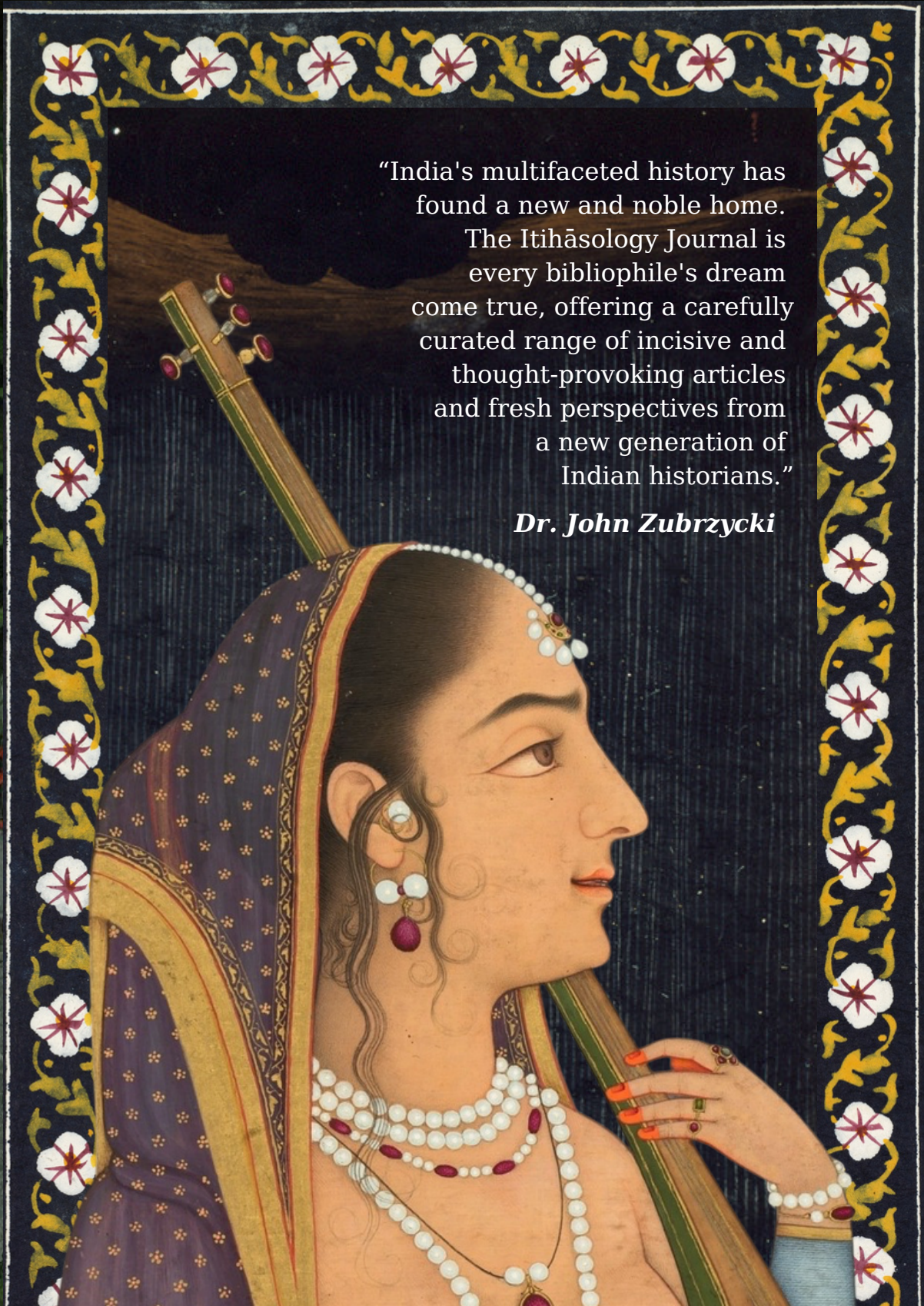


The Itihāsology Journal

Volume 3

"India's multifaceted history has found a new and noble home. The Itihāsology Journal is every bibliophile's dream come true, offering a carefully curated range of incisive and thought-provoking articles and fresh perspectives from a new generation of Indian historians."

Dr. John Zubrzycki



itihāsology

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Volume 3

April 2025

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From the Editors' Desk

Our conversation with our chequered past is a constant process, and this engagement is ever-surprising, allowing us to understand history in new and nuanced ways. Since its inception, *itihāsology* has emphasised that there are diverse ways in which we all interact with and perceive our past, and that there is no single rulebook for how we must approach a discipline that is a repository of all our stories. The Itihāsology Journal is an effort in this very direction: to showcase a *guldasta* of ideas from this fascinating subject. It also aims to offer fresh ways of engaging with a variety of sources to construct historical narratives that are inclusive, thought-provoking, and reflective of the complexities of our shared pasts. In times when monolithic and adjective-driven contours dominate the portrayal of history, we strive to encourage a deeper appreciation for the multiplicity of perspectives that truly define this subject. Our dedication to the field remains steadfast: ethical scholarship, thorough research, all-encompassing themes, accessible language, and a broad spectrum of tales from the multifarious corridors of history. We are deeply thankful and indebted to all the authors who have contributed to the third volume of the Journal and who have patiently awaited the progress of their essays over the past several months. Our sincere thanks go to our reviewers, Dr. Aparna Vaidik and Dr. John Zubrzycki, for their insightful and encouraging feedback on this year's submissions. We hope to keep churning out creations that carry the *ras* of history, making all of us *rasikas* in the process, and in doing so, we are always buoyed by the support and affection of our family of history-aficionados, to whom we are immensely grateful.

Eric Chopra and Kudrat B. Singh

About the Editorial Team

Eric Chopra is the founder of *itihāsology*, an inclusive and engaging platform dedicated to Indian history and art. He studied the History (Honours) course at St. Stephen's College, New Delhi. He is a writer and podcaster who focuses on histories of art, heritage, emotions, sexuality, and the otherworld. A key aspect of his work is making history accessible and engaging for public discourse. He designs and leads a range of experiences at museums and monuments and is the co-host of the *For Old Times' Sake* Podcast and Jaipur Literature Festival's *Jaipur Bytes* Podcast. He also writes and curates for numerous festivals & events focused on heritage and the arts.

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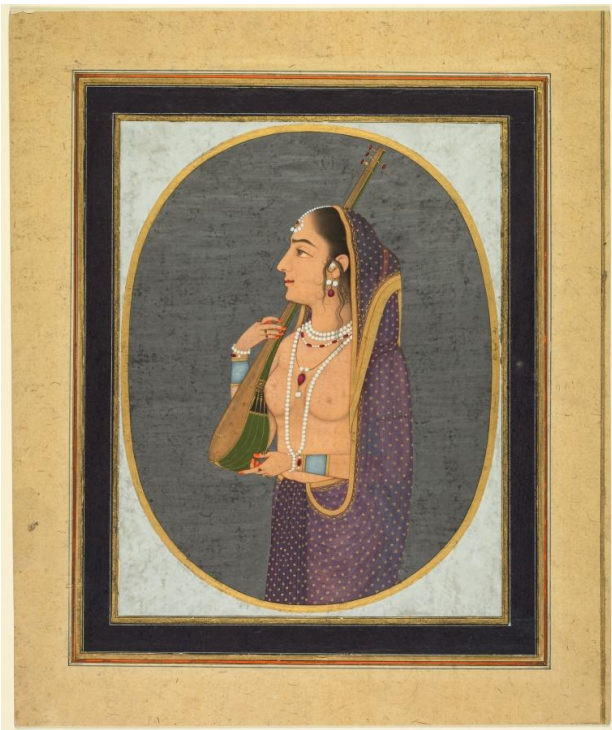
Sukanya Adhikary is a graphic designer with a postgraduate degree in Journalism and Mass Communication in 2024, from the Central University of Odisha. She is particularly interested in the gender and queer aspects of history. In addition to history, she brings a research-driven perspective to her exploration of films and travel.

About the Cover

The cover of this edition of the Itihāsology Journal has been created digitally using artworks from the Mughal, Jaipur, and Bundi schools held at Allahabad Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The central portrait, *Court lady singing and playing the vina*, c. 1760, is reimagined by juxtaposition with two artworks embodying the essence of the Indian monsoon: *Seated lady*, c. 18th century, and *Krishna and Radha strolling in the rain*, c. 1775. Together, the three paintings reflect a new visual representation of Megh Malhar, the Hindustani classical *raga* inviting rains, often depicted in evocative artworks across historical ateliers. The floral border, chosen for its tonal congruence with the scene, is taken from *Nur Jahan holding a portrait of Emperor Jahangir*, c. 1627.

The cover has been ideated and put together by Kudrat B. Singh.

Court lady singing and playing the vina



Seated lady



Krishna and Radha strolling in the rain



Nur Jahan holding a portrait of Emperor Jahangir

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Nabajagaran: A Brief Economic History of the Bengal Renaissance

Mrinalini Bondyopadhyay

I. *Nabajagaran*: The Bengal Renaissance

In numerous ways, the Bengal Renaissance was the beginning of modern India. Starting around the 1820s and going into the 1920s, a movement of socio-political awakening swept through the region. This movement brought in both social reforms - such as the abolition of *sati* and the legalisation of widow remarriage practices - and religious reform movements - like the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission - establishing roots for Western scientific education in Indian education institutions. Around the same time, luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore, S. N Bose, Abanindranath Tagore, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee produced significant works in arts, literature, and sciences. The

achievements and savants that the Bengal Renaissance produced massively impacted modern Indian society, especially in the early dawn of our national movement, when a number of freedom fighters and leaders were inspired by secularist, humanist, and rationalist ideals. The word 'renaissance' means 'rebirth' and has been originally used in the context of European history to refer to the period in the 1400s-early 1600s which saw fervent socio-religious, artistic and scientific "revival" at the end of the Dark Ages.¹ The Bengal Renaissance occupies an analogous position in Indian history.

The movement was the product of a number of circumstances which developed in the late 18th century. The advent of a settled British colonial establishment in the years after the

Battle of Plassey of 1757 and the emergence of Calcutta as a major hub of trade and industry was a primary reason. This was coupled by the introduction of English, Western science and philosophy, as well as a revival in Sanskrit and Persian learning among a prosperous new middle class. The origins of the movement can be traced in the city of Calcutta; the first in the British Empire to introduce British methods in education system (Sarkar 1990), and works of the 'Father of the Bengal Renaissance', Raja Rammohan Roy, who founded the Hindu College (now Presidency College) in 1817, established the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 and led the crusade for the abolition of *sati* in 1829.

Unlike the Renaissance in Europe, its importance in the course of modern Indian history, notwithstanding the Bengal Renaissance, was not exactly a movement that

included and affected the wider masses. In fact, the socio-economic composition of the movement was narrow, focussing primarily on the prosperous, upper class, urban Hindus of Bengal, though we occasionally find leading figures who were Muslim as well. This essay aims to study just this aspect of the Bengal Renaissance, starting with an analysis of the economic context against which the movement arose, and subsequently comprehend how it led to the emergence of the early Bengali 'Renaissance' class. The primary objective is to show how this affluent social group arose as a result of colonial policies, and how their economic privilege accorded them the opportunities to indulge in the arts, sciences, and culture, which directly led the path to developments of the Bengal Renaissance.

2. The Bengali Economy before the Renaissance

In the years after the Battle of Plassey, and the formal establishment of a British colonial government in Bengal, a number of crucial changes drastically altered the social and economic character of the province. It was transformed from a prosperous agrarian powerhouse with thriving international trade (mainly silk, steel, and saltpetre from Dhaka), burgeoning textile manufacturing and shipbuilding industry, to a colonial economy whose main purpose was to provide capital in order to fuel British industrial capitalism and a market where produced goods could be dumped. These administrative and economic changes also impacted Bengali culture and society profoundly: existing social divisions

deepened, new ones created, and prevailing structures destroyed.

2.1 Permanent Settlement

The Permanent Settlement of Bengal (1793), implemented by Charles Cornwallis, the then Governor General of India, was the first major change of its kind. It completely overhauled the decades-old *ijarah* land taxation system of Zulfikar Khan.² Now, instead of short-term settlements, land revenue was fixed for all time and collected from the *zamindars* (landowners), whose power to levy as much tax as they desired on the cultivators remained unchanged as a way to incentivise the landlords. The principal aim on the part of the government - the *diwan* of Bengal by this point - was to ensure a consistent revenue stream, and perhaps encourage investment in agriculture in the rural areas (Sengupta 2011).

The Permanent Settlement had numerous disastrous effects, especially on the condition of Bengal's farmers. Most relevant to this discussion is that the new system strengthened and inflated the *zamindar* class: they were given succession rights and ownership to their estates which transformed them from tax collectors to landed gentry, akin to that of Britain. Their share of the revenue was fixed at 11%, which made them richer, and the remaining 89% had to be handed to the government or there was risk of losing the land. The *zamindars* would be ruthless with their tax collection (Sinha 1960). The system essentially raised "a parcel of tax-gatherers and land-stewards into a sham gentry" (Hunter 1868). The land in Bengal was now commercialized, turning the *zamindar* class from "local chiefs" to "under civil servants and their descendants, and to merchants and bankers" (Cohn 1960), but left

the traditional farmers - the *prajas* - a lot more vulnerable. This prosperous new aristocratic class was loyal to the British establishment and conservative in their opinions. They became more powerful than they ever had been under the Mughals and Nawabs, and their influence continued intact in Bengal till late into the 1950s.

2.2 Destruction of Industries

The Permanent Settlement also contributed in completely destroying Bengal's existent domestic industries (Sinha 1960). Weaving, spinning, and saltpetre production were closely integrated to agriculture and suffered due to the combined brunt of the one sided open-door trade policy the British forced upon India. The British and European markets were deliberately shut off to Indian cotton and silk, which had been the country's biggest exports, through exorbitant tax barriers. This

resulted in a stunting of indigenous capital injection, a rise in population and a destruction of Bengal's traditional agricultural institutions. At the same time, the British establishment did not permit modern industrialisation in Bengal, keeping their colonial interests in mind. In fact, modern industries made no appearance until way into the 1850s when railways came to India, and the government was almost forced to make space for associated industries to grow to keep the railways system running (Sengupta 2011).

2.3 A New Trading Class

This notwithstanding, the first century of British rule in Bengal also saw the emergence of a Bengali merchant class who served as *banian*³ to the British establishment. Many of them were direct benefactors of the private property created by the Permanent

Settlement. Some engaged in inland trading; others financed and ran indigo and cotton plantations. Early European agency houses of the 19th century dealing in indigo, opium etc. trade also depended, for a large part, on partnership of Bengali merchants.

Raghuram Gosain, the Bengali *banian* of Palmer & Co. and a rich merchant in his own right; Ramdulal Dey, who established trade with American merchants in the early 1800s; and Motilal Seal, a ship-owner and merchant magnate and *banian* to Oswald Seal & Co., are some notable early Bengali entrepreneurs (Sarkar 2013). Perhaps the most noteworthy of them was Dwarkanath Tagore⁴, the patriarch of the Tagore family. His ancestors were East India Company employees-turned-landlords and businessmen, and Tagore himself started out as a banker in 1828. In 1834, he founded 'Carr, Tagore & Co.', the first interracial entrepreneurial

partnership in India. The company bought over the Raniganj coal mines in 1836⁵, and subsequently invested in other companies like the Bengal Salt Company (1838), the Calcutta Steam Ferry Bridge Company (1839), the Bengal Tea Association (1839), the India General Steam Navigation Company (1844), and more. Tagore was also one of the early promoters of the Great Western Bengal Railway Company (Kling 1976). Upendrakishore Roy Chowdhury, the patriarch of another great Bengali Renaissance dynasty, was another scion of a *zamindar* family who became an early entrepreneur and tech innovator in Bengal.

3. The Rise of the *Babus*

British colonial policy had essentially divided Bengali society into two: the landlords and the peasants. The landlord class, the *babus*, despite being frustrated often with the

shorter-end-of-the-stick treatment they would receive from colonial policy, had their financial existence closely tied to the colonial establishment. They saw the British government as a necessary catalyst in the awakening of the Bengali people to modernity, even Raja Rammohan did. Economic factors “blunted the political sentiments” of the *zamindars* of Bengal who “threw weight in strengthening the hands of the Government whenever any ten came on the surface” (Chaudhuri 1965). The progressive, intellectual lot that came out of this class fought for social reform and later religious reform, even demanded liberal government for India, but were not revolutionaries. They failed to understand “the exploiting character of the alien British rule in India” and “had little contact with or understanding of the toiling masses who lived in a world apart.” The early Renaissance leaders’ “obsession with Hindu traditions and

life” and attempts at its revival. The Brahmo Samaj, for example, “kept at a distance the community of our Muslim fellow citizens” (Sarkar 1979).

3.1 The Bengali Muslims

The upper-class Hindu intelligentsia were largely removed from the majority Bengali peasantry and a big part of the Bengali peasantry were Muslim. The Muslim community had been more reluctant in taking to Western education and English language than their Hindu brethren had been, and thus, gradually a development and income gap came to appear between the two. In fact, large-scale efforts to bring secular Anglo-Western education to Muslims by community leaders did not happen until later into the 19th century. The British government gave preferential treatment to Hindus in matters of employment and education as a trick of their ‘divide and rule’ policy as well.

The Hindu intellectual class spearheading the Renaissance were also not exactly attentive to the woes of the Bengali Muslims. Rammohun Roy, again, held the view that Hindustan had been languishing under Mohammedan rule for many centuries and “the civil and religious rights of its original inhabitants (were) being constantly trampled upon”⁶. They were put off by the zealous religious character of movements like the Faraizi and Wahhabi⁷ in rural Bengal, but failed to understand their socio-political motives.

That is not to say we did not have any Muslim Renaissance men (or women). Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Suhrawardy family, Begum Rokeya - they were all important literary and social pioneers. But they came up mostly in the later years of the Bengal Renaissance, and its early leaders had still failed to incorporate the

larger masses, both Hindu and Muslims, into their movement.

4. Bengal and Italy: A Comparison

Bengal was a forward-looking cradle of culture and thus, fertile ground for the Renaissance, in the same way that Italy was to the European Renaissance— though Sarkar uses a different analogy. This comparison can be found as early as in the works of Keshab Chandra Sen, Bipin Chandra Pal, Manabendra Nath Roy as well as later historians such as Amit Sen and Nitish Sengupta.

This stems from an essentially Western, colonialist lens for looking at Indian history. The period before Turkish invasions - the “Hindu” era - was pegged as ‘antiquity’ and the period post that, the “Muslim” era, as the ‘dark ages’.⁸ The coming of the British was

read as the advent of the modern age in India. Numerous intellectuals of the time equated the works of Vidyapati, Chandidas, Chaitanya, Raghunandan to Graeco-Roman classical knowledge of Europe and linked the end of that era to Muslim rule. Thus, like Italy was the land where the long-forgotten intellectual treasures of Greece and Rome were buried, the myth of Bengal was built in a similar shape.

Perhaps the most vital factor that triggered the start of the Italian Renaissance was the economic and political prominence of the Italian states in the 1400s and 1500s. A burgeoning maritime merchandise trade, the founding of a banking system and local commerce had turned city-states, like Florence and Genoa into flourishing metropolises (Sée 1928). Families like the Medicis, who owned most of the financial capital in the economy, emerged as the new

aristocracy and gradually came to control politics and religion in these states and beyond. These families were also big patrons of art and literature as a show of conspicuous consumption. It were these conditions that allowed for Renaissance giants like Raphael, Botticelli, Machiavelli and Monteverdi to thrive, and a local revival movement to fire up, which later spread to the rest of Western Europe.

A lot of these developments were also seen in the society and economy of Bengal in the

early 19th century as discussed in the sections above. Bengal too had a flourishing trade and finance hub, as well as a rich upper-class elite who were *dramatis personae* of the Bengal Renaissance. However, the origins of these shared features were very different in the two countries. In Bengal, they were very closely tied to British colonialism and the colonial economic structure.

Notes

1. It is derived from the Latin root *renaistre*.
2. He was a prominent noble in the court of Mughal Emperor Jahandar Shah (1661-1713).
3. Also called “compradors” of the Company, they served as interpreters, suppliers of cash and capital, bookkeepers and agents.
4. Often titled Prince Dwarakanath Tagor, he was father to Debendranath Tagore, close associate to Rammohan and Brahmo leader and grandfather to Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore
5. *Samāchār Darpan*, 9 January, 1836
6. Rammohan Roy’s speech, “To the King's Most, Excellent Majesty”.
7. *Faraizi* was a tenant and peasant-led movement in rural East Bengal, founded in 1818, which focussed on ending ‘un-Islamic’ practices among the people and turning them to more pious Muslim lives. The *Wahhabi* movement began in Barasat in 1827 and built on reformist strands in Sunni Islam in India to form an anti-imperial, anti-landlord movement.
8. The genesis of such a categorization of the Indian historical timeline can be found in the works of early Indologists and British historians recording Indian history like Mill and Elphinstone.

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Perturbing Imperialism: Voicing Indian Nannies through the Colonial Archive

Ritika Patel

The custom of employing *ayahs* emerged as a pivotal colonial institution in British families' lives during the colonial period from the 1750s onwards. *Ayahs*, hailing from South Asia, performed multifaceted roles in British colonial households, including that of nannies, nurses, domestic servants, and on occasion, wet nurses. Stranded in a foreign environment, numerous *memsahibs* heavily depended on the expertise and knowledge of their Indian *ayahs*. Their primary duty was to provide 24-hour childcare, through which they formed deep emotional bonds with 'Anglo-Indian' children, often resembling surrogate mothers. This stout connection between the colonized and the colonizers within the colonial household frequently blurred the

boundaries of authority within the sphere of the home. However, colonial authority was intertwined with the practice of discriminatory social categorisation, serving the interests and protection of the state, thus *ayahs* were inseparable from female subaltern subjectivity.

Existing historiography on *ayahs* recognises their significance and agency within the British Empire, along with their changing positionality. Historians such as Durba Gosh, Indrani Sen, Olivia Robinson, Satyasikha Chakraborty, and Nitin Varma have challenged the prevailing narratives that depict *ayahs* as lacking agency. Consequently, this paper will explore the multifaceted significance of *ayahs* in the

colonial context, exploring the dynamics of their roles, the narratives that defined them, and the broader implications of their representation. While British women had been making journeys to India and hiring *ayahs* in small numbers since the 1620s, this paper revolves around parameters of 1757 to 1850s. The significance of these dates lies in India's political and military control. The Revolt of 1857 resulted in the dissolution of the East India Company, which had ruled India since the Battle of Plassey in 1757, and India became a British Crown colony. The portrayal of *ayahs* in the visual archive following the Revolt have been dealt with in another article featured in the Brown History Newsletter.

This essay uses visual archives, such as oil paintings and a lithograph, as integral components of research. I have applied a combination of visual and historical

methodology for scrutinizing the creation, dissemination, and cultural influence of these visual sources. This approach draws inspiration from Ann Laura Stoler's methodological analysis of colonial archives, viewing them as a 'process' rather than a static 'thing' (Stoler 2002, 87-88).

Although, in the early 17th century, a small number of British women travelled to India, the majority of women began migrating to the subcontinent in the mid to late 18th century. Thus, prior to the 1770s, Company men found themselves grappling with sexual isolation in the absence of women in their posts. Consequently, they sought out relationships with native women for sexual companionship, disregarding the original charters of the East India Company (EIC) that prohibited women from being present on its posts (MacMillan 1996, 16). Men would either wed Indian women or, if

financially able, maintain *zenanas*² where they kept their Indian bibis or mistresses (Nath 2018, 433). Establishing interracial relationships with native women was highly beneficial for the EIC and its employees as it facilitated the formation of political alliances and facilitated their understanding of India's local languages, customs, and etiquette (Newman 2018, 1). These interracial relationships reflect the EIC's mercantile-driven objectives, prioritizing wealth extraction over colonization or assimilation of native populations.

Perhaps one of the most well-known instances of an Englishman's sexual relationship with an Indian woman is attributed to General William Palmer, a story now commemorated in an incomplete family portrait (see figure 1). The painting's incomplete status indicates that Palmer most likely left Lucknow for Calcutta in

1786, coincident with Hastings' retirement as Governor General (De Almeida 2005, 86). The portrait is the work of artist Johan Zoffany, who travelled to India in 1783, encouraged by his friend William Hodges. Through Hodges, Zoffany became acquainted with Warren and Marian Hastings, likely leading to his commission for the portrait in 1786 by Palmer. However, with Hastings' resignation in the same year and the increasing influence of the British government in India, the practice of cohabitation began to decline. Consequently, what was initially intended as a representation of family life in the portrait transformed into a conspicuous statement of miscegenation (De Almeida 2005, 132-135).

Figure 1. Johan Zoffany. Major William Palmer with His Second Wife, the Mughal Princess Bibi Faiz. Lucknow, India, ca. 1784. Oil on Canvas, The British Library, London, England.

Palmer began his career at the East India Company in 1766 and rapidly progressed, eventually serving as Warren Hastings' Military Secretary in Lucknow from 1776 to 1782 (Ghosh 2006, 82). At the time, British officials engaged in strategic political alliances facilitated by intimate connections with women, affording them access to local princely courts for diplomatic manoeuvring (Ghosh 2006, 70). Consequently, Palmer was able to establish his infamous liaison with Begum Faiz Baksh, a Mughal woman and a prominent figure within the Delhi royal court (Archer 1979, 283). In the portrait, Faiz is positioned in the foreground on the left, seated on the floor and holding an infant. Throughout their 35-year relationship, they shared parenthood and had three children together (De Almeida 2005, 86). While historians lack legal marriage records between the couple, all

three of their offspring depicted in the artwork were acknowledged as legitimate and would eventually work in the Company (Ghosh 2006, 82). Thus, this portrait offers a rare glimpse into the phenomenon of cohabitation and the existence of mixed-race families within the operations of the Company.

The children's proximity to their mother suggests a strong familial bond, particularly highlighted by their affectionate gaze towards their newborn brother. William Palmer and the three *ayahs* overseeing the kids further reinforce the sense of familial unity. Despite being of mixed race, the children are portrayed with a lighter complexion than their Indian mother, possibly reflecting Zoffany's attempt to showcase harmony within the household amidst societal norms that opposed interracial relationships, thus challenging

the EIC's view. By including Palmer's second *bibi* in the family portrait, Zoffany further subverts the social mores of the time. The identity of the second *bibi* is unknown, however Palmer's descendants, Hester Eiloart, the great-granddaughter of Palmer, from whom the painting was acquired, conjectured that this junior *bibi* is, in fact, the younger sister of Faiz who resided with the family.

Scholar Mildred Archer, on the other hand, vehemently opposes this, contending that Palmer's close physical contact with the woman leaning on his knee is inappropriate for an unmarried sister-in-law. Rather, the junior *bibi* is mentioned in family documents as 'the Begum of Oudh,' and is thought to be a young lady from Awadh. The baptismal records of Palmer's six children, born just seven months apart in

January and August 1791, suggest the presence of two *bibis* in his household, indicating a possibility of a domestic love triangle (Archer 1979, 283-284). Had the painting been completed, it would have been perceived as a statement of resistance against the EIC's policies which sought to sharpen the divide between the colonists and the indigenous population. Durba Ghosh contends that the sexual relationships between native Indian women and employees of the EIC played a significant role in the establishment of British political dominance in India from the 1620s to the 1760s but quickly changed with the transition to a formalized governmental system (Ghosh 2006, 2).

In contrast to the cultural hybridity evident in Palmer's family portrait, Zoffany also painted the Morse and Cator Families in the same year (see figure 2). However, this

portrait followed the Company's revised 'code of conduct' introduced with Pitt's Act,³ effectively eliminating India from its composition (Tobin 1999, 120).

The painting portrays William Cator standing on the right side, his wife Sarah who is turning the page, her sister Anne, playing the piano and their brother Robert Morse, playing a cello engaged in a strictly British scene, although both men had connections with the East India Company and spent years in India. Unlike Palmer's family portrait, this portrait has no hint of Indian influence. Instead, It underscores the 'superiority' of European culture, signalling a departure from the East India Company's unethical past stipulating the colony's shifting policies, discouraging interracial relationships between British men and Indian women, and instead promoting the ideal of the British family unit abroad.



Figure 2. Johan Zoffany. The Morse and Cator Family. Calcutta, India. ca. 1784. Oil on canvas. [Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums, Aberdeen, Scotland.](#)

By illustrating a family playing European instruments, attired in European fashion of the time, against a neoclassical setting, an ethos of British domesticity transposed to foreign locales is evident (Tobin 1999, 121-122). Another significant aspect is the absence of children from the Morse and Cator families' tableau despite both women

having babies the year before its creation, the painting intentionally excludes them (Tobin 1999, 123) which is unusual given the societal importance of motherhood in India and Britain. Thus, the absence of children prevents viewers from seeing children in any context other than British.

The Charter Act of 1813 ended the East India Company's trading monopoly in India during the early nineteenth century (Webster 2009, 27). This change facilitated the influx of British women immigrants and allowed for the presence of Christian missionaries in the region. This shift marked a transition from a mercantile to a political company, emphasizing missionary work as a civilizing force (Goswami 2012, 16). The increasing British dominance in India since the 18th century brought about significant changes in social and economic dynamics. Interracial relationships were discouraged to

maintain colonial objectives, leading to the emergence of a new colonial space: the British home, where British women and Anglo-Indian children thrived.

Zoffany created another group portrait around the same time in 1784, featuring Sir Elijah and Lady Impey and their children, depicting the cultural hybridity of Anglo-Indian children (see figure 3). At first glance, the Impey family portrait appears to capture the affluent lifestyle of a colonial aristocratic household in India, featuring Impey, his wife, and their children enjoying Indian music and dance in their Calcutta home. However, considering Zoffany's connections with Hastings and Impey, alongside the political and social context as well as his distinctive satirical approach to painting, the artwork reveals deeper layers of complexity.

Figure 3. Johan Zoffany (painter). Group Portrait of Sir Elijah and Lady Impey and Their Children. Calcutta, India, ca. 1783 - 1784. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain.

Impey most likely got to know of Zoffany through their mutual acquaintance, Hastings, while working in Calcutta, and Impey soon commissioned Zoffany for two artworks (De Almeida 2005, 135). The first was an official portrait of Impey as Chief Justice of Bengal and the second commissioned piece was the family portrait. On one side, Impey, his wife, and their middle child stand before British Neoclassical architecture. The couple is dressed in customary British attire to demonstrate their Europeanness. In contrast, the middle child is dressed in an Indian-styled tunic called a *kurta* and loose pants called *salwar kameez* symbolizing his

connection to Indian culture. The visual protagonist, Marian Impey, was the eldest child, and is depicted performing the traditional Indian dance of Kathak wearing *salwar kameez* and exhibiting the most prominent Anglo-Indian identity (Pillai 2018). Conversely, on the right side, Indian figures are situated against dense shrubbery, with musicians playing music and *ayahs* caring for the youngest Impey child. It emphasizes the racial and social distinctions among its figures, progressing from left to right to depict a gradient of cultural backgrounds.

Impey cheerfully watches his daughter dance, seemingly ignoring or oblivious to the cultural divide between himself and his children which is reflective of the intensity of influence that Indian *ayahs* had on British children. Marian symbolizes the fusion of her parents' British heritage and her Indian

ayahs' culture, a conformity that would have been discouraged by the British colonial government in 1784, reflecting their tightening control over the East India Company and disapproval of cultural exchange. Consequently, Marian's cultural hybridity is highlighted not only by her Indian attire and dance but also by the artistic arrangement of her siblings. While the youngest child being cared for by the *ayahs* on the 'Indian side' suggests their intimate relationship with the *ayahs* and immersion in Indian life. In contrast, the middle Impey child holds onto his mother's shoulder, smiling as he observes the performance, while Lady Impey (Mary), with her back turned and gazes off into the distance, offering little affection in return, indicating a disconnect between her and the child. While historical norms may suggest so, it's unreasonable to generalize that the mothers were emotionally distant from

their children; however, Zoffany's satirical style invites interpretation of Mary's depiction as emblematic of the distant *memsahib* figure.

In the colonial household, the workforce primarily involved male servants, with *ayahs* and occasional wet nurses being the only female employees (Sen 2009, 302). Despite the prevalent gender pay gap observed in both Britain and India, *ayahs* were among the most generously compensated servants within the household, owing to their vital duties. By 1813, their monthly wages averaged between eight to ten rupees (Ghose 1998, 185). Britons in India continued to rely heavily on their domestic workers for most basic necessities until the Partition in 1947. *Ayahs* were entrusted with the complete care of children, from infancy until the child was typically sent back to Britain for schooling around the age of six

or seven (Roberts 1836, 128). Typically, the most experienced *ayah* would supervise others to ensure proper childcare. *Ayahs* also served as ladies' maids to *memsahibs*, assisting with household chores alongside childcare duties. In Tayler William's 1842 lithograph (See figure:4) an *ayah* is shown aiding her *memsahib* in dressing and preparing for the day. They also took charge of tasks like ironing, mending clothes, and organizing laundry. *Ayahs* provided additional support wherever the *memsahib* needed, making them indispensable servants in the home.

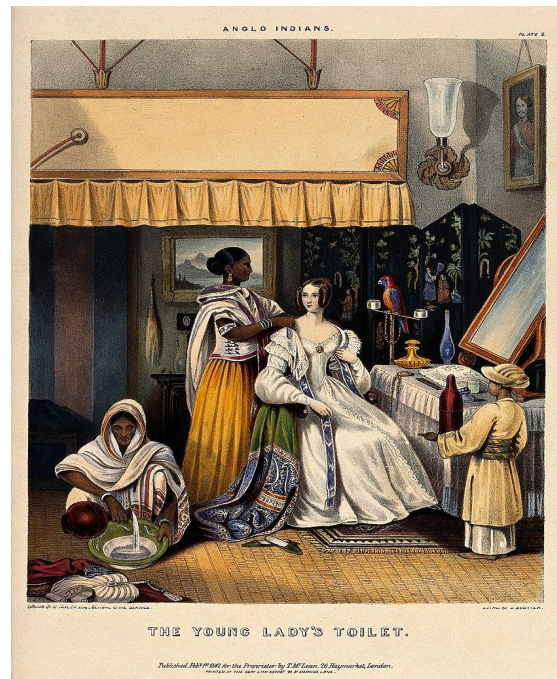


Figure 4. *A female Anglo-Indian at her toilet being attended by three Indian servants.* Coloured lithograph by J. Bouvier, 1842, after W. Tayler. Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). Source: Wellcome Collection. [Wellcome Collection, London, England.](#)

In 1857, the Revolt marked a significant and violent moment in British colonial history. This Revolt rule garnered widespread attention and was particularly highlighted

in art and media across the British Empire. Notably, “the Mutiny's gendered violence against British women and children, brought attention to the role of *ayahs* who emerged as protectors, safeguarding British families from their fellow Indians” (Blunt 2000, 404). Abraham Solomon's painting, *The Flight From Lucknow* (figure 5) stands out as a distinctive representation of the role played by *ayahs* during this time. As the Revolt spread, British forces under the leadership of Sir Henry Lawrence were forced to evacuate the cantonment area of Lucknow and seek refuge in the fortified Residency. The shelling of the Residency and the subsequent cut-off of supplies intensified the desperate situation.



Figure 5. Abraham Solomon (painter). *The Flight of Lucknow*. Lucknow, India, ca. 1858. Oil on Canvas, [New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester, England](#).

In the portrait, the attire of the first two women, who appear to be ill-prepared for such an event, reflects their lack of anticipation of the Revolt. The presence of an *ayah*, carrying a sleeping child, presumably responsible for the care of the fair-haired young woman and her child highlights her as a protector guarding the

British family from her fellow Indian people. This painting depicts how *ayahs* took a nurturing and protective role for their employers' children even in times of intense strife.

The story of British women and children during the Revolt evoked sympathy and outrage in Britain, prompting fierce retaliatory measures. This event left a lasting impact on the collective psyche of British society, leading many to harbour deep mistrust towards the Indian population. Consequently, British families became increasingly apprehensive about welcoming Indian women, particularly into their most intimate spaces (Chaudhari, 529). This increasing apprehension towards Indian women can be attributed to efforts aimed at preserving racial and cultural dominance within the colony, ensuring the

perpetuation of imperial control.

In the October 1880 edition of *The Pioneer*, an English-language colonial newspaper, it was noted that Anglo-Indian children 'carry in their hearts the *ayah's* laughter and tears ... after all else Indian has passed out of their lives' (Sen 2009, 310). This describes the cherished and lasting bond between *ayahs* and children, which transcended racial and social barriers, and was a recurring theme in colonial writings and evoked anxiety among British colonists. They feared that the close relationship between *ayahs* and children, especially in the colonial nursery, could lead to the replacement of biological parents in the children's affections, potentially fostering a stronger affinity for Indian society and culture. This prospect unsettled the British, as it threatened to undermine their efforts to instil imperial values and maintain dominance in India. Specifically,

there was concern that Indian caregivers might not impart the desired traits of leadership, self-control, and manliness, which were seen as essential for upholding British authority. This fear of 'indiscipline among the European children' and the potential for the 'Indianisation' of the British community (Sen, 2009: 311) highlighted the anxiety surrounding the obnubilation of boundaries between colonists and the colonized, undermining the core objectives of British colonialism (Chaudhuri 1988, 531).

Conclusion

This research paper aimed to demonstrate the *ayah* as a crucial invention of the colonial enterprise which played a vital role in ensuring the well-being of British women and children within the perceived hazardous

colonial setting. This perspective adds depth to understanding the *ayahs'* employment, highlighting their contribution to shaping the colonial home as a multifaceted microcosm reflective of the broader empire. The intimate relationships that formed between *ayahs* and British children challenged the traditional colonial power dynamic, and helped to foster a sense of cultural hybridity in British children growing up in India. The *ayahs*, acting as maternal figures, became symbolic protectors for these children, fostering emotional connections that surpassed those with their biological parents. Consequently, giving rise to concerns about the potential 'cultural contamination' of British children under their care reflecting imperial anxieties. The heightened anxiety within the imperial framework led to stringent regulations, particularly in British households, inadvertently contributing to

the historical neglect of *ayahs'* agency.

Eventually the obscured narratives of *ayahs* limited our understanding of their individual stories and the broader contributions they made to history. The scarcity of source material directly from *ayahs* poses a substantial constraint for historians seeking to comprehend their perspectives and understand individual stories. Therefore the use of visual archive in

this paper provides a secondary viewpoint that surpasses the limitations of textual descriptions and aims to push the existing boundaries in the historical narrative surrounding *ayahs*. By centering on the intersectionality and agency of *ayahs*, it highlighted the significant role these subaltern women played in shaping the cultural, political, and economic histories of the empire.

Notes

1. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the term Anglo-Indian denoted individuals of British origin residing in India, commonly applied to British offspring born on the subcontinent. In the 20th century, its usage shifted to describe individuals of mixed European and Indian ancestry
2. *Zenana* is a Persian word that refers to designated areas within households where women were excluded from men, typically accommodating the Indian mistress.
3. The Pitt's India Act of 1784 formally instituted a joint governance of India by both the East India Company and the British monarchy.

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Intermediaries of Worlds: Gandhi and Roy on Body and *Brahmacharya*

Nishitha Mandava

Introduction

By the late 19th century, regional anti-colonial movements were connected to their distant counterparts in a rich tapestry of global anti-colonial networks. Anti-imperialist movements were no longer local affairs, but had acquired a cosmopolitan character. At the vortex of these networks were Indian anti-imperialists, who were deeply involved in local movements in their homelands and simultaneously wielded extensive transnational experience. Precisely this ability of the Indian anti-imperialists to locate themselves beyond the dichotomies of local versus global makes their histories relevant for studying the various developments of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Some scholars have utilized the framework of cosmopolitan thought zones to study Indian anti-colonial leaders and their political thought. Cosmopolitan thought zones have been defined as 'heterotopias that call forth conversation, in which speech is not desiccated and stopped as Foucault proposed, but is generated by the pragmatic need to get things done in communities with highly different others' (Manjapra 2010b, 1). In other words, they were shared intellectual or physical spaces wherein diverse groups sustained conversation to reach shared ends. They were also unequal spaces, where cultures interacted and clashed. However, how such spaces altered the bodily practices and experiences of these revolutionaries has been inadequately

addressed in contemporary scholarship. This essay seeks to address this gap by tracing how M. N. Roy and M. K. Gandhi adapted themselves to these ideas and how their travels informed their contrasting interpretations, especially in the context of *brahmacharya*.

Gandhi in London

Gandhi experienced many ‘rebirths’ during his time in London. His anxieties and experiments offer insights into what being a colonized male subject in the metropole meant. Joseph Alter argues that understanding the relation between Gandhi’s experiments and his politics does not require ‘meta-interpretation’ (Alter 2000, 6). Gandhi’s concerns with celibacy and dietetics need to be understood within the context of colonialism, demonstrating a connection between self-control and

politics, rather than being viewed from the lens of elaborate rituals or myths. Engaging with writings and practices on such themes provides an avenue to explore how cosmopolitan thought zones can be used as a frame to understand the self and bodily practices of the Indian anti-colonial leaders.

Gandhi engaged with the body in terms of medical intervention, diet, and celibacy. However, Gandhi’s emphasis on vegetarianism, celibacy, and community practices did not exclusively emerge from Hindu or Jain ethics. Neither was his approach that of anti-modernity. Instead, it must be located in the global arena by considering his time in London. Gandhi’s journey to London from India can be read as a familiar route from the colony to the metropolis (Roy 2007, 134). However, he thereafter charted a route of his own, coming in contact with England’s vegetarian

circles, anarchists, Theosophists, and so on. In his autobiography, Gandhi recounted a poem he learnt in school:

Behold the mighty Englishman

He rules the Indian small,

Because being a meat eater

He is five cubits tall (Gandhi 1999, 41)

Gandhi associated meat-eating with a strong and virile masculinity. He believed that ‘if the whole country took to meat eating, the English could be overcome’ (Gandhi 1999, 41). This association between meat eating and masculinity, and feelings of inferiority compared to the colonizer, found expression in his initial anxieties in London. Gandhi, writing about his decision to go to London, noted, “If I go to England not only shall I become a barrister (of whom I used to think a great deal), but I shall be able to see England, the land of philosophers and

poets, the very centre of civilisation” (Gandhi 1999, 42). This demonstrates England’s place in Gandhi’s mental map of the world and the feelings of deficiency as a colonial subject. Before his journey to London, Gandhi’s mother made him vow against indulging in meat eating, alcohol consumption, and sexual relations with women (Roy 2007, 136). Gandhi was expected to follow a form of bodily discipline when he came in contact with the metropole. Upon reaching London in 1889, Gandhi narrated the ordeals honouring his mother’s vow and his lack of knowledge of British etiquette. However, Gandhi noted that upon passing by a vegetarian restaurant, he came across several books, including ‘*Plea for Vegetarianism*’ (Gandhi 1968, 70). Upon reading it, Gandhi remarked:

“I had all along abstained from meat in the interests of truth and of the vow I had taken, but had wished at the same time that every Indian should be a meat eater, and had looked forward to being one myself freely and openly some day, and to enlisting others in the cause. The choice was now made in favour of vegetarianism, the spread of which henceforward became my mission” (Gandhi 1968, 70).

Gandhi had previously viewed vegetarianism as embarrassing since he had associated virile masculinity with meat-eating. He attempted to compensate for this by learning British dressing etiquette, and taking violin and dance lessons (Roy 2007, 137). This phase was short-lived, given his exposure to alternate ways of being English. Gandhi questioned what he considered normative of the English environment once he came in contact with England’s vegetarian circles. He came to view London as a hub for cosmopolitan movements, including socialism, anarchism, and anti-colonialism (Roy 2007, 134). Along with reconsidering Englishness, Gandhi began to reconsider

Indianness (Roy 2007, 138). The inadequacy that he felt as a vegetarian colonial subject was rethought. The work of William Loftus Hare and Paul Bureau, *Generation and Regeneration*, which focused on the physiological effects of sex, played a significant part in convincing Gandhi in favour of celibacy. Gandhi understood *brahmacharya* as the following:

The full and proper meaning of *Brahmacharya* is search of *Brahman*. *Brahman* pervades every being and can therefore be searched by diving into and realizing the inner self. This realization is impossible without complete control of the senses. *Brahmacharya* thus means control in thought, word and action of all the senses at all times and in all places (Gandhi 1927, 1202).

Gandhi perceived *brahmacharya* as maintaining control over one’s senses in all contexts. In his article ‘Brahmacharya or Self-Control’ for *Young India*, he wrote, “If I had complete mastery over my thoughts I should not have suffered from the diseases

of pleurisy, dysentery and appendicitis that I did during the last ten years” (Gandhi 1927, 1203). For Gandhi, control over the senses meant a healthy body. In another article for *Young India*, he addressed the readers’ concern that the attraction between men and women was natural. In this context, how does a *brahmachari* negate such urges? Gandhi asserted that ‘the natural affinity between man and woman is the attraction between brother and sister, mother and son or father and daughter. It is that natural attraction that sustains the world’ (Gandhi 1927, 1226). Thus, a sensual attraction between a man and a woman is understood to be unnatural.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi established a clear connection between *brahmacharya* and nationalist politics:

After a great deal of experience, it seems to me that those who want to become

passive resisters for the service of the country have to observe perfect chastity, adopt poverty, follow truth, and cultivate fearlessness (Gandhi 1997, 96)

Observing celibacy was critical for Gandhi because without freedom from one’s impulses, one could not become a passive resister for the country’s service. Attaining *swaraj* on an individual level was a prerequisite for a non-violent resister before attempting to achieve self-rule for the country. Thus, the body became central within the Gandhian conception of *swaraj*.

Roy, Mexico, and Prison Diaries

M. N. Roy left India as an anti-colonial nationalist, and returned to India disillusioned with communism. Despite his extensive transnational travels and experiences with the Mexican Communist Party, Roy failed to find an intellectual

refuge in mainstream political camps. He had become an intermediary of multiple worlds. He was born to a Brahmin family and grew up a vegetarian (Manjapra 2010, 36-37). Unlike Gandhi, Roy was not involved in the struggle with himself to accept the practices of the thought zone he found himself in. Roy's understanding of thought zones appears to have expanded through sensory stimulants, including food, music, and art. In the United States, he continued his life as a vegetarian and abstained from alcohol. It was in Mexico that Roy consumed meat. Mexico was critical not only for the transformations that Roy expressed ideologically but also in terms of the self. He studied German and learned to appreciate art and cello in Mexico (Manjapra 2010c, 36-37). Reflecting on his flexibility in adapting to foreign environments, Roy wrote, "Later on, in Europe, communist friends taunted me as

more European than the natives when I criticized their bourgeois habits and prejudices" (Roy 1964, 165-166).

The relation between politics and body becomes more apparent in Roy's case in his prison writings. In 1930 Roy returned to Bombay upon his expulsion from the Communist International in 1928.¹ He was imprisoned for six years in what came to be known as the Indo-German conspiracy for attempting to procure arms from the Germans. Roy is estimated to have written 3,750 pages during his sentence. He continued to contact his associates. He sent out letters with the help of sympathetic wardens and fellow inmates. These letters reached as far as Paris. His writings included topics like historical materialism and theoretical physics (Manjapra 2010, 102). During his prison term, Roy declared to have become an Epicurean.² According to

Roy, within Epicurean thought, all pleasure was considered good because it resulted from knowledge, and all pain was bad because it stemmed from ignorance (Manjapra 2010c, 103). He shifted his writings to sexual politics and individual freedom.

To intertwine nationalist politics and sexual practices, Roy turned to thinkers including Sigmund Freud. He drew inspiration from Freud's theory of repression to explain the effects of *brahmacharya*. Roy read *brahmacharya* as a condition of mystical experience whose central tenet is the suppression of sexual impulses. However, a sexual impulse is a natural impulse which cannot be entirely negated, and can only be relegated to the subconscious mind. Attempting to suppress sexual desires altogether has several physical and psychological effects. Moreover, a *brahmachari* cannot become unconscious of an impulse they are trying to combat actively (Roy 1982, 53). In other words, when an individual attempts to actively suppress an impulse all their life, it is impossible for

them to negate it. Roy argued that the satisfaction of natural impulses cannot be antagonistic to spiritual development if the faculty naturally belongs to humans. Sex is the fundamental impulse of life; its satisfaction is necessary for a human's physical, intellectual and emotional well-being (Roy 1982, 54). This contrasts Gandhi's position that controlling the senses would translate into a healthy body. For Roy, it was through knowledge that one could strengthen one's mental faculties. Rationality and intelligence and not *brahmacharya* lead to the understanding of reality. Here, Roy appears to be fusing his reading of Epicurus with Freud. Roy interpreted the Epicurean thought as the following:

Epicurean pleasure is not to eat, drink and be merry, but knowledge. Knowledge of the causes of the constantly changing things frees man from fear and anxiety which arise from the feeling of helplessness, and that freedom makes man happy (Manjapra

2010c, 105).

Roy suggested that happiness came not from sensual pleasure but from intellectual pursuits like attempting to understand the world. He further suggested, “Every pleasure is good because it results from knowledge; pain is evil, because it is caused by ignorance” (Manjapra 2010c, 105). This appears to have influenced his reading of religion. Roy argued that religion stems from the ‘original sin’ (Roy 1982, 55), which is ignorance. He asserted, ‘metaphysical agencies are postulated by man unable to explain natural phenomena otherwise’ (Roy 1982, 54). Religion becomes a product of human ignorance and a cause for pain. In order to develop spiritually, one needs to discard religious predispositions and turn to rationality. These critiques of religion and celibacy were expressed in his political ideology of radical humanism, in which he

articulated that not nation or class but human beings were of core concern for him.

Radical Humanism was concerned with the well-being and freedom of humans, not just in a political sense but also in a social and sexual sense (Roy 1981, 5-6).

Conclusion

Gandhi and Roy’s interpretations of celibacy were deeply intertwined with their political ideologies and goals. They were located in very different thought zones from which they approached the topic of *brahmacharya*. Spending his term in a prison cell, Roy found himself in the company of Freudian and Epicurean thought. Roy’s experience was enabled by translation and interpretation, resulting in literary production – in this case, his prison diaries. This highlights the cosmopolitan nature of the thought zone in which he was mentally

located. Conversely, Gandhi argued in favour of *brahmacharya*. His interest in celibacy stemmed from his experiences in London and South Africa. For Gandhi, control over the senses was a prerequisite for achieving the country's *swaraj*. For Roy, suppressing natural impulses like sexual desires was not conducive to spiritual development and was a product of religious ignorance. Overall, Gandhi and Roy did not entirely accept the position of any thought zone. They found themselves at the confluence of several mental and physical thought zones, reflected in their contrasting understanding of the self and *brahmacharya*.

Dipesh Chakraborty argues that a form of Europe persists in India despite political independence. It manifests as an imaginary

figure in 'everyday habits of thought' (Chakraborty 2000, 4). Colonial legacies extend beyond ideological realms, shaping perceptions of the body, self, and daily life. To unravel these complexities, the paper advocates reintegrating the social into global histories. Drawing on methodologies from social history, such as documenting the mundane experiences and anxieties of Indian revolutionaries as colonial subjects and migrants rather than solely as intellectuals, offers a nuanced understanding of their existence. This approach offers insight into the anti-colonial visions underpinning their political ideologies, influencing the articulation of postcolonial world orders in the 'Third World'.

Notes

1. After the demise of Lenin in 1924, the Comintern had become increasingly orthodox, and those who opposed it often found themselves ousted. Roy and his associates, who subscribed to the thought of Rosa Luxemburg, were expelled from the Comintern in July 1928.
2. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus held that philosophy's prime aim was to make individuals attain pleasure.

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Imperial Women and the Mughal Political World of the 16th Century

Trinanjana Sen

Royal Mughal women and the Mughal harem have been a point of fascination in popular historiography of the Mughal empire, in literature, and of late, in cinema. While history writing of early modern South Asia has moved past the harem's oriental exoticised representations, the widely held belief that women were oppressed, sequestered, and curtailed has also become an excuse to invisibilise them in historical processes. Moreso, it has been erroneously assumed that 'the seclusion of women precluded their exercise of any influence beyond the physical boundaries of the harem' (Peirce 1994, 6).

In this essay, by examining the imperial Mughal harem of the 16th century as a site of power, networks, and contesting claims

to imperial sovereignty, I will argue that royal women played a significant if not central role in negotiations of power between different actors in the political sphere of the Mughal world. I will build upon the seminal works of scholars in this field. Among these is Joan Scott (1986), who has prompted the historian to examine the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed and then subsequently relate those findings to a range of activities. Another noteworthy contribution is that of Leslie Peirce (1994), whose work on the imperial harem of the Ottoman Empire has highlighted the significance of maternal figures within the harem as well as problematised the 'pleasure paradigm' of harem historiography. Munis Faruqui (2012), by emphasizing on the nuanced and continuously evolving nature

of the Mughal empire, has drawn our attention to a certain 'networking' process at play, especially in the backdrop of succession struggles. The sources for my study are imperial accounts, namely, Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*, Gulbadan Begum's *Humayun Nama*, and the autobiographies of Babur and Jahangir.

The imperial Mughal harem can be understood in two ways: as a *structure* and a *process*. The harem as a structure allows an examination of tangible, often definitive aspects such as its exceptionally hierarchised configuration and the physical space it came to represent. In this sense, one may understand the harem as an institution within which relations were shaped by social and legal norms, and all actors had a set of socially sanctioned and legally protected rights. Also characteristic of this institution like any other was its

bureaucratic structure, references to which may be found in entries recording deaths such as the following, that implies the existence of a certain office of treasurer held by a woman:

On the eve of the fourth [February 22], a member of the harem passed away. She had executed the office of treasurer with distinction, and the emperor had relied on her extensively (Fazl 2022, 8:443).

A processual understanding of the harem allows us to consider a more dynamic picture, wherein norms were not set in stone, but were constantly being moulded. This perspective allows us to unravel the entwinement of the household and state, the household being as much a political as a social space (Tandon 2018). The nature of the harem, furthermore, changed considerably under the reigns of Babur and Humayun, who had primarily lived

semi-nomadic lives, and of Akbar, who was building his capital in Agra and attempting to settle. While earlier the 'harem' had referred to the quarters of royal women and the emperor, with Akbar's construction of a confined physical space in the capital, it came to refer to a specific physical location: Agra. As Jahangir wrote upon ascending the throne, Agra was:

the centre of the State, the abode of the ladies of the holy harem, and the depository of the world's treasures (Jahangir 2023, 1:70).

The imperial harem, however, was not simply a space, but also represented an idea and a culture consisting of a certain set of etiquettes that dictated the comportment of every member. The harem was very mutable, constantly negotiating with norms, moulding, and remoulding itself in the face of external influences.

Herein Peirce's observations about the 'oriental harems' are noteworthy. The imposition of western notion of the 'public' and 'private' on non-western cultures and spaces has played a large role in shaping our understanding of the imperial harem as a site reserved for and dedicated to pleasure. However, it is imperative to move beyond this pleasure paradigm of harem historiography if one wishes to examine the range of activities that women were engaged in. Another important observation Peirce makes is of the considerable authority that matriarchal elders held over other women in the harem as well as younger males in the family. This authority was sustained by networks of power and notions of imperial sovereignty, that in the case of Akbar especially, gave primacy to the mother through the legend of Alan Qoa, and formal rituals such as weddings, *nauroz* celebrations, lunar and solar weighings, and

visits dictated by etiquette. This is evident in the following anecdotes mentioned by Abul Fazl in his treatise.

In one instance, the emperor was in the vicinity of Bhera (in present day Punjab province of Pakistan), where he had arranged a hunt. After he crossed the river Jhelum, having set up the imperial camp at the edge of the river, he was informed that Maryam Makani, his mother, was in the vicinity. According to Fazl, Akbar immediately sent out prince Salim to venerate, honour, and accompany her to the imperial camp (Fazl 2022, 6:23). In another instance, when the emperor was in Rohtas, Fazl wrote, Maryam Makani, longing to see her son and unable to remain in the capital, came to visit. Here again, Fazl dutifully noted how the emperor greeted her with reverence, escorted her into imperial quarters with honour (Fazl 2021, 7:129). In

yet another entry, Fazl illustrated the kind of rituals involved in receiving elder women of the imperial harem at length:

Since the queen mother was eager to see the emperor, she had thought of journeying to Kashmir. Gulbadan Begim and many of the ladies of court also set forth on such a trip. Hearing that the emperor had gone to Kabul, they traversed the roads to there. In that appreciation and awareness are customs of the emperor's, he first sent Prince Sultan Danyal forward with some officers. Next he sent Prince Sultan Murad with some renowned personages, and then Prince Sultan Salim and many court nobles were sent to greet the ladies. On the thirteenth [November 4] the emperor himself greeted them and hosted the new arrivals at a banquet in his quarters near Bagrame. (Fazl 2021, 7:419)

Another interesting record dated 20 June, 1599, noted the arrival of Maryam Makani at Agra having received a letter requesting her presence (Fazl 2022, 8:291-293). A little more

than a month before this, Sultan Murad had died, having suffered a severe epileptic attack brought on by his excessive drinking, on the banks of the Purna, twenty leagues from Daulatabad (Fazl 2022, 8:281). However, until Makani's arrival no one had dared to mention the demise of the Sultan and Maryam Makani broke the news to the emperor (Fazl 2022, 8:293).

There were constraints in place with respect to movement. But as these accounts by Fazl reveal, Maryam Makani and other senior women of the harem moved around with a certain ease, often coming to meet the emperor from great distances, making religious pilgrimages, etc. Further, the performance of reverence, be it through sending princes forth to greet the women or the emperor himself coming out to greet, speak not just to the authority that these women commanded, arguably accompanied

by their forceful personalities, but also suggest a constant negotiation of power. This was power that the emperor could not command but instead manufactured with their cooperation. Women, particularly elderly women of the imperial harem, were tapped into a network presumably flowing with sensitive crucial information, fuelled, and sustained as Pierce (1994) points out by 'formal rituals' (7).

Munis Faruqi (2012) in his book *Princes of the Mughal Empire* has elaborated upon what he has termed a 'networking' process, which was central to Mughal succession struggles. He has argued that the best 'networked' prince inevitably became the Mughal emperor (Faruqi 2012, 10). Building upon his work, I argue that women played a significant role in this networking process. They were extensively involved in mediations and negotiations of imperial

power and sovereignty. This is evident in the negotiations between Humayun and his brothers Kamran Mirza, Hindal Mirza and Askari Mirza, carried out by the likes of Gulbadan Begum. It was again seen in the interventions staged by elder women of the imperial harem under Akbar's reign during prince Salim's rebellion, after he ordered the murder of Abul Fazl by Bir Singh Deo, enraging his father. Akbar at the time yielded to the requests of his mother, Maryam Makani, and Gulbadan Begum and pardoned Salim, commanding his presence in court. Salima Sultan Begum, the daughter of Humayun's sister Gulbarg Begum, having once been married to Bayram Khan, was then sent to deliver the news of forgiveness to the rebellious prince and bring him back to court. When Salim came near the court, he asked for Maryam Makani to take him 'by the hand' and cast him 'at the feet of the emperor'. The request was subsequently

granted, and Maryam Makani brought him into the palace (Fazl 2022, 8:485-499).

Similar acts of mediation and negotiation can also be observed during the reign of Babur. The *Humayun Nama* written by Gulbadan Begum records an incident wherein Mirza Khan, who had rebelled against Babur, and was holding Kabul along with Mirza Muhammad Husain (incidentally the father of Haidar Mirza Dughlat, the author of the *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*). He hid himself in the house of his mother, while his companion, Muhammad Husain hid in his wife's house (68). Both women were Babur's maternal aunts and for their sake, Babur forgave the 'Mirzas their offences.' Gulbadan (2022) further wrote of Babur, "He used to go, in his old fashion, in and out of his aunts' houses, and showed them more and more affection, so that no mist of trouble might dim their hearts" (68).

These day-to-day negotiations with imperial power and sovereignty reveal a world wherein royal women were active political participants. They were powerful by extension of the emperor's sovereignty, as well as by social norms that bared upon familial relations. However, their cooperation was not commanded, but manufactured through mediations and negotiations. As illustrated, these women played a central role in negotiating different sovereign claims emerging from within the family, and mediated between different

princes and the emperor. They were able to do so by virtue of the networks that they built, sustained by formal rituals. Critically examining these dynamic, constantly evolving aspects where actors were moulding themselves to changing norms and political scenarios complicates our understanding of the imperial harem and the social milieu of the time. This reveals an image contrary to popular understandings of the imperial harem and its inhabitants. It directs us towards acknowledging and understanding royal women as active political actors in the Mughal world.

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The Narratives of Domingo Paes: A Traveller's Insight into a Bygone Era of Vijayanagara Empire

Sneha Nair

In the 15th century, Europeans sought to trade in distant lands like India, leading to their dominance at the cost of jeopardising natives' freedom. Goa, vital for trade, became a Portuguese colony in 1510, and the Portuguese allied with Vijayanagara against common foes like the Bijapur and Surat Sultanates. Christovao de Figueiredo played an instrumental part in Emperor Krishnadevaraya's attack over Raichur in 1520 by providing him with musketeers. After the success of the battle, Christovao de Figueiredo and his Portuguese entourage, which included the traveller Domingo Paes, were welcomed in the city of Vijayanagara (Reddy 2008, 3).¹ Paes' observations were recorded in *Chronica dos reis de bisnaga* (Chronicles of the kings of

Vijayanagara), which also consists of the writings of Fernao Nuniz.² It was later translated from Persian by Robert Sewell in his book *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar*. There is a general concern of loss of information through translation and biases of the authors. The translated chronicles of Nuniz and Paes are supported by Sewell's historiography of the empire and inscriptions from *Epigraphia Indica Journal* of the Bombay Asiatic Society, among other sources.³

These travellers' accounts have inspired colonial and post-colonial writings and are important to Vijayanagara's history, as the region witnessed an influx of foreign travellers and traders entering their

empire. Travellers can be 'participant observers' whose vivid descriptions are verified by archaeological evidence by contemporary scholars from Europe and India (Stein 1989, 4). The traces of foreign visitors can still be seen in various sculptures across the royal enclosure and the sacred centre of the city.⁴ Paes's accounts help one to understand the geopolitical relationship between the Portuguese and Vijayanagara. Paes, as part of his visit after the conquest of Raichur in 1520, gave a dazed account of the pomp and show in the capital. He quotes as he enters the city: "I cannot possibly describe it allto see the horses and the armour that they wear, you would see them so covered with metal plates that I have no words to express what I saw...I was almost falling backward off my horse with my senses lost" (Sewell 1900, 278).

King Krishnadevaraya was described by Paes as a hospitable king who was of medium height, had a fair complexion, with a fat build rather than thin. Another significant observation is that his face showed signs of smallpox. He is the most feared and perfect king that could be and was very merry (Sewell 1900, 246-247). The king serves as an 'idol' in ceremonial rituals, receiving gifts. As a gesture of friendship, he presented the Portuguese ambassador, Christovao de Figueiredo, with a brocade tunic and cap, and the rest of the envoy with embroidered cloth (Sewell 1900, 252).⁵ This is an example of Vijayanagara's hospitality. It is understood that the positive account of Paes is his view of the king as a friend of the Portuguese and a good business partner. There is an indication of foreign talents contributing to the grandeur of Vijayanagara, where an account of Nuniz describes Krishnadevaraya engaging with a

Portuguese master mason named Joao della Ponte to provide his remarkable services to construct a tank (Sewell 1900, 364-365).

Paes wrote descriptions of the bazaars or markets in awe, where he describes a colourful market selling all sorts of wares from jewels to fruits. Paes describes the prosperity of the mercantile class where the broad and beautiful street is full of rows of fine houses belonging to wealthy and prosperous men (Sewell 1900, 255). He also mentions the prices of wild birds and describes the staple food. On the other hand, chronicler Abdur Razzaq made an exclusive mention of bazaars holding courtesans: "Behind the Mint is a sort of bazaar.....on the two sides of the avenue formed by the chambers are represented figures of lions, panthers, tigers, and other animals. Thrones and chairs are placed on the platforms, and the courtesans seat

themselves thereon, bedecked in gems and fine raiment" (Sewell 1900, 92). This imagery of courtesans decked in fineries suggests their prosperity.

This may give us hints on the bias of colonial chroniclers toward writing about sexuality, a taboo in the Western world, where Paes' description provides a more 'sanitised' description of the market and focuses on the western ideals of wealth.⁶ Razzaq also touched upon the prosperity of the kingdom where there is a division of labour among classes, each having a shop selling a particular ware. Jewels are even sold in broad open without the fear of being robbed (Sewell 1900, 90). If one looks at Ibn Battuta's description of markets, it is more focused on the prosperity of the merchants rather than actual material goods. He describes Quilon's bazaar as 'elegant', one whose merchants were

wealthy and possessed the ability to buy a vessel with all its possessions and load it with their own goods (Gibb 2007, 816-817).

The Nayankara system included Nayakas or Amara-Nayakas – military leaders responsible for defence and administration in return for land rights. They oversaw economic affairs, collecting dues and land revenue for the state. Paes and Nuniz compared Nayakas to Europe's feudal lords, emphasising their role as state agents with feudal duties.⁷ Francois Bernier brings in feudalism where he emphasised the need for liberty. He observed that the Mughal state was despotic in nature where the king was the owner of all lands and there was a state-sponsored cycle of oppression maintained through transfers of jagirs. He argued that the deprivation of the subjects of the empire doesn't come from their weakness but rather through the despotic

institutions of the state (Moosvi 2005, 41).

Bernier's account on feudal institutions is more critical whereas Paes and Nuniz write rather observatory accounts in a positive light.

Foreign soldiers being employed in the Vijayanagara army was a common sight, including the Portuguese soldiers in the 16th century. Diplomatic relations are made through such military alliances and such alliances also gave them privileges to trade in return of their services to protect the kingdom.⁸ With a horse-trading background, they were known to understand and analyse economic production and trade better.⁹ Military horses, crucial for Vijayanagara's security, were sourced from the Persian Gulf through trade, solidifying Vijayanagara rulers' control over the horse trade. The kings paid exorbitant prices to the

Portuguese traders, even when these horses barely survived the long sea voyage (Sinopoli 2000, 377-380). The rise in demand shifted trade monopolies from native merchants, Kudirachettis, to Arab merchants in the 15th century (Shukla 1981, 311). With the Portuguese displacing Arabs from Indian markets, they gained control over the realm of horse-trading in the 16th century (Shukla 1981, 313). Paes gives us an idea of the extent of horse trading when he exclaims at the sight of a large tree under which they lodged three hundred and twenty horses. He mentions evening fairs where they sold many common horses. Unlike Paes and Nuniz, Marco Polo and Athanasius Nikitin highlighted the negatives of horse trading, where the horse keepers of the empire were ignorant about the proper care of these imported horses, which led to their premature deaths (Shukla 1981, 312).

The Rayas were known to celebrate their festivals with great pomp and show. One among them is the Mahanavami festival which goes for 9 days to celebrate the victory of Goddess Durga over Mahishasura, the 'buffalo demon'. Paes provided a description of the women participating in the festival: "There are women who handle sword and shield, and others who wrestle, many women playing many trumpets and drums and pipes and viols and many other kinds of musical instruments" (Sewell 1990, 248-249). Women were not mere spectators but assumed diverse roles. Society seems to welcome women in a stronger role as a combat artist showcasing their physical prowess. He also shed light on the military aspects of the festival, where the king reviewed his forces. All the troops aligned in a line according to their rank. Foot

soldiers stood in front of the cavalry, and the elephants behind the horses. This was done to display their military valour in front of their guests.

One significant event during the festival was the welcoming of the Portuguese envoy, comprising of Christovao de Figueiredo as well as Paes (Sewell 1990, 140), which proves that the festival was a means to introduce other states to the power and glamour of the empire, and to build better foreign relations. The ritualistic significance of the king would also have left an impression on the foreign guests, where the rituals emphasised the king and the deity equally. This helped in emphasising the king and the legitimacy of regal control. The festival celebrates the valiant Lord Rama's return to Ayodhya, and also bestowed a divine status to the king, as there are also instances where the

king shares the same prominence as Lord Rama.¹⁰ The deity and the king have a 'shared sovereignty' where the king shares the deity's divine powers (Stein 1989, 7). There is an interdependent relationship where the priests please the deities through rituals, and the deities in turn protect the king, while the king offers patronage to the priests (Verghese 2004, 428). Similarly, in Mysore, the Dussehra festival focuses on the divine kingship where the procession of the king on the horse signifies the victory of the king in a conquest similar to the accounts of procession of Rama to Ayodhya after his victory (Rao 2016, 113).

Another aspect of this festival was its manifestation in architectural brilliance, the Mahanavami Dibba (Figure 2). The stone platform consists of steps leading up from the south and west and an exposed top with a magnificent view (Figure 3).

Paes and other foreign accounts mention that the king witnessed the celebrations from the top. The raised platform, with the king atop, symbolised his authority and commanded awe among spectators, including foreign guests like Paes, emphasising the empire's cultural and ritual significance to political power. Glamourized accounts by Paes and other travellers further underscore the might of the flourishing empire. However, there is a cultural gap among European scholars, which often leads to a flawed account.¹¹

Conclusion

It is fascinating to read about the journey of a horse trader into the Deccan kingdom. Travels can quench the mind of a curious one, and this is evident in the case of Paes. The Vijayanagara Empire, engaging with the Portuguese, sculpted its diplomacy and

trade. Military pacts and trade enriched its global ties. Vijayanagara stands as a dynamic hub of mediaeval South Asian exchange. Ambassadors and envoys were vital in contemporary diplomacy, fostering relations and negotiating agreements. Foreign accounts are in need of native sources which are in dearth, to compliment them. Foreign accounts are always written through the lenses of the author's own cultural background which poses as a 'benchmark' or basis of their judgement. They may over-emphasize or neglect certain aspects based on their biases like Paes' adoration of the immense wealth and Razzaq's candid account on the city's prostitution. As we go through these travellers' narratives, we may ask whether our understanding of Vijayanagar empire might change if we had more native sources to verify the foreign interpretations. There is a need for greater

diversity in interpretations to understand other historical geographies as well. historiography, not only with respect to foreign writings in Vijayanagara, but in

Notes

1. Several sources like Srinivas Reddy's *Stallions of the Indian Ocean* suggests that Paes entered Vijayanagara as part of a group of horse traders. But nevertheless he, along with the traders, were an important part of diplomatic efforts between the Portuguese and the Vijayanagara empire irrespective of being part of the official envoy or not.
2. The book was found by 19th-century Portuguese historian David Lopes in the archives of the National Library of France and is the only known original copy of the accounts that survived the passage of time.
3. Robert Sewell's *A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar, a Contribution to the History of India* is rich in topographical information, maps, and sketches of architecture. Sewell's interpretation of politics such as that of Portuguese tensions may reflect his idea on Krishnadevaraya's policies, as there isn't any first-hand account of the emperor's views on his Portuguese neighbours before he signed the treaty in 1510. The negligence of native sources seems to be a recurring factor among European authors like Sewell.
4. Figure 1 depicts sculptures of horse traders with triangular beards, conical caps, and long moustaches that don't seem native to the region. Figure 4 is the portion of the Mahanavami Dibba where the second band from the top shows carvings of camels that are not native while the third band from the top shows carvings of cavalry. These carvings are significant to understand the overseas trade of camels and horses. We see similar friezes in Hazaara Rama temple too (Figure 5). Figure 6 shows a man holding fly whisks. Fly whisks are often used as a symbol of servitude to an authority, probably a king in this case. The person looks foreign with his elongated beard and moustache, with the extravagant headdress. Figure 7 also depicts a similar figure sans fly whisk with a headdress.
5. The gifting of the ceremonial robes is politicised, where the act is almost a 'royal submission' and acknowledges the authority of the donor king. Other empires were no stranger to this

tradition. Sir Thomas Roe, an English ambassador to Jahangir's court, gifted him hats and portraits from England. Jahangir, on one occasion, gifted Roe his portrait on a gold pendant embellished with pearls attached to a gold chain, which is a special gift given to certain people at the court and only they can wear the king's image (Natif, 249-251). Portuguese embassies were known to gift Mughal courts with portable European organs commonly used at churches in Goa (Natif, 142). Paes's accounts are significant as he is one of the few chroniclers who gave a first-hand description of the king whereas Nuniz's accounts of Krishnadevaraya are more about the conquests of Orissa and Raichur, which are second-hand.

6. Paes has mentioned an instance of courtesans dancing in front of the temple and idol but he neither did not describe the wealth of these courtesans nor the specific lanes of bazaars dedicated to courtesans. His descriptions of the dancing-girls are more towards their religious and ritualistic purpose.
7. Paes noted that in Krishnadevaraya's court many courtiers were his fathers-in-law, hence they strengthened their positions through familial ties (Chekuri, 50).
8. In 1520, with Portuguese mercenary musketeers' assistance, Krishnadevaraya reconquered the Raichur region. These musketeers aided him in reclaiming territories contested by previous rulers, including the area between the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers (Eaton, 88-89).
9. The horse trade was instrumental in the economy of the Vijayanagara empire. The empire was heavily dependent on this trade to supply their cavalry. This can be also supported by carvings of cavalry on walls of temples and that of horse trading on the Mahanavami Dibba (Figure 1).
10. In conquered forts like Raichur and the royal capital, there are images of Rama, Hanuman, Sita, and Lakshmana placed next to the images of the King. The family shrine of the royal family, the Hazara Rama temple, is dedicated to Lord Rama.
11. There are gaps in traveller accounts regarding the timeline of this event. Abdur Razzaq wrote that the festival took place in the month of Rajab and was celebrated for three days. But by popular tradition, Mahanavami starts on Asvina Sukla. Razzaq also mentions that the festival began with the full moon or the 'new moon of Kartika'. Here, Paes gives the right timeline as he mentions the start of the festival as September 15, a full moon night,

signifying the start of Kartika.

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416–31.

APPENDIX - I

Amuktamalyada

(Amuktamalyada, which translates to ‘God’s garland of devotion’ is a classical Telugu poem composed by Vijayanagara emperor Krishnadevaraya during the 16th century.)

“Merchants from distant lands, who import elephants and warhorses should be kept in imperial service at the capital. Treat them with prestige and provide them with towns and mansions. Purchase their goods at a high price and ensure that your enemies are deprived of such resources.” (258).

“Make friends with the forest folk through honesty. Honour the ambassador to make a friend even of an enemy king. Pay the foot-soldier punctually to earn his love, and win over the horseman with gifts” (225).

“Manage your ports well, and let commerce increase in horses, elephants, and gems, pearls, and sandal paste. When drought, sickness and calamity make foreigners seek refuge in your lands, shelter them in keeping with their station. Give out gardens, yards, and mines to those whom you wish to favour” (245).

“Ambassadors from countries on the border should be treated with familiarity. A subordinate should make hard talk in businesslike or warlike tones, while the king affects a light air” (259).

APPENDIX - II

The following pictures were taken during the author's travels to Hampi from 11th to 13th December 2019.



Figure 1: Frieze of foreign horse trade



Figure 2: Mahanavami Dibba



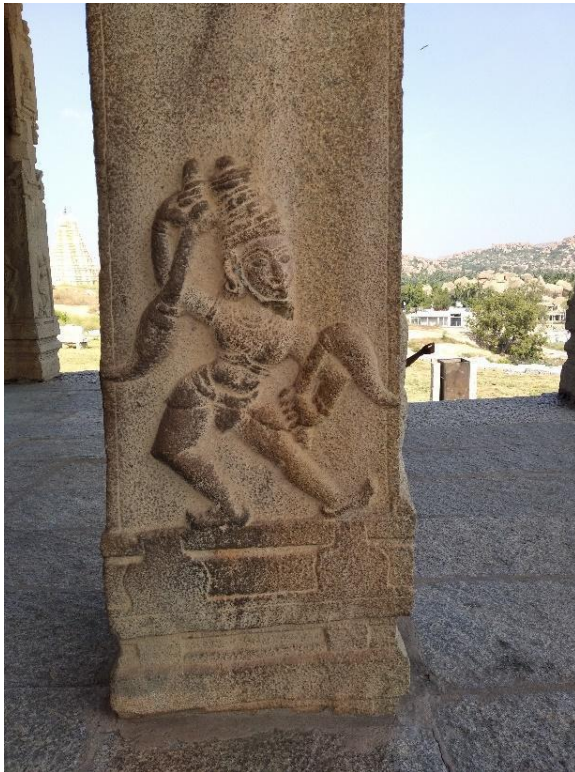
Figure 3: View from the Mahanavmi Dibba



Figure 4: Frieze on Mahanavmi Dibba



Figure 5: Carvings on the Hazaara Rama temple



Figures 6 & 7: Carvings of foreign persons

Behind the Veil of Glamour: Tawaifs' Hidden Role in Shaping India's Freedom Movement

Sristi Mukherjee and Sukanya Adhikary

Tawaif, a term presently associated with 'obscenity,' was initially used to refer to a community of highly skilled courtesans and entertainers who held a unique position in Indian society during the Mughal and British eras. Addressed as *baijis*, *devadasis*, and *naikins* in different parts of the Indian subcontinent, the *tawaifs* played a pivotal role in upholding and nurturing the cultural aesthetics of the country. During the 18th and 19th centuries, noblemen would send their sons to these *tawaifs* or courtesans to teach them the art of conversation and other social etiquette. Such was their standing in the society. But the rigid, racial, moralistic, and patriarchal mindset of the British tainted their reputation by questioning the integrity of their art, likening it to prostitution and

labelling them as 'Nautch Girls' (Rao 2019, 5). Labels like these confined them to the periphery and shunned them from the public eye.

The *tawaifs*, often overlooked in the mainstream historical accounts, played a crucial role in facilitating the Indian Freedom Movement. Despite facing a constant stream of lewd and salacious allegations, they utilised their influence, resources, and artistic talents to provide support, shelter and funds to the freedom fighters. Even their salons became hubs for the emergence of political discourse and revolutionary ideas. However, the writers of history seem to have purposely overlooked their poignant roles in cultivating and furthering the Indian Freedom Movement, a

pivotal chapter in the nation's history that has been otherwise extensively documented. This research paper aims to shed light on their multifaceted roles, revealing the hidden contributions of *tawaifs* in shaping India's path to Independence.

Silencing Marginalised Narratives

Historical records, especially those produced during British rule, have not always been objective; rather, they have been subject to selective memory and conscious exclusion, which stemmed from the emphasis on highlighting the contributions of individuals deemed 'respectable' by society. This need has often overshadowed the contributions of those operating outside the mainstream, even if their actions held significant value. A case in point is Gandhi's advice to the *tawaifs* or courtesans to change the course of their profession and embrace spinning. Geeta

Thatra further writes, "The Gandhian Movement also carried out charitable work in rehabilitating 'prostitutes' and spoke the language of respecting womanhood (Tambe 2009, 198–99). However, it did not feature courtesans as partners in the freedom struggle or view them as legitimate nationalist actors." (Thatra 198).

Moreover, history's long-drawn tendency to omit the contributions of marginalised voices might be largely due to the influence of societal bias and stigma. Throughout history, *tawaifs* have faced societal prejudice and misconceptions surrounding their profession. This stigma, deeply ingrained in the social fabric, possibly led to their exclusion from respectable circles and ostracization from public discourse. During the early days of the Congress movement in India, Mahatma Gandhi called upon the *tawaif* community to contribute to the Tilak Swaraj Fund. Despite

acknowledging their support, he made it abundantly clear that they could not become active members of the Congress Committees. He stated that no one “could officiate at the altar of Swaraj [self-rule] who did not approach it with pure hands and a pure heart” (Tambe 2009, 24).

Interestingly, Gandhi was not the only one who commented on this subject. B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, is vehemently praised for his fight against Dalit oppression. But, when invited to a conference at Kamathipura in Bombay, even a social reformer like him “proclaimed that their (the *tawaifs*) profession was a shame...and that they must leave it” (Omvedt 2017, 66). Thus, these *tawaifs* not only had to battle social prejudice but also had to be subjected to double marginalisation owing to their choice of occupation and their gender.

Another significant factor in the omission of the *tawaifs*' roles from history might be the difficulty involved in documenting their contributions. The nature of most of these contributions, which included gathering intelligence and other subversive activities like hosting the revolutionaries in their salons, would have inherently been shrouded in secrecy to avoid detection by the authorities. Added to this was limited access to authentic historical records, which resulted from the social exclusion faced by the *tawaifs* and the focus on traditional narratives. Naturally, it became especially challenging to document and verify their contributions through conventional historical sources.

Supporting the Cause of the Nation

It is well known that the homes of *tawaifs* served as hubs for the practice and

preservation of the country's culture, art, and literature. But it would be an understatement to say that their utility was restricted to just this. A little-known fact about the *tawaif* quarters is that they also functioned as spaces for intellectual and literary exchange, as well as schools for teaching the art of social interaction and conduct. Politics was also a running discourse inside these walls. The allure and grandeur of the *tawaifs* could hardly be resisted by British soldiers. Night after night, they would assemble in these quarters, indulge in alcohol and discuss their plans of ruling and looting India. These highly confidential bits of information would not go unheard by the *tawaifs*, and a few of them, like Aziz Un Nisa, utilised them to plot against British rule.

Aziz Un Nisa was a reputed courtesan from Lucknow who moved to Kanpur - the den of the British Cantonment - to establish and run

her own *kotha* independently. Around the same time, the introduction of the Enfield rifles with greased cartridges by Henry Hardinge caused an upheaval in the Indian Army. Soon, the heroic account of the rebellious act of Mangal Pandey reached various cantonments, serving as an inspiration to the patriots. Aziz Un Nisa's fiercely independent nature urged her to rise in revolt against the East India Company, and she opened her home to the 'rebels' of the country. One among them was Shamsuddin, a brave rider in the 42nd cavalry, who had close relations with leaders of the 1857 revolt like Nana Saheb and Tantya Tope.

As Aziz Un Nisa would regularly engage in conversations with the British soldiers, she could keep a close track of their plots and intentions. She began to attend parties as a spy to gather useful information and discreetly convey it to Shamsuddin and his

team. Soon, she joined the rebels. Not only did she open her doors to care for and help the wounded soldiers, but there are records in the books of several historians like Janki Prasad that state that upon the death of Shamsuddin, she had taken up arms to fight alongside the other rebels.

Leading the Mass

Begum Hazrat Mahal, the wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow and, more importantly, a contemporary of Lakshmi Bai, is one such *tawaif* who dared to challenge the rigid social hierarchies and patriarchal norms.

Sold to royal agents at a tender age, Hazrat Mahal started her journey as a *tawaif* in Lucknow. Utilising her wit and talents, she soon climbed up the ranks from *pari* to *begum* upon marrying the Nawab. When the East India Company seized Awadh in 1856, her

husband was exiled to Calcutta. Without hesitation, Begum Hazrat Mahal took the ruins of the state and declared her 14-year-old son Birjis Qadar as the Nawab on 7th July. This ascension gave her the position of 'Queen Mother', through which she could wield her power over her subjects and unite them in the act of driving out the British.

Despite several formal orders from Queen Victoria to hand over Awadh to the East India Company, the Begum refused to back down and succeeded in seizing Lucknow from the British powers. Unfortunately, the British troops returned in 1858, and the Begum had to retreat her army. Regardless of her prominent role in impeding the British forces, she was denied sanctuary in Nepal in 1859 by Prime Minister Jang Bahadur. She also proved her faithfulness towards India when she declined the pension offered by the British Government if she agreed to work for them.

Funding and Propagating Movements and Revolts

Tawaifs, through their profession, often accumulated significant wealth. Several historical accounts document instances where they generously donated to support nationalist organisations as well as individuals who were involved in the freedom struggle. While conducting her research in Lucknow, Veena Talwar Oldenburg stumbled upon an interesting facet of forgotten history. She wrote, “I came across its (Lucknow’s) famous courtesans for the time. They appeared, surprisingly, in the civic tax ledgers of 1858-77 and in the related official correspondence preserved in the Municipal Corporation record’s room... it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city.” (Oldenburg 1990, 259)

Vikram Sampath in his book on Gauhar Jaan mentions how she, a renowned vocalist from Calcutta who started her career as a *tawaif*, organised concerts to fund Gandhi’s movements. She also was a generous contributor to the Tilak Swaraj Fund. She was one among many other courtesans from different parts of the country who used their artistry to further the cause of the nationalist movements.

During the era of the Non-Cooperation Movement, a group of *tawaifs* from Benaras formed the Tawaif Sabha to support the movement. Husna Bai, an acclaimed musician famed for her literary wisdom, chaired the Sabha and spread awareness about the ongoing protests. On her encouragement, members of the Sabha embraced iron shackles in place of gold ornaments to show solidarity.

They also actively took part in the boycott movement.

Vidyadhari Bai, another *tawaif* from Benaras, influenced by the ideals and speeches of Mahatma Gandhi, worked hand in hand with Husna Bai to organise meetings and sabhas to promote the cause of the nationalist movements. At one such eventful meeting at Husna Bai's house, on 8th August 1921, Vidyadhari Bai sang a nationalist song, composed by her at the request of Gandhi, that goes, *Chun chun ke phool ley lo/ arman reh na jaye/ Yeh Hind ka bageecha/ gulzar reh na jaye* (Pick each flower carefully, lest any wish remains unfulfilled. This garden of Hind, let it not lose its bloom). Since this performance, she "insisted upon performing (this song) at every mehfil she was invited to" (Dewan2019, 713). In this way, Vidyadhari Bai utilised her musical skills to extend her help towards the

nationalist movements.

Conclusion

The British rulers knew of the active participation of the *tawaifs* in the Indian freedom struggle. To tame them, the British equated the *kothas* to prostitution rings and brothels and urged the police to invade the houses frequently to raid and loot them and taint the image and reputation of the once respected courtesans. Noblemen started avoiding the *kothas*, and gradually, modern Indian society began to look down on them and their profession. To further curb their power, the British also introduced atrocious laws like the Contagious Diseases Act in 1868 and successfully wiped out the *tawaifs* from the mainstream.

The contributions of *tawaifs* are not merely historical footnotes, they are an important

reminder of the complexity of resistance and the importance of recognition of diversity in the liberation struggle. Their courage, ingenuity, and unwavering commitment to

the cause deserve to be celebrated and incorporated into the collective memory of India's Independence struggle.

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