

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON TAWAIF CULTURE OF BANARAS DURING 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Research history of North Indian Music always mentions the music culture of Banaras. This old city is enriched with North Indian Classical and Semi-Classical Music and a memory of an extraordinary community which was known as 'Tawaif'. In musical history of Banaras their contribution as women performer community influenced the whole culture of Banaras. In colloquial term these women performers were known as 'Ganey Wali', with them a new genre of North Indian Music was started. They gave a new definition to North Indian Music. Their crucial role was undeniable though their significant contribution became faded away by cruel time. Tawaif and their contribution is lost history. The religious city Banaras and its culture never forget to utter their name, this old city and its Tawaif community constructed a new cultural decay. Though they were marginalized, stigmatized but their enthusiasm for music made them extraordinary. The most popular and patronized 'Tawaifbazi' served Banaras a cultural hub, and its impact of this culture spread willingly throughout North India.

Key Words: Tawaif, Tawaifbazi, Ganeywali, Marginalized, Stigmatized

INTRODUCTION

Time is like flow of river. It gives many glimpses of many events of life, many circumstances, journey and melodious touch also. The oldest city of India-Banaras or Varanasi is a city of temple, city of worship and city of Music. Every alley of Banaras carries a buzzing sound of Music. From Dawn to Dusk Banaras writes its own story. It carries memories with melody. Banaras, the old city, locates in the heart of Ganges valley, is the witness of rich tradition and Culture. Banaras, the city of Music, is the heritage of classical and semi-classical Music of India. From Puranic age the Music can be traced in Banaras or Varanasi. During the rule of Govinda Chandrara, in 16th Century, Dhrupad style of singing became very popular, spread out and got royal patronage. After Dhrupad, Dhamar, Hori and Chaturang led the place. This city of Music has its own history and a huge treasure of Music. Banaras has its own rhythm, from Ganges Ghat to temple, temple to alley- everywhere. If dawn starts with Sitar, then dusk starts with Sarod and Beats of Tabla carries the rhythm of the city and never-ending charming sound of anklet was delicacy of the city. This is the place of God where another tune continued with-Banarasi Thumri, Dadra, Chaiti, Hori, Bhairavi, Kajri, Tarana, Ghato and many more.

Literature Review

Dewan (2010), explores about the Tawaif culture of Banaras, her research article exhibits the legacy of Tawaifs. It traces the memoirs of Tawaifs, their status, their art practice and mostly how Banaras was enriched by Tawaif culture.

Dewan (2019), describes the four generations of Tawaif family, their lives, their performance. In this book she reveals about Banaras Gharana. It also mentions about Kotha, Mehefil, Mujra of Banaras and about great patrons of Tawaifs and their performance.

Nagar (2016), throws the light on the aspects of sociological, historical and cultural sphere of Tawaif culture or Tawaif tradition where women performers, their performance, their contribution, art practice and above all how Tawaif preserved the cultural tradition of music, are narrated beautifully.

Jafa, mentions the extraordinary Tawaifs of Banaras and Tawaif culture of Banaras.

Bhardwaj (2020), describes about those Tawaifs who were unknown as freedom fighters in Indian history. Twaifs who were not only performers but they also contributed for their motherland. In this book author mentions and narrates those unknown facts and stories.

Dasgupta (2020), explores and analyses North Indian women performers, Tawaifs, their status, their talent, their taalim, their knowledge of Raga of Hindustani Classical Music, their contribution to Hindustani classical and semi-classical music, they as Gramophone artists, Thumri presentation style-these subjects are analyzed here.

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Mishra (2018), writes her article on Tawaifs of Banaras where she beautifully mentioned about Kotha culture of Banaras. She mentions Mehefils of Banaras, patrons of Tawaifs, etiquette, manners, Tahezzeb, Tameez, Nazakat etc.

METHODOLOGY

The study is a qualitative, descriptive research work. It has been done with the help of books, online articles, journals, video-audio recording, interviews etc. These multiple sources help to make this research work analytical, descriptive and exploratory.

DISSCUSSION

It was another community who maintaining and contributing to the Banaras tradition as well as Hindustani Music and Dance. This community had a fragmentary history and culture; it may call- the 'Tawaif Culture'. Banaras is the stalwart of Hindustani Classical and semi classical Music. Raja, Zamindars and other wealthy Merchants were great patron of Music and Dance. The community of Tawaifs had been patronized by elite wealthy. Tawaifs of Banaras were the artist community who gave Bol Banao Thumri, Hori, Chaiati, Dadra of Purab Ang. Tawaifs were epitome of Mazhab, Sharafat, Tahezzeb, Tameez and Taalim (Mishra, 2019).

Kotha culture in Banaras was famous as history tells us. It is another page of history where Kotha culture, Mujra, Mehfil was a prominent part of Banaras. Kashi was the place or center of music; it was motherland of music and interestingly Tawaifs were traditionally attached and associated with it. There was a mention of Nagarbhadhu and Nagar Nartaki in History of Banaras. At the end of 18th century Tawaifs changed their platform from court to Mehefil was a prominent part of Banaras. Kashi, was the place or centre of music, it was the motherland of music and interestingly Tawaifs were traditionally attached and associated with it. It is very obvious that from where generation of Taansen belonged and enriched the court, music and its practices is very common (Mishra,2018).

In the time of Mughal period, it was the golden era for Tawaifs. Their social status, their respect, their financial status, their position on the time of Mughal. Historians say that during 19th century the Royal families and Maharaja took pleasure of melodious rendition of Tawaifs. Mehefil of Tawaifs was popular in Temple also. There was no misconception about their performance. The ruling elite class of Banaras was the great patron of Tawaifs and Tawaif culture, like Bhumihar King, rich merchant 'Gosains' or priest also who presided many temples and controlled them. Actually, it was not only a love for performing art, it was a prestigious matter for the elite, and it was a symbol of high status to attach with Tawaifs or Twaif culture. Many elites or merchants were known by their mistress or Tawaif's name, they were regular visitor of that particular Tawaif-such as 'Chandrakala wale' Babu Yadunath Prasad who was a rich merchant and Chandrakala was a famous Tawaif of Banaras and his mistress also (Dewan, 2019).

Tawaif, Mehefil, Mujra- was a trend then. Zamindar, Mahajan and rich businessman arranged Mehefils and Mujras very frequent in year. The decoration of the Mehefils was followed by Mughal Durbar style- Makhmali Masnad, Taakiya, Gulabpash, Phulchangar, Khaasdaan, Itardaan, Masladaan, Paan ki Tastri. In occasion of Holi the Mehefil was decorated with Aabir and Kumkum and there were some cages of birds also. After midnight Mehefil was crowded and Tawaifs started their performance. If anyone left the Mehefil in middle, it was then bad manner and etiquette. At the end of the Mehefil, most famous Tawaif performed with Thumri, Ghazal they also said about 'Bhav' of the song. End of the Mehefil the 'Jashan' was started where all Tawaifs performed together. In Banaras the other Tawaifs from other places were not invited most of the time because Banaras had its own great and famous Tawaifs-who were invited from other cities. It is very true that not only performer, the merit and excellence of a listener are also very important. In the time of Tawaif there were many connoisseurs of Music, Dance and Poetry. They knew a lot about Music, Dance and Poetry. They understood the wording of Thumri, Dadra, and Ghazal. But it is also true that very common people also enjoyed the music and dance. In Banaras there was an opportunity for common people to listen the song of 'Baijis' especially when they performed in Temple of Banaras and in particular some fare (Nagar, 2016).

Tawaifs were invited in various occasions like- Mundan, Karnachchedan, Upanayan, marriage and other family occasions. They invited in popular temples and Ghats of Ganga during many famous, popular and important religious functions. Their performance had many emotional sides, it was sometime romantic, it was sometime full of anger and jealousy, sometime rejection or sometime they presented Thumri with their sorrow. Banaras is a nostalgic city which was always associated with Tawaifs and these Tawaifs were most talented and skillful persons who was always patronized by elite, high class persons. Here, a question may be raised in this area of talented Tawaifs, was everyone get their actual satisfactory position or they became renowned to all? May be not, a large number of Tawaifs of Banaras could not get their actual position or patron, so they are still unknown to all. It was their luck who did not get their proper respect (Dewan, 2019).

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Every city has its own story. Banaras, Lucknow, Kolkata and Gaya-these cities are well known for music as well as Hindustani Classical Music. Banaras is the place of Gandharva and Kinnar. So, it was very obvious that exclusive kind of Music practiced there. A Guru-Sishya Parampara has been continued in Banaras, Gharana culture keeps a mark in Indian Music, greatest compositions were created there, not only vocal Gharana, there is Tabla Gharana also, Sarangi has its own tune in Banaras. A community, a 'Muhalla' of Musicians is still in Banaras and 'Samajhdar' audience is also there (Kaur, Narain, 2015). In all these Tawaif community stood brightly, enlightened and competed with others male singers or Ustads and Pandits. There were three divisions of Tawaifs in Banaras-Gandharva, Raamjani and Gaunaharin. This division was done before 19th century. Gandharva-these Tawaif class performed in particular Mehefil of a particular person, Raamjani-they performed Sangeet and Nritya both in Mehefils, Gaunharin-they were older Tawaifs who performed in Marriage ceremony only. Tawaifs who were placed lower in their category like- Baisi, Raamjani and Sahban, they were skilled musicians, but they had no right to choose their patron, though they performed Thumri as well as Tappa, other semi-classical forms and also folk songs. They performed as a singer in Parsi Theatre. Tawaifs of Banaras were actually great practitioners of popular Indian culture. Mehefils of old Banars were ornamented by three groups of Baijis-Gazra, Jhumar and Dungal. In Gazra, two Baijis performed, In Jhumar, four or five Baijis performed and in Dungal, there was a completion held between several Baijis, this was called 'Prashnik' in old days (Kaur, Narain 2015).

Damodar Gupta, Mantri of Raja Jaydeep of Kashmir, wrote a book named 'Kutnimatm' where he remarked about Kotha of Banaras, he wrote that many Tawaifs from Kashmir came in Banaras to perform in Mehefils and stayed there permanently. So, it is very natural that another style or 'Gayaki' was added in Banarasi Music. Not only Raja of Kashmir but also Maharaja of Jodhpur, Nawab of Rampur, Maharani of Gwalior -they all were great patron of Banaras Music and artists. Twaif of Banaras were invited them (Nagar, 2016). In cultural elite class, it was more often term-'Ganeywali' than Tawaif, the singing women, in Sanskrit they were 'Gaayika'. In 1827, the famous Shayr, Mirza Ghalib wrote about Muzra and Mehefils and how not only the male person but also the whole family took relishment of their music and dance. Wooden 'Jharokha' was made for the female members of the family which was made specially to enjoy the Mehefil. Female members of the family would not allow in open function of Tawaifs. No one could see the female members of the family but they could see everything in Mehefil. Old 'Havelis' of Banaras are carried the style of Jharokha still now (Mishra, 2018).

In Banaras mostly celebrated Tawaifs came from Gandharva family. The tradition of Tawaifs in cultural history of India is two and a half to three thousand years old. Awadh, Banaras and Muzaffarpur were most popular places of Tawaifs. Gandharva, Kinnar and Dereydar were defined as high-class artists of high culture Banaras. In Banaras particular some places are marked for the Tawaif culture, such as- Chowk, Dal Mandi, Nariyal Bazar, Raja Darwaza and Asa Bhariron. Many wealthy and renowned Tawaifs were existed there. The influence of Tawaifs generated to elite class to common mass. There was many 'Mujrawali' in these places and Tawaifs led a life with respect. They had right to choose their patron also. They were trained by Ustads. These women singers and dancers owned huge property in these areas of Banaras. Their Kothas were cultural institution also where not only patrons, but also musicians and literary persons were regular visitors. A Thumri singer, specially a Tawaif and her performance was judged by her talent, quality and ability also. They were judged by their gesture, posture, voice modulation, by their 'Abhinaya'-the facial expression. And these all things are attached with Bol-Banao Thumri. Indian Classical Music is enriched by North-Indian Classical Music where Khayal singers had a great contribution. But on the other side Bol-Banao Thumri of Banaras led a strong genre of music and it was happened by Tawaifs. Except Thumri they also performed Dadra, Ghazals and many folk songs with their mesmerizing voice. Besides music and dance, they practiced 'ilme majlisi' or knowledge of social etiquette, manners and also literature, politics (Dewan, 2010).

Colonial India kept a deep impact on Tawaif practitioners. They were treated differently; they became national embarrassment. Banaras was no exception. British was worried about the movement of these performing women, they called them 'singing dancing girl'. From 1857, Sepoy Mutiny, their contribution for their motherland was unforgettable. These brave Tawaifs involved directly and indirectly with Indian Freedom Movement and freedom fighters also. Vidyadhari Bai, Rasoolan Bai, Lalita Bai, and of course Dhaneshi Bai who was brave hearted and gave shelter to Chandra Sekhar Azad, the great freedom fighter. She lived behind the police station and no one curious about a Tawaif except her performance. These names were not only famous as Tawaif of Banaras, they were also known for their contribution in Freedom Movement (Bhardwaj, 2020). Here it is very legitimate to say about their various composition of patriotic song. They continued their performance with patriotic song as a protest against British rule. Banaras and its Tawaifs were renowned for patriotism. A huge transformation of cultural field of Banaras took place during colonialism in India. British Raj and political changes in India were a threat for these Tawaifs. Purity Movement, Anti Nautch Movement kept an impact on Tawaif culture. But without these performing women, the tradition of music culture was not possible (Gulati, 2015).

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The nectar of art is dissolved here. It was opulence of arts and Gangotri of literature. People used to go Kotha of Banaras to learn etiquette, decency, and way of behaving, manners. This was the place of poets like Jaishankar Prasad and Bhartendu. Every Chowk, Gali, Muhalla was enchanted with Thumri, Sarangi, Ghungru and the essence of Champa-Jasmine flowers and perfumes with Rasik of Banarasi Music and voice of Tawaifs. It was like a cave of Music where Tawaifs were the rulers. Banaras was the place of Bharat Ratna Bismillah Khan. Sehenai Nawaz Ustad Bismillah Khan used to say that if there were no brothels and courtesans, there would not have been Bismillah Bismillah today. He believed that the quality of singing was at the brothel which was not found anywhere else. Brijbala of Muzaffarpur changed the life of Bismillah. Brijbala, who was a Tawaif met with Khan Sahib in a gathering, after that Brijbala composed the song "Dil ka khilona hi toot gaya" in the film of 'Goonj uthi Sehenai, by Bharat Vyas. This film made Khan Sahib immortal for his Sehenai. Khan Sahib used to say that he did lot of Riyaz with Brijbala. He practiced her Bandish in his Sehenai. But it is the fact that Brijbala got lost in the darkness of oblivion (Sharma, 2021).

A city where music can find out its soul, there music birds lost their shelter and forgot how to fly with music. Sinha (2015) beautifully expressed "That autumn, I heard many songs of loss and love. They were songs of an era lost to us; yet they were sung and were hard to forget. And it was only here that they spoke of the Thumris and Kajris. The Mehefil was no more. But it was enough that somebody had come to listen. Many tears fell. They neither gathered them nor hid them. They let the voice interrupted by the tears. They said it added to its melancholy. It sounded like muffled rain at night, heard from a room, and coming through corridors, and echoing through the empty streets as it entered everywhere."

Music is soul of life where Banaras has its own treasure of Music. The changing scenario of Hindustani Classical and semi-classical music, sometime achieve new things and sometime lost many precious things. Banaras was the witness of Bhakti movement to Indian freedom movement, this old city was the place of Gharana or Guru-Shisya Parampara, Banaras saw the development of new genre of music, the classical and semi-classical both forms are stayed side by side here from the old era. Decay after decay Music-Dance-Poetry was practiced here but some were forgotten by the time flow or may be by negligence. Still today the buzzing sound of 'Lagata karejwa ma chot, phool gendwa na maar' is wondering here and there of Banaras. The voices which enchanted and made sleepless everyone are forgotten. Those women performers of Banaras made a few genres and new journey was started with them. May be the Tawaif culture of Banaras is gone but the fragrance of music of those Divas disperses everywhere.

"Saiyan rooth gaye, main manati rahi...Shyam jaane lage, main bulaati rahi..."-melancholic sound recalls the passing culture, performances, artists still today. It is true that nothing is permanent but music alone can convey the tradition and carries the nostalgic era of women artists. Whenever the discussion about Indian Music is raised, the Banaras music culture is always reminded about Tawaifs like Husna Bai, Myna Bai, Shiv Kunwar Bai, Shehzadi, Badi Moti Bai, Janki Bai, Jaddan Bai, Rasoolan Bai, Vidyadhari Bai. Through singing Tawaifs expressed their feelings; their gratitude, their dedication always found a way by which they can take a pleasure of life. They all know that what their destiny was; they know there will be no one stand and give adieu though they sang with full throat -"Kaise kaate mori bari Umariya"(Sinha,2014).

Dewan (2019) beautifully explained how Banaras culture was influenced by these talented women performers "The Tawaifs, their accompanist musicians and the audience virtually camped in Babu Purushottom Lall's haveli through the period of the festivities. Going home at day break after performing through the night, tawaifs would return a few hours later in time for the Bhairavi ki Mehefil, a music soiree unique to Banaras and its cultural hinterland, dedicated to song in Bhairavi, a raga loved by all for its sweetness and poignancy. Though a morning raga, by convention, Bhairavi can be performed at any time of the day. It is also the raga most performed to bring a mehefil to a close."

CONCLUSION

Musical surroundings may make a person not only knowledgeable, talented, extraordinary but also music can make a person beautiful from both inner and outer side. Every lyric of Thumri or Dadra or Chaiti, Kajri or other semi-classical forms got a new definition when it was presented by these women performers with their beautiful persona and voice. Dewan defines "Freshly bathed, with flowers in their still-damp hair and paan sweetening breath and staining their lips a becoming red, the tawaifs would sing mostly Thumri and Dadra, and appropriate seasonal songs like hori, chaiti and kajri in Bhairavi. From the spiritually imbued 'Babul mora naihar chhuto jaye; My arm-band keeps getting undone, the tawaifs cast a magic spell with their music."

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