

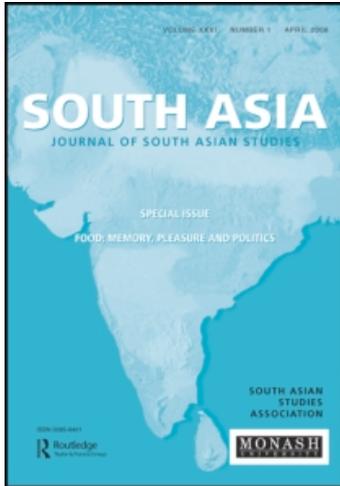
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Tawa'if, Military Musicians and Shi'a Ideology in Pre-Rebellion Lucknow

Adrian McNeil

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Lucknow occupies a particularly poignant place in the musical imagination of North India. A city with a proud cultural history, Lucknow in the first half of the nineteenth century nurtured an explosion of innovations in vocal music, instrumental music and dance whose effects were felt well beyond the Awadh region. Memories of this sublime period of creativity are still today capable of evoking a potent sense of nostalgia amongst connoisseurs. That such memories so passionately endure is testimony to the special place that the arts occupied in the life of that city when it was the capital of a kingdom.¹

Memories of Lucknow's pre-rebellion cultural heritage are nowadays often recalled through its *tawa'if bazi* or 'courtesan culture'. This heritage has been carried into the present through a bevy of films, stories, anecdotes, social

¹ The political formation and religious orientation of post-Mughal Awadh has been well documented. See Richard B. Barnett, *North India Between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals and the British 1720–1801* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); J.R.I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722–1859* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Michael H. Fisher *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British and the Mughals* (Riverdale Md.: Riverdale Co., 1987); Violette Graff, *Lucknow: Memories of a City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, the British, and the City of Lucknow* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) amongst others. For discussion of the city's cultural life see Banmali Tandon, *The Architecture of Lucknow and its Dependencies 1722–1856: A Descriptive Inventory and Analysis of Nawabi Types* (Lucknow: Vikas Publishing House, 2001); Neeta Das, *The Architecture of Imambaras* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); Amir Hasan, *Palace Culture of Lucknow* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1983); Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (trans. and eds E.S. Harcourt and Fakir Hussain) (London: Paul Elek, 1975); and Hakim Mohammad Karam Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries' (trans. Govind Vidyarthi) in *Sangeet Natak Akademi Bulletin* ([1856] 11–12 April 1959) amongst others.

customs, linguistic idioms, images, and music and dance repertoires. A number of studies have also brought to life the culturally-complex and socially-hierarchical world of these courtesans and their significant contributions to the cultural heritage of North India.² Generally the importance of the contribution made by women performers to the development of Hindustani music has been gaining interest, and long overdue recognition.³ Nevertheless, articulation of this recognition has been hampered by the marginal position assigned to the *tawa'if* in mainstream history.

This paper explores three aspects of Lucknow's *tawa'if bazi* that are generally not a part of either musical or historical discussions. One of these concerns the disenfranchisement of the regional military labour market in, and around, Awadh in the late eighteenth century and how this might be connected to a subsequent, and significant, increase in *tawa'if* activity in Lucknow. Another deals with the nature of the social connections between the *tawa'if* and her musical accompanists. A further point involves the role of *tawa'if* as active agents in the promotion and spread of the Shi'a ideology promulgated by Awadh's political administration. My aim in raising these considerations is to further understanding of the nuances of Lucknow's *tawa'if bazi*—how it came about and the influence it had on the development of contemporary Hindustani music and dance.

Lucknow's *Tawa'if Bazi*

Tawa'if is an open-ended term which historically has signified a broad spectrum of professional female performers ranging from wealthy courtesans in the harem of the Nawab to destitute prostitutes in the bazaars on the fringes of the city. The range of meanings *tawa'if* can signify has determined that distinctions between this and cognate terms such as *baiji*, *takahi*, *nachni*, *randi* and so on, can be blurred depending on context. Nevertheless a common link between them is the significant role music and dance play in the course of the professional lives of these women.

² For a general discussion see Mirza Jaffar Hussain, 'Qadeem Lakhnau ki Twaifen', in *Aajkal* (May 1977) (in Hindi); Veena Talwar Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow', in Violette Graff, *Lucknow: Memories of a City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.136–54; and Joep Bor, 'The Voice of the Sarangi: An Illustrated History of Bowing in India', in *National Centre for the Performing Arts Quarterly Journal*, Vol.15, nos.3 & 4 (Sept., Dec. 1986) & Vol.16 no.1 (Mar. 1987), pp.5–182.

³ See for example Reba Muhury, *Thumri O Baijis* (Calcutta: Pratibhas, 1986) (in Bengali); Malka Pukhraj, *Song Sung True: A Memoir* (trans. and ed. Saleem Kidwai) (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003); and Amelia Maciszewski, 'Nayika ki Yadgar: North Indian Women Musicians and their Words', in Amlan Das Gupta (ed.) *Music and Modernity: North Indian Classical Music in the an Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Kolkata: Thema, 2007), pp.156–219.

Historical narratives on Lucknow's *tawa'if* have usually focused on the lives of those patronised by the political and wealthy elite of the city. Such *tawa'if* were normally employed either directly by the court or in respectable *kothas* (salons or bordellos) run by *chaudhrayans* (head courtesans) and tended to be highly proficient in the performance of dance, music, poetry, conversation and etiquette. Indeed before the annexation of Lucknow by the British in 1856, these *kothas* were regarded as important institutions in the cultural life of the city. Oral histories testify that the house of the *chaudhrayan* was often the chief meeting place for the most important musicians in the city and those visiting from elsewhere;⁴ while some *tawa'if* became so well known for their sophisticated and refined manners, conversation and cultural acumen, that the wealthy of the city sent their sons to be educated by them in social skills. Respectable outside women or *khangi* also used these *kothas* for their own liaisons.⁵ Some *tawa'if* in surrounding rural areas were so valued by their *zamindar* patrons that they were assigned their own lands.⁶ Given the associations of this cadre of *tawa'if* with the elite public and cultural life of the city it is no surprise to find that their lives are on public record and have inspired memoirs by commentators such as Sharar and Imam.

However much less is known about the greater number of *tawa'if* in Lucknow who worked in less salubrious locations such as the *kothas* located on the fringes of the city, which by and large catered for a lower socio-economic clientele. Nevertheless, Sharar does list three types of *tawa'if* belonging to these *kothas* whom he describes as the 'queens of the bazaar'. They are identified as *kanchani*, *chuna wali* and *nagarnt*. He goes on to state that the 'Kanchan were from Delhi and Panjab and mostly worked as prostitutes, the Nagarnt were from Gujarat while the Chuna Walis are not associated with any one region' and that these three groups were equally renowned for prostitution as for musical or dance expertise.⁷ As we shall see, though, these were not the only communities to which Lucknow's *tawa'if* belonged.

Inside Lucknow regional differences were blurred. The vast proportion of *tawa'if* living in the city professed Shi'ism. Cole believes that the majority of

⁴ See also Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, p.139.

⁵ Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow', p.140.

⁶ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722–1859*, p.88.

⁷ Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, p.146. In Rajasthan, the Kanchan community is described as one of the sub-groups of the Brahmin sub-caste Kalawant, whose members were hereditary occupational music specialists. Kanchani signifies the women who belonged to this sub-caste. See M.A. Sherring, *The Tribes and Castes of Rajasthan, together with Descriptions of Sacred and Celebrated Places of Historical Value in Rajasthan* ([London: 1881] New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975), p.200.

Lucknow's *tawa'if* were originally low-caste Hindus, often from the ranks of widows, who had converted to Shi'ism once in Lucknow. Up to 85 percent of *tawa'if* in Lucknow, he estimates, were Shi'a by birth or conversion.⁸

A further problem in defining the community of *tawa'if* in Lucknow is the similar role played by the *domni*, another category of women entertainers active during this period. Differences between *tawa'if* and *domni* were not merely limited to the former term being Persian in origin and the latter North Indian. Qureshi differentiates the two also on the grounds of performance practice; where *tawa'if* were known to sing and dance in front of both men and women, *domni* only performed for women.⁹ Sharar supports this interpretation. Performances by *domni*, he says,

... became the most important feature of all wedding celebrations and so fascinated the ladies of wealthy families that there was no household that did not employ a troupe of *domnis* ... the *domnis* themselves were averse to dancing and singing before a male audience.¹⁰

There are a couple of points worth noting here. Firstly, while an occupational demarcation between *tawa'if* and *domni* may have existed in Lucknow, it does not always appear to have always been consistently observed at different times in other parts of the country. Secondly, unlike the women who performed for men, the *domni* were not engaged in prostitution.

Beyond this incomplete sketch, the only thing we can say for sure is that the *tawa'if bazi* in Lucknow embraced a range of ethnicities and caste backgrounds, social and musical attainments, professional activities and clientele. Broadly *tawa'if* can be divided into those who belonged to castes/fraternities (*biradaris*) of hereditary occupational music specialists (such as the *kanchani*) and those from outside of this milieu (destitute widows from regional areas). They can also be differentiated with respect to the location of their work, the clientele they served, the sophistication of their etiquette skills, their performance training and whether the primary emphasis of their professional lives was soliciting or performance.

⁸ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722–1859*, p.87.

⁹ Regula Burkhardt Qureshi, 'Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shia Majlis', in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol.25, no.1 (1981), p.46.

¹⁰ Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, p.145.

Performance Practice

Proficiency in music, dance and poetry were essential skills for *tawa'if* because performance was an integral part of their professional lives. The *talim* (systematic training) and performance capabilities of a *tawa'if* could be audibly discerned in the types of music and dance she performed and the skill she displayed in rendering them. While some *tawa'if* survived more through prostitution than performance, and used only simple regional forms of music and dance to solicit clients, others were extensively trained in 'classical' forms of music and dance, which as Neuman notes, gave them considerable leverage to negotiate with their patrons:

If a tawaif has learned from a reputable Ustad ... then she can establish her own identity as being primarily a vocalist by profession. If she cannot claim to be a disciple, then her reputation will be that of an entertainer, which is subordinate to her primary identity as a courtesan, if not a common prostitute.¹¹

Imam collectively groups the musical genres performed by *tawa'if* in Lucknow under three headings: *thumri*, *ragini* and *dhun*.¹² *Dhun*, which literally means melody, is a regional tune. *Ragini* is used here by Sharar as a collective term denoting what are commonly known today as 'light' genres such as *dadra* or the seasonal songs of *kajri*, *sawan*, *chaiti*, *hori* and so on set to popular *raginis* (the more lyrical 'feminine' *ragas*) such as *bhairavi*, *khamaj*, *kafi*, *pilu*, *sohni*, etc.¹³ *Thumri* though is the most iconic form associated with Lucknow's *tawa'if* and requires some more explanation.

Various forms of *thumri* have been in existence since at least the thirteenth century.¹⁴ But as with many cultural and social conventions, a distinctly Lucknow version (*purab baj*) evolved during the nineteenth century, and this is still popular today.¹⁵ This involves two distinct forms of *thumri*,

¹¹ Daniel M. Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1980), p.101.

¹² Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries', p.23.

¹³ Prior to the introduction of Bhatkhande's *thaat* system for the classification of *ragas* in the early twentieth century, they were classified according to an earlier system based on a type of aesthetic 'genealogy' in which gender was an important marker. See for example Faqirullah, *Tarjum-i-Manakuthala and Risala Ragadarpan* (annot. and ed. Shahab Sarmadee) (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts, 1996), p.15ff.

¹⁴ Shatrughan Shukla, *Thumri ki Utpatti, Vikas aur Shailiyaan* (in Hindi) (New Delhi: Delhi University, 1983).

¹⁵ According to Shukla *thumri* grew out of regional genres such as *hori*, *rasiya*, *sawan*, *malhar* and *led*, which were sung in a number of languages and dialects from what is now western Uttar Pradesh, Bundelkhand and Braj. *Ibid.*, pp.277–8.

namely *bolbanao ki thumri* and *bolbant ki thumri*, also known as *bandish ki thumri*.¹⁶

The artistic training of the best *tawa'if* was a serious and rigorous affair which usually started around the age of five and continued for ten years or more. This *talim* was generally imparted by males, who were either family members or came from the same community as the *tawa'if*. This practice is still evident, for example, amongst the *mirasi* community of Old Delhi,¹⁷ and the Shi'a Kanjar community in Hiramundi, Lahore.¹⁸ Occasionally some *tawa'if* were taught by well-known *ustads* employed by the courts, who belonged to hereditary lineages of music specialists such as *dharis*, *kalawants* and *qawwal-bacheche*.

Performances of *bolbanao ki thumri* and *bandish ki thumri* were accompanied by an ensemble of three to four male musicians which featured at least one melodic instrument (e.g. *sarangi*, *sitar* or harmonium) and a percussion instrument, usually the *tabla*. In these cases, it was usual for *tawa'if* to sing and perform *abhinaya* (stylised miming) in *bolbanao ki thumri*, and/or to dance while they sang *bandish ki thumri* or the *laggi* section of the *bolbanao ki thumri*. This dance was either in, or influenced by, the style and repertoire of the *kathak* form of 'classical' dance.

The musical repertoire of *tawa'if* could embrace a range of vocal genres. These varied from simple regional tunes, *dhuns*, to the more formalised melodic structures of *chaitis*, *kajris*, *horis* set to *raginis*, and finally to the highly-sophisticated *thumri*. A number of points of difference between these genres can be noted. Of these three types, *thumri* has the greatest scope for improvisation and interpretation, the greatest formalisation of melodic and poetic structures, the greatest emphasis on melodic material over text, and more nuanced exploitation of rhythmic complexity. Generally, too, it requires more specialist training and skill. *Thumri* has the closest artistic and hereditary connection with the *kathak* dance form.

The *tawa'if* who received *talim* from court musicians and other specialists in classical music inherited a strong artistic foundation and many of them went on to achieve renown as performers of *thumri* and *kathak*. Among the most well known of such *tawa'if* during the reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (1847–56)

¹⁶ The history, structure and performance practice of these two forms have been well documented by Shukla, *ibid*; Projesh Banerjee, *Dance in Thumri* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publishers, 1986); and Peter Manuel, *Thumri in Historical and Stylistic Perspectives* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985) amongst others.

¹⁷ Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*, p.101.

¹⁸ *Dancing Girls of Lahore*, dir. Ahmad Jamal, First Take Limited Films, 1991.

were Rahim Bai of Charkhari, Luttan Bai, Dhanna Bai, Jai Singh Bai and Khursid Bai.¹⁹ Outside of *thumri*, *tawa'if* of this calibre could, and did, of course, perform other genres, including the *raginis* and *dhuns* mentioned by Imam.

Questions concerning the numbers of *tawa'if* who were professionally active in Lucknow before the rebellion, where they came from, and how they got there, are not likely ever to be resolved with any certainty. Despite the oft-quoted romanticised story of the classic Urdu-language novel *Umrao Jan Ada* about a *tawa'if* kidnapped as a young girl from a village near Faizabad, sold off to a *kotha* in Lucknow and then initiated in the ways of the profession and patronised by the wealthy, it is more likely that financial hardship was the motivating factor for most *tawa'if* who came to Lucknow.²⁰ As discussed below, such hardship was widespread throughout the region in the wake of the social upheaval caused by the dismantling of the military labour market of the neighbouring province of Rohilkhand in 1775—and subsequently that of the entire province of Awadh in 1801—by the East India Company.

Links between regional military labour markets and the conditions of *tawa'if* in Lucknow are perhaps not immediately obvious. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some interesting connections. Firstly, there is the fact that the local militia forces were major employers of *dharis* and *doms* (the region's hereditary military musicians). Secondly, there is a possible correlation between the political and economic hardship and instability caused by the wholesale withdrawal of patronage for regional militias and armies and their support networks, and the increase in numbers of *dharis*, *doms* and *tawa'if* subsequently noted in Lucknow. A further link can be established between these disenfranchised communities of *dharis* and *doms*, and the musicians who accompanied *tawa'if* in Lucknow.

Dharis

Dharis are important to this discussion because they were the single largest category of musical accompanists to *tawa'if* in nineteenth-century Lucknow. (The contemporary commentator, Imam, mentions 'thousands'.²¹) The musical connection between this category of musician and *tawa'if* is also further confirmed by Imam when he states that 'most of the *dharis* earn their living by

¹⁹ Banerjee, *Dance in Thumri*, p.23.

²⁰ Also see Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle as Resistance', p.142.

²¹ Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries', p.24.

accompanying dancing girls'.²² Later in the nineteenth century, a colonial ethnographer recorded a 'common proverb' which, while it derived from a region further west, nevertheless identifies the common bond between *dharis* and *randis* (prostitutes).

Randi ki kamai, ya khae dharhi [dhari], ya khae gari (The prostitutes' earnings go to the pimp [*dhari*] or cabman).²³

At this point the term *dhari* requires further explanation, for it has two broad applications. To ethnographers it commonly signifies a Rajput caste of hereditary occupational music specialists. But the term was also used specifically by the Mughal and Awadhi administrations to denote military musicians.²⁴ Of these the second usage is more relevant to our discussion.

Musicians have long been an integral part of the military machinery in North India.²⁵ Musicians were employed to entertain the soldiers as they marched, and to raise their spirits before battle. During the Mughal period whole communities of *sarangi*-playing military musicians employed by the Mughals resided in towns such as Kirana, Moradabad and Bareilly.²⁶ Again in the Awadhi period, ethnically-diverse music specialists were a valued part of the Nawab's military forces. Likewise, the military labour market of Awadh at large was composed of a multitude of ethnic groups: Bundelas, Baksariyas, Bhojpuris, Baghchotis, Pathans and Ujjainis, amongst others.²⁷

Allied British and Awadh armies defeated the upstart neighbouring Pathan state of Rohilkhand in 1774. Awadh immediately incorporated that province.²⁸ Subsequently the extensive patchwork of militia groups and their support networks spread throughout Rohilkhand was disbanded, resulting in great social upheaval on the western borders of Awadh. This situation was intensified

²² *Ibid.*, p.18.

²³ W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of North Western India, Vol.II* (New Delhi: Cosmos Publications, [1897] 1974), pp.276–7.

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of pre-modern hereditary castes of musical specialists see Adrian McNeil, 'Mirasis: Some Thoughts on Hereditary Musicians in Hindustani Music', in *Context*, Vol.32 (2008), pp.45–58.

²⁵ See for example descriptions of military musicians in S.K Bhakari, *Indian Warfare: An Appraisal of Strategy and Tactics of War in Early Medieval Period* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1980); Bimal Kanti Majumder, *The Military System in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960); and Abul Fazl, *The Ain-i-Akbari* (trans. H. Blochmann) (New Delhi: Aadiesh Book Depot, 1948).

²⁶ Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*, pp.125 & 161.

²⁷ Dirk A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.187.

²⁸ See Jos J.L. Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, c. 1710–1780* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), for the history and political significance of Rohilkhand in the region.

in 1801 when Awadh out-sourced the military requirements of the state to the East India Company. Not long after, the formidable state army of Awadh, itself comprised overwhelmingly of local mercenary forces in the province, was disbanded. Thousands lost their principal source of livelihood.²⁹

Taking into consideration the military labour market as a whole, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many people in total in the region may have been affected by the withdrawal of its traditional sources of military patronage. Nonetheless, two indirect observations may be cited which provide some indication of the size of the phenomenon. Kolff writes that before the demilitarisation of Awadh, the Unnao and Rae Bareilly districts alone supported around 50,000 troops,³⁰ while Bayly suggests there were more than 100,000 mercenaries and militia residing in the neighbouring state of Rohilkhand. All told, there could conceivably have been up to half a million men demobilised.³¹

The 'closed shop' approach followed by the East India Company to the recruitment of personnel precluded most of these disenfranchised mercenaries from enlisting in what had become the sole remaining military force of any significance in North India east of the Sutlej. The rapid cultural and economic expansion of Lucknow which made it a boom town in the early nineteenth century, also made it an important destination for these displaced soldiers and their ancillaries. The city's *kothas* were obvious employment destinations for the *dharis*.³²

Historical sources on the *sarod* (a short-necked plucked lute) describe how these musicians' ancestors (lauded *mirasis* belonging to the Pathan community)³³ came to India from eastern Afghanistan as mercenaries in the early eighteenth century, securing employment with the Mughal army as soldiers, singers and instrumentalists.³⁴ In the early eighteenth century these musicians established

²⁹ P.J. Marshall, 'Economic and Political Expansion: The Case of Oudh', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.9, no.4 (1975), p.467. In the 1830s a common maxim for these personnel in North India apparently was: 'Company ke amal main, kuchh rozgar nahin hai, i.e. there is no employment in the Company's dominion', quoted in Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*, p.187.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.187-8.

³¹ Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770-1870*, p.219.

³² Daniel Neuman, 'Country Musicians and their City Cousins: The Social Organization of Music Transmission in India', in *IMS, Report of the Twelfth Congress* (Berkeley: 1977), p.607; and Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*, p.133.

³³ Adrian McNeil, *Inventing the Sarod: A Cultural History* (Kolkata: Seagull, 2004) p.21.

³⁴ Umar Khan, 'Sarodiyon ki Gharane', *Swarn Jayant Smarik* (in Hindi) (Lucknow: Bhatkhande Hindustani Sangeet Mahavidyalaya, 1976), n.p.g.

mohallas around the towns of Shahjahanpur, Rampur, Bulandshahr, Najibabad and Muzzafarnagar in the province of Rohilkhand. The numbers of Pathan military musicians living in this region at that time has been estimated in the hundreds, if not thousands.³⁵ Oral histories describe how *sarodiyas* (who were subsumed under Lucknow's administrative rubric of *dhari*) would periodically visit Lucknow to work as musicians, with some eventually relocating there permanently. From these histories we come to know about the lives of Pathan mercenaries and musicians like Hussain Ali Khan (1752–1801) who belonged to one of the eleven *mohallas* of *sarodiyas* in Shahjahanpur, and also of his relative Karam Khan (1787–1850) who lived in Bugrasi village in the Bulandshahr district of Rohilkhand. Both of these third-generation Pathans from Afghanistan found work in the Mughal administration as mercenaries. After 1775 they turned to Lucknow to look for employment—like hundreds of other musicians in regional areas.³⁶

This and other migrations to Lucknow helped swell the city's population several-fold in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Llewellyn-Jones estimates that the city's population increased by about 50,000 (to 300,000) during the last quarter of the eighteenth century alone, mostly between 1775 and 1785.³⁷ Habib puts the population in 1799 at half a million, and in 1858 at a million.³⁸ The coincidence between the social upheaval in Rohilkhand and Awadh, brought about by the disenfranchisement of the local military labour market, and the rapid increase in the population of the regional capital, is tantalising. Such a connection would explain how the signification of *dhari* as a military musician in the administration of Lucknow also came to embrace the occupation of accompanist to *tawa'if* and *randis*.

In their role as accompanists and teachers to *tawa'if*, *dharis* also performed in *kothas*, the court and the homes of the wealthy. Highly proficient *dharis* would generally perform solo. The Pathan *sarod* player Dahajudaulah Dhari was one such virtuoso.³⁹ But the social status of these musicians as accompanists was largely tied to that of the *tawa'if* they accompanied. There was a wide range of levels. According to Imam some Lucknow *dharis* became so famous that they

³⁵ For a full account see McNeil, *Inventing the Sarod: A Cultural History*, p.48ff.

³⁶ Personal communication with direct descendants of these musician, Ustad Illyas Khan (1920–1989) and Ustad Irfan Khan (1956–). This is not to imply that these two musicians ever accompanied *tawa'if*. They are cited here as evidence of the migration of musicians to Lucknow during this time. See McNeil, *Inventing the Sarod: A Cultural History* for further details.

³⁷ Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, the British, and the City of Lucknow*, pp.12–13.

³⁸ Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.365.

³⁹ Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries', p.24.

‘were raised to the position of nobles’.⁴⁰ However he dismissed ‘the rest of the *dharis* in Lucknow’ as ‘crazy idiots fit only to teach dancing to *tawa’if*’.⁴¹

While *dharis* comprised by far the largest single group of musical accompanists to *tawa’if* in Lucknow, musicians from two other hereditary communities were also commonly associated with *tawa’if*, namely *doms* and *kalawants*. The difference between *doms* and *dharis* is not at all clear, however, beyond the obvious possibility that *dharis* accompanied *tawa’if* and *doms* accompanied *domni*. *Kalawants*, by comparison, were generally ranked—both musically and socially—higher than *dharis*. It is noteworthy that they were not normally associated with *tawa’if*.

There are many musicians that call themselves *Kalawants* but their claims are baseless. It is interesting to note that they do what is taboo in a *Kalawant* family i.e., they openly accompany the dancing girls, thus putting even the devil to shame.⁴²

That *kalawants* are not linked with *tawa’if* in other historical or geographical contexts, besides that of early nineteenth-century Lucknow, indicates the caste members resident in that city had found alternative sources of patronage. Otherwise why would they have risked transgressing the taboo attached to prostitution?

I now turn to some other interesting outcomes of the migration of musicians to Lucknow. Firstly because of the connection between *dharis* and *tawa’if*, it is likely that many women belonged to the same families and fraternities (*biradaris*) as their accompanists, and were forced to work as *tawa’if* in Lucknow by the desperation of their circumstances. Secondly, regional tunes, *dhuns*, became very popular in Lucknow and influenced different musical forms.⁴³ Along with the influx of musicians from the countryside, this large-scale migration would also have acted as a cultural conduit for a raft of *dhuns*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁴² Imam, ‘Melody through the Centuries’, p.14. Different groups of musicians from across the subcontinent have been described as *kalawants* and this is a term that contains an ensemble of connections and significations. One particular account describes *kalawants* as an endogamous community of Rajput hereditary musicians who in pre-modern times were often ranked amongst the most proficient musicians: ‘The *Kalawant* is more skilled than the *mirasi* (i.e. *dum*)’. See Denizil Ibbetson, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province, Vol.2* (comp. H.A. Rose) (Patiala: Languages Dept., [1883] 1970), p.119. However, their function and status within their traditional patronage network and structures clearly differed from descriptions of their professional activities in Lucknow.

⁴³ Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, p.148.

to find their way to Lucknow from Braj, Bundelkhand, Rohilkhand, Ujjain, Rewa and so on. The musical environment of Lucknow was certainly inspired and enriched by such material. And perhaps they contributed as well to the development of many regional *dhuns*, and more formalised genres such as *dadra*, *kajri* and *sawan* (for which Lucknow became famous). As the following discussion will explain, the popularity of regional *dhuns* became such that they even found their way into the devotional music of Lucknow's Shi'a culture.

Shi'a Ideology in Lucknow

The participation of *tawa'if* in the propagation of Shi'a religious culture in Awadh is an interesting offshoot—one we ought not to have expected, yet in some ways not all that surprising given that, as noted earlier, perhaps 85 percent of *tawa'if* in Lucknow were of the Shi'a faith. But this begs a preliminary question. Why did so many convert? For courtesans engaged in prostitution, one reason could have been the greater protection provided for Shi'a *tawa'if* under Awadhi law, which extended the rights of 'temporary marriage', *muta*, to the relationships between courtesans and their clients. However, links between courtesans and the promotion of Shi'a ideology become still clearer when considered in the context of the overall endeavour to establish Lucknow as the Shi'a capital of India.

Drawing upon their Safavid Persian heritage, the Nishapuri elite under Nawab Asafu'd-Dawlah set about encouraging the spread of Shi'a religion. The most important stage in this endeavour was evident in the instigation of the Friday congregational prayer in 1789. During the reign of Aurangzeb, all Shi'a ritual activity had been banned in the Mughal Empire.⁴⁴ What did the Awadhi ruling elite hope to gain by this policy? Most importantly, it offered a point of differentiation with the Sunni orthodox doctrine of the later Mughals and served as an expression of Awadhi semi-autonomy.⁴⁵ And as Sharar points out, on a personal level too the Awadhi nobility had good reason to want to differentiate themselves, on religious grounds, from the Mughals:

In Delhi, because the religion of the kings was Sunni, the Persians concealed many of their customs and so were unable to reveal themselves completely. The court of Avadh had emanated from Khurasan and adhered to the Shi'a faith. Hence the Persians here

⁴⁴ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722–1859*, p.143.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.173.

[in Lucknow] showed themselves in their true light. The more brilliantly they revealed themselves, the more their co-religionists at this court began to adopt their mannerisms and deportment. Thus Persian culture, which had been nurtured in the stately and majestic laps of the Sassanide and Abbaside dynasties, permeated the society of Lucknow.⁴⁶

As well, to successfully assert their sovereignty, the Awadhi nawabs needed a captive Shi'a *ulama* to invoke divine sanction, and so bestow moral legitimacy, on the enterprise:

The Nishapuris had little charisma of their own and the Usuli *ulama*, not themselves the holders of political power, developed enough charisma of their own among Shi'as to bestow a legitimacy on the Awadh ruler.⁴⁷

During the reign of Nawab Amjad Ali Shah (r. 1842–47) the Shi'a *ulama* sought to establish control over judicial functions within Awadh.⁴⁸ This development both reinforced the dominance of Shi'a doctrine amongst the ruling elite, and buttressed the authority of the state, which came to be seen 'as supernatural, as well as rational-juridical'.⁴⁹

And gradually the pervasive Shi'a influence penetrated other political and social circles in the state. Even some Sunnis outside the ruling circle adopted Shi'ism, or at least tried to incorporate a greater role for Ali and his family within their Sunni framework, in order, as Cole suggests, 'to bond themselves with the ruling house'.⁵⁰

At the same time Shi'a emblems became noticeably more visible. Sharar observes that with the rise of Shi'a ideology the number four, symbolising the four caliphs of the Sunni sect, fell out of favour and the number five, representing the *Panjtan*, the five members of the Prophet's family (and the core of the Shi'a faith), became dominant.⁵¹ This shift in iconography even affected headgear, where the four-cornered Mughal form was replaced with

⁴⁶ Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, pp.83–4.

⁴⁷ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722–1859*, p.189.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.197–8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.173.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁵¹ Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, p.172.

a five-cornered one, and architecture as evidenced in the construction of palaces such as the Panj Mahal (lit. five-storied palace).⁵² These efforts substantially contributed to the realisation of the ruling elite's desire to establish Lucknow as the Shi'a capital of India.⁵³

However, the most imposing and immediate physical manifestation of Shi'a orientation in Lucknow was the *imambara* style of building. The most outstanding example of this new form was the Bara Imambara, commissioned by Nawab Asafu'd-Dawlah who told his architects that he did not want a copy of any Mughal building.⁵⁴ It was completed in 1791. Monumentally proportioned, the building is said to have been designed on a scale sufficient to allow all the Shi'a faithful to come together for the Friday congregational prayers. But the Bara Imambara was only one of many. By the middle of the nineteenth century perhaps 6,000 *imambaras*, including around 2,000 quite large ones, dotted the city. Cole notes:

Asafu'd-Dawlah's courtiers emulated his construction program in their own areas, so that in every neighbourhood they put up new mansions, *imambaras* and mosques Most of Lucknow's Shi'a grandees . . . built *imambaras* in this period as did many Sunnis and Hindus.⁵⁵

And music features here too. At special religious assemblies or *majlis*, dirges and elegies were recited or sung, consisting of five principal musical forms, namely *soz*, *salam*, *marsiya*, *nauha*, and *matam*. These 'chants' were linked by their context and religious theme.⁵⁶ In addition elegies were sometimes

⁵² Brass has provided a useful framework for the study of politically-induced cultural change in his 'Elite Groups, Symbol Manipulation and Ethnic Identity Among the Muslims of South Asia', in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp (eds), *Political Identity in South Asia* (London: Curzon Press/Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), Ch.2.

⁵³ Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British and the Mughals*, pp.246–7.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, Ch.4, note 130. See Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722–1859*, pp.95–6, for a detailed description of the costs involved in the construction of the building and the remarkably elaborate decorations that covered it.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.96.

⁵⁶ Qureshi, 'Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shia Majlis', in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol.25, no.1 (1981), p.41. He also defines *majlis* chant ' . . . not as music but as recitation or chant in which musical features are subordinated to a religious text and function. Along with other vernacular chanting traditions, *majlis* chant falls into the category of *nash'id* (hymns based on vernacular poetry) as against *tahlin* (cantillation of the Qur'an in Arabic), p.41.

presented as straightforward readings in the manner of *taht al-lafz khwani*, the style practised by poets in secular readings.⁵⁷

While these basic forms were not new, in Lucknow they underwent innovations and stylistic developments which have since been characterised as being distinctly Awadhi. One such was the setting of the texts of *marsiya* (elegies)⁵⁸ to *dhuns*,⁵⁹ and *soz* (laments) to *raginis* such as *bhairavi*. Both of these innovations were significant departures from orthodox practice; but it was precisely that which contributed to the greater accessibility of the *majlis* and opened up the music to a wider audience, thereby adding to the popularity of Shi'ism. The choice of *dhuns* for the rendition of *marsiya* also confirms Sharar's observation about the widespread popularity of these tunes in Lucknow and further supports the connection, suggested earlier, between regional migration and regional musical material. Considering the great number of *imambaras* that existed in Lucknow during this time, it is not surprising that the popularity of the *majlis* permeated many levels of society, including reaching 'as far as the noble ladies in purdah'.⁶⁰

Tawa'if and Shi'a Ideology

It is not generally acknowledged that the thousands of *imambaras* which adorned Lucknow were also important spaces for the patronage of *tawa'if*. Qureshi has written that apart from male *gawaye* ('classical' singers), the professional performers employed to 'chant' *majlis* at congregational gatherings were *tawa'if* and *domni*.⁶¹ Sharar also describes how,

... at Muharram, thousands of enthusiasts came to Lucknow from other places and sat hopefully in Haidar's Imambara waiting for the courtesan Lady Haidar to commence her song of lament [*soz*].⁶²

This connection between these female singers and *imambaras* appears to be quite unique to Lucknow and stands at odds with the practice in other parts of

⁵⁷ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722–1859*, p.107; and Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, pp.82–7.

⁵⁸ For an explanation of the textual basis of *marsiya*, see C.M. Naim and Carla Petievich, 'Urdu in Lucknow: Lucknow in Urdu', in Violette Graff, *Lucknow: Memories of a City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.167.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.148.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.217.

⁶¹ Qureshi, 'Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shia Majlis', p.46.

⁶² Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, p.139.

the Shi'a world. This in itself makes the phenomenon important. But we do need to keep in mind how many women were involved. Although we do not know exactly how many courtesans operated in Lucknow at any given time or, for that matter, how many *imambaras* engaged *tawa'if*, it is probable that the number was very substantial.

Thus it is fair to say that the *tawa'if* who performed *marsiya* and *soz* in *imambaras* played a significant role in the religious and cultural reorientation of Lucknow in the nineteenth century and became, in particular, important agents for the promotion of Shi'a ideology. In turn the moral legitimacy and divine authority that Shi'a doctrine bestowed on the Awadhi administration and its nawabs could also have benefited those women who, through the *majlis*, became very public propagators of Shi'a activities. As we know, some courtesans attained high social status and wielded great political influence. If so, this could also have been a contributing factor to the broad social acceptance of courtesan culture by the Awadhi elite. The Shi'a milieu of Lucknow provided the necessary patronage and encouragement to them to innovate and elaborate.⁶³

Finally, the popularity and social status of courtesans such as the aforementioned Lady Haidar would have been aided by the increasing contribution of women to the shaping of elite culture and politics in the province. Cole writes that the 'embeddedness of the feminine in the aristocratic ritual inventiveness of the 1820s and 1830s attests, not only to the religious genius of Badshah Begum as an individual, but to that of Shi'ite women in general'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The forgoing discussion has established that Lucknow's *tawa'if bazi* was a diverse community as regards ethnicity, economic status and performance practice. However, it is also evident that our understanding of Lucknow's *tawa'if bazi* is far from complete. It is clear that music and dance were key elements in the professional lives of *tawa'if*. Further, it is also well known that descendants of *tawa'if* (e.g. Gauhar Jan, Kesarbai Kerker, Mogubai Kurdikar, Zohra Bai and many others) have played pivotal roles in the development of Hindustani music. Therefore, music and dance histories can play an important part in fleshing out the lives and times of Lucknow's *tawa'if bazi*. Oral histories of this frustratingly under-documented musical era and place are growing

⁶³ Naim and Petievich, 'Urdu in Lucknow: Lucknow in Urdu', p.167.

⁶⁴ Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh 1722-1859*, p.89.

fainter with time, and becoming more difficult to recover. Nevertheless fragments are still audible, still in circulation within some of the family lineages of *tawa'if* and hereditary occupational music specialists.

Music histories also alert us to broader connections—for example between the disenfranchisement of regional military labour markets, the large-scale migration of communities of *dhari* musicians from Rohilkhand and Awadh to the boom town of Lucknow after 1775, the rapid increase in Lucknow's population from this time onwards, and the subsequent increase in the breadth and depth of the *tawa'if bazi* in Lucknow. The large-scale social upheaval that followed the massive demobilisation of the early nineteenth century in North India is the most likely factor behind the migration of women to Lucknow. Last but not least these histories provide interesting links between the Shi'a ideology and aspirations of Lucknow's administration, the large-scale *imambara* construction program undertaken in the city, and the consequential arrival of a further source of patronage for *tawa'if*. Coupled with the migration of disenfranchised *dharis* from regional areas, this cultural conduit also provided the opportunity for the incorporation of regional tunes and *raginis* into the *majlis*.

In the end, it seems a cruel irony that Lucknow's *tawa'if bazi* were enlisted gratuitously by the East India Company as part of its 'moral' justification for the annexation of the kingdom of Awadh in 1856. This annexation led to the significant dismantling of the networks and structures of patronage for music and dance in Lucknow, and became yet another episode in a sequence of displacements for communities of *dharis* and *doms* and the *tawa'if* they accompanied. That many *tawa'if* became implicated in the 1857 rebellion is not surprising, considering their history, and the close connections they had built up with the erstwhile nawabi regime.