDA 

ARCHANA PATNAIK 

SUHITA CHOPRA CHATTERJEE

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

RESEARCH ARTICLE

]u[ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

The tawa'ifs were an elite class of performing community engaged in the production of dance, music, and poetry in the form of cultural commons in pre-colonial Lucknow and other princely states. There was a gradual decline in this community's cultural commons throughout the 19th and 20th century. While the performance history of tawa'ifs and their contribution to the art forms of kathak and thumri have been widely explored, there is a sparse understanding of the community's cultural production process, why it was hampered, and if any steps are being undertaken to preserve their cultural resources. Hence, this paper's first objective is to understand the factors that affected the tawa'if community's production of cultural commons. The second objective is to critically analyse a neo-revival project (Courtesan Project) by the Non-Governmental Organization, Sufi Kathak Foundation, and its efforts to re-link kathak and its associated music repertoire with the performing community of tawa'ifs. The arguments will address the gap of academic research on cultural commons produced by tawa'ifs and highlight the neo-revival project's efforts to recreate and reconnect the tawa'ifs' idiosyncratic arts with its community identity. The paper uses cultural commons theory to understand tawa'ifs' production of cultural commons and argues that the loss of desirable community identity, which results in a degraded social value of the community, can lead to a potential social dilemma for the production and maintenance of cultural commons. It further proposes that the Courtesan Project can produce new cultural commons if a community of members with similar interests evolve around its practices.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Sohini Chanda

Indian Institute of Technology
Kharagpur, India

SOHINIC@iitkgp.ac.in

KEYWORDS:

Tawa'ifs; courtesans; cultural
commons; revival; identity;
community

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Chanda, S., Patnaik, A., &
Chatterjee, S. C. (2021). The
Courtesan Project and the
Tawa'ifs' Cultural Commons.
*International Journal of the
Commons*, 15(1), pp. 195–205.
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.5334/
ijc.1073](https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1073)

INTRODUCTION

The socio-historical narrative revolving around hereditary female performers in India is fraught with inconsistencies and erasures (See Brown, 2007; Post, 1987). However, there was a time when these women enjoyed considerable liberty when it came to pursuing education or leading social lives (Post, 1987). This paper reflects upon one such community of performers known as *tawa'ifs* who were “singing and dancing women employed in Indo-Muslim state and noble household establishments, to be significant participants in politics and society” (Leonard, 2014, p. 378). The *tawa'ifs* were preliminary figures of entertainment in the pre-British royal and feudal societal structures over a century (Qureshi, 2006). Hailed as custodians of culture (Srinivasan, 2006), they were exceptionally talented artists and critical exponents of songs and dances associated with India's northern parts (Walker, 2010a). Their most profound contribution was towards the dance form of *kathak* (Chakravorty, 2008; Trivedi, 2012; Walker, 2010a, 2014a) and the vocal genre of *thumri* (du Perron, 2007; Manuel, 1986, 1989; Rao, 1990). Apart from being experts in *kathak* and *thumri*, the *tawa'ifs* were significant influencers in the field of fashion (Oldenburg, 1990; Sengupta, 2014).

In the 1900s, cultural repossession of arts and music by middle-class Indians broke *kathak*'s connection with its ancient past and original performing community (Walker, 2010b, 2014b). *Thumri* also emerged as an independent classical music genre (Manuel, 1986). Meanwhile, *tawa'ifs* were transformed into commercial prostitutes through colonial discourses (See Oldenburg, 1990). Various studies have explored the performance history of *tawa'ifs* (Bor, 1987; Post, 1987; Qureshi, 1997, 2006, and others), their contribution to the art forms of *kathak* and *thumri* (Chakravorty, 2008; du Perron, 2000; Manuel, 1986, 1989; Rao, 1990; Walker, 2004, 2010a, 2014a), and their estrangement from performance arts brought about by revival projects throughout the 20th century (Manuel, 1986; Chakravorty, 1998; Walker, 2010b, 2014b). However, there is a lack of literature that examines the *tawa'if* community's arts as cultural commons or analyses neo-revival projects that aim to revive the cultural production of erstwhile *tawa'ifs*.

This paper's first objective is to understand the factors that affected the *tawa'ifs*' production of cultural commons. The second objective is to critically analyse the Courtesan Project by the Non-Governmental Organization, Sufi Kathak Foundation, its efforts to revive *kathak* and *thumri* and re-link these arts with the performing community of *tawa'ifs*. By analysing the *tawa'ifs* as a performing community of pre-colonial India using the framework of cultural commons, the paper argues that the loss of desirable

community identity, which results in a degraded social value, can lead to a potential social dilemma for the production and maintenance of cultural commons. It also reflects on this project's future potential to keep the cultural commons of the performing community of *tawa'ifs* alive.

This paper is divided into different sections to address the outlined objectives. First, we lay out the methodology adopted for this study. Then, we discuss the theory of cultural commons and argue how performing arts' production and practice result in community identity formation for a performing community. Subsequent sections describe the community and its production of community identity, factors that led to the downfall of the *tawa'ifs*' arts and their community, Sufi Kathak Foundation's revival of *tawa'ifs*' arts, and the courtesan project's potential to produce new cultural commons. The final section of the paper concludes the study and discusses its broader implications for the field of cultural commons.

METHODOLOGY

We combined historiographic and qualitative case study methods to analyse the history and the current practice around the *tawa'ifs*' cultural commons. The first research objective was addressed using secondary sources, including published and unpublished academic writings, census data, organizational reports, and official websites. For the second objective, we identified Courtesan Project's case initiated by New Delhi based Non-Governmental Organization, Sufi Kathak Foundation, founded by the *kathak* virtuoso Manjari Chaturvedi in the year 2008. It is a non-profit society that makes people aware of “India's intangible heritage in music and dance” and inculcates in them a spirit of preservation of the lost arts (Sufi Kathak Foundation, 2020). Through its cause ‘Respect for the Courtesan’, the foundation interrogates society's tendency to conflate courtesans and prostitutes' figures. It further calls for the necessity of de-stigmatizing courtesans and honouring them as skilled artists. ‘The Lost Songs and Dance of Courtesans Project’ or only ‘The Courtesan Project’ aims to document and preserve these women's dying arts and publish the research in the form of a book. Additionally, the foundation organizes concerts and seminars to recreate the arts associated with courtesans and initiate a dialogue among scholars, researchers, academics, art connoisseurs, and the likes. After considering the Project's aims and objectives, we found it a suitable case for reflecting on neo-revival projects.

The qualitative case study method helped us to examine the re-creation of *tawa'ifs*' arts through the Courtesan Project and “to uncover a relationship between

a phenomenon and the context in which it is occurring” by asking “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question” (Gray, 2004, p. 124). The first author interviewed Manjari Chaturvedi, the founder of the Sufi Kathak Foundation, in August 2019. A semi-structured interview schedule acted as a guide to steer the conversation, and subsequent questions were formulated based on the responses received. The sessions were recorded, transcribed, and later coded using data-driven coding from which broad themes were identified about the neo-revival project and its revival of tawa’ifs’ cultural commons. Initial transcription of the interviews was cross-checked with field notes prepared by the first author during her field visit. This helped in overcoming the problem of missing relevant information from the interviews during transcription. Additionally, the first author examined audio-video recordings from concerts and personal interviews of key informants housed in the foundation’s archive to understand its revival process. Multiple sources helped the authors add rigour, richness, and reliability to the research.

CULTURAL COMMONS, PERFORMING COMMUNITY, AND IDENTITY

Cultural commons refer to cultural resources produced and nurtured by a community in a spatial-temporal context, subject to scrutinization through the lenses of culture, space, and community (Bertacchini, Bravo, Marrelli, & Santagata, 2012). This paper understands the performing group of tawa’ifs as the community, the dance form of kathak, the singing genre of thumri, and the detailed dressing regimen they produced, shared and passed down inter-generationally, as cultural resources, and finally, the kothas¹ they resided and performed in, as spaces of cultural production. As argued elsewhere, the cultural resources produced and managed by the erstwhile performing community of tawa’ifs within the socio-cultural framework of kothas can be understood through the framework of cultural commons (Chanda & Patnaik, 2019).

Cultural commons in their material and non-material manifestations are products of human interaction and must be passed down from one generation to another (Bertacchini et al., 2012). Despite their unlimited carrying capacity and non-rival nature, Bertacchini et al. (2012) have identified two classes of social dilemmas associated with their management and production. The first dilemma is a free-riding problem, which arises when individuals over-exploit commons resources and fail to replenish the stock. The second dilemma involves uncertainty in the transmission of commons to subsequent generations due to conflict between ‘traditionalists’ and ‘innovators’

(Bertacchini et al., 2012). While these two dilemmas adequately capture threats related to “a large number of different interaction structures” of the producer community (Bertacchini et al., 2012, p. 11), neither considers external factors such as changes in the socio-cultural context that might affect the producer community and its production process.

According to Bertacchini et al. (2012, p. 6), the community is constructed “upon an identity and symbolic dimension” and determined by the level of interaction among the members and their participation rate in the production process. In India, a hereditary performing community’s identity and resultant social status are determined by their association with the genre of performing arts (Booth, 1997; Sherinian, 2009). Although Bertacchini et al. (2012) recognize ‘identity’ as an essential component in community formation originating from individual or group dynamics, they do not discuss how the social perception of arts impacts the creation of a common identity and the production of cultural commons for a traditional performing community. This discussion is indispensable in the case of tawa’ifs’ production of cultural commons.

To identify the factors that affected the tawa’ifs’ production process, we discuss scholars’ understanding of the role played by music and dance in the formation of community identity. While listing the characteristics of traditional music produced in community-like structure, Burton (2003, p. 951) writes, “music reflects the heritage of the community, reminds the people of who they are and how they came to be, and reinforces community identity”. According to Frith (1996), the performing art of music is a process through which performing identities are produced, making it a conduit of expression for individual performers and their community. As for the performing art of dance, Desmond (1993) argued how dancing bodies could be used as templates to examine the construction and maintenance of social identities by paying attention to the movements that characterize the dance form. Examples of sexually explicit movements such as pelvic thrusts that are more commonly associated with the minorities, Latin and African Americans in her case, further elucidate this argument. When dominant groups appropriated the same repertoire, the movements were de-eroticized and formalized to suit the higher classes (Desmond, 1993). Thus, dance movements sanctioned by the prevalent societal norms reflect the dancer’s social positioning and contribute to their identity construction and social status. Moreover, changes in the configuration of these movements indicate a transition in the dancer’s identity and social status. From the above discussion, we deduce that the performing community derives its identity and

social status through shared artistic experiences, which further helps them produce common resources in the form of dance and music. Hence, any threat to the production of cultural commons, which is performing arts in this case, can disband the production of common artistic experiences and community identity.

THE TAWA'IF COMMUNITY AND ITS IDENTITY

The performing community of tawa'ifs resided across different parts of India, as documented in the Indian censuses conducted between the late 19th and the early 20th century. The prominent districts where they lived were the erstwhile North-West Provinces and Oude, Agra, Meerut, Benaras, Allahabad, Kumaon, Fyzabad, among others (Plowden, 1881; Baines, 1893; Risley & Gait, 1903; Gait, 1913). The number of women in the tawa'if community for the districts of North-West Provinces and Oude was estimated at 473 in 1881 and at 14575 in 1891 (Plowden, 1881; Baines, 1893). For our study, we analyse the members of the tawa'if community based in the city of Lucknow, the former capital of Oude in British India. According to the census reports of 1891 and 1911, there were 495 and 128 women, respectively, in the tawa'if community of Lucknow (Baines, 1893; Gait, 1913). Some records show that tawa'ifs moved from one region to another in search of wealthier patrons (Sachdeva, 2008). While we found no evidence of intermingling among tawa'if communities of various districts, it can be deduced that they were accustomed to moving around the country, which resulted in an evolving population spread across India. Hence, specifying the exact number of members present in the community is problematic.

Oldenburg's (1990) ethnographic study provides an insight into the community structure of the tawa'ifs of Lucknow. According to her, the tawa'ifs were a socially cohesive, women-centred community, which loosely followed the matrilineal form of descent and was headed by a matriarch, or chief courtesan known as '*chaudharayan*' (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 263). While the community consisted of both women and men, each group's roles and statuses were different. The girls born within the community received specialized training in performing arts and inherited tangible properties from their predecessors. Women from non-hereditary backgrounds wanting to escape their oppressive pasts were also inducted into the community. Such women were placed under the tutelage of senior courtesans to hone their skills as future performers. Men in the community belonged to two categories: those born

within the community and those recruited by the head courtesan outside the community. Both the categories were responsible for fulfilling the roles of instrumentalists, cooks, caretakers, guards, and other servants (Oldenburg, 1990). Another category of men who frequently visited the kothas but did not belong to the community comprised patrons who formed the audience base for the tawa'ifs' performances. Cumulatively, these men's contribution to the community ranged from providing varied services to patronage (Oldenburg, 1990).

The tawa'ifs enjoyed the social position of an elite performing community throughout the 1800s (Oldenburg, 1990) and were employed in several types of performance arenas: in court assemblies organized by the state, in private parties arranged by elite Indians, and finally, in kothas (Walker, 2010b). These kothas, which doubled up as residences, were also sites of the women-administered cultural production of music owned by the courtesans who determined how the entertainment sessions would proceed (Qureshi, 2006). The community members within the kothas had to engage in close interactions and abide by shared rules and regulations to ensure uninterrupted production of cultural commons. Studies show how the intimate nature of these establishments immensely influenced the community's cultural repertoire (see du Perron, 2007; Manuel, 1986; Qureshi, 2006, among others). The soirees organised in the evening called for complete surrender before an audience, where the tawa'if turned her performing skills into a weapon of subversion, no longer remaining the dominated inferior (Qureshi, 2006). It was in the kothas while performing *mujras* or seven salutations in the honour of patrons that the identity of the tawa'if was born (Qureshi, 2006). Both the hereditary and newly trained tawa'ifs strategically deployed their shared identity as skilled performers to rise in social status vis-à-vis their power dynamic with the patrons. Apart from their artistic expertise, an essential aspect of their culture was the secret '*art of nakhra*, or pretence' that they deployed to exploit wealthy patrons (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 274). Sumanta Banerjee's work (1993) had traced the deployment of similar tactics in 19th-century prostitutes in Bengal whose characteristics mirrored those of the feudal courtesans. His research showed how the newly-trained prostitute had to master "the six '*chh*'s: '*chhalana*' (tricks and artifices); '*chhenali*' (coquetry); '*chhelemi*' (pretending to be younger than her actual age); '*chhapan*' (hiding the other customers from the main patron, the *babu*² who keeps her as a mistress); '*chhemo*' (deceiving the *babu* with false stories when/if he comes to know about her entertaining other customers); and '*chhenchrami*' (collecting money from the sundry customers—other than

the patron babu—before entertaining them)” (Banerjee, 1993, pp. 2463–2464). Oldenburg (1990) documented similarly elaborate rituals meant to ensure patronage and flow of capital in use by the tawa’ifs of Lucknow. A portion of the capital earned was utilised by the chaudharayan for the maintenance of the household and the sustenance of the community members (Oldenburg, 1990), who, in turn, produced cultural commons.

In the process of continual production of individual performing identities and subsequent reproduction through interaction with others, the tawa’ifs collectively gave rise to the identity of an empowered performing community “capable of managing their art for their own profit” (Qureshi, 2006, p. 312). Thus, while the soirees were “symbolic of total submission before a royal patron” (Qureshi, 2006, p. 322), the hereditary and newly trained tawa’ifs strategically employed their shared identity as culturally skilled women to produce their cultural commons and emerge as elite performers. These constructed identities were sustained by individual members who had a role in creating the community’s and, consequently, their own identity by contributing to what Bertacchini et al. (2012, p. 17) have termed as “accumulated stock of cultural capital”. The undeterred access to performance space (kothas), regular interaction among community members, and shared production of distinct cultural resources enabled the tawa’if community’s identity to survive across generations, which facilitated their contribution towards the reserve of cultural capital essential for maintaining the cultural commons.

FACTORS THAT AFFECTED TAWA’IFS’ PRODUCTION OF CULTURAL COMMONS

By the early 19th century, the East India Company began to question the extravagant nautch parties hosted by natives and cited these as evidence of inefficiency and maladministration (Sachdeva, 2008). Further, the participation of tawa’ifs in the revolt of 1857 was firmly admonished by the British government, who responded by seizing their residence-cum-performance arenas—the kothas (Oldenburg, 1990). As a result, the tawa’ifs lost control over their most prominent performance spaces after the royal assemblies, which prohibited the production process, contributing to the decline in cultural commons.

The next significant factor that affected the tawa’ifs’ production of cultural commons was the anti-nautch campaign started by the colonial missionaries and the Indian social reformers sometime around 1892 (Chakravorty, 1998; Nevile, 2009). The campaign resulted in widescale banning of public performances of which

tawa’ifs were regular participants. Moreover, writings by European travellers grouped all female performers under the single category of nautch girls, thereby eliminating the tawa’ifs’ distinct social status (Sachdeva, 2008). According to Walker (2014), by the beginning of 1900, courtesans’ performance era had almost come to an end. The census of 1921 showed a fall in the population of dancing girls in every province due to the worsening of the country’s general economic condition. The community’s diminished size curtailed the frequency of social interaction, making it difficult to produce and transmit cultural commons to future generations.

The community’s performing arts were gradually stigmatized due to Victorian morality and the newly emerging nationalist sentiments (Walker, 2010b, 2014b). The final blow to the perfect amalgamation of amour and style evident in the tawa’ifs’ performance repertoire was rendered by the purists and nationalists (Walker, 2014a). They made careful attempts to salvage music and dance as separate art forms, a necessary step towards the de-stigmatization of tawa’ifs’ arts and their incorporation into the newly assimilated classical repertoire (See Walker 2010b). According to Desmond (1993), dances conceived in society’s marginal sections had to be modified to become acceptable to the higher classes. This phenomenon of cultural revival is characterized by “the processes of classicization, gentrification and artistic modification” (Walker, 2014a, p. 110). Walker (2014b) argued that classical revivalists identified tawa’ifs as impurities in the dance form of kathak, whom they systematically eradicated to revive the form. Thus, the period of India’s struggle for independence saw a deliberate decoupling of performing arts, especially dance forms, from their Islamic and colonial pasts (Walker, 2010b, 2014b). These changes resulted in the loss of the idiosyncratic nature of tawa’ifs’ cultural resources, which no longer had significance for them in their new avatar.

In the case of tawa’ifs, common identity played an essential role in the production of cultural commons. However, this identity posed a severe threat to the idea of a respectable Hindu³ woman who is a mother before everything else (Bagchi, 1990). There was a call for returning to a tradition that was ‘pure’ and significantly more ‘Hindu’. In Brown’s (2007; p. 11) words, “significant decline in legal and moral status had implications for the way courtesans were perceived by the rising Hindu middle classes”. Consequently, these classes neutralized the identity of tawa’ifs, firstly, by shifting performing arts from the domain of kothas to the public stage, secondly, by altering their original repertoire, and, finally, by denying these women their identity and social status as a performing community.

Thus, we argue that due to the reduced number of members amidst a financial crisis, forced relocation, and increasing stigmatization, uncertainty was created in the transmission of tawa'ifs' cultural commons to their subsequent generations. The community estranged from its arts and desirable identity as elite performers failed to produce and reproduce its cultural commons. Literature shows that cultural commons can be sustained when the producer community regularly contributes to the accumulated reserve of cultural resources (Fiorentino, Friel, Marrelli, & Santagata, 2010). When the community's culture erodes due to "lack of new cultural inputs", there is a tragedy of cultural commons (Santagata et al., 2011, p. 13). Similarly, when the tawa'if community failed to reproduce its cultural resources due to the changed circumstances, it led to a tragedy of their commons. Considering the absence of social dilemmas such as free-riding and conflict between traditionalists and modernists regarding the future course of cultural resources, we argue that the loss of desirable community identity, which results in a degraded social value of the community, can lead to a potential social dilemma for the production and maintenance of cultural commons and hence, can be added as the third dilemma in Bertacchini et al.'s (2012) categories.

THE COURTESAN PROJECT: REVIVAL OF DARBARI KATHAK BY THE SUFI KATHAK FOUNDATION

The Sufi Kathak Foundation officially launched the Courtesan Project in the year 2011. "It is an initiative that combines the two extremes of traditional art and modern technology in a unique amalgamation to make the youth and the masses aware of this dying art form" ("The Untold Stories," 2015). The Project's multi-directional approach includes aspects of 'research and documentation,' 'dissemination of research and documentation,' 'outreach to other academics and students,' 'recreating the old songs of tawa'ifs and recreating their dance' to 'organize and do concerts' (M. Chaturvedi, personal communication, August 25, 2019). This neo-revival project focuses explicitly on the performing community of tawa'ifs and the reinstatement of their identity as the original performers of kathak.

NEO-REVIVAL OF THE PERFORMING COMMUNITY AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

Chaturvedi extensively performs the dance form that was prevalent among tawa'ifs, popularly known as Darbari Kathak. It is "an alluring and abstract form of kathak, known for its delicate movements and expressions, and characterized by exquisite costumes" ("Courtesans through

a Dance Concert," 2015). In Awadh⁵, Kathak originated as a courtly dance and included the salutation pieces *amad*⁶ and *mujra*⁷ that the tawa'ifs performed one after the other (Trivedi, 2012). The Courtesan Project intends to re-establish the tawa'ifs as one of the earliest practitioners of kathak dance by bringing back their original repertoire. Contemporary kathak concerns itself with "god and bhakti⁸," denouncing the elements of "love and romance" that were representative of darbari kathak (M. Chaturvedi, personal communication, August 28, 2019). So, Chaturvedi attempts to recreate the dance elements reminiscent of royal gatherings and *kothas* using kathak manuals, books, paintings, and images from pre-colonial Awadh to reinstate tawa'ifs as the original performers of kathak. One of her important sources is the Hindi translation of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's dance manual 'Bani', which is considered an authority on darbari kathak as practised in erstwhile Awadh. It contains illustrations of *gats* or compositions that are strongly reminiscent of the courtesans, such as two variants of *salami gat*⁹, three variants of *ghunghat gat*¹⁰, *peshwaz gat*¹¹, *lehenga gat*¹², and so on (see Walker, 2004). By bringing back these specific elements, the Courtesan Project attempts to re-build the association between the tawa'ifs and their performing arts.

Chaturvedi (personal communication, August 28, 2019) emphasized that although kathak virtuoso Shambhu Maharaj is credited with the inception of seated *abhinaya* or *baithiki abhinaya*¹³, it was originally a trademark of tawa'ifs' repertoire. The project has adopted this element to depict an authentic portrayal of the tawa'if alternately singing and dancing. Manuel (1989) pointed out that *baithiki abhinaya* allowed the performer to sing and dance in a specific order. In the seated position, Chaturvedi performs 'thehrao¹⁴ ka dance' in which, her face becomes the vehicle of expression. Simultaneously, she makes rhythmic movements with her hands to captivate the audience, just like a tawa'if (M. Chaturvedi, personal communication, August 30, 2019). A newspaper report on one of Chaturvedi's concerts under the banner of Courtesan Project confirmed the same by observing how "her expressions were minimal but they said a lot about the love she personified", which is also a characteristic feature of darbari kathak (Mishra, 2013). Hence, we argue that the Courtesan Project has revived darbari elements of kathak through its live performances.

RECONNECTING THE PERFORMANCES WITH THE DRESSING REPERTOIRE OF THE PERFORMING COMMUNITY

Chaturvedi (personal communication, August 30, 2019) has opted for the revival of 'chaura pyjamas' or wide-legged trousers, which according to her, is the unique feature of the tawa'if community's dressing repertoire. She

has chosen her attire for the performances after consulting archival evidence such as paintings, images, and written descriptions available from that period. This fashion choice marks her performances remarkably different from those of contemporary kathak dancers. The latter opts for churidar pyjamas or tight-fitted trousers that facilitate a view of their ghungroos or ankle bells. Some crucial considerations regarding the tawa'ifs' dressing repertoire were the type of jewellery they wore or the material they used for their dresses. Chaturvedi meticulously works on these two aspects to recreate the authentic look of a tawa'if. While contemporary performers adorn their heads with a jhumar (headgear), it is no longer as ornamental or heavy as it used to be (M. Chaturvedi, personal communication, August 30, 2019). To overcome this, Chaturvedi has refurbished an antique piece she chanced across in a market of Lucknow. The other consideration is the material of dupatta (veil), which Manjari explains, must be heavily embroidered brocade and precisely weighty so that it falls elegantly upon the shoulders. The detailed recreation of the tawa'ifs' attire has a vital role in reconnecting their performing community with their cultural commons.

RE-CREATING THE SPACE OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION – THE KOTHAS

As discussed earlier, urban kothas catering to the newly rising mercantile and colonial patrons emerged as ideal platforms for the cultivation of Hindustani music. Through their shared artistic practices within the space of kothas, the tawa'ifs constructed their identity. By paying particular attention to the recreation of the space of kotha, the Courtesan Project highlights the role these venues played in the evolution of the tawa'ifs' arts. In Chaturvedi's (personal communication, August 30, 2019) opinion, it is essential to recreate the performance space of the tawa'if. There are unlimited options for the aesthetic adornment of the performance venue, but Chaturvedi banks upon the available literature and budget to make decisions. The architecture of kothas was heavily influenced by Persian motifs such as arches (M. Chaturvedi, personal communication, August 30, 2019). Given the lack of provision for installing actual arches, these are digitally projected on screens strategically positioned on the stage. The same technique is used for glass curtains, which was another popular decorative element in kothas. To illustrate this, Chaturvedi gives the example of Mirza Ghalib's poems, where he wrote about witnessing his muse, a tawa'if, through a glass curtain (personal communication, August 30, 2019). Some of the crucial props, according to her, include chandeliers and candlesticks that heavily dot the

performance space. These have been custom-made for the concerts to add to the authenticity of the experience. The aesthetics and the architectural detailing vary according to the themes of the story Chaturvedi is trying to tell her audience while re-creating the space of cultural production.

RECONNECTING THE COMMUNITY AND ITS IDENTITY WITH CULTURAL COMMONS THROUGH THE COURTESAN PROJECT

The authors have established through Burton (2003), Frith (1996) and Desmond's (1993) arguments that music and dance as performing arts are not limited to their role as a medium of expression. They are further responsible for assigning identity and social status for the communities that participate in their production. The period leading up to India's independence saw the classical revivalists appropriating the idiosyncratic arts of tawa'ifs, dismantling their individual and community identity in the process. Through the Courtesan Project, Chaturvedi has successfully restored the tawa'if community's identity as a performing community by recreating pertinent elements of their distinct art forms. Although she has to represent the original performers on the stage, Chaturvedi ensures the tawa'ifs receive their due credit for the reproduced art forms. She relies on a combination of historical sources such as articles, books, paintings, photographs, newspaper clippings, handwritten records, voice, and video recordings, and her artistic sensibilities (personal communication, August 30, 2019) to achieve what Livingston (1999, p. 71) termed as an equilibrium "between individual innovation and adherence to stylistic norms of the tradition". It is important to create an ambience nearest to that of the kothas from the time the tawa'ifs were active. However, there are various constraints in terms of venue, settings, and even the audience.

The tawa'ifs sang and danced while being accompanied by live musicians. On the contrary, Chaturvedi has opted for pre-recorded music since she lacks vocal expertise, and musicians are often unavailable for live performances. The application of technology has helped her to recreate the ambience of the kothas to an extent. However, the enormity of concert halls and auditoriums inhibit any form of intimacy, so characteristic of the tawa'ifs' arts. Despite these limitations, this paper argues that by recreating the tawa'ifs' distinctive art forms, the Project is reconnecting the tawa'if community's identity with its cultural commons, thereby keeping alive a representation of the community identity and cultural production.

CULTURAL COMMONS AND SUFI KATHAK FOUNDATION'S ARCHIVE

Cultural products must be produced and preserved by a community on a given space, physical or virtual, to qualify as cultural commons (Bertacchini et al., 2012). Similarly, the archive at the Sufi Kathak Foundation contains cultural products such as audio-visual recordings of live performances, paintings, photographs, newspaper clippings, handwritten records, and taped interviews. Cumulatively, these resources play a vital role in reproducing and preserving the tawa'ifs' cultural commons. The taped interviews of Pran Nevile, an authority on the culture of British India, and the songs recorded by Zarina Begum, the last mirasi¹⁵ in the court of Awadh, are a couple of notable examples. Additionally, a well-maintained library contains references to tawa'ifs' arts catalogued for ease of use. All digital artefacts are currently preserved in portable devices and are made available on prior request. Some frequent visitors to the archive include scholars, artists, and journalists. Moreover, Chaturvedi offers kathak classes to a limited number of students in her dance studio, housed in the same building (personal communication, August 21, 2019). The cultural resources reproduced and maintained at the Sufi Kathak Foundation can emerge as a new form of cultural commons in the future. But, there are several limitations.

Firstly, the resources are restricted to the building's physical boundary as there are financial and legal constraints on the digital preservation of information. However, recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project took a step in that direction by uploading audio-visual snippets of Chaturvedi's live performances on the Foundation's YouTube page (M. Chaturvedi, personal communication, May 28, 2020). As the pandemic has resulted in an official prohibition on large physical gatherings, this venture into the virtual domain will keep the Project afloat and help maintain and reproduce the cultural commons.

Secondly, in the absence of the original performing community, a new stewarding community must be built around similar interests to keep the cultural production process alive. Given the logistical restraints of nurturing the artistic repertoire, the Sufi Kathak Foundation's operation is primarily dependent on its founder, Manjari Chaturvedi. After her repeated efforts to involve members of the tawa'if community, she has only been partially successful. The surviving community members are no longer attached to or interested in talking about their hereditary occupation, as it had once resulted in their stigmatization. Chaturvedi frequently visits these women to build rapport, which has facilitated dialogue to an extent, albeit off the record (personal communication, August 30, 2019). Despite these limitations, the Courtesan Project can produce a new form

of cultural commons modelled after the tawa'ifs' cultural resources. The prerequisites include virtual transmittance of cultural resources and evolution of a community willing to reproduce and maintain these commons in the future.

CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the factors that affected the tawa'ifs' production of cultural commons and critically analysed a neo-revival project, the Courtesan Project. The analysis suggests that the performing community of tawa'ifs declined and failed to produce cultural commons due to loss of performing space, idiosyncratic culture, and community members. Further, the interplay among the space of cultural production, i.e., the kotha, cultural resources such as kathak and thumri, and the community's close-knit nature, which were inextricably linked to the creation of the tawa'ifs' shared identity were under attack. The systematic reduction of tawa'ifs to prostitutes and their banishment from kothas, driven by colonial and nationalist agendas, impacted their reputation as a performing community and the creation of a shared identity. In this context, we find that the societal perception of cultural resources affects the production of cultural commons. Since the tawa'ifs were no longer producers of idiosyncratic arts that could be passed down generationally as cultural commons, their social status as a professional performing community declined.

Using the cultural commons' framework, we find that the tawa'ifs' production process was not impacted by free-riding or uncertainty in commons transmission due to conflict among community members, as argued by Bertacchini et al. (2012). Instead, we argue that the loss of desirable community identity, which results in a degraded social value of the community, can lead to a potential social dilemma for the production and maintenance of cultural commons. This argument further establishes that the continual production of socially acceptable community identity is an essential factor in the production and reproduction of cultural commons. Although we have used secondary sources to trace the factors that affected the tawa'ifs' production of cultural commons, future studies on similar performing communities can add other variables by studying the original performing community. In our case, the stigmatized nature of the tawa'ifs' existence limited our access to the original performing community.

The paper also analyses the recent efforts to revive the tawa'if community's arts and reinstate their identity as professional performers by the Courtesan Project. The Project's recreation of tawa'ifs' distinctive arts and their aesthetic representation within a kotha-like

performing space have been received enthusiastically by cultural connoisseurs, media, scholars, and the general public, indicating a revival of interest in these art forms. Further, the Project's endeavour to reconnect the tawa'ifs community's identity with their cultural commons by recreating their distinctive art forms is an instance of how neo-revival projects can revive and preserve the dying arts of traditional performing communities. Currently limited to the reproduction of the tawa'ifs' cultural commons, this Project can become the producer of a new form of cultural commons inspired by the tawa'ifs' cultural resources if a community with members having allied interests evolves around its activities. Since it was beyond this particular study's scope, interested cultural commons scholars can enrich the findings presented here by examining similar cases of performing communities that are endangered or have vanished under similar circumstances.

NOTES

- 1 Refers to courtesan's salon where she resided as well as entertained her patrons. See Qureshi's (2006) book chapter for more details on how kothas were controlled by courtesans.
- 2 Colloquial term for an English-educated class of Bengali men who rose to fame in the 19th century through their appeasement of the British colonizers.
- 3 One who practices the four hundred years old global religion of Hinduism characterised by the practice of polytheism. Here, it refers to a pious woman whose life's task is to serve her husband and nurture her male children.
- 4 Derived from darbar or court, mostly royal court.
- 5 Also known as Oudh, it is a place of historical significance in the northern part of India. Currently, it is located in the north-eastern region of the state of Uttar Pradesh.
- 6 A dance item in kathak set to bols or rhythms.
- 7 Another dance item performed by tawa'ifs in the honour of their patrons.
- 8 A Sanskrit word meaning devotion to a supreme deity.
- 9 A graceful walk coupled with salutation in kathak, conceptualized by Wajid Ali Shah.
- 10 A style of graceful walk that involves the dancer covering their face completely with a veil.
- 11 A style of graceful walk in which the dancer lifts the right hem of their skirt-dress with their right hand.
- 12 A style of graceful walk in which the dancer lifts the portion of the skirt near the waist with both hands.
- 13 A late nineteenth century style of performance where the performer sang along with expressive gestures while being seated.
- 14 A slow-paced dance that involves minimal movement of limbs.
- 15 Hereditary musicians who often accompanied professional dancing girls. See Adrian McNeil's (2007) article for an extensive discussion on this community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are incredibly thankful to the reviewers for their critical inputs, which have significantly helped develop

the ideas and arguments presented in the paper. The first author extends her gratitude to the founder of Sufi Kathak Foundation, Manjari Chaturvedi, and her assistant, Vinay, for their generosity and welcoming attitude throughout the fieldwork. The National Library staff, Kolkata were gracious and eager to help track down relevant documents and articles, and for that, the authors extend their gratitude.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Sohini Chanda  orcid.org/0000-0003-0339-6306

Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Archana Patnaik  orcid.org/0000-0001-6333-9931

Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Suhita Chopra Chatterjee

Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

REFERENCES

- Bagchi, J.** (1990). Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(42/43), WS65–WS71.
- Baines, J. A., & India. Census Commissioner.** (1893). *General report on the census of India, 1891*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/saaa.crl.25352825>
- Banerjee, S.** (1993). The 'Beshya' and the 'Babu': Prostitute and Her Clientele in 19th Century Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(45), 2461–2472. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400383>
- Bertacchini, E., Bravo, G., Marrelli, M., & Santagata, W.** (2012). Defining cultural commons. In E. Bertacchini, G. Bravo, M. Marrelli, & W. Santagata (Eds.) *Cultural Commons: A new perspective on the production and evolution of cultures* (pp. 3–18). Edward Elgar Publishing Limited. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781000069.00009>
- Booth, G.** (1997). Socio-Musical Mobility among South Asian Clarinet Players. *Ethnomusicology*, 41(3), 489–516. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/852761>
- Bor, J.** (1987). *The voice of the Sarangi: An illustrated history of bowing in India* (pp. 48–118). Bombay: National Centre for the Performing Arts Quarterly Journal.
- Brown, K. B.** (2007). The Social Liminality of Musicians: Case Studies from Mughal India and Beyond. *Twentieth-Century Music*, 3(1), 13–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S147857220700031X>
- Burton, J. B.** (2003). Music. In D. Levinson & K. Christensen (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of community: From the village to the*

- virtual world (Vol. 3, pp. 950–953). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Chakravorty, P.** (1998). Hegemony, dance and nation: The construction of the classical dance in India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 21(2), 107–120. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856409808723345>
- Chakravorty, P.** (2008). *Bells of change: Kathak dance, women and modernity in India*. Kolkata: Seagull Books.
- Chanda, S., & Patnaik, A.** (2019). Tawa'ifs as performing communities and kothas as spaces of cultural production. In D. Ganguli (Ed.), *Understanding social issues: some reflections* (Vol. I, pp. 163–172). Kolkata: P.A.I.O.L.C.K.
- Courtesans through a dance concert.** (2015, May 18). *Business Standard*. <https://www.business-standard.com/>
- Desmond, J.** (1993). Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies. *Cultural Critique*, (26), 33–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354455>
- du Perron, L. M.** (2000) The lyrics of Thumri: Hindi poetry in a musical genre (Publication No. 29472). [Doctoral dissertation, SOAS University of London]. SOAS Research Online. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/29472/>
- du Perron, L.** (2007). *Hindi poetry in a musical genre: Thumri lyrics*. London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203968062>
- Fiorentino, P., Friel, M., Marrelli, M., & Santagata, W.** (2010). Cultural commons and cultural communities: The case studies of Milan designers and Italian futurists artists. *Working paper No. 2/2010*. https://www.fondazioneasantagata.it/wp-content/uploads/2_WP_Ebla_CSS-2.pdf
- Frith, S.** (1996). Music and identity. In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 108–128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n7>
- Gait, Sir Edward Albert, & India. Census Commissioner.** (1913). *Census of India, 1911. Vol. 1., Pt. 1, Report*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/saoa.crl.25393778>
- Gray, D. E.** (2004). *Doing research in the real world* (pp. 123–149). London: Sage Publications.
- Leonard, K.** (2014). *Hyderabad and Hyderabadī* (pp. 378–427). New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Livingston, T.** (1999). Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory. *Ethnomusicology*, 43(1), 66–85. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/852694>
- Manuel, P.** (1986). The Evolution of Modern Thumri. *Ethnomusicology*, 30(3), 470–490. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/851590>
- Manuel, P.** (1989). *Thumri in Historical and Stylistic Perspectives* (pp. 34–53). Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.
- McNeil, A.** (2007). Mirasis: some thoughts on hereditary musicians in Hindustani music. *Context: Journal of Music Research*, (32), 45.
- Mishra, A.** (2013, November 27). Recreating the Magic of Awadh. *Deccan Herald*. <https://www.deccanherald.com/>
- Nevile, P.** (2009). *Nautch girls of the Raj*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Oldenburg, V.** (1990). Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India. *Feminist Studies*, 16(2), 259–287. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177850>
- Plowden, Sir William Chichele, & India. Census Commissioner.** (1881). Report on the census of British India, taken on the 17th February 1881, Vol. I. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/saoa.crl.25057653>
- Post, J.** (1987). Professional Women in Indian Music: The Death of the Courtesan Tradition. In E. Koskoff (Ed.), *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (pp. 97–109). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.
- Qureshi, R. B.** (1997). The Indian Sarangi: Sound of Affect, Site of Contest. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 29, 1–38. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/768295>
- Qureshi, R. B.** (2006). Female agency and patrilineal constraints: Situating courtesans in twentieth-century India. In M. Feldman & B. Gordon (Eds.), *The courtesan's arts: Cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 312–331). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, V.** (1990). “Thumri” as Feminine Voice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(17), WS31–WS39.
- Risley, H. H., E. A. Gait & India.** (1903). *Census of India 1901. Vol. 1, India. Pt. 1, Report*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/saoa.crl.25352837>
- Sachdeva, S.** (2008). In Search of the Tawa'if in History: Courtesans, Nautch Girls and Celebrity Entertainers in India (1720s–1920s) [Doctoral dissertation, SOAS University of London]. EThOS e-thesis online service. <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.515820>
- Sengupta, M.** (2014). COURTESAN CULTURE IN INDIA: The Transition from the Devdasi to the Tawaif or Bojje. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 41(1), 124–140. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/44733578
- Sherinian, Z.** (2009). Changing Status in India's Marginal Music Communities. *Religion Compass*, 3(4), 608–619. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00153.x>
- Srinivasan, D. M.** (2006). Royalty's courtesans and God's mortal wives: keepers of culture in pre-colonial India. In M. Feldman & B. Gordon (Eds.), *The courtesan's arts: Cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 161–181). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- SufiKathak Foundation.** (2020). *About us*. <http://sufikathakfoundation.com/about-us/>
- The untold stories of darbari kathak.** (2015, May 19). *The Hindu*. Retrieved December 8, 2019 from <https://www.thehindu.com/>
- Trivedi, M.** (2012). *The emergence of the Hindustani tradition: music, dance, and drama in North India, 13th to 19th centuries*. Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective.
- Walker, M. E.** (2004). *Kathak Dance: A Critical History* (Publication No. 61300440). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto]. Library and Archives Canada. <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/services/theses/Pages/item.aspx?idNumber=61300440>

Walker, M. (2010a). Courtesans and Choreographers: (Re) Placement of Women in the History of Kathak Dance. In P. Chakravorty & N. Gupta (Eds.), *Dance Matters: Performing India* (pp. 279–300). New Delhi: Routledge.

Walker, M. (2010b). Revival and Reinvention in India's Kathak Dance. *MUSICultures*, 37, 171–184. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/20234>

Walker, M. E. (2014a). *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Walker, M. E. (2014b). National Purity and Post-colonial Hybridity in India's Kathak Dance Revival. In *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (pp. 205–227). New York, USA: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765034.013.022>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Chanda, S., Patnaik, A., & Chatterjee, S. C. (2021). The Courtesan Project and the Tawa'ifs' Cultural Commons. *International Journal of the Commons*, 15(1), pp. 195–205. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1073>

Submitted: 30 August 2020 Accepted: 25 April 2021 Published: 16 June 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

International Journal of the Commons is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.