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Poetry, Performance, and the Courtesan: Changing Contours of the *Thumri* in *Kathak*

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Abstract: The paper purports to study the changing contexts of the *thumri*, a form of light vocal music that was the mainstay of the *tawaifs* and other courtesan communities of nineteenth century North India. The paper, through a critique of the scholarship on the performing arts, calls for a more serious engagement with the cultural practices of hereditary women performers, one that acknowledges the impact of technological renovation and the emergence of music institutions on the performance practices of the courtesans. More importantly, it charts the evolution of the musical form of *thumri* as an indispensable part of the repertoire of *Kathak* in the decades following the independence, to show how it was significantly influenced by the New Media that altered both its content and structure. The emergence of identifiably distinct repertoires of performance embodied in the *gharanas* of dance in this period and their appropriation of *thumri* as part of their articulation of a distinct aesthetic are explored as parallel concerns in the paper.

Keywords*: Courtesans, Thumri, Kathak, Non-conjugal sexuality, Cultural nationalism, Dance revival*

The notion of a 'break' or a discontinuation is central to postcolonial studies of the social history of the performing arts in India[i]. The primary contention of this body of scholarship is that the performance traditions fostered by hereditary performers like the *devadasis* in the Southern part of the subcontinent and the *tawaifs* in the North have either been subject to severe forms of cultural exclusion or completely erased in the period following the social reform movements initiated by the missionaries in the later decades of the nineteenth century. This school of critical thought also believes that these reductive tendencies eventually united with the nationalist urge for cultural revival which attempted to revive and reconstruct the performance practices of the hereditary performers and thus make them available as symbols of cultural superiority. Each of these accounts of the evolution of music and dance in India comes to a sudden halt with a critique of nationalist attempts at reclaiming pre-colonial performance traditions. A view like this does not just ignore

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the continued existence of these cultural practices in new incarnations and in altered performance contexts in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries, but also glosses over the impact of technological renovation and the new media on performance traditions and the radical ways in which they altered them both contextually and aesthetically.

One of the major fallacies of the body of scholarship either on Indian musical or dance practices arises from the indiscriminate use of the notion of "art" or "art forms". The performances of the hereditary performers like the *devadasis* or the *tawaifs* cannot be understood in terms of our modern perspectives of a coherent and structured body of "art" forms, where the items of a repertoire are clearly defined and neatly categorized in relation to their regional and aesthetic specificity. 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 recognizes the impact of major social-political upheavals like colonialism and nationalism, and purports to go beyond them, thereby attempting to theorize the cultural practices of hereditary performers in terms of continuity, mutation, co-optation, and appropriation.

In his insightful essay "Re-writing the Script for South-Indian Dance" Matthew Harp Allen suggests that the term "revival" tends to be oversimplified in current dance scholarship:

> The term 'revival' is a drastically reductive linguistic summary of a complex process- a deliberate selection from among many possibilities- which cries out to be examined from more than one point of view. While the 'revival' of South Indian dance certainly involved a re-vivification or bringing back to life, it was equally a re-population(one social community appropriating a practice from another), a re-construction(altering and replacing elements of repertoire and choreography), a re-naming(from nautch and other terms to Bharatanatyam), a re-situation(from temple, court, and salon to the public stage), and a re-storation (splicing together of selected 'strips' of performative behavior in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents a historical one (Allen 63-4).

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The ideological transformations and cultural re-orientations that inform the social history of performance traditions in India in the twentieth century call for a more serious and discerning engagement, one that acknowledges the influence of the changing dynamics of public modernity as manifested in the emergence of the New Media and the dissemination of musical knowledge through cultural institutions in a predominantly global set-up. It is in this light that the paper seeks to study the changing contexts of the *thumri*, a form of light vocal music that was the mainstay of the *tawaifs* and other courtesan communities of nineteenth century North India and continues to be performed, albeit in a new avatar as an indispensable element of the repertoire of the modern-day *Kathak*.

Composed in the regional dialects of Hindi like *Braj bhasha*, and, less frequently, in dialects like *Avadhi* and *Bhojpuri*, the *thumri* was generally set to supposedly "light" *ragas* like *Kafi, Piloo, Khamaj,* and *Des*, among others. In the ninetenth century, it was intended primarily for musical rendition with accompanying hand gestures, and it therefore represents a courtly poetic tradition where literary composition was inextricably inter-twined with the idea of interpretation in performance. As hereditary practitioners of the form, the courtesans of North India excelled in the *thumri*, which was almost always written from the perspective of a female narrator, possibly a woman expressing her sense of separation and loss in love. The lover and the beloved, in a *thumri,* often appear as the idealized lovers of Indian mythology, i.e. Radha and Krishna. Most of the *thumris* that became popular in the 19th century are near-erotic in that they give full scope to the courtesan to express her sexual desire in performance. The *thumris* that were presented to the elite audiences of the courtesan clientele celebrate the ideas of sexual transgression by elaborating on the experiences of adulterous love relationships and explore the nuances of the effects of unrequited love on the heroine. As embodying the non-conjugal sexuality of the *tawaifs*, *thumri*-texts are imbued with a certain kind of playfulness:

> Indeed it should be remembered that *Thumri* was traditionally the art par excellence of the courtesans, and that it evolved in their salons. Until the early fifties, most prominent *thumri* singers were practicing *tawaifs* (courtesans) who advertised and sold themselves largely

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> through their music. Hence, a *tawaif* might deliberately sing erotic *thumris* in order to excite her all-male audiences so that she could attract wealthy customers (Manuel 21).

The intimate gatherings of the soirees in the establishments of the *tawaifs*—the *kothas* provided the best platform for showcasing the multilayered complexities of the *thumri.* The courtesan, then, would first begin her performance by a vocal rendition of the text, where the lyrics would be subject to tonal variation with the depiction of changing moods of disappointment at the delay in the lover's return, excitement at meeting the lover after a long sequence of what seemed to be endless waiting, frustration at the unfortunate discovery that he has spent the night at another woman's establishment, restlessness in getting the reply from him, and an internal sense of satisfaction on his apologies. This would then be followed by a more complex explication of the lyrics by the use of hand gestures and intricate changes in facial expression. This attribute of the *thumri*, commonly identified as the most unique contribution of the Lucknow *gharana* of *Kathak* is often referred to as the element of "*bhav"* or expressive richness. The evolution of the *thumri*, then, cannot be studied by separating it from the evolution of the dance practices of the courtesans from North India, which later came to be identified as "classical" *Kathak.*

The general trend in performance-scholarship has been to understand *thumri* as "feminine voice", not just because it takes shape as an articulation of female desire, but because it is subversive in spirit*:*

> I consider *Thumri* to be the feminine voice in music not because of its evident identification with women singers, nor with the fact that the poetic text articulates female desire (albeit constructed in the male gaze) but because of its interrogative/subversive quality. I understand this quality to inhere in its structure and to manifest in the ways in which it extends its space by playing with ambiguities, meanings, and in its use of humour (Rao WS31).

Consider, for instance, a popularly sung *thumri "Ehi thaiya motiya hiraye gaile rama"*, a *"chaiti"*, which is a sub-genre of *thumri*, one amongst a series of songs normally sung in the month of *chaitra.* The song represents an important rite of passage in the life of a courtesan, a transition from the stage of childhood and apprenticeship to womanhood and professional autonomy. The

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lyrics of the song are centered on the lost nose-ring of a courtesan, and her anxiety over the irreparable loss. The lost nose-ring, in performance, acquires deeper connotations, as it also represents the loss of virginity. This ceremony, known as *nat-utaarna*, is an important occasion in the life of a courtesan. The first benefactor of the courtesan, after having paid a befitting amount specified by the keeper, 'de-flowers' her and replaces her nose-ring with a pearl symbolizing her initiation in to the profession.

The poetic/performative form of the *thumri* is often said to have attained its high watermark in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow, who was an ardent exponent of the form. He extended patronage to the *thumri* especially as an accompaniment to the dance practices of the courtesans who resided in large numbers at the royal court. Wajid Ali Shah himself both composed and performed to *thumris*—his compositions were generally made under the pen name of *Akhtar Piya. Thumris* also came to be composed by learned and accomplished *ustads* for dance rendition by the *tawaifs.* The name of one such *ustad*, Bindadin Maharaj, gets inextricably associated to the form. He composed hundreds of *thumris* for the performances of the courtesans and provided intensive training to the court dancing-girls both in the vocal rendition of *thumri* as well as its expressive interpretation in dance. The *thumris* of Bindadin continue to form an indispensable part of contemporary *Kathak*, despite the severe condemnation of the form of *thumri* in the period following social reform, when a predominantly Victorian notion of conjugality questioned the existence of the courtesans in an emerging national cultural order.

The 'Anti-Nautch' campaign that aimed at the prohibition of all public performances by the *devadasis* or temple dancing-girls of Southern India quickly spread to the North, where the communities of *tawaifs* and *baijis* and their performances became the subject of social scorn. With the onset of social reform movements in the late nineteenth century and the re-ordering of existing gender roles, the courtesan was relegated to the periphery, as also the literary forms she excelled in. Performative genres like the *thumri* and the *ghazal* came to be perceived as unabashed expressions of sensuality, and thus unfit for the newly emerging 'national' literary tradition that

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thrived on the preservation and publicization of woman's chastity. The communities of *tawaifs* then continued to either perform in extremely private settings or took to prostitution.

Literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was preoccupied with the project of the construction of modern femininity by recasting women in the roles of the 'chaste', 'monogamous', Hindu wife, and genres like the *thumri* challenge this project through their celebration of woman's sensuality and their recognition of women in non-conjugal roles like that of the courtesan. The lack of proper documentation of the fate of the performance traditions fostered by the courtesans of North India after the waves of reform supposedly swept their existence leads many to assume that these forms became completely extinct. However, the 'Anti-Nautch' movement might not have been the only social change that resulted in the relocation of the performance practices of the courtesans. There were other parallel changes of course, which often remain unnoticed because of the prominence attributed to social reform movements in scholarly discussions of the performing arts.

Another significant development had radically altered the performance traditions of the courtesans by this time. The arrival of the gramophone record on the Indian scene resulted in the re-contextualization of music from the feudal space of the courtesan's salons to the more "modern" space of the recording studio. The introduction in India of HMV's 78 rpm records initiated a set of transformations in the musical practices of hereditary performers. What happened in the process was a complete refurbishment of musical forms, and the accompanying dance renditions that supplemented and qualified one another. The displacement of musical genres like the *thumri*, for instance, from the courtesan's soirees to the impersonal space of the recording studio, also uprooted the form from the context where it was originally meant to be rendered. The element of performative interpretation and improvisation, that came to be intimately associated with the form in the nineteenth century, was at once considered inappropriate. Gauhar Jaan, a courtesan from colonial Calcutta became the first woman to have recorded her voice on Fred Gaisberg's shellac in the make-shift recording studio of HMV in the city[ii]. The highly nuanced and playful *thumri*

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that acquired polyvalence in performance now became largely devoid of its semantic richness. When sung in the absence of the elite male audience to whom it was primarily addressed, and the accompanying hand gestures, *thumri* acquired a more abstract form. Commenting on Gauhar's first attempt at recording her voice on the gramophone, Vikram Sampath asserts:

> As the first strains of her high pitched, cultured and captivating voice were etched on the grooves of Gaisberg's shellac, Indian classical music took a giant leap forward. From the confines of the courtesan's salons and the rich man's soirees, it was catapulted right into the homes of the common people. In the process it underwent a major transformation in its content, structure and style of presentation (Sampath 86).

This led to the emergence of a notion of the democratization of music, where music would not be restricted to the courtesans or their clientele, but could be accessed by the common man, provided he was in a position to buy a gramophone. *Thumri's* inextricable relationship with interpretation in dance came to be negated by privileging vocal rendition over performance. The use of even hand movements, not to mention facial expressions and gestures, was considered unnecessary in the process of recording, and therefore, the *thumri* began to gain currency as a musical piece rather than performance[iii].

The nationalist project of cultural regeneration radically redefined the performing arts in the first three decades of the twentieth century, a time when dance and music were being given an explicitly political meaning in order to make them available for the imperatives of nation building. A certain need to 'revive' these 'art forms' was increasingly felt by the middle class, which assumed the custodianship of music and dance in the twentieth century. In order to appropriate music as a claim to cultural superiority over the Englishman, the middle-class initiated a process of sanitization of the performance practices of traditional performers. This kind of a 'cleansing' of these art forms went hand in hand with purging them of their supposedly erotic associations with the *devadasis* and the *tawaifs*. Different musical and dance traditions came to be identified as 'classical' and innovations were made in pedagogy and performance in order for music to represent a certain notion of 'Indianness'. Innovators like Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu

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Digambar Paluskar revived and refashioned the plural musical practices of North India as 'classical' by providing them a textual base. Institutionalization of music and dissemination of musical knowledge in the form of seminars, lectures, debates and discussions also became an interesting aspect of their self-appointed role. In her book *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* Janaki Bakhle discusses the contribution of Bhatkhande and Paluskar to the project of the classicization of music:

> Cultural nationalists, some of whom were themselves musicians, worked hard to reclaim the space of music for the nation. In the hands of Bhakti nationalists like Paluskar, so named here because his claims were on behalf of a sacralized bhakti (devotionalism) rather than vedic textual Brahminism, music was envisioned as the instrument of Hindu proselytizing, with bhajans (devotional music) supplanting all other forms. For secular musicologists like Bhatkhande, music was the hope for a new modern, national, and academic art that would stay away from religion. What both sets of nationalists had in common was the sense that music itself was on the verge of extinction, either because it had lapsed in to degeneracy or because it had failed to become adequately modern.
>
> Both men worried about the imminent disappearance of music. Its recovery hinged on what Indian music lacked-namely a connected history, a systematic and orderly pedagogy, and respectability … Bhatkhande tried to classify, categorize, and classicize music, whereas Paluskar wanted to cleanse and sacralize it. (7-8).

It is commonly assumed that it was Paluskar who was instrumental for making music available to women through his immensely popular Gandharva Mahavidyalayas. Bakhle argues that this could only have been made possible by the minimization of the courtesans' possibilities to perform:

> Paluskar's bhakti nationalism "Hinduized" music and sacralized its pedagogy, but it also created the conditions under which women could enter a public cultural sphere without the fear of social disapproval. Yet even as middle class women moved slowly in to a new public cultural space, they replaced an entire generation performers, known pejoratively as *baijis*…. (11)

The formation of aesthetically and stylistically distinguished '*gharanas'* or lineages of music and dance was a central attribute of the project of revival. These *gharanas*, with their lofty visions of

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their art and self-perceptions of their "glorious" past reclaimed the musical genres and styles that were otherwise an inseparable part of the cultural practices of the courtesans. The establishment of institutions like the Kathak Kendra, with the objective of disseminating both theoretical and performance training in the dance form has led to the codification of a set of varied dance practices. Its appropriation of *Kathak* and the creation of standards of authenticity and classicism have over the years tended to erase the regional inflections and the idiosyncrasies of individual *gurus.* The systematization of what was supposed to be a fluid form of performative behavior led to the creation of a 'monolithic identity' for *Kathak* (Chakravorty 68). The emergence of the Kalka-Bindadin *gharana* of *Kathak*, with its roots in Lucknow and stalwarts like Shambhu Maharaj, Lachchu Maharaj, and now, of course, Birju Maharaj as its unquestioned pioneers remains a major event in the history of the "classical" dance form of *Kathak.* The style of dance followed by the practitioners of this *gharana*, as different from the Jaipur *gharana,* for instance, is deeply rooted in the performance practices of Wajid Ali Shah's court. Derived from the forms and patterns endorsed by Thakur Prasad, Kalka Maharaj and Bindadin Maharaj, who were all dancers at Wajid Ali Shah's court, the set of practices represents an important link with the genre of the *thumri*, the mainstay of the courtesans of the time. The *thumri* continues to be an important part of the *abhinaya* aspect of this *gharana*, which is what differentiates it from other *gharanas*. The makeover from the dance practices of the *tawaifs* to classical *Kathak* entailed a fundamental redefinition of the ways in which the form was performed and received. The content of the *thumri* now came to be identified invariably with the mystical union of *Radha* and *Krishna*, the idealized lovers of Indian mythology. The articulation of sexual desire, which constitutes the underlying theme in a *thumri*, began to be interpreted as the craving of the human soul for the universal, as delineated in the figures of *Radha* and *Krishna*, and, more often than not, the *gopis*.

The attempt at defining standards and creating universal patterns in the training and performance of *Kathak* is also reflected in the appearance, in recent decades, of anthologies of *thumris.* Prominent among the anthologies used for *Kathak* is *Rasgunjan: Maharaj Bindadin ki Rachnayen*, a collection of the *thumri, dadra,* and *bhajan* compositions of Bindadin Maharaj. The

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whole endeavor of presenting in print an otherwise plural and culturally varied form of poetry can be seen as an attempt to privilege the song-text over the performance of *thumris.* Each of the texts is supplemented by a detailed depiction of the notation and a brief description of the narrative situation. The *thumri* compositions of Bindadin Maharaj, which have attained a classical status, are linked to his mystical experiences rather than his association with the *tawaifs*. His creative genius is referred to primarily in spiritual terms. In his introduction to the anthology, Birju Maharaj asserts:

> My mother says that Maharaj (Bindadin) was a staunch devotee of *Krishna* and used to worship him regularly. It was said of him that not a single day passed when he did not compose a *thumri, bhajan,* or a couplet…A discerning observer has written of him that when Bindadin Maharaj enacted Lord *Krishna* it seemed that *Krishna* himself had appeared.
>
> Maharaj has shown various incarnations and playful activities of Lord *Krishna* in his compositions. It is to present this that he made use of several *rasas* and *bhavas*… (Maharaj "Introduction")[iv].

Two ideas stand prominent in the passage quoted above. Firstly, the creation of a spiritual framework provides a context to discuss the *thumris* of Bindadin. This attempt also resists the interpretation of his compositions in other terms (as erotic, for instance) because it comes directly from the 'authentic' voice of his successor and the propagator of his *gharana.* Secondly, the conscious use of musical terminology, as reflected in the words like "*rasa"* and "*bhava"* classicize a set of dance practices which otherwise resist categorization. It is common for students training in the Lucknow *gharana* of *Kathak* to come across parables related to Bindadin Maharaj—of how Lord *Krishna* appeared in his dreams and made him compose *thumris.* These tales form a primary vocabulary by which the *gharana ustads* like Birju Maharaj define themselves, their art, and thus gain legitimacy as performers in the sanitized cultural space of the nation.

The self-appointed role of *gharanedar ustads* as custodians of dance is not limited to publication alone. The concert stage becomes the major site for the classicization of performance and the promotion of a cultural ideology that serves as a rationale for the continued existence of the *gharana* and the values it adheres to. The concert stage, over the years, has also emerged as a

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befitting context for the articulation of the cultural anxieties of a newly emerging nation-state. The *thumri*, then, as embodying the corporality of the 'otherized' figure of the courtesan undergoes a massive change on the concert-stage. Most of the *thumri* renditions of Birju Maharaj, carefully choreographed and executed, invariably assert the role of a narrator who distances himself from the experience being narrated in song and dance. The objectification of the experiences of the *nayika* (the Sanskrit term for a heroine, as derived from Bharata, and used self-consciously by Birju Maharaj) shift the anxieties over the uncontrollable sexual desire of the courtesan to the character within the narrative, rather than the performer himself. The recurrence of expressions like "*Binda dekho"* and the like, carry the stamp of the composer, but also, and more importantly, separate the narrator/observer from the woman involved in making love within the poem. Shambhu Maharaj's rendition of a Bindadin *thumri* in the documentary on *Kathak* released by India Films Division in 1970 shows him performing the roles of the narrator as well as the *nayika*—the lyrics of the *thumri* typical of Bindadin where a *gopi* complains that *Krishna* is not allowing her to return home:

Kahe rokat dagar pyare nandalal mere
Nit hi karat jhagara hum se
Panghat nahi jane det
Dekhat sab nari mori
Bahiya kyun dhare re
Kahe-
Vinati karun mai nahi who manat
Sunat nahi mori
Cheen leenho he gale ko haar
Mangu nai de re
Kahe-
Binda dekho dhith langar
Barabas mori laaj let
Dungi duhai abahi jaye
Nandaji ke dere
Kahe-... (Maharaj 5)

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The *thumri* quoted above represents a situation where a *gopi* questions *Krishna* as to why he has blocked the road that leads her home. She is returning from the *ghat* with a pitcher of water that she carries home. They are both being noticed by the rustic women who have gathered along. He refuses to release her hand and takes away her pearl necklace by force. The composition is explicated by the use of hand gestures and intricate facial expressions that depict the anguish of the woman in question, but from a safe distance. The roles in the performance are so sharply delineated that not even for a single instance does the spectator identify Shambhu Maharaj with the woman whose protests against the amorous adventures of the adulterous lover, playful as well as desired, form the primary content in the poem. Another piece commonly performed to by Birju Maharaj is "*Dhaye gaho shyam"*, a *thumri* where the *nayika* implores her lover to spare her and permit her to return home. Obstinate that he is, the lover doesn't heed to her repeated entreaties and holds her wrists in protest. Her bangles begin to crackle in the process, and she is overcome by a sense of embarrassment at her lover's frankness in making love. The *thumri* is generally presented by means of hand gestures where the performer is seated in a fixed position. The performer gives full scope to his creativity in conceiving situations that offer minute variations on the general theme. What strikes a discerning viewer is the relative maturity of the narrator and the immature state the courtesan-heroine (here represented as *Radha* or a *gopi*) is in. Every interpretation is followed a posture—possibly a frozen hand movement or a contortion of the face—where the narrator's moral maturity is showcased. These postures provide a predominantly moral stance to the performance, where Birju Maharaj the performer emerges unscathed even as he is seen enacting the role of a woman involved in a non-conjugal relationship with a man, a bonding that does not receive societal sanction. His function as an upper-caste, 'respectable' custodian of *Kathak* remains intact in the course of the performance. Though not explicitly stated or suggested, these performances of respectability act as important and indispensable links within the narrative.

The presentation of *thumri* as seated *abhinaya* and simultaneous song and dance rendition in the performances of Shambhu Maharaj, Lachchu Maharaj and Birju Maharaj seem to

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retrospectively recreate the contexts of the courtesan's salons while at the same time negating their identities in so far as the articulation of desire is concerned. The aim of providing an afterlife to the courtesan's *thumri* and the simultaneous intention of appropriating a form by regularizing the elements of its performance go hand in hand on the concert-stage.

The aesthetic signals produced in the performances of the *ustads* establish a counterpoint to the performances of the courtesans. By their intentional chastening of the body, as reflected in the discipline imposed on body movements, the *gurus* attempt to erase the memory of the diseased and despised body of the courtesan, while at the same time reclaiming her dance practices for forging their own versions of authenticity. What is created through the dissemination of intensive training and staging of performances on the concert-stage is a predominantly *Brahmin* version of the body that eventually gains acceptance in a middle-class milieu. It is within these ambiguities that *thumri* performances situate themselves when presented on the concert-stage.

The economic reforms that swept over the Indian scene in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have ushered in a global phase in the cultural practices of India. Music and dance forms now have to restructure themselves to fit in to new spaces that have been created for them by a predominantly consumerist culture. The emergence of radically new sites and contexts for music and dance can also be understood in terms of the 'rise' of mass media over the decades. The idea of the propagation of performance traditions gets closely associated with technological renovation. Commenting on global modernity in *Kathak*, dance scholar Pallabi Chakravorty suggests:

> Owing to the structural (or liberalizing economic) reforms in India since the mid 1980s, the growth of consumer culture and electronic media has ushered in a new phase in Kathak and other classical dance styles. The new forces of the global market and mass media are currently reinventing the nationalist narrative of Kathak in multiple and contrasting ways. 'Innovation' is now the popular buzzword in classical dance parlance that encapsulates the emergent multiple trends in Kathak (Chakravorty 55-56).

The commercial film has emerged as another important context for the endorsement of the dance form of *Kathak*. Whereas most of the dance–sequences in Hindi films seem to have been derived

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from *Kathak*, there are more explicit ways in which *Kathak* and the elements of its repertoire have made way in to the cinematic space. The courtesan-film in Hindi cinema remains the most discussed in relation to *Kathak*, and the genre of the *ghazal* has been conventionally considered to be the most privileged of poetic/musical forms in such movies. Celluloid incarnations of the courtesan in post-independence Hindi cinema take shape as nostalgic celebrations of a lost *nawabi* way of life. As critics like John Caldwell and Poonam Arora have argued, "the film makers could best exploit the fascinations of courtesan culture by "othering" it, making it a feature of the minority Muslim community and its decadent past"(Caldwell 124).

Although not as popularly featured as the *ghazal*, the genre of the *thumri* has entered the cinematic space in rather complicated ways. The appropriation of the form of the *thumri* as an important accompaniment for *Kathak* sequences in Hindi cinema cannot be understood in Caldwell's terms, because the genre, as a celebration of erotic love between *Radha* and *Krishna*, has remained predominantly Hindu in its orientation. Although performed at the courts of the Mughal emperors and promoted by exponents like Wajid Ali Shah, the genre has tended to retain its Hindu orientation. The *thumri* performance in the cinema represents a site where the courtesan comes to terms with her non-conjugal sexuality and negotiates her identity in relation to and as different from the sexual norms of her milieu. *Thumris* have been an important aspect of the aesthetic as well as ideological messages communicated to the audiences in movies like *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (1977), *Yatra* (2006), *Laga Chunari Mei Daag* (2007), *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014), to name but a few. More importantly, the use of Bindadin *thumris* in movies like *Devdas*(2002) and *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) further complicate our understanding of the multiple ways in which the form as an embodiment of the memory of the figure of the courtesan, reconfigures itself in new performance contexts. The two instances mentioned above offer two contrasting perspectives on the re-stylization of the *thumri* in view of the current trends in our understanding of culture. Whereas the well-known Bindadin *thumri* "*Kahe chedd chedd mohe"* from *Devdas,* choreographed by Birju Maharaj, represents a conventional *kotha* setting, the *thumri* from *Bajirao Mastani* represents a performance in the "respectable" confines of the domestic space. Through costumes, settings, and

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carefully choreographed dance sequences, what is asserted is the embeddedness of the performance in the contexts that they represent. Madhuri Dixit's celebrated performance in *Devdas* gives ample scope to the sexual desire of the courtesan Chandramukhi to manifest itself in various forms within the choreographic patterns. The use of flamboyant hand movements, lurid and tempting facial expressions and the gaudy costume that gets enough attention in the video invariably highlight the situated-ness of the courtesan outside the boundaries of social respectability. While the seductive and enchanting voice of the courtesan renders the lyrics of the *thumri* in all possible variations, the voice of the maestro Birju Maharaj imposes itself authoritatively through the recital of ambitious *bols* or rhythmic patterns of *Kathak* which may, or may not have been a part of the *thumri* in the courtesan context. The performance, as a coherent piece, leaves a certain impression on the viewer. Although structured as a courtesan rendition, it is the choreographic aspect of the performance that etches itself deep on the viewer's minds. "*Kahe cheedd chedd mohe"* as a piece with the thought of an intellectual of the caliber of Birju Maharaj behind it is what remains by the end of the performance. The intellectual element involved in the act of choreographic re-creation and a consequent re-structuring, of the dance practices of the courtesan is reflected in the dexterity of *taal*, that forms a kind of a technical constituent of *Kathak*. The non-conjugal sexuality of the *tawaif*, though represented adequately at the level of choreography is obliterated in the process.

The cinematic medium has always facilitated the perpetuation of certain dominant perceptions of gender and sexuality engendered by cultural nationalism, and the appearance of the courtesan as a remnant of a pre-modern, feudal extravagance is not an exception to it. Through the dance and song renditions that feature the figure of the socially despised *tawaif*, a certain ideal of 'chaste' womanhood is privileged on the screen. The idea attains a higher level of problemmatization when a supposedly 'chaste' heroine performs a *thumri* in a movie. *Thumri's* primary function, the articulation of sexual desire is at once nullified by the enactment of chastity in the figure of the respectable woman. This is precisely what has been attempted in *Bajirao Mastani*, where Deepika Padukone, who plays the role of Mastani, the daughter of the Rajput king

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Chhatrasal and his Persian queen, Ruhani Bai, performs a *thumri* from the Kalka-Bindadin repertoire. The *thumri* celebrates the festival of *Holi*, and eloquently depicts the heroine's cravings to be coloured in crimson. The colour crimson, and by implication vermilion, is representative of auspiciousness and conjugal bliss, and is therefore an appropriate take-off point for the heroine to articulate her conformity with established sexual norms of monogamy. The costumes here are devoid of the gaudiness of *Kahe chedd*, and they symbolize the sanctity and the moral steadfastness of the woman who runs the possible risk of compromising with her chastity by performing a *thumri*, a genre that evolved exclusively in the salons of *tawaifs.* Several attempts are made to preserve and publicize her chastity within the dance sequence, and the dynamics of dance are transformed painstakingly in order to serve the purpose. The use of flamboyance, an important determinant in the articulation of the aesthetic in *Kahe chedd* is brought to the bare minimum. The playfulness and banter that ought to have characterized the celebration of *Holi* in performance appear to have been chastened by an absolute and unconditional control on body movements and facial expressions. The attention of Mastani, the performer, in perfect contrast with that of Chandramukhi (whose gaze keeps on shifting from one to another member of her clientele), is consistently fixed on Bajirao, the man whom she is in love with. Thus the *thumri*, that is replete with sensual imagery and is erotic in its appeal, is completely divorced from its primary function. On the contrary, it becomes a medium to uphold the notions of chaste 'Indian' womanhood in the figure of the heroine.

It is in the accomplishment of this curiously contradictory function that the *thumri* is evoked in an aesthetic space that thrives on the propagation of the ideals of cultural nationalism, albeit in new incarnations and in radically altered performance contexts. The memory of the courtesan, as inhered in the expression of desire and the assertion of non-conjugal sexual behavior is partially or completely erased by the predominance of the revivalist notions of uncompromising classicism while the poetic/musical form of the *thumri* itself still continues to be appropriated for the perpetuation of the very ideals which it is an antithesis of.

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In his scholarly study of the *devadasis* of Andhra Pradesh and their performance practices, Davesh Soneji suggests that the body of the performer, through its production of multiple signs that constitute the elements of a repertoire, acts as an embodiment of memory. It is through the aestheticization of the body that a historical fact can be established:

> The memory of bodily habitus, in the form of a repertoire allows us to perceive connections between history, language, and gestures of the body that would be invisible otherwise, and are impossible to house in the archive. These individual acts of remembering illuminate historical networks and reconfigure pathways for historical study (Soneji 16).

Soneji examines the repertoire itself as a site of memory. In the series of interviews with the *devadasis* that he conducts, the "articulations of the past emerge from historical fragments that permeate and linger in the corporeal memory (163)." It is the body of the performer that transforms itself in to a site of memory, where history is inscribed in the signs that are produced by the dancer. By implication, what is embodied in the multiple signs produced by the bodies that perform the *thumri* in contemporary contexts is a highly nuanced history of the musical form. Cultural memory, in this case, is embodied not in the body of the courtesan, or the hereditary performer, but in the bodies of the numerous 'artists' whose appropriation of the form and the re-creation of the elements of its repertoire at a moment in history when the original contexts of performance have ceased to exist, projects them as the legitimate propagators of the form.

Notes:

[i] For a detailed discussion of the decline of hereditary performance traditions in India following social reform and nationalist revival, see Srinivasan and Bakhle.
[ii] See Vikram Sampath's *My Name is Gauhar Jan* for a detailed account of the life and times of the courtesan.
[iii] I do not intend to discuss the evolution of the *thumri* as a part of the repertoire of *Hindusthani* vocal tradition in this paper.
[iv] My translation of the Hindi excerpts taken from the volume.

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