



Panel's title : Dancing Girls and Courtesans: Historicizing a Fixation in South Asia

Coordinator (Affiliation, University...): Dr. Nida Sajid (Georg-August-University Goettingen)

Language : Français / English : English

Topics : Gender ; History ; Literature ; Politics ; Culture

Panel presentation :

Once considered valuable adjuncts to elite social communities all over India because of the performance traditions they cultivated and the customs of courtesy and religion they practised, tawaifs and devadasis (jointly called courtesans) have figured consistently, often prominently, in histories and private correspondence as well as in South Asian literary and popular cultural texts for more than 200 years. As women who occupied space and sometimes wielded influence in the Indian public sphere from the 17th to the 20th century, courtesans, it could be argued, contributed to the historical consolidation of modernity in India. And yet, throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they were subjected to a multi-pronged campaign to marginalize them, one that sought to classify them and their performances as 'obscene' and so outside the norms of 'respectable', modern society. But this attempt to suppress their music and dance traditions and exclude them from the public sphere, paradoxically, put tawaifs and devadasis at the forefront of debates and controversies among social reformers, colonial officials, and middle-class (male and female) nationalists, according them a centrality in colonial and nationalist political thought, legal and political policies, and the construction of modern gender imperatives for women and girls. The papers in our panel will examine the representation of specific courtesans in terms of their own historical contexts, discuss their contributions to the art, dance, and history of modern India, and theorize their continuing relevance to us in the 21st century.

Key words : Gender ; Sexuality ; History ; South Asia ; Courtesans

Participants :

1) **Name(s) (Affiliation, University...)** : Dr. Teresa Hubel (Huron University College)

Communication's title : Begum Samru: Confounding Imperial Rulership and Queering History

Language : Français / English : English

Presentation :

Surely one of the most remarkable figures involved in the fierce militaristic politics that characterized the late 18th century in north India, Begum Samru was a historical personage rare for her time and for ours. A woman ruler initially described in glowing terms by a number of British authors, Begum Samru was said to have wielded her authority with greater skill and compassion than that possessed by her rival male contemporaries, including even the officials of the British East India Company. However, in spite of this earlier general approbation, by the mid-19th century, when British control of north India was consolidated, the Begum begins to get represented through the trope of the Oriental despot, though she continues to be a subject of some astonishment for British travellers and writers, and a good deal of their interest lay in their assumption that she had originally been a 'dancing girl'. Using insights from queer historiography, I will explore the implications of this representation in published and unpublished British texts, paying attention not only to the significance of the Begum's supposed origins as a 'nautch girl' or courtesan, but also attempting to understand the scholarly usefulness of recovering such a figure.



Key words : Begum Samru; British East India Company ; Historiography; Nautch girls; Women Rulers

2) Name(s) (Affiliation, University...) : Dr. Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fras (Jagiellonian University)

Communication's title : Courtesans in Service of the State – Begum Hazrat Mahal and Mah Laqa Bai

Language : Français / English : English

Presentation :

At the courts of Hindu and Muslim rulers, in numerous kingdoms that existed in the Indian Subcontinent before the advent of the British conquerors, the courtesans were an influential female elite, recognized as the preservers and performers of refined Indo-Muslim culture. Well lettered in Arabic, Persian and Urdu literature, trained to high standards in South Asian musical tradition and performing arts, they made a significant contribution to Hindustani music, dance and creative writing (especially Urdu poetry), and later also to theatre and film. But the courtesans not only sustained the principles, manners, and uniqueness of Indo-Muslim society and its traditions. Contrary to other women of their times, having often achieved considerable financial and social independence, they had open access to the public sphere and most important political figures. In result, many of them more or less openly influenced shaping the policy and affairs of the states they lived in. In the presentation the subject of courtesans' public service will be discussed with special emphasis on the activities of Begum Hazrat Mahal from Lucknow and Mah Laqa Bai from Hyderabad.

Key words : Begum Hazrat Mahal; Mah Laqa Bai; Politics and Public Sphere ; Literature and Performing Arts ; Indo-Muslim Culture

3) Name(s) (Affiliation) : Dr Lata Singh (Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Communication's title : Foregrounding Courtesan's Lives: Problematizing the Question of Marriage, Sexuality and Labour

Language : Français / English : English

Presentation :

Existing studies on courtesans in India underscore the erosion of their cultural power and identity as artists, and also their stigmatization as 'loose' women during the colonial rule. Courtesan's representation-narrative is often mired in the discourse of prostitution. Existing writings reflect uneasiness around this historical trajectory of courtesans from artists to the category of prostitutes. The anxiety around sexuality pits the prostitute as the other of courtesans. However, the contemporary struggles of sex workers and bar dance girls are throwing up questions which makes one critically revisit the construction of the courtesan figure. These questions foreground the lives of courtesans, along with sex workers and bar dancers, to critique the patriarchal institution of marriage, family, domesticity and sexuality. In fact, one of the famous progressive writers, Premchand, in his novel *Sevasadan*, has critiqued the institution of marriage through courtesans' lives. Marriage is talked about as a commercial transaction with a single client/*dukan* (warehouse) vis-à-vis the courtesan with many clients in this novel. Being professional women, the courtesans were in the bracket of highest tax payer during colonial period. By foregrounding the



courtesans' lives, this paper problematizes the question of sexuality, labour, marriage and family.

Key words : Family ; Labour ; Sexuality ; Economy; Professional Women

4) Name(s) (Affiliation) : Dr. Nida Sajid (Georg-August-University Goettingen)

Communication's title : Munni Begum: Defining Virtue and Corruption in Legal Discourse

Language : Français / English : English

Presentation :

This paper examines how the prosecutors structured their impeachment case against Warren Hastings, the first governor general of India, during the late 18th century through a largely fictitious story of Munni Begum's life as a dancing girl and a prostitute. Munni Begum was the second wife of Mir Jafar, the first native 'puppet' ruler instated by the British East India Company in 1757. In order to create a narrative of her availability for both political and sexual intimacy to Hastings, the prosecutors portrayed Munni Begum as a courtesan who defied the norms of gendered domesticity to remain in close proximity to masculine centers of power. The arguments during the trial bring into play how the *Zenana* shares a vexed relationship with colonial interpretations of Islamic laws in India. Through Munni Begum's case, I demonstrate how the formulation of the "*Zenana* Doctrine" during the trial became one of the founding principles on the basis of which inheritance law was constructed and within which certain individuals were endowed with rights and privileges. I argue that this case further reveals the modalities through which social hierarchies were scripted onto women's bodies, and, in turn, how these inscriptions defined ownership and privacy of property.

Key words : Munni Begum ; Zenana ; The Trial of Warren Hastings ; Gender and Law; Commerce