

The Tawaifs of Lucknow: Reclaiming Cultural Agency, Power, and Forgotten Histories

Khushi Arya¹, Dr. Andrey Shastri²

¹(Scholar, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Lucknow, India

²(Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Lucknow, India

Abstract:

The Tawaifs of Lucknow, a community of educated, cultured courtesans, played a central and contested role in the social, political, and artistic life of pre-colonial and colonial North India. This report examines the cultural authority the Tawaifs held in the Nawabi courts of Awadh, and their subsequent marginalisation and criminalisation under British colonial rule. Drawing on historical scholarship, postcolonial feminist theory, and cultural memory studies, it shows how moral regimes enforced by the colonial state — including legislative measures such as the Contagious Diseases Act — systematically undermined the Tawaifs' economic and social prestige, an erosion that persisted well after the colonial era. The report then examines the ongoing recovery of Tawaif history through literature, documentary filmmaking, archival research, and public memory initiatives, situating this recovery within broader feminist and postcolonial concerns. Finally, it considers the imagery and material culture of the tawaif tradition as an expression of a rich heritage that remains relevant to contemporary debates on gender, art and belonging in South Asia. The analysis concludes that reclaiming Tawaif history is not merely an academic exercise but a politically necessary act of historical justice.

Keywords: Tawaif; Lucknow; Awadh; colonial India; courtesan; postcolonial feminism; cultural memory; moral regulation; reclamation.

Date of Submission: 07-08-2026

Date of Acceptance: 20-08-2026

I. Introduction

Lucknow, the historic capital of Awadh, occupies a distinctive place in the cultural and social history of North India^{6,7,16}. Renowned for its refined etiquette, composite culture, architecture, music, poetry, dance, cuisine and literary traditions, the city developed a cultural identity shaped by the interaction of diverse communities. Under the Nawabs of Awadh, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Lucknow emerged as an important centre of artistic and intellectual life⁸. The Nawabi court patronised musicians, poets, dancers, painters, craftsmen and scholars, creating an environment in which artistic expression became integral to urban culture. The tradition of *tehzeeb-o-tamaddun* — associated with civility, refinement and sophisticated social interaction — became one of Lucknow's defining characteristics.

Within this rich cultural landscape, the tawaif occupied a complex and often misunderstood position. The term historically referred to highly trained women accomplished in music, dance, poetry, etiquette and conversation. They were not performers in the contemporary sense alone; many possessed extensive knowledge of classical music, *thumri*, *dadra*, *ghazal*, *Kathak* and Urdu poetry. Their *kothas* functioned as important spaces of cultural transmission, where artistic skills, language, manners and literary traditions were cultivated. In nineteenth-century Lucknow, these women were significant participants in the cultural life of the city and enjoyed forms of social recognition and economic independence that challenge conventional assumptions about women's position in pre-colonial and early colonial society.

The history of the tawaifs has nevertheless frequently been narrated through the narrow framework of morality, sexuality and prostitution. Such representations have obscured their cultural contributions and reduced complex women performers to stereotypes. The colonial encounter played an important role in this transformation: British administrators and colonial commentators increasingly interpreted Indian performance traditions through Victorian notions of morality and respectability, and practices previously associated with courtly culture and artistic refinement were gradually recast as immoral or socially undesirable. The changing political structure after the annexation of Awadh in 1856 further weakened the patronage networks upon which many tawaifs depended, and the decline of the Nawabi court transformed the social and economic environment surrounding these performers.

Lucknow's tawaifs nevertheless continued to exercise cultural influence. Their kothas remained spaces where music, dance and poetry survived and evolved despite changing political circumstances, and they played an important role in the development, popularisation and transmission of Kathak and other art forms. Their relationships with poets, musicians and patrons demonstrate that the cultural world of nineteenth-century Lucknow was not exclusively controlled by elite men. Tawaifs negotiated their position within a patriarchal society through artistic expertise, patronage networks, economic activity and social relationships, exercising a form of cultural agency that deserves greater attention in historical scholarship.

The history of these women also offers an opportunity to rethink conventional narratives of women's history. While mainstream accounts often portray women primarily as wives, mothers or victims of patriarchal structures, the history of tawaifs reveals women occupying more complicated social and economic positions: some acquired property, managed their own establishments, trained younger performers and maintained networks of patrons and disciples. Their lives therefore demonstrate that women's experiences in nineteenth-century North India cannot be understood through a single framework of oppression or domesticity.

At the same time, it would be historically inappropriate to romanticise the institution of the kotha or present all tawaifs as independent and empowered women. Their lives were shaped by class, gender, patronage, social stigma and changing political conditions, and the distinction between artistic performance, courtesan-ship and prostitution was itself fluid and changed considerably over time. A nuanced history must therefore recognise both their agency and the structural constraints within which they operated.

The decline of courtly patronage, colonial legislation, changing notions of respectability, and the emergence of nationalist ideas about the "ideal Indian woman" together contributed to the marginalisation of the tawaif tradition. In the early twentieth century, anti-naught campaigns and reformist movements increasingly associated female performers with social degradation¹², and women who had once been important cultural figures were gradually excluded from respectable representations of Indian history; their contributions to music, dance, language and urban culture were often appropriated even as their identities were erased.

Revisiting the history of the tawaifs of Lucknow is therefore an attempt to reclaim a forgotten and contested history. It enables an examination of the relationship between gender, culture, power and memory in a city celebrated for its composite cultural heritage. By placing tawaifs at the centre of historical inquiry, this study seeks to move beyond stereotypical representations and explore them as cultural practitioners, economic actors and agents who actively shaped Lucknow's cultural landscape. Their history not only enriches our understanding of Awadh but also challenges the ways in which gender, respectability and cultural memory have shaped the writing of Indian history.

Lucknow developed one of the most complex court cultures in the history of South Asia in the late Mughal era and the golden age of the Nawabs of Awadh, and the Tawaifs stood at the heart of this culture — women who were educated, skilled, socially influential, and expert in poetry, classical music, dance, language and the art of refined conversation. The term tawaif derives from the Arabic for 'circumambulating' or 'moving about', and referred to courtesans whose professional and social presence extended beyond the kotha itself. Their art was not merely an accompaniment to Lucknow's Nawabi culture; it was part of the culture itself.

Yet the tawaif occupies a paradoxical position in popular and historical consciousness. In much twentieth-century nationalist and moralistic discourse she was transformed into a figure of sexual promiscuity and cultural decline, her artistry erased and her multifaceted character reduced to the caricature of the prostitute. This is no coincidence: it is the outcome of colonial law, nationalist moral campaigns, and postcolonial regulatory measures that together worked to disenfranchise the Tawaif from her legal identity, property, art and history. Reclaiming this history is therefore not simply a corrective exercise but an act of cultural and political restitution.

II. Methodology and Objectives

Methodologically, this report draws on the existing scholarship in South Asian studies, postcolonial feminist theory, oral history and cultural memory studies. It uses primary sources where available — including original fieldwork photographs and oral testimonies gathered in Lucknow^{17,18} — alongside secondary and foundational texts that have shaped the present-day study of Tawaif history. The report relies on and extends the archival and theoretical work of scholars such as Veena Talwar Oldenburg^{13,14}, Kathryn Hansen^{3,4}, Pran Nevile¹² and Saba Dewan², whose research has been central to placing the Tawaif at the core of scholarship on Lucknow's cultural history.

This study also extends beyond the historical boundaries of Lucknow and India to broader questions of the recognition of intellectual labour, assumptions about the gendered division of work, and the preservation of history. The Tawaif community exemplifies a group that produced a sophisticated cultural repertoire while remaining outside the purview of formal authority and civic recognition. Understanding this history requires critical engagement with orally transmitted narratives, a questioning of dominant male-centred colonial and nationalist accounts, and a serious accounting of women's artistic and intellectual production outside the domestic sphere.

Objectives:

1. To examine the historical and cultural construction of the tawaifs of Lucknow.
2. To analyse the socio-cultural, political, and economic roles of the tawaifs.
3. To investigate the gendered and matrilineal structures within tawaif communities.
4. To critically assess the impact of colonial intervention on the transformation and marginalisation of the tawaifs.
5. To explore the processes of historical erasure and the contemporary reclamation of tawaif heritage.

III. Negotiating Power, Prestige and Cultural Identity

The tawaifs of Lucknow occupied a distinctive and complex position within the city's social and cultural landscape. Their influence extended far beyond artistic performance: they participated in shaping the cultural practices, social etiquette and aesthetic traditions associated with Nawabi Lucknow. Through their expertise in music, Kathak, poetry and refined manners, they acquired recognition among members of the court, aristocracy and emerging urban elite, and their kothas functioned not merely as spaces of entertainment but as important centres of cultural interaction and learning.

The history of Lucknow's tawaifs thus provides an important lens through which to examine the relationship between gender, power, cultural production and social status. Their experiences demonstrate how women could negotiate authority within structures that were simultaneously enabling and restrictive.

The social and cultural power of the Tawaifs of Lucknow had its foundation in a system of courtly refinement known as *tehzeeb*, encompassing manners, taste, elegance, and moral cultivation. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *tehzeeb* extended beyond mere social nicety to become an ethical and aesthetic ideal — a measure of a fully cultivated person within Awadhi court culture — and the Tawaifs were its most accomplished practitioners and most important teachers. Those who attended the kothas did so not to be “used” but to be trained: young men were taught to use Urdu with excellence and beauty, to appreciate classical music and poetry, and to conduct themselves gracefully in refined company.

This pedagogical function endowed the Tawaifs with a form of cultural, social and moral authority. To be educated in the kotha was to be initiated into the values and high culture of Awadh, and it was the Tawaifs who preserved and transmitted that culture, holding a recognised authority in matters of taste and propriety. As Oldenburg observes¹⁴, far from being merely objects of pleasure, the tawaifs of Lucknow were custodians of the aesthetic culture of their time.

The cultural forms in which the Tawaifs excelled were themselves among the most demanding in the South Asian tradition. *Thumri*, the semi-classical vocal form that blends devotional *bhakti* poetry with romantic imagery, was developed and refined in the kothas of Lucknow, where it became the signature form of Tawaif performance¹⁰. *Kathak*, the classical North Indian dance form recognised today as one of India's eight classical dance forms, was similarly nurtured and transmitted through the kotha system. The Tawaifs were not simply performers of these forms but their innovators and custodians, shaping an aesthetic grammar that would outlast the kotha system and later be claimed as national heritage³.

The linguistic dimension of the Tawaif's cultural authority was equally important. The Urdu of the Awadhi court was a highly sophisticated language, and the Tawaifs numbered among its most accomplished practitioners. Trained in the *ghazal*, the *rekhti* and the *mujra*, they stood at the forefront of literary culture; some composed poetry under their own pen names, participated in *mushairas*, and formed part of Lucknow's wider literary tradition. The kotha also functioned as a complex social space in which relations of social and moral obligation were carefully negotiated.

The bond between a Tawaif and her patron, or principal companion (*yaar*), was not one of straightforward transaction but of complex loyalty, discretion and mutual obligation.

The Tawaif's household, or kotha, was organised as a matrilineal unit through which property, artistic knowledge and professional identity passed from mother to daughter or adopted daughter. This matrilineal organisation gave the kotha community a unity and continuity largely absent from the patriarchal environment of nineteenth-century North India more broadly. Women administered the affairs of the kotha, managed its property and finances, and determined the education and professional training of daughters — an autonomy and authority that colonial administrators found remarkable, and troubling, by the standards of their time.

IV. Women, Patronage and the Politics of Power

The political and economic status of the Tawaifs of Lucknow must be situated within the Awadhi political economy of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries^{6,7}. The Nawabs of Awadh maintained a well-established court culture in which ritual, aesthetics and social structure were closely intertwined with political power, and the kotha was integrated into this political economy in ways that afforded the Tawaifs both economic freedom and

political influence. They received gifts, property and stipends from the Nawabs and nobles, owned property in their own right, contributed substantially to the urban economy of Lucknow, and maintained contacts with powerful patrons who supplied them with information and influence.

Among the most historically significant attributes of the Tawaifs was their economic independence. At a time when respectable women were largely confined to the zenana and dependent on male relatives for income, the Tawaifs earned and controlled their own money and managed their own financial affairs. Archival research in the Lucknow municipal records shows that, by the mid-nineteenth century, the Tawaifs were among the city's largest contributors of tax revenue and among its wealthiest property owners. This economic power was not incidental to their social status but constitutive of it, underpinning their capacity to make independent social, professional and personal choices.

The Tawaifs maintained a mutually reinforcing and interdependent relationship with the Nawabi state. The Nawabs of Awadh — particularly in the later period, as their political control was progressively eroded by the East India Company — devoted considerable resources to courtly patronage of the arts as a means of political legitimisation. The kotha's musical and artistic sophistication became a way of asserting the continued vitality and refinement of Awadhi civilisation even as its political autonomy declined, and the Tawaifs were central actors in this political performance, their participation in the Nawabi cultural project constituting a form of political alignment in itself.

The Tawaifs' political engagement was most visible during the Revolt of 1857, when a number of them played an active role in resisting British rule: providing financial support to the rebels, sheltering insurgents, and gathering intelligence through their dealings with the British officials who frequented their kothas. This resistance reflected not only anti-colonial sentiment but also the recognition that the Nawabs had offered more reliable patronage and protection than British colonial administration.

The economic model of the kotha was also fundamentally at odds with the colonial economy that displaced the Nawabi political system. The kotha depended on the wealth and patronage of a nobility whose economic and political power was steadily undermined by colonial land-revenue policy — first the Permanent Settlement, and later successive changes to the land-revenue system — which severed the traditional link between the kothas and the aristocratic patrons on whom they relied. The Tawaifs consequently faced the loss of traditional patrons, the expropriation of land, and a new colonial moral economy that rendered their profession illegal.

The Tawaif also performed an informal diplomatic function within the courtly world. Their kothas provided a relatively neutral space in which men from different political factions and social, economic and ethnic backgrounds could meet over music and poetry, creating an environment for the mediation of information and the informal negotiation of interests outside of formal contracts. This required active management of complex social dynamics rather than passive presence; the ability to hold the confidence of several patrons with conflicting interests was as much a political as a social skill.

A. Colonial Modernity and the Disruption of Tawaif Culture

The transformation of Tawaif life and culture was not a sudden event but a gradual process driven by the legal, administrative and moral measures of nineteenth-century colonial government. British authorities viewed these women through conflicting lenses — as a threat to public morals on the one hand, and as a population requiring strict regulation on the other — and devised a regulatory system that subjected Tawaifs to humiliation and state surveillance, including compulsory medical examination and registration under the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868¹⁻⁵. These measures reshaped the relationship between Tawaifs and colonial society, subjecting kotha performances to greater scrutiny while curtailing the autonomy of the women themselves.

The Contagious Diseases Act was framed primarily to protect British soldiers from venereal disease, but its application to the Tawaif community amounted to a form of structural violence⁵: it collapsed the intricate social distinctions of the kotha world into the single category of 'prostitute', stripping the Tawaif of her professional identity as an artist and reducing her to a body subject to sanitary management. For women who held a recognised, if contested, social standing, the compulsory examinations required under the Act were experienced as deeply demeaning, and the accompanying registration system placed Tawaifs under direct and continuous state monitoring, further eroding the autonomy the kotha system had once afforded them.

Alongside these legal changes, shifts in the wider cultural and political context reshaped the Tawaif's social standing. Before colonial encroachment, Tawaifs in Lucknow were recognised as performers, instructors of etiquette, and patrons of the arts¹³. Following the British annexation of Awadh in 1856, the patronage networks that sustained these institutions weakened considerably, and as the Nawabi court culture declined, so too did the social standing of the kotha.

Colonial authorities also viewed Tawaif culture through a Victorian moral lens that was largely incapable of distinguishing artistic practice from prostitution. This shift in outlook diminished the Tawaif's public standing and obscured her role as custodian of musical, literary and dance traditions. While forms such as Kathak, thumri and ghazal continued to develop and eventually became recognised elements of Indian culture, the contribution

of the Tawaifs to their preservation and transmission was frequently forgotten, severing many art forms from the community that had originally cultivated them.

B. Postcolonial Marginalisation and Moral Regulation

Indian independence in 1947 did not end the marginalisation of the Tawaifs; if anything, it intensified. The nationalist movement's investment in ideals of respectable womanhood, domesticity and sexual purity meant that the colonial moral framework was inherited and extended by the postcolonial state. The economic and social structures of the kotha were criminalised under the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1956 and its subsequent amendments, driving what remained of the institution underground and stripping away the legal protections Tawaifs had formerly possessed.

The postcolonial state's approach to the Tawaif was shaped by a nationalist framework of gender politics that defined respectable Indian womanhood in opposition to the courtesan. Within this framework, the Tawaif was cast not as a victim of exploitation deserving protection but as a figure of immorality to be controlled and, where possible, rehabilitated into a "useful" citizen. Welfare schemes aimed at sex workers typically offered vocational training in domestic arts such as sewing, embroidery and home management, premised on the assumption that the Tawaif's artistic skill and social autonomy were themselves the problem to be corrected. The cultural dimensions of her identity — her artistry, her education, her professional standing — remained largely invisible within this regulatory framework.

Postcolonial urban change compounded these effects. The mohallas of Lucknow where Tawaif households had traditionally lived were subject to urban-renewal schemes that erased much of the surviving architectural heritage and displaced residents without adequate resettlement, deepening an economic marginalisation that had begun with the colonial confiscation of property and leaving descendants of once-prominent Tawaif families in poverty and social stigma.

One enduring consequence of this colonial and postcolonial regulation has been the marginalisation of Tawaif histories within mainstream narratives of Indian society and culture. As legal restriction, social stigma and urban transformation weakened the kotha system, the histories of many Tawaif families were overlooked or misrepresented — even as these communities continued to preserve important cultural traditions through music, dance, oral history and family archives.

V. Reclaiming Tawaif Histories: Historiography, Memory and Fieldwork in Lucknow

The recovery of the Tawaifs of Lucknow is not simply the recovery of lost individuals; it is an intervention in intellectual, cultural and political terms that contests the narratives of gender, morality, culture and power that have shaped South Asian history more broadly. Colonial stereotypes and nationalist anxieties about female respectability continued to shape dominant conceptions of the tawaif through much of the last century, leaving generations of historians, policymakers and the public with a simplified and distorted view of the institution. Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged these assumptions in order to reclaim the agency, cultural power and social meaning of the women who occupied this space.

The first step in this reclamation is to recognise that historical erasure is rarely unintentional. The marginalisation of Tawaifs was produced through a specific political and cultural process in which certain forms of knowledge were privileged over others. Colonial archives frequently divided Tawaifs into administrative and moral categories, emphasising sexuality over artistic labour and thereby othering complex cultural figures. Later nationalist narratives celebrated practices such as Kathak and Hindustani classical music while detaching them from the women who nurtured, preserved and transmitted them. Recovering Tawaif histories therefore requires not only uncovering missing narratives but critically examining the assumptions embedded within the historical sources themselves.

This has led recent historians to read colonial archives against the grain — treating official descriptions not as neutral fact but as products of a particular social and political milieu. Such readings show that many colonial depictions of Tawaif life reflected imperial anxieties about gender, sexuality and indigenous social arrangements rather than an accurate account of that life, and that Tawaifs in fact played a significant role in the affairs of government and society rather than remaining hidden from the colonial gaze.

Literary scholarship has similarly worked to restore the Tawaif's voice to history. Studies of Urdu literary culture — particularly the rekhti tradition of poetry composed in the feminine voice and closely associated with Tawaif recitation — reveal a rich intellectual world of women's experience, emotion and perspective, indicating that Tawaifs were not merely performers but active participants in the creation of literary and aesthetic culture.

The rediscovery of Tawaif history also feeds into broader debates in feminist historiography^{9,11}. Feminist scholars have long observed that conventional histories tend to omit women who do not conform to dominant ideals of femininity and respectability. The Tawaifs of Lucknow are of particular interest here, having occupied a social position that challenged the binaries of public and private, art and commerce, respectability and transgression. They demonstrate that women exercised power in ways that were not necessarily official or

institutional — through cultural expertise, economic independence, social networks and patronage relationships — and their systematic recovery redefines the cultural history of Lucknow while prompting a broader reconsideration of women's history beyond the conventional boundaries of respectability, restoring the Tawaifs to the centre of North India's cultural, social and intellectual history rather than its margins.

The Tawaif's memory continues to occupy an important, if complicated and often contradictory, place in Lucknow's cultural imagination. A number of neighbourhoods — including Chowk, Qaiserbagh, Gol Darwaza and Phool Wali Gali — retain traces of the kothas that once formed the heart of the city's artistic life. Fieldwork conducted for this report, involving interviews with local residents, shopkeepers and community members in these neighbourhoods^{17,18}, found that memories of the Tawaifs remain alive in local histories and family traditions, although many younger residents were unaware of their broader historical significance.

In recent years, museums, archives, heritage organisations and independent researchers have begun documenting the Tawaifs' contribution to Lucknow's cultural heritage^{4,15}. Photographs, manuscripts, recordings and family archives have become valuable resources for reconstructing these histories, while documentary films, exhibitions and public lectures have encouraged wider audiences to reconsider long-standing assumptions about the community. These initiatives mark an important shift toward recognising Tawaifs as creators and custodians of cultural heritage rather than simply as subjects of historical curiosity.

Organisations and Scholars have contributed to this effort by documenting oral histories, identifying historic sites, and encouraging public engagement with communities that have otherwise been written out of the city's history, helping to ensure that the Tawaifs' artistic contributions remain part of Lucknow's historical narrative. Such work illustrates that heritage extends beyond monuments and architecture to include the stories, performances, traditions and communities that have shaped a city's identity over time.

The disappearance of the kotha as an institution has not erased the memory of the Tawaif from Lucknow's cultural life. It survives instead in fragments — photographs, songs, buildings and oral recollection — that resist narratives of erasure and point to the need to reconsider the Tawaif as artist, educator, patron of culture, and significant participant in the social life of Awadh. Contemporary memory-work is therefore not only a means of preserving women's legacies but of reclaiming a past that was long obscured by colonial morality and postcolonial social stigma.



Fig 1: Author's fieldwork photograph from Chawal Wali Gali, near Chowk, Lucknow, supported by testimony from a local resident (13 June 2026, 10:00 AM).



Fig 2 & Fig 3: Author's fieldwork captured in Chowk (Old Lucknow): street scenes of contemporary Lucknow showing a neighbourhood landmark associated with former courtesans, based on an interview with a local rickshaw driver (13 June 2026, 9:30 AM).



Fig 4 & Fig 5: Author's fieldwork captured in Chowk and Chawal Wali Gali, based on an interview with a local resident.



Fig 6 & Fig 7: Author's fieldwork showing the Akbari Gate and a dharamshala near Gol Darwaza — older cultural quarters that have undergone urban reconfiguration and historical erasure, based on an interview with a local shopkeeper (13 June 2026, 10:15 AM).



Fig 8 & Fig 9: Author's fieldwork captured in the lanes of Gol Darwaza — historical lanes and gateways of Gol Darwaza and Phool Wali Gali, based on an interview with a local rickshaw driver (13 June 2026, 9:55 AM).

VI. Conclusion

The history of Lucknow's tawaifs reveals the richness and complexity of Indian society and challenges the simple labels through which women have often been represented in history. Tawaifs were not merely entertainers or prostitutes; they were skilled artists, teachers, poets, patrons, entrepreneurs and cultural leaders who played an important role in shaping the cultural life of Awadh. Through music, dance, poetry, language, etiquette and education, they contributed significantly to the development and transmission of Lucknow's distinctive cultural traditions, and their kothas were vibrant centres of artistic learning, intellectual exchange and social interaction where poets, musicians, nobles and scholars came together.

During the period of Nawabi rule, many Tawaifs enjoyed considerable economic independence and social influence. They owned property, supported artists, trained younger performers, and contributed to the preservation of classical traditions, and their influence can be traced in the development of Hindustani classical music, Kathak, Urdu poetry, and the culture of *tehzeeb* for which Lucknow remains renowned. Their lives therefore challenge conventional understandings of women's roles in pre-colonial Indian society and demonstrate that women could exercise authority through culture, knowledge and economic independence.

The position of the Tawaifs changed considerably under British colonial rule, as Victorian ideas of morality and sexuality increasingly defined them within the narrow category of prostitution. Colonial laws and administrative practices regulated their lives, while campaigns against public performance and traditional patronage weakened the social and economic foundations of the *kotha*. Nationalist ideas of respectable womanhood that followed often celebrated Indian culture while overlooking the women who had preserved and developed many of its artistic traditions, so that the cultural legacy of the Tawaifs survived even as their own contribution was gradually separated from it.

Recent scholarship, feminist history, oral narratives, literature, documentary film and alternative archival sources have begun to challenge this historical erasure, helping to recover the voices and experiences of Tawaifs and encouraging a more critical understanding of their place in Lucknow's history. Much nevertheless remains to be done: popular culture often presents a romanticised image of the courtesan, while the historical realities of Tawaifs' work, agency, struggles and contributions remain comparatively less visible.

Reclaiming the history of the Tawaifs is therefore not simply a matter of correcting an incomplete historical record. It also raises important questions about who is remembered, whose contributions are recognised, and whose experiences are pushed to the margins. Their lives challenge ideals of womanhood grounded solely in domesticity, sexual respectability and dependence on men, revealing instead alternative forms of female agency grounded in economic independence, artistic skill, professional identity and cultural authority.

The continued stigma and marginalisation faced by some descendants of Tawaif communities further demonstrate that historical recognition must be accompanied by cultural inclusion and dignity; reclaiming their history is consequently an act of cultural justice as much as of historical recovery.

Ultimately, restoring the histories of Lucknow's Tawaifs allows us to understand culture as something created not only by rulers and institutions but also by artists, performers and communities. Recognising Tawaifs as makers and custodians of culture, rather than merely as subjects of history, offers a more inclusive understanding of Lucknow and of South Asian society — one in which their history is remembered not as a marginal story but as an essential part of India's cultural and social past.

References

Secondary Sources

- [1]. Ballhatchet, K. (1980). Race, sex and class under the Raj: Imperial attitudes and policies and their critics, 1793–1905. Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- [2]. Dewan, S. (2023). Tawaifnama: Bai to bethak.
- [3]. Hansen, K. (1992). Grounds for play: The Nautanki theatre of North India. University of California Press.
- [4]. Hansen, K. (2020). The beauties of Lucknow: An Urdu photographic album. University of Texas at Austin.
- [5]. Levine, P. (2003). Prostitution, race and politics: Policing venereal disease in the British Empire. Routledge.
- [6]. Llewellyn-Jones, R. (1985). A fatal friendship: The Nawabs, the British, and the city of Lucknow. Oxford University Press.
- [7]. Llewellyn-Jones, R. (2007). Lucknow: City of illusion. Prestel.
- [8]. Losty, J. P., & Roy, M. (2012). Mughal India: Art, culture and empire. British Library.
- [9]. Mani, L. (1998). Contentious traditions: The debate on sati in colonial India. University of California Press.
- [10]. Manuel, P. (1989). Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives. Motilal Banarsidass.
- [11]. Meduri, A. (1996). Nation, woman, representation: The sutured history of the Devadasi and her dance (Doctoral dissertation, New York University).
- [12]. Neville, P. (2009). Nautch girls of the Raj. Penguin Books India.
- [13]. Oldenburg, V. T. (1984). The making of colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877. Princeton University Press.
- [14]. Oldenburg, V. T. (1990). Lifestyle as resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India. *Feminist Studies*, 16(2), 259–287. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177958>
- [15]. Pinney, C. (1997). Camera Indica: The social life of Indian photographs. Reaktion Books.
- [16]. Sharar, A. H. (2001). Lucknow: The last phase of an oriental culture (E. S. Harcourt & F. Hussain, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1926)

Primary Sources and Field Research

- [17]. Fieldwork photographs collected in Chowk, Akbari Gate, Gol Darwaza, and Phool Wali Gali, Lucknow (2026).
- [18]. Oral testimonies from local residents, shopkeepers, and community members collected during field research in Lucknow (2026).