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## ***Tawa'ifs* on the road: travelling female performers, middlemen, and patrons of the arts in colonial North India, circa 1857–1911**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the changing trajectories of *tawa'ifs*—highly trained female performers of music and dance—in colonial North India, with a focus on their mobility and evolving patronage relationships. As British colonial policies and reformist moral discourses shattered long-standing networks of courtly support, *tawa'ifs* increasingly travelled between regional centres in search of livelihood and artistic relevance. Focusing on the princely state of Rampur, this study explores the complex interactions, power dynamics, and social hierarchies between Muslim female performers, middlemen, and elite patrons, particularly in the context of public festivals and fairs. Based on handwritten petitions, letters, and poems in Urdu and Persian, as well as vernacular print sources, the article argues that princely patronage was not static but adapted to the pressures of colonial modernity and wider pan-regional transformations. It also shows that post-1857 Lucknow remained a vital hub for recruitment, training, and trade. By tracing female performers across princely and colonial contexts, the article illuminates how their mobility and professional flexibility expanded alongside rising social stigmatisation and the intensifying conflation of courtesans with sex workers.

**Keywords:** colonial India; female performers; mobility; patronage; princely states

Trained in raga-based music, song, and dance, elite female performers collectively known as *tawa'ifs* occupied a long-standing and influential position within the courtly culture of North India. Sustained by a complex network of patronage that connected them to the Mughal imperial court and the regional nobility, their appearances at public festivals like royal weddings or coronation ceremonies signified ‘celebration and good fortune’,<sup>1</sup> while their salons (*koṭhās*) served as arenas in which young aristocratic men would receive grooming in matters of aesthetic taste, comportment, and social etiquette (*ādāb*). Mobility and social liminality were major aspects of *tawa'ifs*’ professional lives,<sup>2</sup> closely tied to the dynamics of elite male patronage, regional courts, and urban cultural circuits.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> K. B. Schofield, ‘The courtesan tale: female musicians and dancers in Mughal historical chronicles, c. 1556–1748’, *Gender and History* 24.1 (2012), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> On the occupational liminality of both male and female performers of music and dance, see K. B. Brown [Schofield], ‘The social liminality of musicians: case studies from Mughal India and beyond’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 3.1 (2007), pp. 13–49.

<sup>3</sup> See S. Waheed, ‘Women of “ill repute”: ethics and Urdu literature in colonial India’, *Modern Asian Studies* 48.4 (2014), p. 993; V. T. Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), pp. 134–142;

Over the course of the nineteenth century, sweeping socio-cultural transformations led to increasing stigmatisation, marginalisation, and outright criminalisation of female performers. Colonial interventions and the collapse of courtly patronage networks in cities like Delhi and Lucknow, especially after 1857, contributed to shifting attitudes towards female performers and their roles as purveyors of enchantment among the upper and emerging middle classes. Culminating in the Anti-Nautch movement,<sup>4</sup> intense debates over their morality and the perceived dangers of their sexual allure ensued, both among the Muslim gentry (*ashrāf*) and elite Hindus, as well as among Anglo-Indian patrons of ‘dancing girls’ and ‘Hindustani airs’.<sup>5</sup> In consequence, large sections of society began to conflate the umbrella term *ṭawāʾif* (the Arabic plural of the word *ṭāʾifa* or ‘troop’, ‘band’, ‘people’, ‘party’) with a range of ‘disrespectable’ women, thereby blurring the boundaries between elite courtesans, lower-class entertainers, and sex workers.<sup>6</sup>

By the early twentieth century, the *tawāʾif* had literally become a ‘woman of ill-repute’ or ‘prostitute’ (embodying disease and immorality). Simultaneously, it morphed into a figure of nostalgia for a past of Mughal and Awadhi courtly culture in parts of the Urdu public and literary sphere. And yet, despite multiple campaigns against these ‘fallen women’, the consequences of which ranged from the de-eroticisation of performance repertoires to changes in instrumentation and an increase in the numbers of professional female performers effectively forced into sex work, ‘the culture of singing and dancing women survived in a much-reduced form up to the present day’.<sup>7</sup>

While prior studies have yielded pioneering accounts of the ways in which the *tawāʾif* as a ‘public woman’ had become the subject of moral censure and how this affected performance practices, songs, poems, and dance repertoires, this article focuses on the power dynamics, hierarchies, and relationships between Muslim aristocratic patrons of the arts, middlemen, and travelling female performers in post-1857 northern India. Why, when, where, and how were *tawāʾifs* selected and recruited in this time of socio-cultural change? How, if at all, were female performers able to negotiate the terms of their employment? And how did aristocratic patronage of female performers adapt to the pressures of colonial modernity?

Seeking answers to these questions, this article focuses on the patronage of *tawāʾifs* in the princely state of Rampur as a case study, while drawing particular attention to links with former cultural capitals in the region and to the wider North Indian performance circuit.

A. Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (London, 2013), pp. 32–41; S. Sachdeva [Jha], ‘In Search of the Tawāʾif in History: Courtesans, Nautch Girls and Celebrity Entertainers in India (1720s–1920s)’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, SOAS University of London, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Nautch’ is a corruption of the Hindi/Urdu term *nāch* (dance). See R. D. Williams, ‘Songs between cities: listening to courtesans in colonial North India’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27.4 (2017), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Waheed, ‘Women of “ill repute”’, p. 993; C. Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2001), pp. 108–122; V. T. Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle as resistance: the case of the courtesans of Lucknow’, *Feminist Studies* 16.2 (1990), pp. 259–287; I. Woodfield, *Music of the Raj: A Social and Economic History of Music in Late Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Indian Society* (Oxford, 2000); M. Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (New Delhi, 2013); S. Dewan, *Tawāʾifnama* (Chennai, 2019); J. Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (New York, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The term *ṭawāʾif* stems from the Arabic verb *ṭāfa* (to go/travel/wander about), which is in turn related to *ṭawāf* (circumambulation/the Islamic ritual of going around the Kaʿaba in Mecca) and *ṭawwāf* (migrant/itinerant). Only around 1800 had *ṭawāʾif* come ‘to designate a unitary meta-community of elite female performing artists in North India’. Schofield, ‘Courtesan tale’, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, ‘Songs between cities’, p. 2. Also note that the Contagious Diseases Act (1868) forced ‘prostitutes’ (and increasingly *tawāʾifs*) to be medically inspected for venereal diseases while being placed under constant surveillance. See Waheed, ‘Women of “ill repute”’, pp. 986–1023; M. E. Walker, ‘The “nautch” reclaimed: women’s performance practice in nineteenth-century North India’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37.4 (2014), pp. 551–567; E. Wald, ‘From begums and bibis to abandoned females and idle women: sexual relationships, venereal disease and the redefinition of prostitution in early nineteenth-century India’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 46.1 (2009), pp. 5–25.

It aims to recover and critically examine the social and historical positioning of some of the many female performers whose identities, agencies, and histories have been obscured or erased through intersecting forces of colonial governance, moral censure, nationalist reform, and the enduring stigmatisation that conflated their artistic labour with prostitution. Far from being peripheral figures, *tawa'ifs* in colonial India were central to the production, preservation, and transmission of performance practices that laid the groundwork for what is now institutionalised as 'classical' or 'semi-classical' Hindustani music and dance.<sup>8</sup>

I argue that princely patronage of *tawa'ifs* was a dynamic and continually evolving affair that adapted to the pressures of colonial modernity. Drawing on archival materials in Urdu and Persian, including unpublished petitions and letters written by or about female performers, I demonstrate that post-1857 Lucknow (rather than Delhi) retained a certain importance as regional hub and recruitment ground for mobile courtesans. Moreover, I show that it was the conscious articulation of a distinctly 'native princely modernity'<sup>9</sup> in Muslim-ruled Rampur that enabled the princely state to emerge as a major patron of (female) performers.

In this context, I explore ways in which courtesans negotiated the conditions of their employment, and I provide rare evidence of female performers from the Ottoman empire travelling across the subcontinent in search of patronage. Finally, this article looks at previously overlooked Urdu print media to trace shifts in the public discourse on *tawa'ifs* performing at popular fairs and exhibitions, be it as part of emerging Parsi theatre companies or as early gramophone recording artists. Mobility and adaptability to changing socio-political circumstances, aesthetic trends, media, and technologies appear to have been crucial for their survival as professional singers, dancers, and later as actresses and recording artists.

### Setting the scene: the emergence of Rampur as a centre of music and dance

Foreshadowing some of the developments and disruptions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Delhi already ceased to be the predominant musical centre of the Mughal world during the late eighteenth century. Especially the years between 1739 and 1761 witnessed a substantial 'scattering' (*tafriqa*) of the Mughal capital Shahjahanabad (now 'Old Delhi'), as many Hindustani court musicians sought alternative patronage at emerging regional courts in Awadh, Rohilkhand, Rajasthan, the Punjab, Nepal, or the Deccan.<sup>10</sup>

Situated on the upper Gangetic plains, Rohilkhand (or 'land of the Rohillas') was settled by upwardly mobile Afghan military and mercenary communities during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century in search of service and status under the Mughals. Having consolidated their power and established several Rohilla chieftaincies in the region, the leaders of these Afghan Pashtun migrants quickly recognised the high cultural value and prestige accorded to the performing arts at the Mughal court as a key marker of elite

<sup>8</sup> See Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance*; M. E. Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective* (Farnham, UK, 2014); R. Qureshi, 'Female agency and patrilineal constraints: situating courtesans in twentieth-century India', in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, (ed.) M. Feldman and B. Gordon (Oxford, 2006), pp. 312–331; K. B. Leonard, 'Political players: courtesans of Hyderabad', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50.4 (2013), pp. 423–448.

<sup>9</sup> M. B. Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: Princes, Education and Empire in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> This 'scattering', or the demographic upheaval the term seeks to capture, was 'caused by the series of invasions and pitched battles between the Mughals, Marathas, Afghans, Rohillas, British and other smaller players that marred the middle decades of the eighteenth century'. K. B. Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India: Histories of the Ephemeral, 1748–1858* (Cambridge, 2024), p. 130.

social status and political authority.<sup>11</sup> In 1737, ‘Ali Muhammad Khan (d. 1748), their charismatic leader, was granted the title of *nawwāb* (governor, viceroy) by the Mughal emperor, cementing their political standing. By the time Rampur—an ally of the British East India Company—emerged as the sole surviving Rohilla-led principality in the region after the First Rohilla War of 1774, it had already begun to attract a distinguished cohort of poets, scholars, artists, musicians, and dancers circulating between various centres of patronage.<sup>12</sup>

Until the mid nineteenth century, however, the region’s musical scene remained dominated by Awadh with its capital Lucknow, and even Shahjahanabad continued to be renowned for a courtly culture that survived in a somewhat transformed form.<sup>13</sup> This radically changed with the British annexation of Awadh in 1856 and the final dismantlement of the Mughal throne after the Uprising of 1857. With the loss of their main patrons, competition among the remaining female professional performers rose while semi-independent princely states like Rampur gained a significant boost. Being loyal allies of the British, Rampur’s nawabs not only ensured their survival as the only remaining Muslim-ruled principality in erstwhile Rohilkhand (or what became the United Provinces of British India), they also turned their court into a genuine refuge for musicians, dancers, and poets.<sup>14</sup>

Under Nawab Kalb-e ‘Ali Khan (r. 1865–1887), Rampur’s reputation as an authentic North Indian Muslim centre of artistic and scholarly life reached its pinnacle. Among the state’s most prominent court musicians at this time were the *rabāb* and *sursingār* player Bahadur Husain Khan (d. 1879) and the vocalist and *bīn* player Amir Khan (d. 1880), both representing the *senīya* lineage of hereditary professional musicians—that is, those claiming descent from Emperor Akbar’s foremost court musician, Miyan Tansen (d. 1589). As respected master-musicians (*ustads*), they performed primarily in the setting of the North Indian *maḥfil* (assembly)—intimate gatherings of connoisseurs and musicians in elite male spaces—and instructed the nawab and his younger half-brother, Haidar ‘Ali Khan (d. 1903), in the art of music, thereby exerting significant influence over many professional court performers.<sup>15</sup>

Since the 1840s, with the exception of Kalb-e ‘Ali Khan, all rulers of Rampur adhered to Shi‘i Islam, as did the Nawabs of Awadh. Among the latter, Wajid ‘Ali Shah (r. 1847–1856) was especially associated with a court culture in which rulers frequently married *tawa’ifs* as

<sup>11</sup> On the role of institutionally liminal musicians within elite male spaces of Mughal society, see Brown [Schofield], ‘Social liminality of musicians’, pp. 26–35.

<sup>12</sup> Around 1759, the Mughal court musician Firoz Khan Adarang was one of the first elite Delhi *kalāwants* (a hereditary community of male musicians specialised in the *dhruwad* genre and in playing the *bīn* and *rabāb*) to settle in Rohilkhand. Simultaneously, the regional military labour market contributed to a constant demand for lower-class female performers and sex workers, which declined only with the demilitarisation of British North India in the early nineteenth century. See Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, p. 251; A. Miner, *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Wilhelmshaven, 1993), p. 66; A. McNeil, ‘Tawa’if, military musicians and Shi’a ideology in pre-rebellion Lucknow’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 32.1 (2009), pp. 46–62; R. Khan, *Minority Pasts: Locality, Emotions, and Belonging in Princely Rampur* (New Delhi, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> See Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, p. 237–240.

<sup>14</sup> In 1856, Awadh’s last nawab, Wajid ‘Ali Shah, was dethroned and exiled to Matiyaburj near Calcutta. After the Uprising of 1857, the last Mughal ruler—Bahadur Shah Zafar (r. 1837–1857)—was exiled in Burma. See Miner, *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, p. 75–160; Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, p. 65; R. Khan, *Minority Pasts*.

<sup>15</sup> On the history of musical performance and patronage in Rampur, see G. Sievers, ‘Auditory Culture in Transition: Muslims, Music, and Nationalism in Colonial North India, c. 1857–1947’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2023), especially pp. 125–207. On the North Indian *maḥfil* and its potential to enable transgressions of gender and status boundaries, see K. B. Brown [Schofield], ‘If music be the food of love: masculinity and eroticism in the Mughal *mehfil*’, in *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, (ed.) F. Orsini (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 61–83; R. Qureshi, ‘The Indian sarangi: sound of affect, site of contest’, *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 15 (1997), pp. 14–15, 23–27.

temporary *mut'a* (pleasure) wives—a form of marriage permitted under Shi'i law.<sup>16</sup> Several members of the Rampur royal family likewise entered into such unions with courtesans, reflecting the social liminality of female performers as an occupational class capable of crossing boundaries into higher-status spaces that were otherwise impenetrable to women of lower rank.<sup>17</sup> Nawab Yusuf 'Ali Khan (r. 1855–1865), the father of Kalb-e 'Ali Khan, for example, married the *tawa'if* Tuti Jan—an accomplished singer and poet who assumed the title Sardar Dulhan Begum—as his third wife.<sup>18</sup> Their son Haidar 'Ali Khan, a well-educated connoisseur and patron of music, later married the singer Lali and transmitted his passion for music to his own offspring, especially Sa'adat 'Ali Khan (d. 1922), a close associate of Nawab Hamid 'Ali Khan (r. 1889–1930).<sup>19</sup>

While some musicians and dancers were able to secure stable positions and remain attached to a particular court for long stretches of time, many professional performers—both men and women—led itinerant lives, moving between alternating centres of patronage. Beyond working in the salons (*koṭhās*) of urban centres such as Lucknow, mobile *tawa'ifs* sought appointments at regional courts, where they performed at ritually auspicious events, religious festivals, and state ceremonies, or trained women of the zenana in music, poetry, and dance.<sup>20</sup> Lower ranking women often remained in relative seclusion, appearing only rarely outside the private quarters of elite households, and some were even regarded as 'property' that could be lent or gifted to other patrons.<sup>21</sup>

If the patronage of Hindustani music was considered 'central to the notion of what it meant to be a *mirza* or nobleman',<sup>22</sup> the ability to host the most accomplished and beautiful female performers of song and dance served as an important signifier of cultural capital and power.<sup>23</sup> Yet, echoing the observations of the medieval Iraqi polymath al-Jahiz (d. circa 868 CE) in his *Epistle on Singing-Girls* (*Risālat al-Qiyān*), *tawa'ifs* were both revered and feared for their ability to appeal simultaneously to the eye, the ear, the sense of touch, and the

<sup>16</sup> Note that *mut'a* wives generally occupied a lower social status than more permanent *nikah* wives. See R. D. Williams, *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal* (Chicago, 2023), pp. 123–128.

<sup>17</sup> See Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians', pp. 13–49.

<sup>18</sup> Apparently the nawab's other wives, jealous and unwilling to accept the former courtesan as a legitimate co-wife, conspired to have her murdered. See N. A. Şiddiqī, *Rāmpūr darbār kā sangīt evaṃ navābī rasmeñ* [The music of the Rampur court and Nawabi customs] (Rampur, 2008), p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> Lali's sister Chandrabhanga, a courtesan active in Gwalior and later Lucknow, had children with the maharaja of Gwalior, among them the harmonium player Bhaiyya Ganpatrao (d. 1920). Sa'adat 'Ali Khan later co-organised the 1918–1919 All-India Music Conferences with Nawab Hamid 'Ali Khan and musicologist V. N. Bhatkhande (d. 1936). Although Hamid 'Ali Khan also maintained several liaisons with courtesans, *tawa'ifs* were excluded from their reformist efforts to standardise and institutionalise Hindustani music as a respectable national 'classical' tradition. See Sievers, 'Auditory Culture in Transition', pp. 155–156, 225, 257, 478, 487–488; Şiddiqī, *Rāmpūr darbār kā sangīt*, pp. 113–114; Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*.

<sup>20</sup> See Sachdeva [Jha], 'In Search of the Tawa'if in History'; Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, pp. 147–179.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, Kalb-e 'Ali Khan appears to have sent at least five so-called *khawāṣ* or *muṣāḥiba* (i.e. domestic 'companion') women—Nourozi Jan, Bhullun, Nazirjan, Wazirjan, and Masiri—to Khas Mahal, the estranged wife of Wajid 'Ali Shah at her home-in-exile in Matiyaburj. See Williams, 'Songs between cities', pp. 3–4; Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 144–147. For court cases in princely Hyderabad in which *tawa'ifs* were viewed as property, see Leonard, 'Political players', p. 437. Note also that musicians and dancers associated with the private domestic space of the *haram* or the bazaar were excluded from the princely *maḥfil*. See Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians', p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians', p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> On Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital in this context, see P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (trans.) R. Nice (Cambridge, MA: 1984); Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians'. See also R. Qureshi, 'How does music mean? Embodied memories and the politics of affect in the Indian *sarangi*', *American Ethnologist* 27.4 (2000), pp. 823–825.

heart.<sup>24</sup> While the status of *tawa'ifs* as purveyors of multiple sensory pleasures to elite men began to erode under colonial modernity, the question remains how this transformation affected continuities within the 'paracolonial' space of the princely state.<sup>25</sup>

### Travelling female performers, princely patrons, and public festivals

Previous scholarship has tended to characterise princely states like Rampur, Hyderabad, and Bhopal as sanctuaries of the arts in which Indo-Muslim courtly culture was 'preserved'.<sup>26</sup> A closer examination, however, reveals that princely patronage, cultural production, and preservation were neither static nor insulated from developments beyond their borders. A distinctly modern public space in which the multisensory appeal of *tawa'ifs* came to fruition in princely Rampur was the *Jashn-e benaṣīr* (Incomparable Festival), an annual fair established by Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan in commemoration of his accession to the throne in 1866.<sup>27</sup>

Inspired by late Mughal and Awadhi examples of public gatherings as well as colonial-era industrial exhibitions, the Benazir fair not only boosted economic and cultural production and trade in the state, but it also gave Rampur's rulers a stage for the demonstration of royal authority and splendour. As Amanda Lanzillo recently stated, princely 'state elites sought to create material and industrial cultures that emphasised their authority as Indian rulers [..., which] often meant engaging with claims on religious pasts and specific, locally rooted courtly cultures that exceeded colonial state authority'.<sup>28</sup> I suggest that this was enacted, among other things, by hosting an impressive assembly of artistes, entertainers, and poets performing before audiences composed of regional elites, merchants, the general populace, and representatives of the colonial state.

Capable of providing multisensorial experiences across social boundaries, talented *tawa'ifs* were key figures in these public-facing events—at least until shifting social mores, new performance venues, and the rise of the gramophone and radio (in addition to theatre and film) around the turn of the century altered their social status and also introduced 'a new set of male controllers and gatekeepers'.<sup>29</sup> As will become clear, many of the female dancers and singers performing at the Benazir fair were recruited from outside the princely state, largely gaining their livelihoods by being 'on the road'.

<sup>24</sup> See al-Jāhīz, *Rasā'il*, edited by M. 'A. al-S. Hārūn (Cairo, 1964), vol. ii, pp. 143–182; C. Lange, 'Al-Jāhīz on the senses: sensory moderation and Muslim synesthesia', *Senses and Society* 17.1 (2022), pp. 8–21.

<sup>25</sup> Following Katherine Schofield, I draw on Stephanie Newell's neologism here to emphasise that courtly culture in the semi-independent princely state was neither determined only by the colonial encounter, nor did it develop as a 'backwater' of 'tradition' and in isolation from British imperialism, technological innovations, and modern forms of globalisation. See S. Newell, "'Paracolonial' networks: some speculations on local readerships in colonial West Africa", *Interventions* 3 (2001), pp. 336–354; Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., M. Pernau, 'Emotions and modernity in colonial India: from balance to fervor' (New Delhi, 2019), p. 210; R. Khan, 'Local pasts: space, emotions and identities in vernacular histories of princely Rampur', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58.5 (2015), pp. 693–731.

<sup>27</sup> After 1879, the fair was also called *Qadam sharīf kā melā* ('[The Prophet's] Sacred Footprint Fair'). While *benaṣīr* refers to the garden of a summer palace three miles outside the city, *Qadam sharīf* denotes a tower there that houses an imported stone slab said to bear the Prophet Muhammad's footprint. By the early 1880s, the fair drew some 20,000 visitors annually and was substantially revamped by Nawab Hamid 'Ali Khan in the 1890s. See F. H. Fisher (ed.), *Statistical, Descriptive, and Historical Account of the North-Western Provinces of India*, Vol. IX, Pt. III: *Rampur* (Allahabad, 1883), p. 34; R. Khan, *Minority Pasts*, pp. 36–39.

<sup>28</sup> A. Lanzillo, 'Princely prisons, state exhibitions, and Muslim industrial authority in colonial India', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34.4 (2024), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> R. Qureshi, 'In search of Begum Akhtar: patriarchy, poetry, and twentieth-century Indian music', *World of Music* 43.1 (2001), p. 110.



Despite its local specificities, organising a state-sponsored fair that emphasised both cultural and religious authority was not unique to Rampur. Indeed, some scholars have identified the emergence of a veritable 'exhibition culture' during this period.<sup>30</sup> Beginning with the Madras Exhibition of 1855, agricultural and industrial exhibitions were inaugurated throughout the 1860s in towns and cities across British India. In addition, pre-existing religious festivals and trade fairs (*melās*) were revived, transformed, and expanded.<sup>31</sup> Many exhibitions and festival-fairs shared the common feature of providing public spaces in which audiences could engage in novel sensory experiences. On this level, Rampur competed with both emergent colonial exhibitions and pre-existing pilgrimage fairs. What distinguished the *Jashn-e benazir* from many agricultural and industrial exhibitions, however, was that the nawab—in emulation of Mughal noblemen—continued to value and support both male and female performers of Hindustani music and dance.<sup>32</sup>

An important text introducing us to the range of performers present at the first iteration of the Benazir fair—from Rampur's male court musicians and accompanists to the cross-dressing or transgender dancer 'Ali Jan (d. circa 1879) and several female performers—is the *Musaddas tahnīyyat-e jashn-e benazir* (Musaddas: felicitations for the Incomparable Festival), a generously illustrated commemorative *rekhti* poem composed around 1867 by the local Urdu poet Mir Yar 'Ali Jan Sahib (1810–1896).<sup>33</sup> Making every effort to present his princely patron as a just and benevolent ruler, Jan Sahib describes the nawab as a highly cultured connoisseur of the arts wealthy enough to host and reward the best musicians, dancers, artisans, storytellers, and poets available in the region.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the poem's 'ethnographic mode' shows us how cultural activity in the princely state was not restricted to the elites and the physical space of the court, but that it included all varieties of people, the rich and the poor, who mingled in the bazaars, streets, gardens, and fairgrounds.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> S. Bhatti, *Translating Museums: A Counterhistory of South Asian Museology* (London, 2012), p. 56. Also see Jubbulpore Exhibition Central Committee, *Once in a Way: A Jubbulpore Miscellany* (Calcutta, 1866). Note that in Europe and North America, too, the mid nineteenth century witnessed the proliferation of public fairs and grand 'universal exhibitions' in which cultural, technological, and industrial developments were on display.

<sup>31</sup> For example, the *Yogi melā* (a.k.a. *Shāhi melā*) was held at Lucknow's Qaisarbagh Palace (1853–1855) before moving to Wajid 'Ali Shah's 'court-in-exile' near Calcutta after 1856. The *Nauchandī melā* ('New Moon Fair') near a temple and Sufi shrine in Meerut combined religious festival and agricultural exhibition since the seventeenth century. British administrators distinguished between 'industrial' or 'agricultural' exhibitions intended to 'instruct' and 'elevate' the colonised from 'mere native' fairs of lesser value. See *Report on the Administration of the N. W. Provinces for the Year 1866–67* (Allahabad, 1867), p. 80; Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 91–94; K. Hansen, *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies* (London, 2013), pp. 45, 285; N. L. M. Tabor, 'A local apocalypse: district fairs and poetry recitation in rural India', *Journal of Urdu Studies* 1 (2020), pp. 79–80; N. Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires, 1803–1931: Society, Government and Urban Growth* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> Grand openings and spectacular performances (or *tamāshās*) by local artists were, of course, part of many fairs and exhibitions. Some British administrators, however, thought of them as 'peripheral ceremonies' merely necessary to popularize the events. See Bhatti, *Translating Museums*, p. 58; *Report on the Administration of the N. W. Provinces for the Year 1866–67*, pp. 71–81.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Sahib, one of the foremost *rekhti* poets of his time, settled in Rampur after 1857. See R. Khan, 'Introduction: space, speech and subjectivity in Jan Sahib's *Jashn-e-Benazir*', in M. Y. A. K. Jan Sahib, *The Incomparable Festival*, (ed.) R. Khan, (trans.) S. Naved (Gurugram, 2021), pp. 2, 24–28. For more on *rekhti* poetry, a poetic genre in which a male poet assumes the voice of a woman, see C. Petievich, 'Rekhti: impersonating the feminine in Urdu poetry', *South Asia* 24 (2001), pp. 75–90; R. Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhtī Poetry in India, 1780–1870* (New York, 2012); C. M. Naim, 'Transvestic words? The rekhti in Urdu', *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16 (2001), pp. 3–26.

<sup>34</sup> Evoking famous kings like the Mughal emperor Akbar or the Persian king Jamshed, Islamic and Hindu religious and mythological references, or festivals like Nowruz and Holi for comparison, the poem depicts Rampur as a place of trans-regional significance, prosperity, and communal harmony despite being surrounded by British imperial dominance. See Jan Sahib, *Incomparable Festival*, pp. 47–79.

<sup>35</sup> See R. Khan, 'Introduction', pp. 1–40.

Musicians and dancers assembled at the festive fairgrounds performed on small make-shift stages and in tents. Setting their performing bodies apart, Jan Sahib differentiates between the distinct characteristics of individual *tawa'ifs* and alludes to nuances in social standing or occupational specificities, be it by emphasising the quality of their singing voices, the refinement of speech and manners, the level of physical beauty, or notoriety based on repertoires and place-related identities. For example, he writes:

Today Nauratan ensures that she remains peerless.  
A sweet-singing voice, and tuneful no less.  
A cultured whore (*randī hāi bā-tamīz*) she is and to declare it is not meaningless.  
Each dancing girl (*ṭā'ifa*) is a rose, belongs to the garden, no less.  
Seeing the rose makes it a garden, the heart of the nightingale.  
These flowers also decide to blossom to the song of the nightingale.<sup>36</sup>

Of note is that Jan Sahib not only uses the term *ṭā'ifa* (troupe/company of a courtesan) interchangeably with *randī* (prostitute), but he also qualifies the latter with the (seemingly contradictory) term *bā-tamīz* (cultured). We can therefore assume that he understood *randī* as an 'unmarried [but respectable] woman', as was common before the late nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, the poet ranks the *tawa'ifs* Chunno, Mammi, and Allah Rakhi among the most cherished and cultured female performers available:

In their jobs both are polished and perform exquisitely.  
Among dancing-girls (*ṭā'ifoñ*), they are more than ten times twenty.  
Sweeter than Shirin's, their speech is unfussy.  
Why won't they be dear to every heart and be friendly?  
The one 'Night-dispelling Moon' (*badr-e munīr*), the other 'Incomparable' (*benazīr*),  
Devoted to Mammi-Chunno is every patron and noble (*amīr*).<sup>38</sup>

They are daughters of Subba and a wealthy (*ḍeredār*) courtesan—  
To give the only description of Mammi and Chunno we can.  
Women (*randīyāñ*) they are fit for soirees of any nobleman,  
Just as Allahrakkhi is known to any worldly man.  
All three of them an aristocratic way of life maintain,  
Just like Indra's fairy house their house they maintain.<sup>39</sup>

Described as highly cultivated and possibly also providing sexual companionship to elite patrons, Mammi and Chunno seem to have been relatively well-off courtesans who could clearly be distinguished from other women of the bazaar, their mother being a *ḍeredār ṭawā'if* with her own fixed abode.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the poem highlights the elite courtesan Daroga

<sup>36</sup> Jan Sahib, *Incomparable Festival*, p. 68. While following Shad Naved's translation of the poem, I indicate different interpretations in my analysis, and I have added certain terms from the Urdu original in brackets, via W. H. Siddiqi and I. 'A. Khanḍārā (eds.), *Musaddas tahnīyat-e jashn-e benazīr muṣannafa Mīr Yār 'Alī Jān* (Rampur, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City*, pp. 19–20. Richard Williams further notes in this context how derogatory terms like *bazārī* (market-girl), *maqbul-i bazār* (mistress of the *bazār*), or *randī* and *khāngī* (prostitute/harlot) were used by Urdu writers to situate women they evidently admired in social and professional contexts rather than passing moral judgements. See Williams, 'Songs between cities', p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Jan Sahib, *Incomparable Festival*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>40</sup> The term *ḍeredār* (lit. 'camp/tent-dweller') has roots in the practice of elite courtesans to travel and camp with their patrons. See R. Khan, 'Introduction', pp. 18–19; Sachdeva [Jha], 'In Search of the Tawa'if in History', pp. 92, 362–364.





**Figure 1.** Nanhi Kalkatte-wālī and accompanists in Rampur, circa 1866. Source: M.Y. 'A. Jān, *Musaddas tahniyat-e jashn-e benaḡīr*, Urdu Illustrated Manuscript 1229, fol. 25v, Rampur Raza Library.

(lit. 'keeper') Mahbub Jan (d. around 1891), a long-time resident in Rampur who acquired a significant respectability and intimacy with Nawab Kalb-e 'Alī Khan, even accompanying him to Mecca in 1872.<sup>41</sup>

Jan Sahib's poem also indicates that many female performers travelled from one engagement to another. While it does not directly engage with the theme of mobility, it nonetheless notes that numerous performers in Rampur came from Lucknow. Covering the longest distances to reach the princely state for the annual festival was Nanhi Kalkatte-wālī who, as her name's *nisba* (attribution) indicates, hailed from the colonial capital of Calcutta (see Figure 1). Her appearance illustrates not only how the regionally distinct *khemṭā* dance genre associated with her gained popularity across northern India but also the willingness of lower-status performers, seeking social mobility, to travel far and wide.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> A visible sign of her high standing at court is the fact that she sponsored the construction of a little mosque and a public *waqf* (Islamic trust) in the city centre, close to the *mazār* of the Sufi saint Chup Shah Miyan. See M. 'A. K. A. Rāmpūrī (ed.), *Musaddas tahniyat-e jashn-e benaḡīr muṣannafa-ye Mīr Yār 'Alī Jān* (Rampur, 1950), pp. *jīm*, 117. Also see I. Chatterjee, 'Renewed and connected histories: slavery and the historiography of South Asia', in *Slavery and South Asian History*, (eds.) I. Chatterjee and R. M. Eaton (Bloomington, IN, 2006), p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> For more on the circulation of *khemṭā* during this period, see R. D. Williams, 'Salacious songs: *khemṭā* dance and participatory printed media in nineteenth-century North India', *International Journal of Islam in Asia* 3 (2022), esp. pp. 194–195. It is also worth mentioning here that the famous Rampur-based poet Dagh Dehlvi (d. 1905) immortalised his love affair with another lower-class *tawa'if* from a Calcutta bazaar in his *maṣnavī Faryād-e Dāgh* (Plaint of Dagh, 1882), which later reformist writers heavily criticised. See Williams, 'Songs between cities', pp. 16–17.

### Negotiating female performers' terms of employment

For all its artistic and 'ethnographic' value, including a certain class and gender consciousness, Jan Sahib's *Musaddas* remains the work of a male poet writing to please his princely patron. To gain a more nuanced perspective on the patronage of mobile *tawa'ifs* in post-1857 Rampur, we need to engage with a different set of primary sources and archives. Let us therefore turn our attention to several unpublished petitions and letters written by or about female musicians and dancers to the royal court during the reign of Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan, preserved in what survives of Rampur state's *Dār al-inshā'* (Department of Official and Diplomatic Correspondence) records. I contend that this change in perspective helps us recuperate some of the commonly occluded aspects in the relationships between patrons, middlemen, and performers.

In August 1865, a female envoy of the nawab—modestly referring to herself as a humble maidservant (*kaniz*), but likely a senior courtesan—sent the following report from Lucknow to the Rampur court, detailing her efforts to recruit talented female performers:

To the illustrious and renowned Nawab, the pinnacle of authority [...], may God perpetuate his glory and fortune. After presenting the humble salutations of this devoted servant, it is respectfully submitted as follows: This humble maidservant (*kaniz*), having taken leave of her noble patrons, arrived in the city of Lucknow on the 22nd of *Rabī 'al-awwāl*, 1282 AH [15 August 1865 CE]. Astonishing events unfolded before her eyes: Mir Hasan Ja'far (known as Bahar al-Daula), Mir Sayyid 'Ali, and Mir Mahbub 'Ali, envoys of Sahibzada [Prince] Haidar 'Ali Khan, were already present. These gentlemen had taken up residence in the city in accordance with the royal decree mandating obedience. Regarding the search for the lamp of desire and the execution of the sacred orders, arrangements were duly made, and she applied herself with the utmost diligence and heartfelt effort to carry out all necessary tasks. The first company of *arbāb-e nishāt* (lit. 'masters of pleasure'), whose capital is pleasure and delight, was summoned, and the *mujrā* (lit. 'salutation') performances were conducted [by the *tawa'ifs*]. After the *mujrā* and the distribution of tips and gifts, she carefully recorded the details of each courtesan troupe (*tā'ifa*) present: Haidari, Wazir Jan, Amir Jan, *Dukhtar* ('daughter of') Biba Jan, Haingan, and Sundar. In addition to these, several other well-known troupes were also called and their skills assessed, but none except Sundar pleased the maidservant or seemed worthy of the company of highly refined and noble patrons. Indeed, Sundar's dance (*raqs*) puts Zohra [lit. 'Venus'; a famous *tawa'if*] to shame, and her singing brings Mushtari [lit. 'Jupiter'; Zohra's sister] to sweat with embarrassment. However, that moon of beauty and star of excellence was presently attached to Munshi Binak Parshad of the Commissioner's office. [...] God willing, she will soon ensnare that '*Huma* [bird] of pleasure' (*humā-ye 'ishrat*) in the net of her craft and send her to Your exalted service. Many troupes were enticed by Mir Hasan Ja'far and the others, so some hesitated to arrive. Upon hearing of this, Sahibzada Haidar 'Ali Khan immediately came from Rampur by mail coach (*dānk*) and took up residence at the house of Sajjad 'Ali Khan, son of Nawab 'Ali Naqi Khan.<sup>43</sup> Sundar, the naïve one, whose *mujrā* the Sahibzada attended twice, still has a longing for him in her heart. As for Haingan *tawa'if*, she is presently at Gorakhpur. The maidservant has sent some men to bring her back. Haingan is excellent in character, though flawed in appearance. Should any other troupe with similar qualities appear, she will send them [to you] immediately. [...] May the divine sun of fortune eternally

<sup>43</sup> 'Ali Naqi Khan was likely the former chief minister and father-in-law of Nawab Wajid 'Ali Shah, whom he had first met in the house of Waziran, a *tawa'if*. See Williams, *Scattered Court*, p. 84.

shine from the horizon of glory and majesty [...]. Petition, respectfully submitted by this long-standing devoted well-wisher, dated 1865.<sup>44</sup>

Although the author remains anonymous, the letter appears to have been written by a high-ranking courtesan commissioned by Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan to identify, assess, and, where appropriate, dispatch talented *tawa'ifs* to his court, presumably in connection with the coronation celebrations of 1865 and the subsequent Benazir fair. Displaying a well-trained eye and a discerning ear, as would befit a senior *tawa'if*, she describes her efforts to gain an overview of the finest courtesans available in the *koṭhās* of Lucknow, having them perform sample *mujrā*<sup>45</sup> sessions of song and dance while rating or classifying the women according to their quality of voice, their singing and dancing skills, their physical beauty, as well as their manners and social etiquette.

Though clearly objectifying the female performers' bodies, the letter's descriptions appear to reflect a long-established convention of evaluating the qualities of *tawa'ifs*. In Dargah Quli Khan's eighteenth-century *Muraqqa'-e Dihli* (Delhi album, 1738–1741), for example, courtesans are similarly assessed according to their physical beauty, body shape, age, and demeanour, while the effect they had on the eyes of the (male) beholder is weighed against their talents as singers and dancers.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, as Katherine Schofield has observed, selecting the right kinds of musicians and dancers was of utmost importance for a nobleman 'to prove to his peers, who were his social judges, his mastery of elite male etiquette'.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the mission to search for talented courtesans in Lucknow was a serious undertaking, and the author of the letter seems to have been regarded as a trustworthy agent by the nawab.

The fact that only one or two courtesans met with her approval suggests either a genuine scarcity of high-quality performers in post-1857 Lucknow or the author's exceptionally high standards as an evaluator. Moreover, it confirms that many courtesans travelled from one patron to the other, often across considerable distances. Gorakhpur, for example, whence Haingan *tawa'if* was summoned, lies around 300 miles east of Lucknow. Other passages, especially those referencing Mir Hasan Ja'far and the sudden arrival of the nawab's half-brother, Haidar 'Ali Khan, by mail coach, underscore the importance attached to securing desirable performers and reflect the competitiveness of elite male patronage. This demonstrates that skilled courtesans continued to serve as vital markers of social prestige and cultural capital among certain elite circles.<sup>48</sup>

In a passage omitted from the translation above, the letter abruptly shifts to the challenges of acquiring several consumer goods for the nawab—such as a water pipe, tobacco, mango saplings, fine rice, and a particular kind of lentil (*dāl*).<sup>49</sup> This casts light on the complex economy of patronage, connoisseurship, and princely *mahfil* culture, in which

<sup>44</sup> Uttar Pradesh State Regional Archives Allahabad (UPSRAA), Rampur State Records, Dar al-Insha Fort, Correspondence with Ruling Princes and Others, Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan, 1865, Bundle No. 64, File No. 177. All translations, unless indicated, are my own.

<sup>45</sup> According to Regula Qureshi, the term *mujrā* is 'symbolic of deep submission', and 'recalls the deep obeisances that the tawaif executes in an entreating and artful gesture when introducing her display of artistic mastery and herself as a desirable female'. Qureshi, 'How does music mean?', p. 823.

<sup>46</sup> Quli Khan also describes the colour and shade of their complexion as either fair, olive, dark, or black, and evaluates their voices in categories like thin, sharp, melodious, fresh, soothing, harmonious, or stable in pitch. See D. Quli Khan, *Muraqqa'-e-Dehli: The Mughal Capital in Muhammad Shah's Time*, (trans.) C. Shekhar and S. M. Chenoy (Delhi, 1989), pp. 109–125. For a discussion of a similar vocabulary used in early Urdu poetry to describe the individual traits of *tawa'ifs*, see Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City*, pp. 189–211.

<sup>47</sup> Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians', p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> See Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians'.

<sup>49</sup> Note that traders such as the tobacco seller or pipe bearer apparently also negotiated their monthly payments via the same person in charge of hiring the *tawa'ifs*. See UPSRAA, File No. 177. For another example of a letter in which staff are instructed to bring musicians and *tawa'ifs* to their patron alongside other luxury items, see M.

luxury, artistic performance, and everyday household supplies were closely intertwined. While patrons may have objectified the *tawa'ifs*' bodies, treating them almost like commodities, the performers nonetheless retained social esteem and cultural value, even as their profession ensured that they remained of lower social rank than the elite they served.<sup>50</sup>

It is noteworthy that several of the names mentioned in the letter—Zohra, Mushtari, Sundar, Haidar, Wazir, and Amir Jan—also appear in the early photographic album, *The Beauties of Lucknow* (1874).<sup>51</sup> The album's introduction claims that some of these women had performed at Wajid 'Ali Shah's court prior to the 1856 annexation, yet most appear too young for that to be true. As Kathryn Hansen suggests, this retrospective framing sought to preserve their social prestige by linking them to a lost era of royal patronage, rescuing them from a colonial present marked by 'moralistic censure and legal regulation'.<sup>52</sup>

Of all the *tawa'ifs* mentioned in the letter, only Haingan reappears in Jan Sahib's poem, indicating her presence at the Benazir fair in 1866 (see Figure 2).

The quick-witted wench (*randī*) is brazenly flirty,  
Hingan [sic] of Lucknow, she too is a 'green fairy'.  
Her breasts (*jōban*) are youthful, her heart full of intensity.  
She maintains her unique style of immaturity.  
But [...] Bandi Jan shows great cultivation (*bā-tamīz*):  
Her habits and comportment (*khū-o mizāj*) have universal admiration.<sup>53</sup>

Haingan's young female body comes across here as sensuous and sexually attractive to the male gaze, her appearance as energetic and flirtatious. The couplets allude to the way in which the performer incited not just the sense of hearing and sight but also that of touch by arousing carnal desire. By contrast, her counterpart Bandi Jan seems to have been admired for her refined manners (*tamīz*), suggesting a capacity to arouse more than mere physical pleasure or a longing for intimate sensory experiences.<sup>54</sup>

Female performers' petitions to the court appear at regular intervals in the princely state's records. *Tawa'ifs* would seek permission to enter the state in search of employment, ask for financial assistance in matters of urgency such as the passing of a close relative or head of the household, or submit complaints and claims concerning payments denied by a patron (e.g. in the form of jewels), inheritance disputes, and other such issues.<sup>55</sup> A particularly rich example is the following petition, written by the Lucknow-based *tawa'if* Haidar Jan in response to an offer from the Rampur court to perform at the nawab's robe-of-honour ceremony (*jashn-e khil'at*), along with several other female performers. Dated 7 October 1865, the letter is written in Persian on a paper dotted with rectangular gold plates. It reads:

Pernau and Y. Jaffrey (eds. and trans.), *Information and the Public Sphere: Persian Newsletters from Mughal Delhi* (Oxford, 2009), p. 168 [January 1830].

<sup>50</sup> See also Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians'.

<sup>51</sup> See [A. 'Abbās,] *The Beauties of Lucknow* (Calcutta, 1874). Two photos of Muslim *tawa'ifs* wearing silk garments and cashmere shawls, the so-called 'bazaar women' Waziran and Diljan from Saharanpur, are also featured in J. F. Watson and J. W. Kaye (eds.), *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan* (London, 1868), vol. iii, pp. 165–166.

<sup>52</sup> K. Hansen, 'The beauties of Lucknow: an Urdu photographic album', *Journal of Urdu Studies* 1 (2020), p. 164.

<sup>53</sup> Jan Sahib, *Incomparable Festival*, p. 71.

<sup>54</sup> According to Asar Rampuri, Haingan Jan was a *tawa'if* from Lucknow who moved to Rampur during Kalb-e 'Ali Khan's reign and to Haidar 'Ali Khan's estate in Bilsa after his death in 1887. See Rampuri, *Musaddas*, p. 120.

<sup>55</sup> See UPSRAA, Rampur State Records, Dar al-Insha Fort, Correspondence with Ruling Princes and Others, Local Miscellaneous Records, 1839, Bundle No. 6, File Nos. 37–38, and 1841, Bundle No. 10, File No. 80; NAI, Central India Agency, Bundelkhand Agency, No. 1382, 1860; NAI, Foreign, Internal, Part B, Nos. 318–320, February 1903; Leonard, 'Political players'.





Figure 2. The tawa'ifs Haingan Lakhnawi (right) and Bande Jan in Rampur, circa 1866. Source: M.Y.'A. Jān, *Musaddas tahniyat-e jashn-e benazir*, Urdu Illustrated Manuscript 1229, fol. 27v, Rampur Raza Library.

Most Exalted and Elevated, may God prolong his dominion and sovereignty. His Excellency, the Shadow of the Divine, Vice-Regent of the Merciful; may God make his kingdom and authority everlasting. A petition, humbly submitted to be presented by those granted audience at the august court, refuge of the world: In accordance with the exalted decree of the world-illuminating sovereign, source of the sun's radiance [i.e. the nawab], the esteemed servants, Musamma Fajja and Musammi 'Ali Jan,<sup>56</sup> have arrived here in search of courtesan troupes (*ṭā'ifa bā ṭawā'ifān*) and other selected performers from the city of Lucknow, for the arrangement of the auspicious and blessed festivities of [Your Majesty's] royal accession [to the throne]. Several troupes have entrusted this maidservant (*kaniz*)—herself belonging to the circle of the *arbāb-e nishāt* (masters of pleasure) and well-versed in the arts of pleasure (*ba funūn az bāb-e nishāt*), namely dance and music (*raqs-o naghma-pardāzi*), perfected to the highest degree—with the wish that they might lay the forehead of servitude and devotion before the gift of the spheres of heaven [i.e. the nawab] and display the brilliance of their skilled craft. However, since the sum of 200 rupees in wages (*mawājib*) for the above-mentioned lady is insufficient to cover the expenses of this maidservant, she remains in difficulty. Therefore, it is hoped that the maidservant's request concerning an increase in salary (*mushāhara*) will be granted and a royal order issued accordingly.

<sup>56</sup> *Musammā* and *musammi* (lit. 'named') are gendered honorifics used before personal names. 'Ali Jan is likely the transgender performer who is featured in Jan Sahib's *Musaddas* (see above).

If this be so, this maidservant, present in the state of heavenly glorious dominion (*dar daulat falak-shaukat*), shall remain devoted and continuously engaged in prayers for the prosperity and fortune of Your Majesty's realm. [...] Petition submitted by the humble and devoted maidservant, Musamma Haidar Jan *tawa'if*, resident of the city of Lucknow.<sup>57</sup>

Haidar Jan was most likely a high-status courtesan with a permanent residence (or *koṭhā*) in Lucknow, writing to negotiate her salary directly with the Nawab of Rampur. By the nineteenth century, several *tawa'ifs* owned property in the city and derived income from it, reflecting their economic and cultural influence.<sup>58</sup> Acting as head of a household, Haidar Jan represented not only herself but also several ensembles of *tawa'ifs* invited to perform in Rampur by the nawab's agents, Lady Fajja and 'Ali Jan. Written just seven weeks after the above-cited letter by an anonymous servant of the nawab, it is possible that Lady Fajja was the same agent mentioned earlier. Interestingly, Haidar Jan addresses the nawab directly rather than negotiating further with the court's envoy, who appears to have lacked the authority to approve salary increases. A seal bearing her name (see Figure 3) suggests that she regularly communicated via mail, likely with the aid of a professional scribe, underscoring her authority and established position within the elite patronage networks of the period.<sup>59</sup>

Based on the extant response, written on 12 October 1865 in Urdu, it is evident that the court took Haidar Jan's petition seriously enough to raise the salary from 200 to 250 rupees:

To Haidar Jan *tawa'if*. The application you have written has come to our notice. Your pay (*mushāhara*) has been fixed at 250 rupees. Please accept this salary and come quickly. Besides the above-mentioned remuneration, all allowances (*parvarish*) including benefits (*'ināyāt*) and gifts (*in'ām*) will be provided. [...] Please prepare for the journey immediately, because the robe-of-honour ceremony (*jashn-e khil'at*) is to be held in the month of November of this year. As there will be many courtesan groups (*ṭā'ifa*), your participation is necessary. In this court (*sarkār*), one does not have to depend on remuneration alone. Rather, gifts and tips etc. (*in'ām wa ghaira*) are so generous that servants (*mulāzimīn*) can gain tremendous benefit (*falāḥ*) from them. Just imagine what that would mean for you...<sup>60</sup>

Imploring the *tawa'if* to accept these conditions and to leave immediately so as to reach Rampur on time, the letter stresses how important it is that she participate in the festivities marking the nawab's accession to the throne. Not entirely certain that she would accept

<sup>57</sup> UPSRAA, Rampur State Records, Dar al-Insha Fort, Correspondence with Ruling Princes and Others, Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan, 1865, Bundle No. 64, File No. 265. I thank Asghar Seyed-Gohrab and Zhinia Noorian for their feedback on my translation of this text. Any remaining errors are my own.

<sup>58</sup> See Oldenburg, *Making of Colonial Lucknow*, pp. 134–142. Also note that a namesake of Haidar Jan is featured in the above-mentioned photo album, *The Beauties of Lucknow* (1874), and the Urdu writer and journalist 'Abdul Halim Sharar (d. 1926) also refers to a *tawa'if* of the same name in his *Guzashta Lakhna'ū*: 'The houses of Chaudhrayan ["head of a profession," here "chief courtesan"] Haidar Jan and some other courtesans of high status were the "clubs" of genteel people.' A. H. Sharar, 'Lucknow: the last phase of an oriental culture', in *UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, Indian Series*, (eds. and trans.) E. S. Harcourt and F. Hussain (London, 1975), p. 196. For the Urdu original, see 'A. H. Sharar, *Guzashta Lakhna'ū*: *Hindūstān meñ mashriqī tamaddun kā ākhirī namūna* (Lahore, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Similarly, some *tawa'ifs* in the princely state of Hyderabad also used small seals bearing their names in the petitions they sent to that court. We equally find a few gold-speckled letters here. See *Arbāb-e nishāṭ*, basta (bundle) No. 122, section R 1 in the Telangana State Archives (APSA), Hyderabad, India, containing the Persian records of the Department of Enjoyment, *Ṣarf-i khāṣ* (Nizam's Private Estate), 1288 H–1301 H (1871–1885).

<sup>60</sup> UPSRAA, File No. 265.



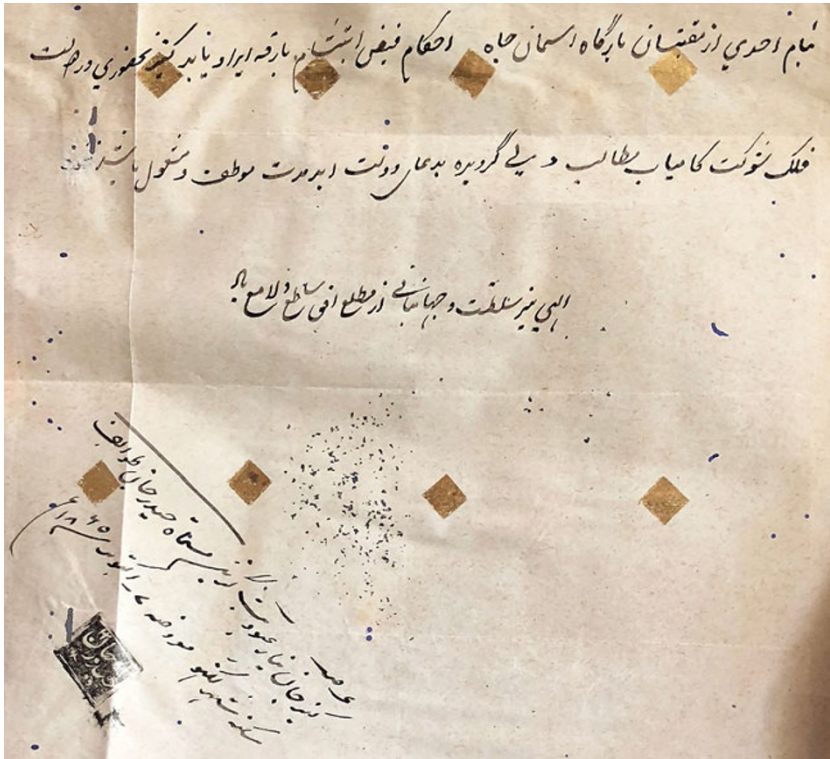


Figure 3. Seal under *tawa'if* Haidar Jan's petition to the Nawab of Rampur, 7 October 1865. Source: UPSRAA, Rampur State Records, Dar al-Insha Fort, Correspondence with Ruling Princes and Others, Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan, 1865, Bundle No. 64, File No. 265.

the offer, the writer also deemed it expedient to remind her that the court always richly rewarded performers with gifts and tips.<sup>61</sup>

While some well-established female performers had the ability to negotiate their terms of employment via written petitions, most travelling musicians seeking engagements with the wealthy nobility in the region were dependent on middlemen. The following petition signed by the gemstone and curiosities dealer Alexander Malcolm Jacob (d. 1921) is a good example in this regard. It also provides unique evidence of female musicians from the Ottoman empire travelling and performing across the subcontinent in the nineteenth century (see Figure 4).<sup>62</sup>

Acting as their agent in 1874, Jacob invites Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan to engage a father and his three talented daughters from Constantinople:

<sup>61</sup> The habit of the Rampur court to pay low fixed salaries to performers while remunerating them richly with gifts and tips is confirmed in Rampuri, *Musaddas*, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Jacob was born in the Ottoman empire and retained connections to Constantinople after his arrival in India in the 1860s. After engagements at various princely states (including Baroda, Dhulepur, Hyderabad, Jaipur, and Rampur), he set up shop as a curio, jewellery, and gemstones dealer in Simla around 1876. His clients and business partners included colonial officers, traders, tourists, and the European and Indian nobility. See J. Zubrzycki, *The Mysterious Mr Jacob: Diamond Merchant, Magician and Spy* (Gurugram, 2012), pp. 15–16, 39–56, 94.

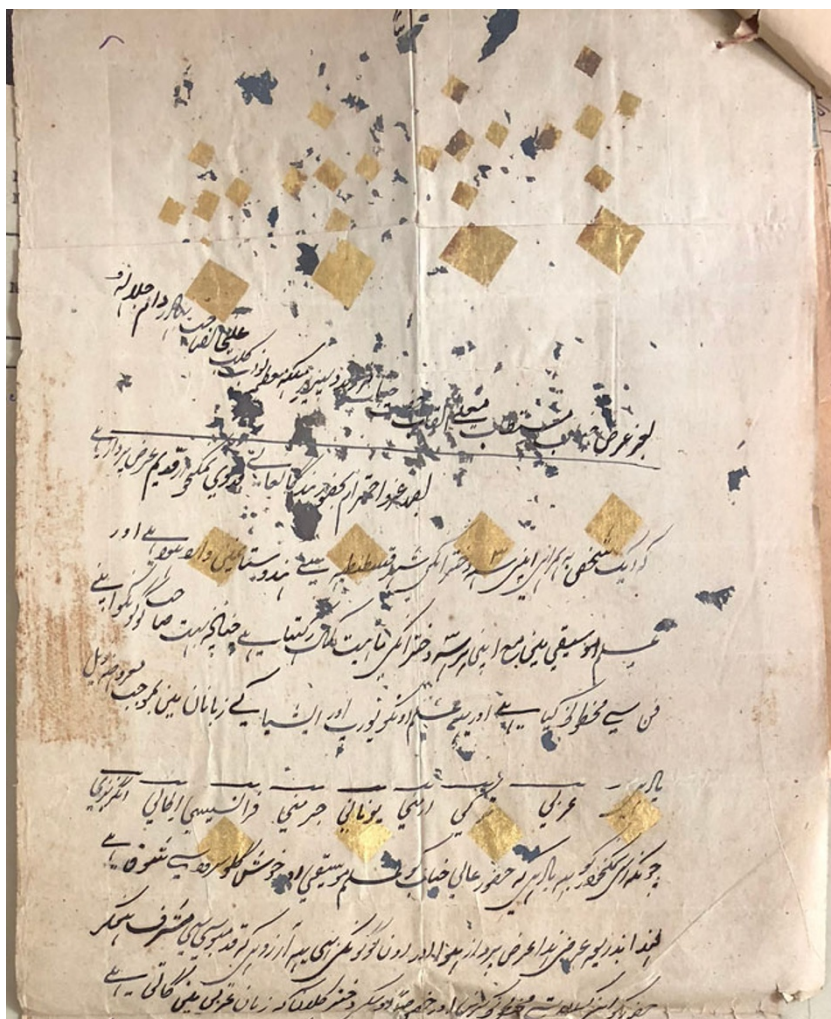


Figure 4. A petition by Alexander Malcom Jacob to the Nawab of Rampur, 16 November 1874. Source: UPSRAA, 1874, Bundle No. 99, File No. 455.

With utmost respect, a request ('arz) to His Exalted Highness [...] Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan sahib Bahadur, the beloved son of the Great Queen (*malika-ye mu'azzama*) [i.e. Queen Victoria], may his glory endure forever. With utmost reverence and respect, this humble and long-standing servant [henceforth 'I'], nourished by Your beneficence, submits the following petition: A man has recently arrived in Hindustan from the city of Constantinople, accompanied by his three daughters. Both he and each of his three daughters possess great mastery and accomplishment in the art of music (*'ilm-e mausiqī*). They have, in fact, delighted many noble gentlemen with their skill (*fann*) and are learned in this art (*'ilm*) in the following languages of Europe and Asia: Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, Greek, German, French, Italian, and English. Since I remember that Your Highness has a deep affection (*shauq*) for music and melodious singing, I humbly bring up this matter through this letter. They, too, have a keen desire to attain the honour of kissing the threshold [i.e. to be granted an audience] and to

delight Your Exalted Self by presenting their accomplishments. Especially the eldest daughter (*dukhtar-e kalān*) sings in Arabic with such a sweet voice and perfection that if another like her were found in Egypt, it would indeed be a wonder; otherwise, she is without equal. It is therefore hoped that Your Majesty will graciously issue an order for their attendance [at court]. [...] Should it not be Your wish to summon them, I still hope to be honoured with an instruction so that they do not wait in vain but may instead go on to another city in search of livelihood. With the utmost courtesy and respect. May God keep the son of the state and its glory forever shining. Submitted by Your humble servant, M. Jacob 'Rumi', 16 November 1874, from Delhi, signed in English.<sup>63</sup>

Jacob's petition shows us that musicians from the Ottoman empire, and especially good Arabic singers, were rare to come by in British India. With their unique background and impressive multilingual repertoire—one might even say 'exotic' in the sense that it did not include Indian vernaculars—the sisters can certainly be regarded as a 'curiosity' worth Jacob's time. He clearly believed that they would appeal to the nawab, knowing that he was not only literate in Arabic but also emphasised his connection to the language of the Qur'an as a marker of his piety and Muslim identity.<sup>64</sup>

But, perhaps in view of prominent 'Eurasian' singers born and raised on the subcontinent such as Malka Jan and her famous daughter Gauhar Jan (d. 1930), this proposal was apparently not attractive enough. After all, Gauhar Jan (who eventually became one of India's first gramophone celebrities), was also known to be able to sing in a variety of languages, including Bengali, Urdu, Gujarati, Tamil, Marathi, Persian, and English. In the end, the nawab politely declined Jacob's offer.<sup>65</sup>

### Increased mobility, new artistic trends, and emerging public spheres

Successful *tawa'ifs* could be relatively wealthy and vulnerable at the same time, part of which had to do with the mobile nature of their trade. 'As itinerant professionals carrying plentiful jewels and cash', Schofield writes, 'they were clearly at risk of attack even when they travelled together in large troupes.'<sup>66</sup> Indeed, we find several reports of *tawa'ifs* being ambushed, robbed, kidnapped, or murdered while on the road during the colonial period.<sup>67</sup> Even marriage processions (*bārāt*) were occasionally looted.<sup>68</sup> And in other instances, royal patrons made sure to send out instructions to the gatekeepers of their forts and palaces to let the performers in without any hassle upon arrival.<sup>69</sup>

In any case, the evidence cited above alludes to the fact that female performers active in the second half of the nineteenth century often had to undertake long, arduous, and time-consuming journeys to reach their patrons. A typical means of transportation for female performers and their accompanists since the Mughal era was the ox-drawn cart (*bahal*),

<sup>63</sup> UPSRAA, Rampur State Records, Dar al-Insha Fort, Correspondence with Ruling Princes and Others, Nawab Kalb-e 'Ali Khan, 1874, Bundle No. 99, File No. 455. Since Jacob signed the letter in Roman script, a professional letter writer likely composed the Urdu part on his behalf, even though his penname 'Rumi' (referring to the famous thirteenth-century Iranian poet) would suggest otherwise. Jacob adds in English: 'And if your Highness wish to do me the honour: by a reply to my petition. Kindly to be addressed as fo[llows:] M. Jacob, c/o J. Danenberg [sic], Delhi.'

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, the letter counts Arabic, Turkish, and Armenian among European and Asian languages.

<sup>65</sup> On 'Eurasian' performers in India, see S. Sachdeva Jha, 'Eurasian women as *tawa'if* singers and recording artists: entertainment and identity-making in colonial India', *African and Asian Studies* 8.3 (2009), pp. 268–287.

<sup>66</sup> Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, p. 153.

<sup>67</sup> Pernau and Jaffrey, *Information and the Public Sphere*, pp. 69, 75–76, 165, 172, 202, 215.

<sup>68</sup> NAI Bhopal, Pol. Dept., File No. 131 B/7 (1904).

<sup>69</sup> Pernau and Jaffrey, *Information and the Public Sphere*, p. 89.



**Figure 5.** 'Nautch girls' travelling by bullock cart, circa 1922. Source: George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ggbain-00377.

even as the railway network expanded (see Figure 5). Though around 200 miles south-east of Rampur and no longer a city with a functioning court, post-1857 Lucknow nevertheless not only seems to have retained some of its reputation as a centre of cultural refinement but also remained an important recruitment ground for *tawa'ifs* catering to the needs of wealthy landed elites in the region.<sup>70</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, transformations in the musical, technological, and infrastructural landscape across the subcontinent had an increasing impact on the labour market for travelling female performers. This was an era marked by the growth of Indian nationalism and anti-colonial mass movements, which were amplified by the introduction of new sound recording and transmission media, as well as the proliferation of brass and military bands and the employment of European bandmasters in Indian princely states. Moreover, the increasing mobility of Rampur's elites during this time, coupled with a massive influx of new kinds of commodities and ideas from industrialised countries, had considerable effects on the patronage and practice of music.

While itinerant *tawa'ifs* continued to find patronage in Rampur during the reign of the princely state's second-last ruler, Nawab Hamid 'Ali Khan (r. 1889–1930), these changes and modernisation efforts also impacted their social standing and relevance in the princely state. Like his predecessors, Hamid 'Ali Khan remained loyal to the British Crown while offering generous support for Muslim cultural institutions and educational modernisation

<sup>70</sup> For more information on how the *tawa'ifs* of Lucknow were affected by new colonial rules against the spread of venereal diseases and gradually debased into common sex work, see Oldenburg, *Making of Colonial Lucknow*, pp. 134–142. On the challenges of travel by train and connected debates around gender and class distinctions, see Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 124–125; R. Kapuria, J. Howes, and S. Sachdeva Jha, 'Introduction: the travelling female performer: mobility and agency in and beyond South Asia, c. 1760–1940', in this special issue.





Figure 6. Nawab Railway Station, Rampur, circa 1911. Source: The British Library Collection, photo 36/(47).

projects across the country, such as the campaign for a Muslim university at Aligarh.<sup>71</sup> Being the first ruler of his state to visit Europe and North America, he revamped fairs like the *Jashn-e benazīr* with the aim to promote the princely state as a site in which Rampur's Indo-Islamic heritage would merge with and contribute to industrial modernity. This involved an emphasis on important innovations and new trends in the performing arts, including guest appearances by the increasingly popular Parsi theatre groups.<sup>72</sup>

In February 1894, shortly before Rampur was connected to the railway line (see Figure 6), the young nawab celebrated his marriage (*jashn-e 'arūsī*) to Sultanat Ara Begum (d. 1925), daughter of the Nawab of Jaora. What role both court musicians and travelling female performers played in such festivities can be gleaned from the published descriptions of the event by the Rampur state employee Muhammad Firoz Shah Khan 'Firoz'. Narrating how musicians and dancers crowded in front of the groom (comparable to the illustration in Figure 7), Firoz highlights the flash-of-lightning-like dance of the Lucknow *tawa'if* Bi Jiddan, the tinkling of 'dancing girl' Bi Haidar *chune wali*'s ankle-bells ('*chūne wālī*' denoting her characteristic white make-up), and the ever-present sounds of *tabla* strokes. Illustrating how the singing and dancing reached a colourful and ecstatic climax, he also lists the musical genres performed on the occasion (including *ṭappa*, *ṭhumrī*, *tirvaṭ*, *tarāna*, *dhrupad*, and *khayāl*), suggesting an eclectic mix of Hindustani music and dance.<sup>73</sup>

Firoz's account indicates that the nawab's week-long wedding celebrations much resembled the entertainments at the yearly *Jashn-e benazīr*, with dance performances (*maḥfil-e raqṣ*) in the evenings and military demonstrations, games, or wrestling competitions during

<sup>71</sup> Note that the princely state of Rampur was merged with the Dominion of India in 1949 and incorporated into the United Provinces in 1950. See R. Khan, *Minority Pasts*.

<sup>72</sup> See Sievers, 'Auditory Culture in Transition', pp. 125–287; Lanzillo, 'Princely prisons', pp. 14–17.

<sup>73</sup> See M. F. S. Khan, *Ṭilsim-e benazīr* [Incomparable enchantment] (Rampur, 1894), p. 9.



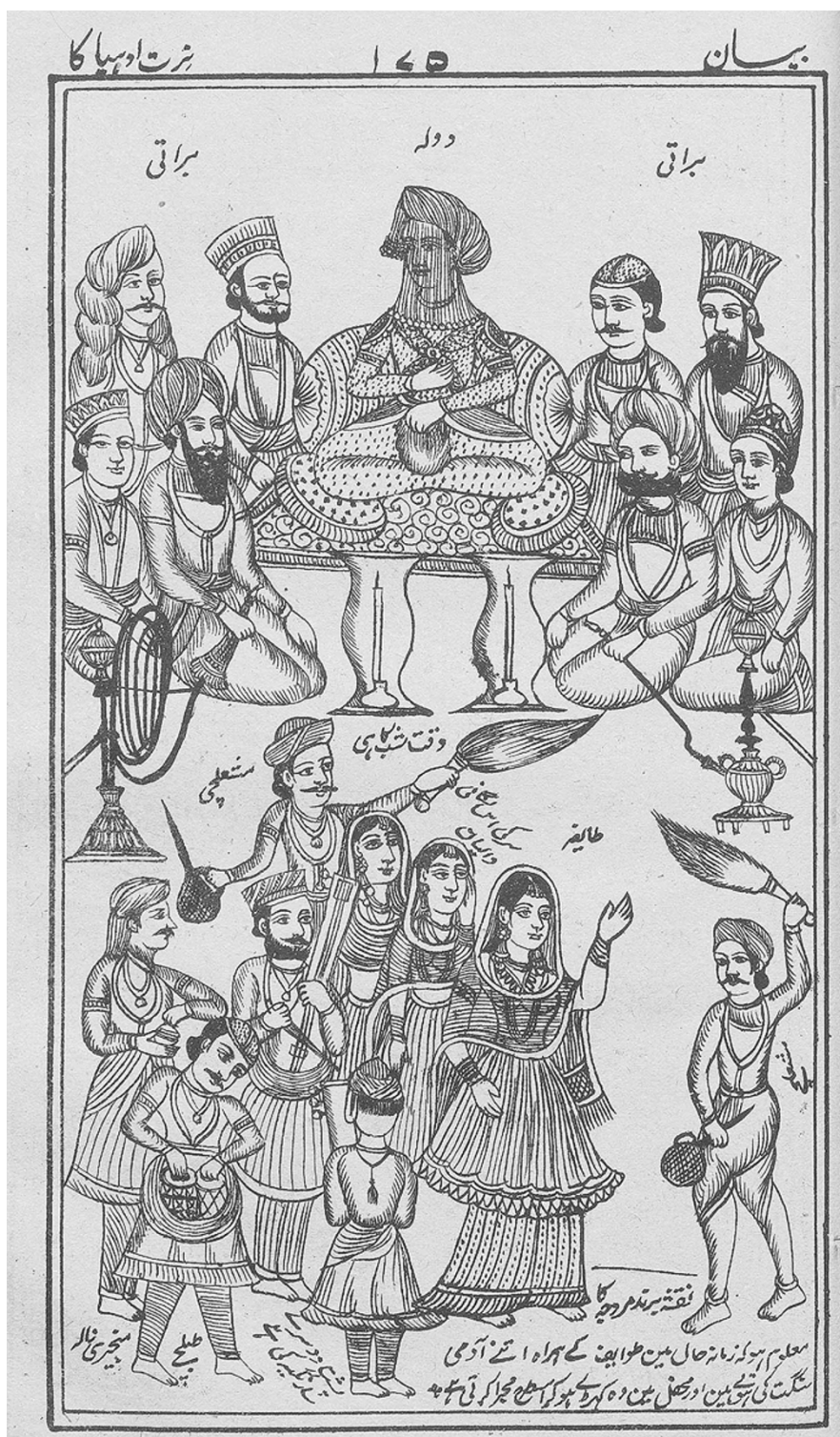


Figure 7. A bridegroom (seated) and wedding guests watching the performance of a tawa'if ensemble.

Source: S. 'A. Khān, *Sarmāya-ye 'ishrat ma'rūf Qānūn-e mausiḳī* [A treasury of pleasure, known as the Law of Music] (Delhi, 1875), p. 175.

the day. In addition to the salaried musicians of Rampur's music department (*arbāb-e nishāt*), many mobile *tawa'ifs* were hired from places as remote as Calcutta, Bombay, Lucknow, Benares, Agra, Jaipur, Nainital, Kanpur, Bareilly, Moradabad, and Kashipur, to make sure that there would at least be four to five unique performers every night. And in between, the new state-owned military brass band played marches and anthems.<sup>74</sup>

But the distinctly modern and mobile character of the event is perhaps most evident in the fact that the marriage party took a train from Moradabad to Agra for the *bārāt* (i.e. the groom's wedding procession to the bride's house), where they were welcomed with a dance performance by members of the *arbāb-e nishāt* in a tent set up for breakfast next to the railway platform. Travelling on via Ajmer, the *bārāt* arrived in Jaora, where *domnis* (female musicians generally performing in seclusion for women) sang ferociously in the palaces, while groups of lower-status courtesans (*randīyoñ ke ṭā'ife*) danced outside in the streets, contributing to a festive atmosphere in the entire city. Cheerful singing, dancing, and 'permissible magic' (*sihl-e ḥalāl*), we are told, set the tone of the festivities. Ensuing the *nikāh* ceremony presided over by a *qāzī* (judge of a *shari'a* court), court musicians intoned a congratulatory song, followed by a military band and another raga-based music session in the evening. Once the joyous *bārāt* set off for the return journey, fanfares blared at every halt. Three days later, upon arrival in Moradabad, a colourful group of elephants, horses, and camels brought the party home from the station to the streets of Rampur, where crowds eagerly awaited the procession.<sup>75</sup>

Both the actual celebrations of Hamid 'Ali Khan's marriage and the publication of this officially sanctioned description of its sights and sounds along the journey certainly had the intention to promote a positive image of the nawab as a generous ruler and Rampur as a 'modern' and magnificent 'house of pleasure' (*dār-us surūr*).<sup>76</sup> It is significant to remember the reconceptualisation and modernisation of public fairs and exhibitions in this context.<sup>77</sup> In the case of Rampur's revamped *Jashn-e benaṣīr*, the main objective was to put the state's industries and crafts (especially handicrafts, trade, and agriculture) on a path of 'progress' (*taraqqī*). In 1894, the old festival was therefore suspended, and the foundations of a new kind of fair (*numā'ish*) were laid, intended to feature elements believed to have the potential to benefit the entire country (*mulk*) and nation (*qaum*). Entertainments (*tafrīḥ-e ṭab'*) and sports spectacles (*khel tamāshoñ*), while no longer of central importance, nevertheless retained their function to attract and amuse visitors.<sup>78</sup>

Prominent among the new cultural trends introduced at the fair were daily performances by the New Alfred Theatre Company (est. 1891 in Bombay). The increasing presence of travelling Parsi theatrical companies across northern India (including the princely states) had a lasting impact on the labour market for mobile performing women.<sup>79</sup> Except for its managers, most actors and musicians of the company hailed from Gujarat and the United Provinces, and its popularity across northern India was 'aided by the fact that Urdu

<sup>74</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 10–22.

<sup>75</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 23–33.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 6. However, shortly thereafter the Nawab's image was significantly damaged by several rumours circulating in the vernacular press about scandals involving allegations of sexual misconduct with young, unmarried women and boys. These accusations often revolved around mobile performers, both male and female, who were reduced to prostitutes and sex objects. See R. Khan, *Minority Pasts*, pp. 72–82.

<sup>77</sup> See M. F. S. Khan, *Taqrib-e benaṣīr* [Incomparable festive occasion] (Agra, 1894); M. F. S. Khan, *Numā'ish-e benaṣīr* [Incomparable exhibition] (Agra, 1895).

<sup>78</sup> M. F. S. Khan, *Numā'ish-e benaṣīr*, pp. 5–12, 23; *Taqrib-e benaṣīr*, pp. 3–15; *Ṭilsim-e benaṣīr*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>79</sup> The New Alfred Company, which flourished under its Parsi director Sohrabji Ogra until the 1920s, visited Bareilly and Rampur almost every other year. See Hansen, *Stages of Life*, pp. 102–169.

had become the prevailing language of the Parsi stage'.<sup>80</sup> During the Rampur fair, the company's performances—their stories, colourful costumes, songs, and dances—seem to have been a particular highlight among visitors.<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly, the rise of Parsi theatrical companies went hand in hand with an increase in the levels of public stigma attached to travelling female performers. An article in the short-lived Urdu *Music Gazette of India* (1910–1911), edited by the harmonium teacher Sutikshan Ray Qamar Dehlvi, straight-out characterised *tawa'ifs* employed as actresses in travelling theatre groups as immoral and untrustworthy seductresses, explicitly cautioning young men about the perils of becoming infatuated with them and the subtle ways in which they could manipulate the senses:

These days, theatrical companies employ the finest *tawa'ifs* for a rudimentary salary and teach them how to act. They then progress very quickly and become known as the soul (*jān*) of the company. And each year, they are at the forefront of ruining not just thousands of romantic lovers but also lots of simple students. The voice of a woman is pleasant and more impactful than that of a man. Its apparent innocence and delicacy have a tremendous effect. It is, of course, a simple matter for the theatre people to transform the appearance of a dark or an ugly face [...]. Glittering clothes and artificial jewellery considerably enhance their [destructive] beauty (*husn*) to the effect that moving about on the stage with licentious coquettishness becomes calamitous. In such a situation, it is understandable if someone becomes agitated and cannot restrain himself. I have seen lots of right-minded men become instantly besotted and ruined by the ladies of the theatre. It is difficult to find any actresses with virtuous qualities, and if not, all of them are immoral (*bad-akhilāq*), greedy (*tāmi'a*), ugly (*bad-ṣūrat*), and afflicted with some disease or the other. It should always be remembered that the inward and hidden nature (*bāṭin aur poshīda dhang*) of an actress is as detestable as her outward style (*ẓāhirā aḍhang*) is stunningly beautiful (*ghazab*). Parsi company people are mostly very cautious and don't let actresses become spoiled, but that is not necessarily so. And no actress can be considered trustworthy unless we make sure of it [as follows]: (1) A beautiful face is a deception of the highest order. Look at any actress's face in the morning and by daylight! (2) Even if they appear to be sixteen years old while acting in the theatre, their age is often deceptive [i.e. they can be much older]! (3) Has she been in theatre since childhood, or has she taken up this work during her youth? If she has been in the theatre since childhood, then she is really an actress, and it is useless to show any kind of love for her because the owner of the company would never allow it. However, if she entered the company during her adolescence, then she will most likely be an ordinary *tawa'if*. These are commonly a sheer waste of time and expressing love to them is like putting oneself in a burning fire. After considering these issues, I have realised that you should never be careless enough to fall in love with an actress. Do not look only at their bright side. Rather, let not their dark side remain hidden from view, which seems to us to burn more fiercely than the fire of Hell.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>81</sup> See M. F. S. Khan, *Taqrib-e benazir*, pp. 15–16. While several *tawa'ifs* continued to be employed by the Rampur court under Hamid 'Ali Khan, their significance as prestigious signifiers of cultural capital and connoisseurship appears to have diminished in comparison with that of emerging celebrity gramophone recording artists and the continued patronage of male hereditary musicians. See R. Khan, *Minority Pasts*, pp. 93–98.

<sup>82</sup> 'Thiatrikal kampaniyan: Aikṭrīs kā 'āshiq' [Theatrical companies: the actress's lover], *Music Gazette of India*, October 1910, p. 7.



Emphasising sonic and visual aspects, especially those that can be deliberately concealed or artificially enhanced, the author warns the male readers (and main clients) of travelling Parsi theatre companies to stay away and shield their hearts from the deceitful allure of actresses. Such derogatory and discriminatory portrayals of actresses and *tawa'ifs* who switched into this line of work out of economic necessity was relatively widespread in British India, especially since the 'anti-naught' campaign had gained momentum in the 1890s.<sup>83</sup>

Operating in a male-dominated world and at a time when the words *ṭawā'if* and 'actress' came to be associated with immorality and prostitution, Parsi theatrical company owners were apprehensive about employing female performers as actors. At the same time, their status as 'public women' suggested that the profession of the performing artist was not suitable for respectable women.<sup>84</sup> As Hansen has argued, 'a new social conservatism emerged in companies such as the New Alfred, marked by stern adherence to traditional gender norms'.<sup>85</sup> Reflective of the increasing stigmatisation of *tawa'ifs*, the New Alfred at some point even prohibited actresses from appearing on stage. Nevertheless, the allure of female performers remained an integral component of theatrical performances, which the company navigated creatively by relying on artistic female impersonations and cross-dressing. At least some *tawa'ifs* who made it onto theatre stages (and later into the film business)<sup>86</sup> as actresses succeeded in becoming new celebrities of a growing commercial entertainment industry.<sup>87</sup>

While several articles in the *Music Gazette* painted *tawa'ifs* in a negative light, the paper paradoxically also featured favourable pieces that defended the rights of *tawa'ifs*, so much so that several readers began calling it a 'prostitute's newspaper'.<sup>88</sup> In light of the number of journalists already subscribing to the view that *tawa'ifs* and the performance culture they embodied required reform, this is important to note.<sup>89</sup> For example, while several newspapers complained on moral grounds about the performances of *tawa'ifs* and gramophone celebrities at the 1911 Allahabad Exhibition, the *Music Gazette of India* enthusiastically announced that the famous 'dancer' (*raqqāṣa*) Gauhar Jan was coming to the exhibition from Calcutta.<sup>90</sup> Addressing his critics, editor Qamar Dehlvi felt that any music lover ought to be excited about this unique opportunity to see and hear her sing and dance, stating:

<sup>83</sup> See K. Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (Berkeley, 1991); K. Hansen, 'Making women visible: gender and race cross-dressing in the Parsi theatre', *Theatre Journal* 51.2 (1999), pp. 127–147; Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*, p. 52.

<sup>84</sup> Such developments were not unique to British India, though, and we can see similar patterns emerging elsewhere. See, e.g., R. Cormack, *Midnight in Cairo: The Divas of Egypt's Roaring '20s* (New York, 2021), pp. 28–29.

<sup>85</sup> Hansen, *Stages of Life*, p. 17.

<sup>86</sup> Stigmatised as sex workers, *tawa'ifs* only gradually entered the film trade, as producers of early silent films preferred to feature male actors in female roles. While Muslim courtesan-actresses eventually did become an important pillar of the film business, many were again pushed to the margins by upper-class and/or Hindu women entering the scene in the late 1930s, with the industry aspiring to project an image of greater respectability. See D. Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York, 2020), pp. 30, 177.

<sup>87</sup> See Sachdeva [Jha], 'In Search of the Tawa'if in History', pp. 285–292. Also note that 'although companies remained under Parsi management well into the twentieth century, actors and actresses were increasingly drawn from the ranks of Muslims, Hindus, Anglo-Indians, and Baghdadi Jews'. K. Hansen, 'Languages on stage: linguistic pluralism and community formation in the nineteenth-century Parsi theatre', *Modern Asian Studies* 37.2 (2003), p. 382.

<sup>88</sup> 'Raṇḍiyyoñ kā akhbār' [The prostitute's newspaper], *Music Gazette of India*, March 1911, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> See also Sievers, 'Auditory Culture in Transition', p. 336.

<sup>90</sup> One critic remarked that 'if amusement and money-making were the only aims of the Exhibition, the [organising] Committee should have allowed twenty prostitutes instead of one to give their performances at the Exhibition'. See 'The United Provinces Exhibition', *Fitna*, 8 January 1911, Vernacular Newspaper Reports, North-Western Provinces & Oudh (VNR), p. 31. Also see 'The United Provinces Exhibition', *Saddharm Prachārak*, 28 December 1910, VNR (1911), p. 15; 'Haftah-dār jalsah-e mausiḳī numā'ish meñ' [A week-long musical gathering



Their objection [to Gauhar's Jan's performance] is valid from one point of view, but we ask our esteemed social reformer why he is so angry with Miss Gauhar Jan and why he left out the real purpose of the exhibition (*numā'ish*)? Gauhar Jan is one of India's universally accepted and most famous dancers. Other experts have been invited to the exhibition to demonstrate their accomplishments. Why, then, should Gauhar Jan, who is a *tawa'if* unmatched in her craft, not be invited to the exhibition and appreciated as well? The exhibition is neither a church nor a temple of the [Hindu reformist] Arya Samaj or a Muslim mosque but a theatre in which every religion (*māzhab*) and every community (*qaum*) should be able to display anything that is original. For the first time, at the exhibition in Lahore, a few like-minded individuals prevented assemblies of *tawa'ifs* for dancing and delight, leaving the event noticeably duller. [...] Didn't Shivaji and Parvati-shri or Krishna and Radha use to dance? Then why do you now think that dancing is bad? [...] As for a *tawa'if*, dancing is her profession. We, too, say, don't go to a *tawa'if* [and become her lover]! But watching a *tawa'if*'s dance and listening to the best *raginis* can never be wrong!<sup>91</sup>

Qamar Dehlvi not only defends Gauhar Jan as a highly skilled *tawa'if* and nationally recognised celebrity performer, he also makes a more general case for allowing dancing women to perform on stage at colonial industrial fairs on the national level. Citing both Hindu gods and goddesses renowned as dancers, as well as social reformers who themselves could not resist the pleasurable effects of sound and rhythm on their senses, he upholds the practice of dancing as entirely natural and the exhibition as an inclusive public space.<sup>92</sup> Seeing in her one of the country's best and most respectable musician-dancers, the secular-minded editor similarly expressed the hope that Gauhar Jan be invited to the Delhi Durbar of 1911, which scholars have rightly called a 'sonic spectacle of Empire'.<sup>93</sup>

Some *tawa'ifs* were certainly able to redefine themselves as early recording artists and even film actresses, yet most 'hereditary female performers of dance were legislated and shamed out of existence', while 'hereditary male performers, the Kathaks, were taking their place on the stage'.<sup>94</sup> In sum, careful examination of turn-of-the-century Urdu print sources shows us that at least a few voices stood in solidarity with the increasingly marginalised female Muslim performers of North India, even if constrained by the observance of certain proprieties and the need for male patrons to keep their senses, hearts, and bodies in check.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

From the Uprising of 1857 to the years leading up to the First World War, performers at festivals and fairs in the region under consideration in this article cut across diverse socio-occupational categories, from hereditary *kalāwants* and *qawwāls* to elegy (*marṣīya*) singers, storytellers (*dāstān-gos*), jesters, and both transgender and female entertainers ranging

at the exhibition], *Music Gazette of India*, December 1910, p. 2; 'Gauhar Jān-e Kalkatta aur numā'ish-e Allahabād' [Gauhar Jan of Calcutta and the Allahabad Exhibition], *Music Gazette of India*, December 1910, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> 'Gauhar Jān-e Kalkatta aur numā'ish-e Allahabād', p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> For more on the stigma associated with female dancing in the early twentieth century and how it was not equally applied to singing, see Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*, pp. 94–98.

<sup>93</sup> See T. Barringer, 'Sonic spectacles of empire: the audio-visual nexus, Delhi–London, 1911–12', in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, (eds.) E. Edwards, C. Gosden, and R. B. Phillips (Oxford, 2006), pp. 169–196.

<sup>94</sup> Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*, p. 96.

<sup>95</sup> See 'Dehli darbār meñ raqṣ aur Hindī rāg' [Dance and Indian ragas at the Delhi Durbar], *Music Gazette of India*, March 1911, p. 4.

from the elite singer to the dancing sex worker and bonded labourer. While evidence suggests that the performing arts continued to flourish within the 'paracolonial' space of the princely state, this vitality coexisted with broader processes of marginalisation and transformation under colonial influence—especially as voices calling for the need to 'reform' and 'classicise' Hindustani music and dance grew louder across the subcontinent. Increasingly stigmatised as an 'immoral' public woman or 'prostitute', it was particularly the figure of the Muslim *tawa'if* that fell victim to the pressures of nationalist reform movements dominated by Hindu upper-caste men. In consequence, and especially once princely patronage completely ceased to exist after 1947, their struggles and the occupational diversity, artistic expertise, and cultural capital they embodied were eventually forgotten or pushed into the realm of fictionalised nostalgia.<sup>96</sup>

The primary materials discussed in this article, especially the handwritten exchanges between performers, middlemen, and elite patrons, enable us to recover some of the frequently occluded nuances of this bygone era. They illuminate that only a few high-ranking *tawa'ifs* were able to negotiate their terms of employment directly with aristocratic employers, whereas the majority were selected and recruited via intermediaries—sometimes senior courtesans—operating within the regional labour market for itinerant female performers. While these findings suggest that post-1857 Lucknow remained an important, if somewhat depleted, centre for the acquisition of mobile courtesans, they also indicate how a growing influx of bodies, ideas, and consumer goods from abroad impacted performance practices, gender norms, and moral codes of conduct—both within and beyond the borders of the princely state.<sup>97</sup>

Much remains to be done, particularly through comparative, regionally grounded studies across princely states, to fully recover the complex historical, social, and artistic dimensions of *tawa'ifs'* lives and labour. As I have illustrated, even popular recording artists of the early twentieth century like Gauhar Jan remained dependent on male intermediaries and negotiators, and they could not perform live on stage without facing critical backlash in the press. In view of the widespread stigmatisation of female artists in public discourse as 'fallen women' or 'prostitute-courtesans' representing ideas of 'deviant female sexuality',<sup>98</sup> only few media outlets chose to speak on behalf of *tawa'ifs* and in defence of their rights.

I would argue that the period under consideration in this article might best be understood as a time of transition, shaped by a range of distinctly modern forces: the criminalisation of sex workers; the expansion of the railway network; the growing popularity of agricultural and industrial exhibitions; emerging nostalgia for pre-colonial cultural expressions; the rise of vernacular print publics; social reform and nationalist movements promoting middle-class values; the proliferation of Parsi theatre companies; and new technologies such as the gramophone, radio, and film. Together, these developments significantly altered the working conditions, recognition, and social acceptance of travelling female performers.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> See Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*; Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance*; Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*. For the parallel stigmatisation of hereditary Muslim male musicians (*ustāds*), see M. Katz, *Lineage of Loss: Counternarratives of North Indian Music* (Middletown, CT, 2017). On distinctions between the modern 'classicisation' movement and earlier attempts to canonise Hindustani music and dance, see K. B. Schofield, 'Reviving the golden age again: "classicization," Hindustani music, and the Mughals', *Ethnomusicology* 54.3 (2010), pp. 484–517.

<sup>97</sup> See Sievers, 'Auditory Culture in Transition'.

<sup>98</sup> On being labelled 'deviant', see D. Mitra, *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (Princeton, NJ, 2019); Brown [Schofield], 'Social liminality of musicians', pp. 13–20, 35–43; H. S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, 1963), pp. 79–120.

<sup>99</sup> 'Whereas the *tawa'if* culture with its refined ethos and context did indeed fade and eventually die out through the first half of the twentieth century', Margaret Walker rightly states in this context, 'the women themselves did not'. Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*, p. 95. Also see Oldenburg, *Making of Colonial Lucknow*.

Princely state elites continued to see value in highly skilled *tawa'ifs* and the multisensory experiences they embodied well into the late nineteenth century, for as long as these performers reinforced their identity as aristocratic patrons and connoisseurs of the arts. Across the subcontinent, however, *tawa'ifs* increasingly faced discrimination and stigma, while also having to compete with new artistic and aesthetic trends. Although mobility had long been a part of performing women's lives, travel became an economic necessity amid growing marginalisation and the conflation of courtesans with prostitution. The readiness to adapt to these socio-cultural shifts, ideally coupled with the capacity to modify one's occupational identity and status, thus emerged as a key criterion for survival in the national entertainment culture that gradually developed across northern India during the early twentieth century.

**Acknowledgements.** I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Jennifer Howes, Radha Kapuria, and Shweta Sachdeva Jha for inviting me to present this research at the panel *The Travelling Female Performer: Mobility and Agency in and Beyond South Asia, c. 1760–1940* at the European Conference on South Asian Studies (ECSAS) in Turin in July 2023, and for including my article in the resulting special issue.

**Conflicts of interest.** None.

**OA Funding statement.** Open access funding provided by Utrecht University.

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**Cite this article:** G. Sievers, 'Tawa'ifs on the road: travelling female performers, middlemen, and patrons of the arts in colonial North India, circa 1857–1911', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2026) 36, pp. 323–348. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186325101302>