



WHISPERS IN THE ZENANA: SILKEN DIPLOMACY AND THE POLITICAL GRACE OF THE MUGHAL TAWAIF

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Abstract

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This article recontextualizes the Mughal-era tawaif as cultural authority as well as soft power in response to colonial and postcolonial misrepresentations sexualizing her into stereotype. Using literary analysis, historical accounts, and feminist theory, research traces how tawaifs—master performers in music, dance, and verse—operated as custodians of Hindustani classical arts as well as etiquette teachers of elite men. Located in such sites of feminization as the kotha and zenana, tawaifs shaped aristocratic aesthetics as well as political culture in terms of what this article describes as silken diplomacy—a performance-oriented form of strategic agency. Researching how colonial moral regimes disenfranchised such women, even as it documents their resistance as well as resilience through artistic performance, this article recovers the intellectual as well as cultural agency of the tawaif as well as makes intellectual contributions toward broader conversations about gendered labor, cultural memory, as well as aesthetic resistance in South Asian history. The study finds that the tawaif functioned not only as a guardian of artistic heritage but also as a strategic diplomatic agent, leveraging elegance, education, and performance to shape political and social culture in Mughal and colonial courtly life

Keywords: *Tawaif, Hindustani Classical Arts, Gender And Performance, Colonial Morality, Cultural Resistance*

INTRODUCTION

This essay analyzes the Mughal-period tawaif as political-cultural agent of importance, whose cultivated artistic abilities enabled one particular modality of soft power. Far more than simple entertainers, the tawaifs were custodians of Hindustani classical arts, shaping elite tastes in music, verse, dance, and deportment. While laboring in feminist institutions like the kotha and zenana, they tutored noble men and built courtly identity. Tawaifs' situated productions of beauty, intellect, and performance enabled them to exercise what this essay terms silken diplomacy—a subtle but compelling modality of agency. Drawing on case studies in conjunction with close readings of literature, this essay places the tawaif within gender, aesthetics, and resistance discourse:



In what ways, and through what pedagogical and performance mechanisms, did the tawaif, as political and cultural agent, exercise agency in Mughal and early colonial life, and how did colonial discourse erase or occlude her existence?

Scholarship on the tradition of the tawaifs has undergone dramatic transformations across the decades. Pioneering work in the earlier period by Veena Oldenburg (1990), Sumanta Banerjee, and Ruth Vanita moved away from colonial-era narratives representing the tawaifs as sexual objects without artistic and intellectual agency. Oldenburg's work, in particular on Lucknow's courtesans, situates them as guardians of etiquette and refinement, integral to elite moral and political life. Banerjee describes the popular cultural production of the courtesans, especially in song and performance, while Vanita explores the interstices of female creativity, sensuality, and subversion in South Asian history.

More contemporary feminist historiographies have refigured the female performer as an agent of cultural production in multiple forms. These narratives insist on transcending deviant-respectability binary thinking in order to recognize the tawaif as a politically located actor. Building on these interventions, this research develops the thesis of silken diplomacy in order to explain the contribution of the tawaif towards mediating the exercise of influence through performance, teaching, and spatial position within elite cultural and domestic sites.

Using qualitative, interdisciplinary research methods based in postcolonial and feminist theoretical paradigms, this research draws on a range of primary and secondary sources, incorporating Urdu and Persian verse, colonial-era travelogues, life writing, and court documents. Literary sources are scrutinized for patterns of representation, erasure, and agency as are historical sources; performance studies propositions are drawn on for assessing how music, dance, and recitation functioned as modes of influencing; feminist spatial analysis is deployed in order to elucidate how gendered sites like the kotha and zenana enabled sites of strategic positionality as cultural brokerage. By interfacing cultural history with literary studies, this project aims in its research to restore the visibility of the tawaif within South Asian historiography—not as ciphers but as central actors within artistic, social, as well as political life in Mughal as well as early colonial India

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite their historical prominence as cultural arbiters and political actors in Mughal and early colonial India, *tawaifs* have long been marginalized by colonial and postcolonial narratives that reduced them to hypersexualized stereotypes, thereby erasing their roles as educators, diplomats, and soft power agents. This study addresses the critical gap in South Asian historiography by recontextualizing the *tawaif* not merely as an entertainer, but as a refined political strategist whose performance, pedagogy, and cultural labor embodied what can be termed “silken diplomacy.” The problem lies in the persistent colonial legacy that occludes female cultural agency and undervalues the tawaif’s



contribution to courtly politics, elite education, and the shaping of aesthetic and moral codes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on *tawaifs* has evolved significantly, challenging colonial portrayals that reduced them to mere sexualized entertainers. Foundational works by Veena Oldenburg (1990) reframed the *tawaif* as a custodian of etiquette and cultural refinement, especially in Lucknow's courtly circles. Sumanta Banerjee and Ruth Vanita emphasized their roles in popular culture and subversive expressions of femininity. More recent feminist historiographies, such as those by Katherine B. Willis and Nilofer Qureshi, focus on the *tawaif* as a politically situated cultural producer who negotiated influence within gendered spaces like the *kotha* and *zenana*. Scholars like Lal (2017), Singh (2014), and Ghosh (2013) highlight the concept of soft power in the *tawaif's* aesthetic labor, portraying them as educators, diplomats, and arbiters of elite taste. This growing body of work underscores the need to reassess *tawaifs* not as marginal figures, but as central agents in the socio-political and cultural life of South Asia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach grounded in feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. It utilizes historical analysis, literary criticism, and performance studies to examine primary and secondary sources, including Urdu and Persian poetry, colonial travelogues, court documents, and life writings. Close reading techniques are applied to literary texts to trace representations of *tawaif* agency, while historical documents are analyzed to uncover patterns of erasure and resistance. Feminist spatial theory informs the analysis of gendered locations such as the *kotha* and *zenana*, assessing how these sites facilitated strategic cultural and political influence. The method emphasizes reconstructing the *tawaif's* voice and agency through archival recovery and critical reinterpretation of existing historiography.

DISCUSSIONS

Courtesans of Culture: The World of the Tawaif Unveiled

The South Asian cultural heritage of the *tawaif*, particularly of Mughal, Rajput, and colonial periods, refers to women formally schooled in music, dance, poetry, and courtesy and playing a leading role in cultural, intellectual, and state life. Prevalent during the Mughal era, the *tawaifs* were highly respected figures in the monarchies where one was well schooled in various arts. They were intensively schooled in various arts formally, beginning when she was young and specializing in the cultivation of various arts. Music schooling, which was of central significance, included learning ragas (melodic forms), thumri (romantic semi-classical music), and dhrupad and khayal (styles of classical Hindustani music). These women were also schooled in rhythm and meter (tala), and playing instrument of a classical type, e.g., the sitar, tabla, and harmonium (Begum, 1992; Khan, 2006). Concurrently, the *tawaifs* were schooled in Kathak, which is a dance genre involving intricate movement of the legs, fast turns, and storytelling by



movement, and was regularly performed alongside thumri or ghazal music. An extension of their music skill, dance was stressed in respect of elegance, expression, and skill of storytelling by movement of the body (Chakrabarti, 2001).

In addition to performance arts, literature and poetry, particularly the ghazal, a lyrical poem that deals with love, longing, and loss, were also studied by the tawaifs. As opposed to merely reading the poem, the majority of the tawaifs also composed their own, and made a significant addition to the literature of the era. They were also taught classics in Persian and Urdu during their education, reading the poetry of Hafiz and Rumi among others (Farooqi, 1999). Education in *tehzeeb* or manners was also crucial, in that it encompassed social polish, conversation skills, body language, bearing, and hosting social parties. They were also expected to engage in intellectually polished debates among the upper class, host parties of cultural and intellectual bent, and uphold worldly and cultured appearance (Haq, 2002). They were empowered through their teachings to perform in family settings as well as to engage in social and political agency in the royal courts and intellectual salons.

Tawaifs and Soft Power: Cultural Labor as Influence

The life of the Mughal and post-Mughal Indian tawaifs—courtesans—had typically remained occluded by a reductionist discourse that looks toward them as performance figures in isolation. But if one peeks beneath the surface of their lives, their engagement in soft pre- and colonial Indian power dynamics becomes evident. While undoubtedly performance artists of the classical arts, tawaifs were also astute agents of the sociopolitical sphere whose cultural labor produced courtly refinement, facilitated upper-class social networks, and governed politics discreetly in the currencies of beauty, taste, and wit. Their lives and actions portend how beauty and performance might be modalities of influence, a soft power (Oldenburg, 1997; Singh, 2007).

Soft power, according to political theorist Joseph Nye (2004), is the ability to influence preferences and achieve influence through attraction rather than coercion or force. In 18th and 19th century Indo-Islamic courts, soft power was exerted not solely by means of royal favor and statecraft, but also in the less showy labors of cultural refinement. Educated in music, dance, poetry, conversation, and courtesy, the tawaifs were virtuosos of affective and aesthetic persuasion. They were the masters of salons (*kothas*), which were performance spaces, schools, and social spaces that nurtured a moral-aesthetic ideal that was at the very center of elite life (Singh, 2014; Trivedi, 2003).

Tawaifs were guardians of *adab* (cultivated behavior), *sharafat* (nobility or respectability), and *nazakat* (gracefulness). These were not idealized qualities, but concrete practices—executed by a inflected voice, the movement of a hand, the modulation of verse. They instructed upper-class men—princes, poets, and nobles—in the arts of comportment. Through example and instruction, they constructed the courtly codes of behavior, instilling in them values that were above aesthetic and bordering on moral and political life (Oldenburg, 1997). In this way, the influence of the tawaif extended beyond the sphere of entertainment to the very construction of upper-class identity. This was predicated on extensive networks of patronage, which encompassed nawabs, poets,



musicians, and scholars. Within the Nawabi courts of Delhi, Hyderabad, and Lucknow, there was fertile ground for the nurturing of tawaif culture. Within these networks, the tawaifs were not passive receivers of patronage but active agents in the constitution of intellectual and artistic life. They were often the location where poetry genres were experimented upon, music traditions were developed, and gossip about politics was exchanged. They were exposed to high-class men in informal yet intimate environments, which made them crucial nodes in cultural and political networks (Lal, 2017; Trivedi, 2003).

Two figures represent the scope of the influence of tawaif: Wazeeran of Lucknow and Begam Samru of Sardhana. Wazeeran, the prime courtesan of Wajid Ali Shah's rule—the last Nawab of Awadh—was a counselor to his court. Her proximity to the Nawab was in no sense a question of individual volition as well as a cultural issue. As a woman of delicate taste and artistic turn of mind, Wazeeran was the personification of the taste of the inclinations of Lucknowi culture which Wajid Ali Shah was attempting to maintain in response to increasing colonial pressure. Her influence suggests how cultural labor can be made to function as political advice (Oldenburg, 1997; Misra, 2001). Begum Samru's life takes this dynamic to a new level. Born a courtesan, she constructed power in the form of strategic alliances and dominated the North Indian state of Sardhana. She maintained her own army, converted to Catholicism, and was diplomatically aligned to both Mughal and British governments. Her life resists complete dualities between sovereignty and sensuality, and her biography shows how charm, intelligence, and political shrewdness—skills developed in the *kotha*—could be applied in government and diplomacy. Begum Samru is the fullest expression of soft power translated to hard power, and the political potential of the cultural sphere (Zubrzycki, 2006; Misra, 2001).

At the center of the agency of the tawaif was the politics of charm. They were doing something on stage rather than displaying beauty; they were engaging in acts of persuasion and relational agency. Through poetry, dance, and song, they created affective bonds of association between themselves and audiences and patrons. These bonds generally meant access, protection, and influence. The body and voice of the tawaif were translated into cultural negotiating devices, providing pleasure and instruction, nearness and distance. In a patriarchal and hierarchical society, their skill of performance granted them a bypassing of systematic forms of agency and the exercise of a different form of agency—cultural agency rather than one of heredity or coercion (Lal, 2017; Singh, 2007). In brief, Indian tawaifs wielded a previously underestimated soft power in histories of the past. Not only did their cultural labor civilize court life, it also informed the emotional and political life of their moment. Through *adab*, the system of patronage, and the astute deployment of charm, they wielded power that was aesthetic, social, and political. To acknowledge the power of the tawaif is to acknowledge the significant role of women's cultural labor in defining the contours of historical change—far from a margin, in the center of court.

Wazeeran occupies a unique position in Awadhi cultural and political life. One of the better-known of the Lucknow tawaifs, she was in her glory days during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, whose court was renowned for fostering the arts (Oldenburg, 1990). Wazeeran was far from a court ornament; she was in close



contact with the social and court life. Her cultural refinement, awareness of etiquette, and aesthetic sensibility made her a close friend and counselor of the Nawab. Wajid Ali Shah himself was himself a poetry, music and dance patron—a poet, danseuse of Kathak, and playwright—and in Wazeeran saw both a Muse and intellectual peer (Llewellyn-Jones, 2014). She enjoyed semi-formal status in court society, privy to court politics, social temperament, and court intrigue. Wazeeran's reach also extended beyond the saloon; she was reputed to advise on court appointments and wield influence in the Nawab's own private determinations (Oldenburg, 1990). She had access that was informal yet powerful to authority, a form of affective rule that was rooted in interpersonal strength rather than institutional dominance.

Alongside, Wazeeran advised and counseled fellow courtesans, among them her protégée, one of Wajid Ali Shah's official wives, Aliya. Simply one of her tactics showcases Wazeeran's finesse in court politics in patriarchal rule. Positioning herself and her family in the royal family secured cultural heritage and augmented her political clout (Oldenburg, 1990). Through beauty, social grace, and charm, Wazeeran navigated herself from entertainer to soft power negotiator, showing how aesthetic agency was converted to political counsel and access to the state's innermost circles. Begum Samru's life was one of the most striking metamorphoses in the history of India. Born a Delhi courtesan known as Farzana in 18th-century Delhi, she ascended to the status of ruler of the state of Sardhana, which is near Meerut in Northern India (Llewellyn-Jones, 2014). She ascended through her association with Walter Reinhardt Sombre, a German mercenary serving in the Mughal army. She came to own his army and property upon his death, ultimately intensifying her grip to emerge as the de facto ruler of Sardhana (Gupta, 1991).

Begum Samru is unique in that she did wield authority, if in the way that she did—an intersection of military force, statecraft, and theatrical beauty. She converted to Christianity and bore the baptismal name Joanna Nobilis, hosting emissaries, bishops, Mughal officials, and eventually British agents in her court (Llewellyn-Jones, 2014). Her court was syncretic and cosmopolitan in character, something that was reflective of her ability to navigate across different spheres of politics and religion. Begum Samru's political acumen was matched by her public image. She evinced a gracious air of command, frequently making public appearances in her finery, presiding over public events, and displaying generosity and disciplinarian behavior in equal measure (Gupta, 1991). Her palace in Sardhana was a hotbed of political intrigue and platform of cultural performance and rituals of power. She maintained a private army, quelled rebellions, and even assisted the British in war—continuously weighing her alliances and defending her autonomy (Llewellyn-Jones, 2014).

Her transformation from courtesan to Catholic queen embodies the full arc of soft power to hard political agency. Her early cultural education in music, dance, oratory, and charm—or certainly in her cultural instruction in her youth—served her both in the salons and in state and diplomacy. Begum Samru is the personification of the trope that charisma, wedded to strategic insight, is a force that cannot be stopped in the empire and colonial encounter (Oldenburg, 1990; Gupta, 1991). Begum Samru's conversion to Catholicism and acceptance as a ruler of Sardhana are the crux of her legacy. Her conversion to Catholicism, while politically prudent, also attested to strong personal



beliefs and served to rally powerful European missionary and interest groups (Khandelwal, 2012). Her religious and political actions can be evidenced in her construction of the Basilica of Our Lady of Graces and support of the Catholic faith (Sarkar, 2007).

The phrase "the politics of charm, performance, and influence: cultural capital as political leverage" sums up how individuals, and women in particular like the tawaifs (courtesans), used cultural as well as aesthetic skills as tools of power in environments where there was a tendency towards monopolizing formal political power by men or by the elite. Under such conditions, cultural capital, charm, and performance were among the prominent means by which influence was activated and political leverage attained. Charm and performance were the ability to engage, involve, and persuade people and groups by one's presence, beauty, wit, and social skill. Courtly or upper-class charm was not just a matter of skin-deep attraction, however, but also of skill in coping with the subtleties of interpersonal dynamics, flattering others, and releasing pent-up strain or conflict. Performance is a term applied to a self-conscious acting-out of social skill, typically in music, dance, poetry, or badinage.

In each society, and particularly in Indo-Islamic courts, the courtesan or the tawaif had a unique role in the shaping of courtly life. They were not only known for beauty, but for cultural literacy—their command of music, poetry, and even philosophy. Performance was never confined to the stage, spilling over to social and the political sphere. Through their presence in court, the tawaifs acted as social and political brokers of capital—they were the favored confidants, guides, and companions of ruling men, including rulers (Majeed, 2020). The cultural capital developed by French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) refers to intangible resources acquired by individuals through education, qualifications, cultural taste, and social networks - resources that secure them access to resources and influence. Cultural capital exists in various forms: control of language and courtesy, artistic achievement, knowledge of social conventions, or even the ability to navigate high society.

In the tawaif's life, cultural capital was multi-dimensional in nature. It was intellectual (poetic, music, or literary knowledge), as well as aesthetic (beauty, grace, and the skill to practice arts such as dance and singing). These women were in no way mere entertainers; instead, most were cultural brokers working between the world of art and the world of politics. For example, upper-class nobles and monarchs, i.e., Nawabs, were advised by and consulted tawaifs on state and cultural matters. Politics, statecraft, art, and philosophy were the subjects in these salons. Nawabs in particular were found to rely on these women's consultancy: not only on private entertainment, but also on state, diplomatic, and court politics (Rastogi, 2011). Tawaifs demonstrated how soft power was really utilized, especially in a stratified society like that of Mughal and post-Mughal India.

The performance and charm of the tawaif were soft power in that it was exercised on a subtle level. These women were able to influence powerful men by acting upon them through affective ties or bonds of love, intellectual friendships, or emotional identification. In this manner, they influenced deep aspects of political life. Their aesthetic achievements—whether in poetry, dance, song, or wit—would be translated to

tools of influence, and they influenced courtly matters, mediated disputes among belligerent parties, or influenced matters of appointments and policymaking. As an example, a tawaif would gain access to royal command or political counsels through nothing else besides her bodily presence in the ruling class. Her charm would be negotiable in terms of political clout, greasing the wheels of favor, securing protection for herself and colleagues, or engaging in court politics (Begum, 2015). Tawaifs were a strategic approach to the cultural politics of power. They acted as the brokers of the court's powers through their cultural resources. They were masters of negotiating between public performative self and private discrete role in exercising influence. They were able to exercise influence without necessarily appearing to, playing the role of cultural arbiters while also exercising their soft power in the world of politics.

For example, Wazeeran, a celebrated tawaif of Lucknow, positioned herself strategically as a counsellor of the Nawab, using her artistic sense and charm to gain access to the deepest recesses of the court. She had politically important information at her disposal, counselling the Nawab both informally and formally. Such subtle negotiation of cultural capital was not done for entertainment purposes alone but actively built the political climate of the era (Ahmed, 2020). In the same vein, Begum Samru used her cultural beauty and diplomatic dexterity in maintaining rule in Sardhana, negotiating her court's transactions between Mughal and British armies. Her ability to decode cultural codes, syncretize the influence of Europe and that of her Indian origins, and use her performative skills to gain favor in several directions of political favor is deserving of mention as a prime example of how cultural capital may be translated to real political influence (Ali, 2017).

The politics of persuasion, performance, and charm is a subtle form of political agency in which cultural capital is rendered a central tool of influence. For women like Begum Samru and Wazeeran, performance and charm were not postures or appearances but were inextricably bound to social status and influence. They were able to engineer political outcomes, form alliances, and negotiate subtle arrangements of power on the basis of facility in the arts of culture. In the soft power model, these women translated their cultural labor into commodities of value, structuring court life and determining larger outcomes of state. In societies in which regular politics were formally male and constricted by strict hierarchies, the cultural labor of tawaifs provided them with a subtle yet powerful form of political leverage, and rendered them central actors in the informal and affective aspects of ruling and statecraft.

Gendered Spaces and the Tawaif's Reclamation in between Zenana and Kotha"

The kotha, the domestic sphere in which the tawaifs entertained and hosted parties, was a hub of art, learning, and influence. They were not entertainment venues in the strict sense but also venues for reading poetry, music concerts, and philosophical discourse. They were distinct compared to other women in similar circumstances, that is, the nautch girls or prostitutes. Unlike the nautch girls, public celebratory entertainers, and the prostitute, engaged in carnal trade, the tawaifs were learned women engaged in intellectual and artistic pursuits. Although they generally had liaisons with men of authority, they were not subject to the social obligations of royal consorts and were still independent (Sharma,



2004; Menon, 2013). Their contribution to the arts, literature, and intellectual life was significant, and their heritage continues to influence South Asian cultural history.

Women's zenana quarters. Even though physically removed from the public domain, the zenana was by no means without any political influence. At any royal court, women of the zenana, especially queens, princesses, and other upper-class women, wielded significant informal influence. They were able to influence decision-making by informal means, access to men advisors or courtiers, and direct political interference (Willis, 2012; Asher, 2003). Women in royal courts likely influenced access to the monarch, determining outcomes in the shadows. Women of the zenana were also involved in the handling of internal matters, internal court life, and even diplomatic ties between kingdoms through marriages or other unofficial means (Willis, 2012; Qureshi, 2005).

The kotha, however, was a hall that was inhabited by the tawaifs (courtesans) in India, renowned for music, poetry, and arts. Even though the tawaifs had a public image in society, entertaining the male elites and taking on the entertainment role, their hall was private in the sense that it was intimate. The tawaifs were intellectuals as well as artists, teachers, and also political counsellors. They were also in charge of the schooling and political grooming of young noblemen (Cooke, 2002; Qureshi, 2005). The young nobles learned the arts of social diplomas, music, literature, and politics in the kotha. They were taught by these courtesans, and subsequently, the nobles took on roles in the court or in the state. They were hence unofficial yet potent tutors, churning out politicians and diplomats in the future (Habib, 1996; Qureshi, 2005).

Between the Veil and the Courtesan: Gendered Spaces in the Zenana and the Kotha

The intersection of the kotha and zenana were of critical importance in both political grooming and mentoring. Both were feminized spaces, yet each had distinct roles where the zenana was private and the kotha was public. They intersect frequently in powerful contexts. Those women in the zenana whom the tawaifs engaged can be related to noblemen through women in the zenana by birth, by shared interest in politics, or as court politics brokers (Lewis, 1996; Willis, 2012). In the sphere of diplomatic contexts, women in both spaces were unofficial diplomats. Those marriage alliances were widely used in statecraft, and women can use the access granted by the alliances for influence without, however, inclusion in the state politics. These spaces were made into arenas of negotiations of alliances, strategy, and statecraft discourse, though in private (Qureshi, 2005; Cooke, 2002).

These two spaces, though feminized and often kept in check in their influence in officialdom, were of immense value in the construction of realities of politics, culture, and society of the day. They were not secret or secluded domains but rather intersecting arenas of influence where the state and cultural practices were exchanged, mentored, and even initiated (Asher, 2003; Qureshi, 2005). The cultural and historical importance of the zenana and kotha in history, particularly in the contexts of politics, of power, and of gender, offers a bizarre perspective in which one may perceive secret mechanisms of courtly rule and unofficial diplomacy (Willis, 2012; Lewis, 1996).



These were women of superior artistic and intellectual ability, well-versed in the upper circles of society's culture. It was a venue of sensual indulgence as well as of intellectual discourse and lessons in politics (Qureshi, 2005). The women of the *kotha* played a significant role in socializing younger noblemen of superior birth—those meant for a government or military career. These were gurus or instructors, and their role extended far beyond the realm of art and entertainment; even as guides, these women were guides through the complex nexus of court life and statecraft. Education of younger nobles in the *kotha* included the whole range of the disciplines, from the philosophical to the technical, and was part of the preparation of men for statecraft (Asher, 2003).

tawaifs were well-read and well-educated in poetry, music, studies of philosophy, and history. They taught young men the cultural mores of their society, including poetry (e.g., *ghazals* and *rubaiyats*), music in the classics, and dance, as well as intellectual heritage of Islamic literature and of philosophy. These cultural traditions were of a high order in the court and supplied young men in the cultural capital needed in order to thrive in upper-class society (Willis, 2012). To that end, in a way, this education taught them in *suave bearing* expected of *lead Tawaifs* were well schooled in court politics, having had exposure of contact with nobles, military commanders, and even monarchs. They taught the knowledge of rule, advising young noblemen in strategy, the game of power, and alliance-building. These *tawaifs* were able to subtly teach these men in reading the room, playing court politics, and using acquaintanceships in a political game. Through discussion and shared anecdotes, the *tawaifs* taught strategies in how to successfully navigate the complicated web of alliances, feuds, and intrigue typical of the royal courts (Qureshi, 2005).

One of the significant tasks of the *tawaifs* was that of educating young nobles in the art of politics. Being aware that in the royal courts, politics were often a game of veiled signals, hidden partnerships, and planned friendships, the *tawaifs* instructed nobles in how to establish and maintain friendships with other courts, military captains, and foreign ambassadors. They inculcated in them the importance of tact, persuasion, and negotiations (Cooke, 2002). Nobles visited the *kotha* and were instructed by them in how to maintain the balance of alliances—whether among other groups of politicians, provincial commandants, or foreigners. They were instructed by the *tawaifs* in how to build loyalty, how to gain the confidence of others, and how to break stalemates in politically sensitive circumstances (Habib, 1996).

Royal courts were often plagued by conspiracies, plots, and fluctuating loyalty. Having known and observed these dynamics, *tawaifs* instructed valuable lessons in survival in the corridors of power. They instructed their wards how to negotiate betrayal, how to decode conspiracy signals, and how to navigate where loyalty was in constant flux (Qureshi, 2005). Aside from official governmental alliances, the *tawaifs* also instructed in the importance of unofficial politics—such as hosting visiting dignitaries, negotiating through social functions, and playing the game of public appearances. Whether or not one was a skilled socializer mattered to his success in top-level official politics (Lewis, 1996).

The *zenana*—the private apartments of the women in royal and aristocratic households—was traditionally a domain of domesticity and seclusion. But the *zenana* women, and

particularly the queen, consorts, and upper-class women, were politically powerful in spite of their physical exclusion from the male world of public politics. While the tawaifs were public personalities, the zenana women asserted influence by less publicized, backroom politics (Asher, 2003). Marriage alliances were one of the important modes through which the women of the zenana made their influence felt. Royal marriages were often a political tool utilized in the achievement of political alliances, the extension of dominance, or the termination of war among kingdoms. Royal women, and particularly the queen and the princesses, were agents of such marriages rather than passive receivers of them—they were actors in pre- and post-alliance politics (Willis, 2012).

Women in zenana were drawn in from politically influential households. They were used as bargaining agents in wedlock in order to bring in the strength of the ruling clan. These women used their position in the royal court to influence their sons, husbands, or other male family members to make crucial decisions, engage in alliances, as well as acquire peace (Habib, 1996). Queens and princesses were used in diplomatic actions by providing a link between ruling dynasties. These clandestine diplomatic actions of women in zenana are important in acquiring peace in the kingdom and neighboring kingdoms (Cooke, 2002). Women in zenana were also important in succession. Succession of the royal clan was overseen by women in zenana to ensure their sons or preferred cousins took the throne. It also included how the governing clan was ruled, as women in the royal court would influence their sons or husbands in administrative roles (Qureshi, 2005).

Even though the zenana and kotha were physically and socially distinct locales, they often intersected on the level of individual affiliation, common agendas in politics, and common concerns. It was not a matter of women's agency in these locales, but how women negotiated between these borders (Lewis, 1996). There are instances in the past where women in the zenana and in the kothas' tawaifs collaborated in subtle means. An example is a queen visiting a tawaif for counsel on court politics or intrigue. Equally, the close affinity of the tawaifs to powerful men can serve as informants or middlemen between state officials and royal women. Through these arrangements, both groups were able to exchange intelligence, organize, and influence the state course of direction (Willis, 2012).

The kotha was also often a venue where news and rumour was offered freely, especially if the tawaifs had access to powerful princes and courtiers. These women in the zenana profited by this network of news by virtue of their association with the tawaifs, well-informed of court politics and threats (Habib, 1996) Some of the tawaifs also taught zenana women. While younger men were taught arts of state and politics, younger noble women were also sometimes taught by the tawaifs how to wield their powers, how to conduct court life, and how to be forceful agents in their own right (Asher, 2003). In other cases, the tawaifs themselves wielded high levels of political influence, asserting their own authority. Some of the tawaifs were monarch's confidants or consorts which gave them a privileged position of authority. Through their bachelor life, it was possible for them to influence politics directly, sometimes in competition to the zenana women. These tawaifs had a dual function as both cultural preceptor and political operator, negotiating the subtle divide between relation on a private level and state-craft (Qureshi, 2005).



The zenana as well as the kotha were unofficial yet significant locales where the negotiating of the exercise of authority, mentorship, and fashioning of the future rulers occurred. The fact that the tawaifs were in a position to teach young nobles the arts of state, court politics, and intrigue meant that they were positioned at the forefront of the education of future rulers. Within the zenana, women were using their position to affect dynastic and political outcomes in the form of marriages, successions, and unofficial reigns. These spaces together served as locales of political power that acted beyond institutions to ensure that women—officially forbidden in politics—played a constitutive role in politics of their day (Cooke, 2002; Lewis, 1996).

Tawaif Feminized Soft Power in South Asian Courtly Culture

Tawaifs were deeply embedded in the political and cultural milieu of elite society. By hosting noblemen, princes, poets, and high-ranking courtiers in their *kothas*, they became conduits of cultural transmission and political insight. These courtesans were not merely entertainers; they were intellectuals and refined conversationalists who possessed acute awareness of political dynamics. Having interacted with multiple layers of the power structure—including governors, generals, and even rulers—they developed an intimate understanding of court politics (Qureshi, 2005). Through informal conversations, stories, and performances filled with symbolic meaning, they transmitted knowledge about power dynamics, strategies for political maneuvering, and techniques for maintaining alliances.

Tawaifs mentored young men in more than just the arts of poetry and music. They trained them in reading social cues, understanding allegiances, and manipulating courtly intrigue. By modeling charm, restraint, emotional intelligence, and rhetorical skill, tawaifs equipped future rulers and administrators with essential tools for survival and influence in highly politicized royal courts (Habib, 1996; Qureshi, 2005). In this way, the *kotha* functioned as an informal political academy where soft skills and strategic thinking were taught alongside classical music and Persian poetry. By mentoring the future political class, tawaifs shaped not only behavior but also values and ideologies. Noblemen trained in the *kotha* carried forward the courtesan's influence into their later roles as ministers, diplomats, and rulers. Their decision-making and diplomatic style were often marked by the grace, negotiation skill, and social tact instilled during their formative years. In this way, tawaifs influenced political outcomes through indirect yet profound means—a hallmark of soft power. Moreover, the *kotha* itself served as a symbolic space of cultural attraction. Association with a famous or respected tawaif elevated a man's prestige. Being known as her pupil or companion added to his social capital and legitimacy. This reputational dynamic echoes Nye's (2004) point that soft power works when others want to emulate or associate with the source of influence.

The tawaif's role in the education and political grooming of South Asian elite men reflects a unique and often overlooked form of soft power. Though marginalized in formal histories and often mischaracterized in popular imagination, tawaifs were key agents in the shaping of court culture and political life. Their influence—exerted through persuasion, mentorship, and cultural sophistication—provides a compelling case study of how women in feminized spaces like the *kotha* exercised significant agency through non-coercive means. As Nye (2004) argues, the most enduring power is that which persuades



rather than forces—and in this regard, the tawaif was among the most powerful women of her time.

Colonial Recasting and the Moral Panic

Under British colonial rule, many traditional Indian systems, including the role of tawaifs (courtesans), were systematically marginalized. The tawaif had historically held a respected cultural and social position, particularly in North Indian aristocratic circles, where they were skilled in poetry, music, and dance. However, colonial rule sought to impose Victorian moral codes that conflicted with the cultural values that the tawaifs represented, leading to their marginalization (Ghosh, 2014; Kaur, 2011). The British colonizers, especially influenced by Victorian morality, viewed tawaifs through a lens of shame and immorality. The "Anti-Nautch Movement," which sought to ban the public performances of dancing girls (particularly those who were tawaifs), linked their art and dance with debauchery and degeneracy. This rebranding stripped away the tawaif's complexity and social significance, reducing them to symbols of moral decay (Sharma, 2017; Nair, 2019). The colonial period also saw the erosion of tawaifs' connections to royal courts and cultural institutions. Once integral to the courts of Mughal rulers and other Indian elites, tawaifs were increasingly displaced from these positions. Westernized education and cultural institutions disregarded traditional forms of music and dance, relegating the tawaif to the fringes of society (Ghosh, 2014; Kaur, 2011).

Cultural Erasure, Victorian Morality, and the Reimposition of Patriarchal Norms

The colonial era's focus on a Westernized, patriarchal society had long-lasting effects on South Asian cultural institutions, particularly the way gender roles and cultural identities were conceived. The British colonial state tried to impose its Victorian ideals, which were patriarchal and limiting in nature. These came into direct conflict with many native cultural practices, including the position that women, especially tawaifs, held in society. The tawaif, who was formerly a respected one in the arts, was now relegated to the status of an embodiment of "immorality" by the British colonists, setting the stage for the erasure of the tawaif's cultural standing and reassertion of strict patriarchal norms.

Victorian sexual morality, in its emphasis on the sexual propriety, modesty, and domesticity of women, directly came into conflict with traditional Indian cultural norms. The Victorian woman ideal was chaste, domesticated, and pure, and this ideal was foisted upon the colonized Indian societies as part of British moral and cultural reform. The indigenous cultural practices, such as the tawaifs' music and dance, were viewed by British officials, intellectuals, and reformers through the prism of moral corruption and decline. Victorian morality not only demonized the public life of the tawaif but also framed her work—whether as a dancer, poet, or musician—as morally unsuitable and exploitative in nature (Gupta, 2017).

Victorian ideals were based on the repression of female sexuality and the privatization of women's lives, which was directly opposite to the public and celebratory nature of the tawaif's artistic work. Therefore, colonial discourse defined the tawaif's dance (nautch) as indecent, immoral, and characteristic of the "decline" of Indian civilization, a premise on



which colonial powers wanted to improve. Colonial rebranding of the tawaif repeated these attempts to bring India in line with Victorian conceptions of morality, which positioned public female performers—specifically those with a provenance of sensuality and agency—to be out of place in a "civilized" society.

Before colonialism, tawaifs were not only performers but also skilled artists, trained in music, poetry, dance, and intellectual conversations. They mastered Urdu poetry, classical music (that is Hindustani classical music), and dance like Kathak, which was a part of royal courts and upper-class social functions. Tawaifs were usually trained in poetry and other cultural practices at a young age, and thus they were greatly valued members of cultural communities (Sharma, 2017). Additionally, the social status of the tawaif allowed them to play an important part in transmitting knowledge, especially among the ruling classes. Tawaifs were acting as cultural brokers, preserving and transmitting old customs, intellectual ideas, and pieces of art. During their performances, tawaifs typically conveyed cosmopolitan sentiments and social insights, which placed them as much as entertainers as intellectual and artistic beings in their own right. The Victorian moral order, however, with its insistence on women's domesticity and privacy, denied the tawaif as an intellectual or cultural agent, affirming the colonial fantasy of the passive and submissive woman (Singh, 2020).

The colonial effort to rebrand the tawaif as immoral had a close relationship with the larger project of cultural erasure. Under British colonial rule, there was a deliberate effort to reinterpret native cultural practices as regressive, debased, and in need of reform. The tawaif, who was previously a dignified presence in royal courts, became the embodiment of moral decline. British colonizers introduced the tawaif as a loose, dangerous woman whose dance and sexuality represented the downfall of native Indian values. This was part of the colonial discourse that claimed to depict native cultures as "decadent" and in need of Westerners' intervention for their "reformation." There was also a gendered dimension to this: demonizing the tawaif and her dance was meant by the British to prescribe the ideal Indian woman as modest, chaste, and submissive, as Victorian ideals of femininity dictated. The tawaif's complex function of transmitting culture and knowledge was dismantled systematically, and further patriarchal configurations of femininity were imposed (Nair, 2019).

The British colonial project sought not only to deconstruct pre-colonial cultural processes but also to re-impose patriarchal values on Indian society. The Victorian moral and gender codes were inherently at odds with the independent and freer roles which women like the tawaif had held. During colonial rule, the re-construction of the tawaif as debased served to aid the patriarchal belief that women need to be kept within the domestic space, outside of public visibility and creative pursuits (Gupta, 2017). Indian women, particularly in music, dance, and literature, during periods prior to colonial rule, were relatively freer and stronger compared to Victorian women in England, where gender roles were strictly imposed. The visibility of the tawaif in public space, both as a performer and intellectual, threatened the patriarchal society which the British colonialists were striving to create. Hence, the British colonialists worked towards reframing these women's roles within public space as immoral, perpetuating the ideology that the women's place was at home, hidden away, and that anything which involved



involvement in public activity—especially that which involved the arts and intellectual endeavors—was unsuitable for women (Singh, 2020).

The erasure of the tawaif's place in the culture and the reassertion of patriarchal norms within the colonial context are a key part of the British social control and cultural transformation project. The transformation of the tawaif from a cultural prestige figure to a figure of moral debasement opened the way for the wider colonial project of the imposition of Victorian values upon Indian society. This change did not only affect the tawaifs but also deeply, irreversibly impacted the lives of women across the subcontinent, limiting their options for artistic expression and intellectual participation in public life. The effects of this erasure of culture remain felt today in the way Indian women's participation in public life and the arts is constantly devalued or forgotten.

Reclaiming the Tawaif: Modern Scholarship and Feminist Readings

Modern scholarship, but especially feminist interpretations, has played a significant role in reclaiming the image of the tawaif and giving a new and rich explanation of her role in Indian history and culture. The tawaif, who had for long been portrayed as a shame and immoral figure in colonial days, is now embraced as a composite figure who was deeply involved in the intellectual, cultural, and political activities of her time. These fresh readings reverse the colonial narratives that reduced her to an exploitable object and instead highlight her agency, wit, and cultural power. Some of the larger themes through which contemporary scholarship and feminist readings have reinterpreted the tawaif are as follows. For instance, Tanika Sarkar (2019) argues that the colonial construction of tawaifs rested on a Victorian moral design that viewed womanly sexuality as risky and corrupt in quality. Modern feminist scholars emphasize how the sexuality of the tawaif was largely represented as her only defining feature, whereas in reality, she played complex roles as an arts patron, poet, musician, and even occasional political influence. By recovering these, modern scholarship brings attention to the multi-dimensionality of the tawaif's life beyond colonial characterizations of immorality (Kapadia, 2021).

A major part of reclaiming the legacy of the tawaif is recognizing her as a cultural strategist. Tawaifs, pre-colonial and colonial India, were placed at the center of intellectual and artistic thinking. They occupied the space between the ruling class and the masses and functioned as cultural brokers who had to navigate complex social and political landscape. The majority of tawaifs were well-educated, multilingual and proficient in philosophy, history, and literature. This training, along with their position in high society, allowed them to dictate cultural and political events to some degree which is only now being fully understood. The tawaif's role extended beyond the cultural sphere into the political sphere too, where she could influence and, on occasion, mediate political events.

Her connections with powerful political rulers ranging from rulers, courtiers to even colonial officers put her in a particular position where she could direct social and political changes. For example, the majority of tawaifs engaged in diplomatic negotiations, acting as facilitators between different political factions. Their mobility between political spheres helped them make socio-political choices, which were unattainable for the majority of women in colonial India. Furthermore, fame was also attained by some



tawaifs from being part of military and politics. The understanding of court politics and political ramifications, which a tawaif possessed, put her in a position of power from which she could decide the political course of things. At this level, tawaif's agency was not only limited to the artistic or domestic sphere but also extended over the political and diplomatic spheres to make her a central figure of power dynamics in her era (Banerjee, 2022; Malik, 2021).

The tawaif's legacy, through the lens of scholarship at present, particularly feminist understandings, has moved from cultural debasement to empowerment. By re-situating the tawaif as intellectual, cultural agent, and political operator, not only has she been recovered from the past, but inserted into the general cultural and political history of South Asia. This reclamation helps to counteract the erasure of the tawaif from history and opens up the potential for more sophisticated, more nuanced interpretations of her role in defining the political and cultural horizons of her time.

CONCLUSION

The tawaif tradition represents a vital yet underexplored facet of South Asian history. By revisiting the cultural, aesthetic, and political roles of these women, this paper challenges reductive colonial and postcolonial narratives. The concept of *silken diplomacy* underscores the nuanced and strategic forms of power tawaifs wielded through performance and pedagogy. Ultimately, re-centering the tawaif in historical discourse not only enriches our understanding of gender and art in Mughal and colonial India but also invites broader reflections on agency, respectability, and cultural memory.



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