

BYGONE CULTURE OF NORTH INDIA: TAWAIF, KOTHA, MUSIC & POETRY-A LITERARY REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Intellectual manifestations and all the art forms of a civilization make a culture where every person's behavior, idea, custom make it more distinguish every time. But nothing is permanent including culture, with the river of time lost days are never regained. Some popular bygone culture of North India, which carried the Indian tradition of Music, Dance, literature, exhibited actual pictorial monograph of Indian Culture. Tawaif Culture and Kotha culture was one of bygone cultures and it is very pertinent to say about those personages and their practices of performing arts and literature, along with it is more important to say that these personages were great contributors of North Indian performing art and literature. Kotha was a cultural hub where Tawaifs sculpted and reconstructed the musical-poetical sculpture passionately. It is true that the culture is bygone but its murmur sound is still being echoed from everywhere. An era, a culture was explored, constructed, decorated, its impact was immense. Kotha was an artistic heritage where Tawaifs were the artists, music and poetry gained a new life there. These all may be lost culture; a huge transmutation was happened but the contribution is undeniable and showing the path of light.

Key words: *Bygone, Monograph, Tawaif, Kotha, Heritage*

Introduction

A potent cultural image of North India always stands like intermediary between art forms and society. Performing Art forms and Indian society is related with two-way path, on one way society influence every art form and same way every art form keeps a deep impact on society. By this influential course a culture, a custom, tradition, trend, a practice becomes flourished. Culture means a resource of everything of a human life. Here Indian culture commemorates every practice but according to the rules of time practices became bygone. A historiographical overview always shows how cultural era comes and how a new cultural era reforms and takes the place of new. It is very pertinent to say that history can not reveal all the cultural period and practice. Bygone culture of North India was not only an idea, custom or practice. Bygone culture of North India was not only an idea, custom or practice; it was a manifestation of human intellectuality which carried art, performing arts, literature, its own community and their achievements and catastrophic ending.

Methodology: The study is historical and qualitative study; it analyses the history of Tawaif and North Indian Culture. It has been done by the help of books, journals, video, audio recording, online article etc.

Discussion

Now a day North Indian performing art forms, especially classical and semi-classical music, is significantly popular. North Indian Hindustani Classical Music, as musical history explains, itself holds a commanding position in Indian cultural ground. North Indian Performing art culture is a hidden treasure where Music is most precious form which brilliance brightness spreads out everywhere. But a few evidence of theoretical side of Music can hardly be find. And it is not enough to properly the Indian Music. As Prof. Dasgupta explains in his research article 'Women and Music: The Case of North India': "Though a number of texts on the theory of music have survived in India from ancient and medieval times, there is relatively little that we can say about nature and content of earlier performative techniques."

In some existing history, anecdotes, verbal history or some evidences, few traces can be found about the performers of North Indian performing art forms. And it is very crystal clear that North Indian culture, society, status-everything was influenced by the performing arts and performers. North Indian Classical Music, which is known as Hindustani Classical Music, is as old as human history. A definite and textual study confirmed that the root of Indian Classical Music originated in Vedic Period. Formation, transformation, reformation, invention, construction was done and with it there are many styles, genres, new compositions, presentation styles come and go. Performers of every era represents different styles, techniques, methods, approaches, and after a starting of new era it becomes older version but traditional things go on. The performers were remembered era after era for their contributions, devotion. But somehow the history women performers of 18th and 19th century, their contribution are not properly recorded. In his research article Dasgupta stated: "It comes as no surprise that there is an especial dearth of knowledge about women musicians." In the domain of classical music, women singers accomplished and performed very skillfully. But it is true their performance was always separated from male performers. Though the talent and

skill were same. These women performers were experts in various type of songs along with classical and their performance became more attractive with their dance movements. These women performers were courtly artists and known as Tawaif, Baiji, Bais. (Dasgupta,2020)

Tawaifs, the performer community, were remembered for their music, dance and poetry. There were an inseparable connection and relationship between Tawaif and Music. In Mughal era they were treated as eminent and exponent performer of the court. In her research article Das Purakayastha explains: "Indian cultural history testifies to the intimate bond the Tawaifs had for centuries with the performing arts. Be it the pre-Mughal folk culture of rural India or the highly sophisticated culture of classical music in the Mughal courts, the tawaifs had always remained at the focal point of it."

History of Tawaifs was documented and declared that they were acquired a respectable position on the time of Mughal or before Mughal period. By their mesmerized voice and gesture, posture or 'Ada' ruled and enlightened the court. On that time their status quo, class and achievements had a height. Music, Dance, poetry or Shayeri were touched the pinnacle. The crystal-clear fact that in the time of Mughal art, Music, dance, poetry got a touch of spring or it may be said that it was the prime time of North Indian Classical Music. Music breathed new life where Tawaifs represented it more graciously. As Hazra found that- "Courtesans history documents that young girls were taken under the tutelage of eminent classical musicians, dancers and poets in the Mughal period, a time when art and culture received much attention and aesthetics flourished like never before. As the patronage of music, dance and poetry/Shayeri in the Mughal courts grew, performing arts became a viable option for many who had interest, potential, and skill set. For years the girls were trained to achieve the heights in the musical and literary tradition."

Tawaif the identical term carried a heavy and symbolic meaning, the deep meaning of the term Tawaif refers to a different community of women who were totally detached from regular life of normal women. They had an own dominion in society, they were as free as fountain, as Sen Gupta explains about them "the dominion of Courtesan is described as an oasis of refinement, pleasure and contentment that wealthy gravitated to, while the rulers of native Indian states sent their sons to imbibe both etiquette and culture." Tawaif, the performing women community of north India, were a class which kept example of sophistication, excellent mannerism, courteous etiquette, bearer of culture with expertise in music dance and literary field (Sengupta,2014).

Again, and again some questions arouse that how their social position became fall down? How they became fallen women? How the drastic change was happened after Mughal period? Were they only entertainer? It has a long history, a history which is gradually forgotten. A history which was started with Amrapali and continued with Tawaif, Baiji or Kothewali, these terms also were changed with the changing political, social, economical scenario of India where the culture was affected mostly. And these cultural women performers community was deliberately depreciated by colonial stigma, social reformers, low thinking and perception of society (SENGUPTA,2014).

In the north Indian cultural ground, the women performers of Mughal era could explore themselves. As DasPurakayastha points out "Mughal darbars accorded to the baijis a rather 'secular' position of court performers patronized by the emperor and appointed for his entertainment." The Tawaifs were, the artists of rich heritage of north Indian classical music they had no boundaries, they were not marginalized or stigmatized. They were honoured and patronized by the rich patrons. Their performance was appreciated by connoisseurs, they were the artists whose knowledge skill, talent and presentation style was unique (Purakayastha,2013).

But the contradiction was started from the end of the Mughal period. During Nawabi culture Tawaifs where progressive artists community who presented north Indian classical music or Hindustani classical music and semi classical music parallely with their proficiency. In her research article "Tawa'if as Performing Communities and Kothas as a Spaces of Cultural Production' Chanda and Patnaik explain "the amateur tawa'ifs where placed under the tutelage of senior tawa'ifs so that they could master the diverse performance repertoire through intensive rehearsals., thus as a community these women added to the cultural resources in a shared manner." These Tawaifs recreate new Gayaki with their 'Ada' and enriched the cultural resources. These all were happened at their personal salon, which was called Kotha. Kotha was that place which could be compared with a cultural hub where these hereditary artists cultivated and refined the art forms of north India with north Indian culture.

North Indian classical music is an inseparable part of Indian culture, it is better to say without Hindustani classical music the Indian cultural tradition is incomplete. And by the contribution of most elegant personalities these north Indian music culture became more chromatic. These intriguing personalities were Tawaifs. Century after century their contribution in music, dance and poetry will be undeniable. Their tehzeeb, tameez was their status. This status of Tawaifs, their art forms, their aesthetic practice cannot be understood by modern perspective. The artist, Tawaif, had a class, a category and their art forms and presentation style was different from each other. Their music, dance and literary practice had various, a critical thinking and changing perspective of nationalist, reformist and colonial notion certainly marginalized their art forms, presentation and

performance, as Sharma noted: “What existed, in turn, was a set of loosely held music, dance, and literary practices that was Varied, eclectic, and most importantly resisted categorization in terms of a single, unified and codified art form. It is therefore extremely important for the scholarship on performing arts to invoke a more critically nuanced notion of cultural “revival”, one that recognises the impact of major social political upheavals like colonialism and nationalism, and purports to go beyond them, thereby attempting to theorise the cultural practices of hereditary performers in terms of community mutation, cooperation, and appropriation.”

Mughal period was a period of art and culture where the rulers arranged separate Mahal, separate area for these women performers, as Purakayastha explains “The flamboyant Mughal darbar accorded to the baijis a rather ‘secular’ position of court performers patronised by the emperor and appointed for the entertainment.” These Tawaifs had two groups one who were the public women and less sophisticated and other where ‘refined, trained, experts. They were admired and their performance was appreciated by elite class. History says that some Mughal emperors tied the knot of marriage with Tawaifs (Purakayastha,2013). It is very common inquisitiveness that how elegant talented women performers who were once courtly artist started Kotha or personal salon or how Kotha culture made its place in north Indian cultural zone. The Mughal dynasty became gradually lost its glow. These dedicated women performers or Tawaifs started to find out artistic shelter.

Tawaifs started to move to those places where they could be saved their Artistry and art forms. Awadh was one of the glorious places of north India where every art forms, on that time, could have bloomed like a flower and could took fresh air. The structural changes were happened on that period. Nawabi era was special for music, dance and poetry. North Indian culture again got another wing to fly high. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah himself was a poet, singer and dancer also. His compositions were sung by many renowned artists and the women performers or Tawaifs. In Awadh Tawaifs got shelter into the Mahal of nawab. Nawab founded Parikhana where girls were trained in music, dance and poetry, among them the most talented was chosen for the entertainment of Nawab. From parikhana Nawab married many girls. This was Nawabi culture of Awadh as well as north India. Though Nawab was a passionate person of performing art.

History of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah is another story. But his era was most precious for performing art culture of north India. In Mughal darbar where pure classical music forms like dhrupad, dhamar, khayal, sadra was presented, there Nawabi period was experimented with new genre of north Indian music, here ‘Thumri’ and other semi classical forms took place. From this time not only in the court of Nawab, Tawaifs started their own Mehfil in their personal Kotha. Tawaifs being a preserver, preserve cultural assets like music dance and poetry. In her research article Chanda noted “Moreover, Kothas acted as spaces where the female performers or the tawa’ifs perform and through their performances preserve their cultural resources.” Kotha was that place where intellectual conversation and interchange of arts was happened, new dimensions were originated by these ‘socially cohesive community of tawa’if’. “Kotha was that place where artists, connoisseur, stalwarts gathered and discussed produced, reproduced and conserved over generation.” North Indian culture was enriched though a transformation was started. Transformation of musical form like Thumri which was associated with the name of Tawaif. Thumri, the beautiful vocal rendition was specially presented by tawaifs. It was different and special because of its presentation style (Sharma,2017).

North Indian cultural history and musical history both has evidence how from dhrupad- dhamar- khayal- sadra patronage became take interest in this form of music. A long period of time pure classical forms was presented in court and the classical music is still now acquired a place of hierarchy and a class of audience understand and enjoy to listen this. On that period of time the scenario was same. Thumri is a form of north Indian music which has a great influence from that era to this era. Thumri is still popular for its presentation style and various Ras, subjectivity, composition and all these made thumri exceptional from any other musical genre of north India.

As previously said that new culture reforms and it was started. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and his court in Awadh and after that Metiaburz in Kolkata, which was called chota Lucknow, was always filled with musical notes of thumri, Tal, Chand, with the tune of sarangi and ringing bells of ghungru and Tawaif. Mughal period to Nawabi period changes was happened in musical reformation, musical interest, musical aspects, musical perspective and conceptions. The Mughal culture was gone but faint echo is still echoing whole north India.

It is very important to discuss about the colonial perspective of north Indian culture. Nawabi culture came to an end after Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. It was 1857 the time of Sipahi Mutiny and a movement was started against colonialism. British government changed the mindset, where Kotha became the only musical production centre and shelter for Tawaif. Because, in perspective of the British culture they were only ‘nachne gane wali’ or ‘singing dancing girl’ or Nautch girl. It was a phase where patronage of Tawaif culture became colonial. As Chanda noted “urban Kothas catering to the newly rising mercantile and colonial patrons emerged as ideal platforms for the cultivation of Hindustani music through their shared artistic practices within the space of Kothas, Tawaifs constructed their identity.”

Kotha was the institution which made essence of performing art where Tawaifs were the actual 'itar'. Kotha culture and Tawaif Culture was much meaningful than people's knowledge. Every corner of Kotha carried artistic symbol where architecture like 'Sahajani pillars', and arches also represents the weightage of that place. Mehfil, Mujra, Hookah, Paan and Thumri, Ghazal presentation of Tawaifs-these all made a life in a Kotha. 1857, revolt was started. Freedom fighters started their movement against British Raj. Kotha was that place which turned into shelter for freedom fighter. British officers enjoyed the Mehefil and Tawaifs tactfully, secretly passed the messages to the revolutionary about the next plan of British officers. Tawaifs were directly-indirectly attached with freedom movement; even they composed many patriotic songs also, they contributed their property for free motherland. Kotha carried the untold history of freedom movement.

Poetry was a part of life of Tawaifs. As Debanjan stated in his article 'Poetry of the women the rise and fall of the Urdu Rekhti'- "The 18th and 19th centuries not only saw significant changes in the political climate but also in the cultural milieu view of the subcontinent." Maratha and Afghan attacked Delhi several times and there was a declination stated against reach court culture. A large number of artists migrated from Delhi to Awadh, Bengal and Hyderabad. These places became a station of highly cultured Urdu poetry. This was golden period for Urdu poetry. Ghazal- Arabic verse is full of love and romanticism and loss. It was flourished in this time. It was written in masculine form Rekhta. When it came and grew with feminine hand it became Rekhti. The subject matter of Rekhti was pleasure and passion. Debanjan explains "while ghazals which adhere to specific meter and rhythm eulogise separation and pain suffered by the beloved during the quest of love and more often than not have mystical undertones rekhti strictly deals with this worldly passions and pleasure."

Rekhti poetry was pronounced at the same time with Tawaif. In Tawaif culture of north India ghazal was composed by them but it was not allowed for the common women, not only writing but also reading of this kind of poetries was very shameful matter. Here again Tawaifs were marginalised by the society. But but Awadh court showed a liberal culture, where Rekhti had a wind and open window to spread out. It was Lucknow, where poetry, music dance was practised and it was the place of north India where person could learn how to be a cultured, he could learn how to compose poetry. There was most important cultural practice was 'Mushaira' or Poetic symposium. Here famous compositions were recited before audience and the sound wave came- 'Wah Wah,! Mokurrer Irshad!'

It would be a misdemeanour not to say about Umrao Jaan whose pseudonym was 'Ada', who composed her own verse and there were many musical compositions she did. As Singh and Hussain stated "It was the courtesan who preserved classical Indian music from corruption for centuries." Umrao Jaan was that Courtesan or tawaif whose compositions remind everyone who was she and who were the Tawaifs.

"Thy winsome ways a thousand hearts will charm
prayers of well wishers will keep thee from all harm"

In every moment of life, in every situation a composition of her poem declared the feeling, mood, emotions, sentiment everything
ada from loves poison they are can no freedom be,
prisoner in love with capture can enjoy no liberty

In South Asian literature the name Umrao Jaan Ada was most mysterious figure who was forgotten. Her poetic verse is still mysterious as she is. But her every verse, composition is a precious gift for Indian literary culture. Her talent, elegance, scholarly character will pioneering new literary genre.

Another name definitely comes here-Mah Laqa Bai Chanda, the famous Tawaif of Hyderabad, born as Chanda Bai, she was famous for her excellent poetry, her writing led the male voice also. Her Ghazal compositions significantly told about the beloved, and this beloved is no one but a Tawaif. She wrote Rekhta style. Here naturally some contradictions come, as Nasir pointed out that "some contemporary South Asian feminists have argued that Mah Laqa Bai's work does not speak with an 'authentic feminist voice' about the struggles of real women in achieving freedom and independence from male supremacy or the experiences of the woman for empowerment."

These contradictions will come and go, which will remain-some of these words:

Hoping to blossom (one day) into a flower,
Every bud sits, holding its soul in its fist.
Between the fear of the fowler and (approaching) autumn,
The bulbul's life hangs by a thread.

Thy sly glance is more murderous than arrow or sword;
It has shed the blood of many lover.
How can I like a candle to thy (glowing) cheek?
The candle is blind with the fat in its eyes.
How can Chanda be dry-lipped. O Saqi of the heavenly wine!
She has drained the cup of thy love

(Translation by Syed Sirajuddin)

In Indian culture, it is very common scenario that women will maintain her household, maintain family status, it was same on that time also but scenario was different for these performing women or Tawaifs, their artistic, scholarly abilities, qualities is always marginalized and ill treated. These women hold the musical, literary and above all cultural tradition of North India (Chaudhary, 2023).

Conclusion

North Indian Cultural history says many episodes at a glance, many untold stories of bygone culture which still now painted picture on flowing water but its great impact is still pioneering the path. Bygone culture of Tawaif, their artistic practice, their contribution, their dedication, their musical lyrics, gayaki, their every movement, their poetic verse, their 'tameez', 'tahezeeb', 'ada', 'nazakat'-everything made a strong pillar of North Indian Culture. Tawaifs, Kotha, Music, poetry, dance are all synonymous and stood together and made a new cultural genre and still resonate across generation.

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