Courtesans in Colonial India
Representations of British Power through Understandings of Nautch-Girls, Devadasis, Tawa’ifs, and Sex-Work, c. 1750-1883

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ABSTRACT

COURTESANS IN COLONIAL INDIA
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British representations of courtesans, or nautch- girls, is an emerging area of study in relation to the impact of British imperialism on constructions of Indian womanhood. The nautch was a form of dance and entertainment, performed by courtesans, that originated in early Indian civilizations and was connected to various Hindu temples. Nautch performances and courtesans were a feature of early British experiences of India and, therefore, influenced British gendered representations of Indian women. My research explores the shifts in British perceptions of Indian women, and the impact this had on imperial discourses, from the mid- eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries. Over the course of the colonial period examined in this research, the British increasingly imported their own social values and beliefs into India. British constructions of gender, ethnicity, and class in India altered ideas and ideals concerning appropriate behaviour, sexuality, sexual availability, and sex- specific gender roles in the subcontinent. This thesis explores the production of British lifestyles and imperial culture in India and the ways in which this influenced their representation of courtesans. During the nabob period of the eighteenth century, nautch parties worked as a form of cultural interaction between Indian elites and British East India Company officials. However, over the course of the nineteenth century the nautch and nautch- girls became symbolic to the British of India’s ‘despotism’ and ‘backwardness,’ as well as representative of the supposed dangers of miscegenation and Eastern sensuality. By the mid- nineteenth century, nautch- girls were represented as commercial sex- workers and were subject to the increasing surveillance and medical intervention of the British colonial state. In addition, this representation perpetuated the belief of the British ‘saving’ Indian women as a way to justify the continuation of colonialism in India. My research explores how British conceptualizations of courtesans were fundamental to the justification of the imperial project in India, as well as representative of changing British perceptions of their own political and territorial power in the subcontinent.
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Introduction

In spite of the disadvantages attendant upon the colour of the skin, perhaps no part of the world can present more perfect specimens of feminine beauty than are to be found in Hindostan.¹

The above quotation from The Essex Standard newspaper encapsulates much of what this thesis explores around British representations of Indian women through their understandings of gender, ethnicity, and class. A fascination with the ‘Oriental’ woman, her erotic and exotic beauty and sexual availability, along with her inferiority based on her positionality within a rigidly classist, heteropatriarchal colonial society was constructed through British narratives. This thesis explores the shifts in British perceptions of Indian women, and the impact this had on imperial discourses, from the mid-eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries. The time frame is employed to explore how British imperialism constructed representations of gender, ethnicity, and caste in the subcontinent. Over the course of the colonial period examined in this research, the British increasingly imported their own social values and beliefs into India. These British constructions of gender, ethnicity, and class in India altered ideas and ideals concerning appropriate behaviour, sexuality, sexual availability, and sex-specific gender roles in the subcontinent. This thesis explores the production of British lifestyle and imperial culture in India and the ways in which this influenced the construction of Indian women, particularly courtesans, in the colonial period.

This research examines how the British represented and perceived Indian women and their sexuality from the nabob period in the eighteenth century through the late nineteenth century. ‘Nabob’ was the term that the British applied to British men who stayed in India and took on ‘Orientalized’ lifestyles and culture during the eighteenth century. Nabob culture, or nabobism, was an expression of the close cultural interaction and collaboration that occurred

between British and Indian societies during the early decades of imperialism in India. At the same time, it was an expression of the unequal relationship between the British and Indians under imperialism. Nabobism reflected both the British fascination with, and apprehension of, their new imperial project in India, as well as the impact their Indian empire would have on British culture and norms. British nabobs were eventually criticized in metropolitan Britain for their perceived corruption and decadence, and the more duty-based *sahib* that embodied idealized notions of Britishness replaced them as a cultural ideal in the early nineteenth century. In addition, the representation of British women, or *memsahibs*, is examined to conceptualize the dichotomous representation of British and Indian women in a colonial context. Therefore, this thesis examines gendered and racialized representations of Indian women during the *sahib* period in the first half of the nineteenth century, through the Rebellion of 1857, and into the direct rule of the British Crown. This thesis concludes with the representations of Indian women produced under the Contagious Diseases Act and its repeal in 1883. Thus, I explore how nabobs, *sahibs*, *memsahibs*, and the British Crown were influential in the production, alteration, and perpetuation of gendered and racialized perceptions of Indian women.

Courtesans and *nautch* performances are a feature in this research to more fully understand British gendered perceptions and representations of Indian women. The *nautch* was a form of dance and entertainment, performed by courtesans, that originated in early Indian civilizations and was connected to various Hindu temples. This form of dance became more secular in the northern regions of the subcontinent as Islamic rulers established empires, and courtesans became associated with courts and palaces instead of religious temples.\(^2\) During the early colonial period of the eighteenth century, *nautch* parties worked as a form of cultural interaction between Indian rulers and British East India Company officials. However, over the

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course of the nineteenth century the *nautch* and *nautch*-girls, as the British came to call them, became symbolic of Indian ‘despotism’ and ‘backwardness,’ as well as representative of the supposed dangers of miscegenation and Eastern sensuality. By the mid-nineteenth century, *nautch*-girls were represented as commercial sex-workers and were subject to the increasing surveillance and medical intervention of the British colonial state. In addition, this representation perpetuated the belief of British men ‘saving’ Indian women as a way to justify the continuation of colonialism in the subcontinent.

British perceptions of *nautch*-girls and performances over the course of this period illustrate the changes that occurred in the British imperial project in India. This thesis argues that the British perception of courtesans altered as the power dynamics of the British Empire in India changed over the course of the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. The British became increasingly powerful in the subcontinent over this period and they were subsequently less receptive towards sharing and experiencing Indian culture and traditions. This correlated with the shift from the British nabob to the *sahib* as the ideal British ruler in India during the early nineteenth century. Ideals of proper forms of Britishness, gender roles and behaviour, Victorian and Evangelical morals, and the rise of liberalism altered how the British interacted with India and perceived courtesans. *Nautch*-girls, and Indian women more generally, were originally portrayed as hyper-sexualized beings, while simultaneously being represented as available for British men’s sexual consumption. However, this shifted throughout the nineteenth century to a narrative of *nautch*-girls as dangerous figures of sexual temptation and of the British ‘rescuing’ Indian women and improving their lives. Both of these, at times conflicting, narratives worked to justify, to the British, Britain’s continued colonial presence in India. This study of the shifting attitudes of the British towards courtesans and the *nautch* illustrates the importance of constructions of gender, ethnicity, and caste to British empire-building in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries. British representations of courtesans during this period reflect the changing levels of perceived and actual British political power and social stability in the subcontinent. In addition, these representations illustrate the shifts in British understandings of their own ideals, norms, and values around gender, ethnicity, and class. Ratnabali Chatterjee demonstrates that British colonization was a process of legitimizing their presence in India and was often “based on theories built in England and worked out in the colonies.” Therefore, this thesis argues that British constructions of nautch-girls were integrally linked to the validation and justification of their empire and rule over India.

The British in the early eighteenth century were relatively accepting of courtesans and nautch performances as they were regarded as significant cultural practices of the ruling Indian elite. The British readily accepted, and participated in, these traditions because they possessed minimal political, military, and territorial power in the subcontinent. Through adopting the cultural practice of the nautch, the British validated, for themselves, their colonial presence in India. By the late eighteenth century, nabobs, their lifestyle, and cultural integration or Orientalization came under increasing pressure and disdain from metropolitan Britain, as the British gained territory and political power in the region. In the early nineteenth century, nautch-girls were increasingly constructed as negative aspects of a ‘backwards,’ exotic, and erotic Indian culture. Courtesans were understood, and portrayed, as proof of the ‘dangerously exotic Orient’ that threatened the power and stability of British colonial rule. This occurred simultaneously with the British maintaining rule over a much larger territory as well as the rise of liberal and Evangelical beliefs, which solidified British Victorian ideals and constructions of gender, ethnicity, and class. Subsequently, elite metropolitan Britain increasingly conceived of

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courtesans in relation to nabobism and a dangerous exoticism that corrupted British men and threatened the legitimacy of the East India Company’s rule.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the British understood courtesans as sex-workers. Under the British Crown, courtesans were increasingly represented as sex-workers and the British were encouraged to not patronize nautch performances. In the nineteenth century courtesans were subject to a loss of their cultural, political, and financial power due to the combined decline in Indian elites’ power and patronage, as well as the comparative lack of British patronage of nautches. Therefore, many courtesans had to depend on commercial sex-work in order to survive, which corresponded to British representations of these women as ‘prostitutes.’ Simultaneously, the British government in India increasingly institutionalized sex-work for the military through the Contagious Diseases Act and the subsequent proliferation of lock hospitals, which were hospitals that female, Indian sex-workers were forced to stay in if they were found to have a sexually transmitted disease. Furthermore, the mid-nineteenth century represented sex-workers throughout Britain and the colonies as ‘fallen’ women who were in need of elites to ‘save’ them. This narrative of the victimized woman was also applied to courtesans in colonial India. The need to ‘save’ Indian women became another way to justify and validate British colonial rule of the subcontinent during a period of change in the governance structure and the fear of political instability after the Revolution of 1857. Thus, as Priyadarshini Vijaisri expressed, the category of woman “is central to the ideology of power.”

Therefore, this thesis demonstrates how the shift in British representations of courtesans as criminals and victims was integrally related to their perceived political power and stability within the subcontinent.

This research illustrates how the British constructions of courtesans were their production of the Other. Therefore, courtesans were fundamentally linked to their construction and

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representation of the Self and British norms. Through the changing representations of nautch-girls in relation to the perceived political stability of the British in the subcontinent, the understanding and ideal of the British in the colony altered. This thesis demonstrates that these representations informed and depended on each other. The British created and maintained these constructions to represent themselves and work out their understanding of their role as colonial rulers of India. The nabob, as a figure of rapacious consumption and Orientalization, relatedly produced the construction of courtesans as alluring and sexually available. During the late eighteenth century as the nabob was criticized for their Orientalized lifestyle, nautch-girls were seen in an increasingly negative manner. In the early nineteenth century, the sahib and memsahib, British men and women in India, were represented as the epitome of Britishness and solidified hierarchies of ethnicity, class, and gender. Courtesans were represented as sexual temptresses who threatened the stability of British colonial rule through miscegenation and subsequent, so-called, ethnic degeneration per the pseudo-scientific racist beliefs of the Victorian period. By the mid-nineteenth century, the British became increasingly powerful in the subcontinent. Therefore, the British had a lessened need for courtesans to validate their political authority through Indian cultural traditions. Consequently, courtesans were represented as sex-workers, which fundamentally shifted their cultural power and role in Indian society. Courtesans lost their cultural and political influence as the sahib and memsahib ideals grew in significance and the British no longer required the social validation of their political authority that nautch-girls provided. This thesis demonstrates that courtesans were understood as sexual beings throughout the period under study. The sensuality of courtesans was represented in different ways depending on the political stability of the British Empire, as well as British understandings of themselves and their role in colonial India.
This thesis does not examine representations of courtesans into the late nineteenth century. The 1890s experienced a shift as British gender values were internalized by some Western-educated, elite Indian men and culminated in the anti-nautch campaign that extended into the early twentieth century and was linked to the nationalist movement. The anti-nautch campaign was a significant aspect of Hindu conservative and nationalist ideology and illustrates the importance of elite Indian men in the representation and control of Indian women’s bodies in the late colonial period. The period explored in this work illustrates how British representations of courtesans were explicitly related to their understanding of their own power and stability in India, as well as the shifting constructions of gender, ethnicity, and class that produced and justified the colonial project in India.

Intersectional feminist theories concerning gender, ethnicity, and class/ caste, as well as conceptualizations of scholarly Orientalism are the primary theoretical frameworks utilized throughout this thesis. British representations of courtesans and their responses to nautch performances are examined in order to illustrate the subsequent constructions of Indian women. In addition, the broader shifts in British society during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are explored to demonstrate the impact these changes had on the British community and colonial project in India. Travel narratives, letters, diaries, paintings, and newspaper articles are employed as evidence that offers contemporary insights into the manner in which empire, class, ethnicity, and gender were understood and conceptualized during this period. This thesis briefly analyzes pre-colonial courtesans and their social, financial, cultural, and political agency in order to create a more holistic understanding of these women and the changes they experienced in the colonial period. These frameworks will enable a more nuanced understanding of how gender constructions altered, and subsequently influenced, the production of empire in colonial India.
There is a relative academic silence concerning courtesans in the colonial period. Therefore, this thesis uses scholarship from a variety of topics and theoretical frameworks, including intersectional feminism, Orientalism, colonial sex-work, pre-colonial courtesans, nabobs, sahibs, and the British Crown in order to produce a holistic understanding of courtesans. The intersection of ethnicity, gender, and caste/class during the period of British imperialism in India has received extensive attention by the academic community. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is formative for a wider discourse on scholarship surrounding British imperialism in India. Though Said’s study mainly focuses on Western perceptions of the Middle East, many of these ideas can be applied to British views on India during the nineteenth century. The development of the Other in India through simplified stereotypes were of utmost importance in the construction and maintenance of British superiority and imperial rule throughout the subcontinent. India was constructed as the Other, through its exoticization and eroticization, in order to define the West.\(^5\) Constructing the Orient as weak, irrational, and feminized meant that the West was inherently and implicitly represented and understood to be the opposite: strong, rational, and masculine.\(^6\) This demonstrates the gendered nature of East-West relations, as well as how the British utilized gendered stereotypes in order to maintain their imperial power in India through emasculating male Indian bodies. Said’s *Orientalism* has been seminal in shaping present-day scholarship, specifically concerning the theory of post-colonialism, and influences subsequent literature in relation to British imperialism throughout Asia.

The study of the creation and maintenance of colonial power and British superiority through gender, ethnicity, and caste in India has evolved and lent itself to greater insights in how these hierarchies developed and endured. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak illustrate the significance of studying subaltern identities in India to nuance historical narratives and

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 4.
conceptualize the myriad and intersecting forces at work within the colonial matrix. The scholarship surrounding Indian women during the colonial period tends to focus on high-caste women and their experiences. This includes the British moral crusades against *sati*, the self-immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre; polygamy; *zenanas; purdah*, or veiling; female education, particularly literacy; and the production of the high-caste New Woman in the late nineteenth century due to the nationalist movement and Western-educated elite Indian men. Nandita Prasad Sahai argues that recent scholarship often homogenizes the experiences of Indian women and presents upper-caste women as the overall norm. The works cited above encourage scholars to approach Indian women in a more intersectional manner in order to create more nuanced understandings of their experiences under British colonialism.

Scholarship on courtesans throughout Asia is slowly increasing in the twenty-first century. However, scholars often use the figure of the courtesan and their experiences to prove other topics around the intersections of gender, ethnicity, caste/class, and colonialism. Veena Talwar Oldenburg’s article “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India,” is a seminal work on Indian courtesans that has enhanced scholarly interest in the topic by bringing the study of these women into academia that encouraged a nuanced understanding of their lives. However, there remains only a few larger scholarly works on courtesans. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon produced their edited collection *The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, which examines the representations and various experiences of courtesans.

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9 Ibid.
in many different cultures, including India.\textsuperscript{11} Pran Nevile’s \textit{Nautch Girls of the Raj} is a seminal work in the field and establishes the general history of courtesans from their religious inception to their demise in the mid-twentieth century.\textsuperscript{12} There are few monograph-length texts devoted solely to Indian courtesans, and those that do exist are often broad in their temporal scope, as the primary and secondary literature remains quite minimal on this topic.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, a significant portion of the scholarship around courtesans often argues that the colonial period was a time of degradation of courtesans from culturally and politically influential figures, to performers, to commercial sex-workers.\textsuperscript{14} This thesis adds to extant scholarship through a more temporally-specific analysis of courtesans in the colonial period. In addition, this thesis attempts to go beyond the present ‘degradation’ narrative, while not diminishing its potential accuracy, in order to demonstrate how courtesans were understood by colonial powers in relation to British political and territorial power in the subcontinent. Therefore, this thesis illustrates that the colonial period is not solely about the loss of courtesans’ social and political power, instead it focuses on how that loss of power was represented and influenced by British colonizers and their changing constructions of gender, ethnicity, and caste/class.

\textsuperscript{11} See Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, eds. \textit{The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) for their extensive analysis on the cultural place of courtesans, as well as the social, economic, and political requirements for a courtesan culture to develop.

\textsuperscript{12} See Nevile, \textit{The Nautch Girls of the Raj}, for analysis of courtesans from asparas and devadasis to their secularization as \textit{tawa’if} to their experiences under British imperialism and their eventual legal demise in 1947.

\textsuperscript{13} See Awadh Kishore Prasad, \textit{Devadasi System in Ancient India: a study of temple dancing girls in South India} (Delhi: H. K. Publishers and Distributers, 1991); Kay Kirkpatrick Jordan \textit{From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute: A History of the Changing Legal Status of the Devadasis in India, 1857-1947} (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003); Nevile, \textit{The Nautch Girls of the Raj}; and Vijaisri, \textit{Recasting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India} as examples of monographs focused on courtesans. Also, note the vast majority of these monographs focus solely on the \textit{devadasi} tradition in South India. In contrast, there are predominantly scholarly articles on \textit{tawa’if} in the north, with few monographs.

The primary sources used throughout this thesis are predominantly from a British perspective. At times other European writings are also used in cases where they produced significant or enduring commentary on courtesans, such as Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois (1765-1848). This work utilizes travel narratives, journals, diaries, and letters, as well as paintings, prints, and other imagery produced mainly by the British who travelled, served, or lived in India. In addition, some sources are used from those who had never been to India, in order to illustrate the widespread social reach of the gender, ethnicity, and class representations of Indian women. This also demonstrates the impact that the metropole had on colonial India and the British population there, as well as the influence of India on British representations of their colonial rule in the subcontinent.

Substantial silences exist in the sources used in this thesis. There is my personal lack of Indian languages that limits the texts and perspectives that can be accessed in this research. In addition, though courtesans were literate, there is a lack of sources from their own perspectives and in their own voices, whether these sources did not survive or did not exist in the first place is unknown. The majority of primary sources about courtesans do not possess the first-hand experiences of these women. In the pre-colonial period, Indian men often wrote about courtesans and in the colonial period it was predominantly British men and women who produced these sources. Therefore, courtesans are constructed by others throughout their history in India, limiting scholarly understanding about the women’s personal experiences from their own perspective. Felicity A. Nussbaum demonstrates the scholarly difficulty of locating women’s agency within male-dominated sources, particularly within the imperial domain, where colonized

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15 See Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois, Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India; and their Institutions, Religious and Civil (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1817). This text is one of the more famous documents that examine the cultural, political, and religious role of devadasis in Southern India.
women “were scarcely visible” in the sources. Due to this silence, this thesis attempts to nuance the understanding of courtesans by recognizing the lack of sources within the historical narrative. In addition, this thesis explores the British perspective of courtesans as a social construction, recognizing that it was produced within a framework that continuously silenced these women.

The terms used throughout a scholarly work are important and inform the understanding of many historical issues. Therefore, the choice of terms utilized throughout this thesis is significant. Scholarship contends with many problematic terms that possess numerous connotations and should be challenged in order to create more nuanced and respectful understandings of a topic. This thesis utilizes the terms ‘West’ and ‘East’ in reference to various, hegemonic, geographical understandings of the world. These terms are accompanied by problematic, monolithic, connotations, such as the ‘West’ as fundamentally more ‘civilized’ while the ‘East’ is often represented as ‘decadent’ and ‘tyrannical.’ However, these terms tend to be less problematic than previous understandings of these regions as the ‘Occident’ and the ‘Orient.’ Therefore, this thesis uses ‘West’ and ‘East,’ however, it recognizes the various issues and hegemonic ideologies that exist around these words, as well as the nuanced and varied experiences of the cultures and peoples in these places. In addition, the words used to denote the region of study within this thesis are important to examine. Scholars such as Durba Ghosh challenge the use of terms such as ‘Indian’ and ‘South Asian.’ Ghosh argues against using ‘India’ and ‘Indian’ because this period pre-dates a nationalist consciousness and sense of

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India. In addition, Ghosh argues that ‘South Asian’ as a term to refer to the people and cultures of the Indian subcontinent is a post-colonial concept that should not be retroactively imposed on the region. Therefore, in reference to the various political issues surrounding these terms, this thesis uses the terms ‘India’ and ‘Indian’ to refer to the peoples, cultures, and histories of the Indian subcontinent as the British understood it in the colonial period, as that is the main temporal focus of the work.

Furthermore, this thesis employs the term ‘Anglo-Indian’ to refer to the children produced through Euro-Indian unions. During the colonial period, and in much of present-day scholarship, the term ‘Eurasian’ denotes such children and ‘Anglo-Indian’ denotes the official British community in India. The terminology has recently shifted to use ‘Anglo-Indian’ to reference the children of European and Indian heritage. Therefore, this thesis utilizes the term ‘Anglo-Indian’ in this manner. Furthermore, the term ‘Oriental’ is placed with quotation marks around it in order to interrogate the stereotypes and narratives that exist in the context of the racist hierarchies of empire. In addition, the terms ‘sex-work’ and ‘sex-worker’ are employed throughout this thesis to avoid and challenge the negative connotations surrounding the words ‘prostitute’ and ‘prostitution.’ ‘Prostitute’ and ‘prostitution’ may, at times, be employed to bring awareness to the negative connotations that were imposed on courtesans in the colonial period, however, they will appear in quotation marks in order to challenge these assumptions and problematic representations of sex-work and sex-workers.

19 Gosh, Sex and the Family in Colonial India, p. 34.
20 Ibid.
21 Lionel Caplan, “Iconographies of Anglo-Indian Women: Gender Constructs and Contrasts in a Changing Society,” Modern Asian Studies 34, no. 4 (2000): p. 864, fn. 1. A host of other, more problematic, terms were used to refer to children of Euro-Indian unions during the colonial period, including ‘half-castes’ and ‘half-borns’ and relates to their systematic oppression by both Europeans and Indians throughout this period.
22 Ibid.
23 Indrani Sen, Women and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India (1858-1900) (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), pp. xiv-xv.
Lastly, there are numerous terms used to reference the women this thesis examines. In pre-colonial India, these women were referred to by numerous names, including tawa’if, ganika, devadasi, vesya, and randi, as well as many more. These terms were based on intersections of region and caste, which denoted the various levels of cultural significance, roles, and agency these women had in India. In order to create consistency within this thesis, the term ‘courtesan’ will be used to denote the various women who possessed social agency and engaged in some form of culturally and religiously-influential performances and sex-work. Though the term ‘courtesan’ has some negative connotations of the erotic and exotic, this thesis works to challenge these ideas and illustrate the cultural and political agency many of these women possessed, particularly in pre-colonial India. Furthermore, when exploring pre-colonial female performers, the term ‘courtesan’ will predominantly be used, unless in particular reference to a certain type of courtesan where a specific term is employed. In addition, this thesis utilizes the term ‘nautch-girl’ interchangeably with ‘courtesan’ when exploring the colonial period because ‘nautch’ and ‘nautch-girl’ were terms employed specifically by the British to denote Indian courtesans and female performers. ‘Courtesan’ is used throughout the thesis in order to re-establish the cultural and political importance of these women, while ‘nautch-girl’ is used to illustrate the amalgamation of these various women and the overall ‘degradation’ of female performers throughout the colonial period.

A significant aspect of this work is recognizing my own positionality in society. It is important to acknowledge that as a white, middle-class, Western-educated woman, I possess a certain set of experiences and privileges that impact the lens through which I understand and study historical topics. Though this is influenced through the intersectional feminist framework that I use in my approach to this thesis, it is important to recognize the limits my knowledge and

24 These terms are explored more extensively later in this thesis.
experiences create in my study of British representations of India and Indian women in the colonial period. In an effort to follow Linda Alcoff’s suggestion that scholars should attempt to create “the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others,” this thesis tries to produce a conversation in which numerous voices are included and the chance for continued dialogue exists, rather than the erasure of marginalized groups’ perspectives and experiences. Therefore, this thesis attempts to ‘speak to’ the representations of courtesans in colonial India in the hopes of a broader discourse on the experiences and historical narratives of those marginalized by the hierarchical systems both past and present.

This thesis chronologically traces the development of representations of courtesans in India. The first chapter briefly examines the social organization and roles of courtesans in the ancient and early modern periods of pre-colonial India. This chapter also explores the political, cultural, and financial influence and agency courtesans possessed prior to the mid-eighteenth century. The remaining chapters solely focus on the colonial period. The second chapter explores British imperial culture in the eighteenth century and the Orientalized lifestyle of the nabob, as well as British representations of nautch-girls as a form of political validation and an integral aspect of their Orientalized lifestyle in the subcontinent. The third chapter examines the second half of the eighteenth century and the social anxieties produced by the Orientalized lifestyle and rule of the nabob in India. Subsequently, this chapter illustrates the changing British conceptions of Indian courtesans and elite metropolitan policing of nabobism. The fourth chapter explores the cultural shift from the nabob to the sahib as the ideal British ruler in India during the early nineteenth century. In addition, this chapter examines the rise of the memsahib as a significant

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figure in colonial discourse and representations of colonial authority in the subcontinent. This chapter explores the various British representations of courtesans and *nautch* performances in relation to the perceived threat cultural and sexual interactions posed to the imperial project. The final chapter examines the criminalization and victimization of courtesans in the second half of the nineteenth century under direct British rule of India. In conclusion, this thesis explores the changing British representations of courtesans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the correlating British understandings of their own political power and stability within the subcontinent.
Chapter 1
Courtesans in Pre-Colonial India

But for this girl, adorned with jewels, whom I once dearly loved, such dances are a daily performance. She is only a dancing girl.27

The above quotation is from the second century CE text *Shilappadikaram (the Ankle Bracelet)*, by Prince Ilango Adigal that follows his romance with a courtesan. It recognizes the professional nature of pre-colonial Indian courtesans, as well as their skill and influence over powerful men. Prior to the analysis of nautch girls in the colonial period, an exploration of courtesans in pre-colonial India is required in order to obtain a more nuanced understanding of British representations of dancing-girls. In addition, it is important to recognize the diversity of Indian women’s experiences and gender relations, as many scholars create a homogenized view of their lives which perpetuate stereotypes that are “both ahistorical and unhistorical.”28 This chapter explores the historical context of courtesans, their long history throughout the subcontinent, as well as their cultural significance and subsequent political power. In addition, larger concepts of Indian women’s gender roles and expectations, agency, and the intersections of gender with caste in pre-colonial India will be examined to enable a more holistic view of courtesans and their position within society.

The scholarship surrounding pre-colonial Indian courtesans is relatively sparse, particularly in comparison to academic work on high-caste Hindu women in the ancient and early modern periods. According to Nandita Prasad Sahai, there is less academic study on how gender relations were constructed among the lower-castes, where a significant amount of the courtesans originated.29 The scholarship up to the 1980s on the pre-colonial courtesan continued

29 Ibid., p. 36.
the representation of their sexualized and less than respectable status in Indian society.\textsuperscript{30} This is observable in Anant Sadashiv Altekar’s monograph \textit{The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day} that argues courtesans were “persons who had sacrificed what was regarded as specially honorable in a woman.”\textsuperscript{31} Priyadarshini Vijaisri argues the reason for this interpretation is that many studies on the pre-colonial courtesan rely on and replicate ideas about caste dynamics in the colonial period that portrayed lower-caste women as ‘prostitutes.’\textsuperscript{32}

By contrast, more recent scholarship recognizes the sexual component of Indian courtesans’ lives in the pre-colonial period, while refraining from passing moral judgement on courtesans or portraying them as inherently immoral.\textsuperscript{33} Present-day academia contests the image of courtesans created by previous generations of scholarship and attempts to nuance the experiences of these women through subaltern and intersectional theoretical frameworks of gender, ethnicity, and class/ caste. For example, Vijaisri explores how religiously-sanctioned sexuality enabled \textit{devadasis} to exert political, cultural, and economic autonomy within ancient and early modern Indian society, as well as the patriarchal structures that contained this agency.\textsuperscript{34}

Scholars often lack historical sources from courtesans’ perspectives because the vast majority of primary sources available to scholars are literary sources and traditional treatises on politics, love, law, and arts, which were mainly written by men and often expressed theoretical ideals or

\textsuperscript{31} Anant Sadashiv Altekar, \textit{The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day} (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1959), p. 181. This monograph was originally published in 1938, however, it was reprinted until 1983, illustrating the persistence of this representation of courtesans in the academic community.
\textsuperscript{32} See Vijaisri, \textit{Recasting the Devadasi}, pp. 6-30 for an analysis of the problematic scholarship surrounding courtesans and \textit{devadasis}.
\textsuperscript{34} Vijaisri, \textit{Recasting the Devadasi}, pp. 93-97.
criteria for gender norms rather than the way these norms were expressed in society.\textsuperscript{35} Therefore, it is difficult to produce an understanding of pre-colonial courtesans that recognizes their varied roles and experiences, as well as their personal lives and views of their profession. This chapter examines courtesans through literary sources, paintings, and contemporary scholarship to produce a nuanced conceptualization of pre-colonial courtesans and more fully understand the alterations that occurred to the representation of these women under British imperialism.

A Brief History of Pre-Colonial Courtesans: Devadasi and Tawa’if

Courtesans were a cultural phenomenon that was not limited solely to India. Evidence of courtesans exists in numerous parts of the world including Ancient Greece, Edo Japan, and Imperial China.\textsuperscript{36} Courtesans in ancient and early modern India shared aspects of lifestyle with these cultures, although they also were unique expressions of Hindu and Muslim histories and cultures. Courtesans were an integral part of Indian society since the third century BCE and possessed a divine origin in Hindu culture.\textsuperscript{37} According to Pran Nevile, Lord Brahma created asparas, female dancers, and the most accomplished aspara, Urvashi, imparted her dancing knowledge to humans. The first to receive this knowledge were the temple dancers, devadasis, at which point devotional dances became an essential part of temple service and were prevalent throughout the subcontinent in the ancient period.\textsuperscript{38} Devadasis were dedicated at a young age, typically around seven or eight, and were rigorously trained in dancing and singing. Upon reaching puberty they went through a marriage ceremony to the deity, which solidified their connection to the temple as well as their social position and role as a devadasi.\textsuperscript{39} Daughters were


\textsuperscript{36} Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, eds. \textit{The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Srinivasan, “Royalty’s Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives,” p. 162.


\textsuperscript{39} See Srinivasan “Reform and Revival,” pp. 1869-1870. A devadasi was initiated as a young child by a priest of the temple in a Pottukattu, tali-tying, ceremony. Upon reaching puberty, she went through a Sadanku ceremony, where
often dedicated to the temples of the goddess Yellamma, although other popular goddesses to dedicate daughters to included Dymavva, Maramma, Hulingamma, and Uchchangiamma.\textsuperscript{40}

The advent of the Mughal Empire in North India in 1526 disintegrated the \textit{devadasi} system in the region. However, dance was an important cultural aspect for Muslim rulers and the Mughals facilitated the amalgamation of Persian and Hindu dance forms, which produced secularized courtesans, typically referred to as \textit{tawa’if}, who were attached to their courts and palaces.\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Tawa’if} who were not patronized by the courts worked in \textit{kothas}, or salons, which catered to the nobility and were often run by an older, retired courtesan or \textit{chaudharayan}. \textit{Chaudharayans} typically received approximately one third of their courtesans’ income in order to maintain the \textit{kotha}, pay servants, and train new dancing-girls, which enabled older courtesans to maintain their financial independence and agency throughout their lives.\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Tawa’if} practiced their craft from around the age of five, and were trained rigorously by male teachers known as \textit{ustads} for approximately ten years.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, \textit{tawa’if} performed similar cultural functions as the \textit{devadasi} in southern India, without the religious overtones associated with temple service.

The \textit{Arthasastra}, a significant treatise on Indian polity dating from around the first or second century CE, encouraged the state to finance and invest in the training of courtesans as it would directly profit from their success.\textsuperscript{44} In this way, though the temple support of the \textit{devadasi} system was absent, northern India continued to maintain the cultural significance of courtesans and classical dance forms, albeit in a different and secular manner. Therefore, the Mughal Empire became the patrons of the dancing-girls of the north and actively supported the training of dancing-girls.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[40] Vijaisri, \textit{Recasting the Devadasi}, p. 35.
\item[41] Neville, \textit{The Nautch Girls of the Raj}, p. 3.
\end{footnotes}
and employment of courtesans. Emperors such as Akbar (r. 1556-1605), Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), and Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658) heavily supported courtesans during the early modern period. This was observable through courtly images that depicted these emperors, including Akbar, holding extensive performances in their courts (Figure 1.1).

![Figure 1.1](image_url)

Figure 1.1: Akbar’s court dancers performing at the celebrations of the birth of Salim from the Akbarnama, c. 1590.

The image from Akbar’s court also illustrates the prevalence of courtesans and their performances at significant events and ceremonies, as the print depicts the celebration of the birth of Akbar’s son, who later became the emperor Jahangir.

There were many terms used in pre-colonial India to describe courtesans. The main differentiation was between *devadasis*, religious dancers attached to Hindu temples, and *tawa’if*, secular performers who received patronage from the royal courts of the Mughal emperors. There

were numerous regional and caste-based sub-groupings within these two terms. This illustrates the various experiences, cultural differences, and regional varieties of courtesanship that existed in pre-colonial India. In addition, by the early modern period, the proliferation of terms to denote courtesans demonstrates how the practice had developed into a highly specialized and hierarchized system.\textsuperscript{46} Within the \textit{devadasi} category, \textit{jogatis} and \textit{basavis} denoted temple dancers who were influenced by region and social standing.\textsuperscript{47} Edgar Thurston listed seven types of \textit{devadasis}, including \textit{data}, \textit{vikrita}, \textit{bhritya}, \textit{alankara}, and \textit{hrita}, who received different labels depending on if they gave themselves to the temple as a gift, for their family’s prosperity, out of devotion, or were presented to the temple by noblemen.\textsuperscript{48} In the north, the terms \textit{nati} and \textit{barangana} denoted various levels of accomplished courtesans, whereas the word \textit{randi} referred to a “common prostitute” and was seen to occupy a separate sphere in relation to training, caste, and subsequent clientele.\textsuperscript{49} In addition, a \textit{ganika} was seen to be the highest level of a courtesan, whereas \textit{vesya} or \textit{rupajiva} denoted a sex-worker who was socially ranked below a \textit{ganika}. Low-grade sex-workers were often termed \textit{pumscali} and female slaves who were forced to provide sexual services to men were known as \textit{dasi}.\textsuperscript{50} Etymologically, these women were different from each other and, therefore, most likely had various experiences and levels of agency within the pre-colonial patriarchal systems. Priya Srinivasan argues that \textit{devadasis} had a significantly different history than the \textit{tawa’if}.\textsuperscript{51} However, there remains a lack of scholarship on the topic and, in many ways, these women experienced a similar fate during the colonial period, as the

\textsuperscript{46} Vijaisri, \textit{Recasting the Devadasi}, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 100.
\textsuperscript{50} Srinivasan, “Royalty’s Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives,” p. 162.
British amalgamated the vast personifications of this profession and produced a single, monolithic image of courtesans as the _nautch_-girl.

**The Social Organization, Political Power, and Cultural Significance of Courtesans**

The stereotypical image of the courtesan as an immoral or sexually promiscuous woman is inaccurate in relation to the female performers of pre-colonial India. According to Nevile, pre-colonial India had more open and less restrictive ideas around sex and, therefore, the role of the courtesan was recognized in society.⁵² _Tawa’if_ were highly educated and culturally refined women whose main purpose was to provide cultural entertainment through song, dance, and intellectual conversation to aristocratic male patrons. Though courtesans could provide sexual services to elite Indian men, this component of their profession was only a small part of the cultural role they played.⁵³ Occasionally, courtesans would sexually gratify a patron, if a sufficient price were paid; however, many court dancers did not normally offer their sexual services to upper-caste men.⁵⁴ This demonstrates, that though these women were subject in many ways to the male gaze and patriarchal power structures, they were often able to exercise sexual agency and have control over their bodies within the confines of patriarchal systems. However, courtesans were also constrained by patriarchies, for it was standard practice throughout India for a courtesan’s training to be financially supported by a rich patron, who would typically become her first sexual partner upon reaching puberty.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, courtesans continued to exercise agency within these patriarchal systems.

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Courtesans were often quite wealthy, as they received money and land from patrons, and *devadasis* were often given land endowments from their temples. Courtesans’ legal ability to acquire and inherit property as well as pursue paid professions, unlike other women during this period, enabled them to maintain financial independence. In addition, courtesans usually had only a few sexual partners throughout their lives and any children with these men were solely connected to the woman.\(^{56}\) The children of courtesans often inherited dance practices, economic capital, and land from their mothers, as courtesans were the only women in India who were legally entitled to own and inherit property.\(^{57}\) This caused many scholars to argue that courtesans were the only group in India to have matrilineal kinship organization.\(^{58}\) Though not their own caste, the role of courtesans and *devadasis* was often hereditary, as their female children frequently entered the same profession. If courtesans lacked a daughter, they could adopt one based on customary Hindu law.\(^{59}\) Furthermore, as the female members of courtesan communities were the primary source of income, land, and political power, daughters were favoured over sons, which was contrary to the vast majority of Indian society during the pre-colonial period.\(^{60}\)

In addition, courtesans throughout India were able to exercise power through cultural significance, courtly politics, and caste mobility. The most significant aspect of courtesans’ agency was their cultural significance, for this informed all other aspects of their social, political, and economic power in the pre-colonial period. Courtesans were considered the keepers and disseminators of high Hindu and Muslim culture due to their intellectual and artistic skill,

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58 Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, p. 177 fn 1. However, see Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, “Female Agency and Patrilineal Constraints: Situating Courtesans in Twentieth-Century India,” in *The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 312-331. Particularly p. 326 for a challenge to this widely held belief, as they argue that the “absence of patrilineality does not equal matrilineality,” and illustrate how courtesans’ agency continued to be constrained in pre-colonial India by patrilineal social organization and patriarchal institutions.
60 Ibid., p. 1869.
particularly through their training in poetry and dance. The *Kamasutra* contains section VI, which was devoted to courtesans, and argued that in order for a courtesan to be considered accomplished, she had to be proficient in the sixty-four arts. These arts included singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, drawing, writing, decorating, magic, carpentry, tailoring, architecture, chemistry, minerology, rules of society, and how to pay respects and compliments to others.\(^{61}\) The *Kamasutra* also illustrates the cultural importance of the courtesan, as it states when fully accomplished in the above arts a courtesan “receives a seat of honour in an assemblage of men. She is, moreover, always respected by the king, and praised by learned men, and her favour being sought for by all, she becomes an object of universal regard.”\(^{62}\) This demonstrates that courtesans held significant cultural status and influence in pre-colonial Indian society. The rigorous education of courtesans in these arts meant that they were the only literate women during the ancient and early modern periods in India, when it was considered improper and unrespectable for high-caste women to be literate.\(^{63}\) Their extensive education also meant that members of the Mughal nobility frequently sent their sons to *kothas* in order to learn etiquette, the art of conversation, polite courtly manners, and appreciation of Urdu literature from courtesans.\(^{64}\) In addition, courtesans, and particularly *devadasis* who were married to a deity, were considered auspicious women because they were not married to mortal men and could, therefore, never become widows. This bestowed enhanced cultural significance on courtesans, as they became important aspects of wedding ceremonies, often tying the *tali* of the bride and leading the wedding procession in order to confer their marital luck onto high-caste women who

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\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 26.

\(^{63}\) Walker, “The ‘Nautch’ Reclaimed,” p. 553

\(^{64}\) Singh, “Retrieving Voices from the Margins,” p. 100.
could afford this service. Courtesans’ luck in marriage translated to a general auspiciousness, which meant that their presence was often socially required at important ceremonies, such as birthdays, festive occasions, puberty ceremonies, weddings, and processions.

Due to their cultural significance, courtesans in pre-colonial India were able to exercise agency through both political power and caste mobility. As noted above, many courtesans originated in lower castes. However, due to their close, and at times intimate, relationships with nobility, princes, and emperors, courtesans were able to cross caste boundaries and experience social treatment, positions, and privileges similar to high-caste women. Courtesans were also able to freely interact with men and did not practice purdah, as many Indian women did during this period. The cultural significance of courtesans was enhanced because, for members of the nobility, maintaining a tawa’if or a devadasi as her main or sole patron was a symbol of social prestige and privilege. Though political power was not open to all courtesans, many influenced the politics of the period in both Hindu and Muslim courts through their cultural importance and artistic developments of classical Hindu music and dance forms. In addition, a few courtesans became the wives of important Mughal emperors, and were able to indirectly exercise political power. For example, Jahandar Shah (r. 1712-1713) married a dancing-girl named Lal Kunwar and Nasir-ud-Din Muhammad Shah (r. 1719-1748) married the courtesan Qudsia Begum (d. 1765), who were both able to exercise substantial political power through their marriages.

Therefore, many courtesans were able to gain political influence and challenge delineations of social structures due to their mobility within gender and caste-based social hierarchies. However,

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their marginal position within a largely patrilineal kinship system meant that they were often
denied full access to the highest strata of society. 71 Although this rule did have a few exceptions
in the figures of courtesans who married emperors, it was typically true for most dancing-girls.

In sum, courtesans were significant cultural figures in the pre-colonial period. Their
cultural, financial, sexual, political, and caste agency ensured that they were significant historical
players who heavily influenced Indian culture, particularly in their dissemination and
perpetuation of classical arts. However, though courtesans had a substantial amount of agency
and independence, they were still constrained by patriarchies that produced and maintained their
very position within pre-colonial society. 72 Courtesans held a position within society in which
they maintained patriarchal institutions, however, they operated within these systems in ways
that resisted traditional gender norms and values. In this way courtesans were able to carve out a
space for themselves in which they had substantial amounts of agency within a system that
oppressed women. The following sections will examine how courtesans were influenced by the
advent of British imperialism in the subcontinent, and the changes in their representation in
relation to British conceptualizations of their political power in India.

72 Singh, “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl,” p. 190.
Chapter 2
Courtesans, Nabobs, and British Power in Eighteenth-Century India

No entertainment can in India be complete without a nautch.\(^{73}\)

Though written in 1838, the above quotation from the *Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian* illustrated the general view of the British in the eighteenth century in regard to nautch performances. This chapter explores the importance of British nabobs and constructions of nabob masculinity in the eighteenth century, as well as how nautch-girls and performances were represented at the time. Though only a small number of men were able to achieve the opulent lifestyle of the stereotypical nabob, this section will argue that they had a substantial influence on British cultural understandings and representations of India, Indian women, and Britain itself. This chapter examines the period of early British presence and cultural contact of the eighteenth century in India, and the political and cultural landscape that shaped it. Nabobism was an important feature of British society in India, and the shifts it went through during the eighteenth century were mirrored in, and linked to, British understandings of Indian courtesans as nautch-girls were a stereotypical part of the nabob experience. These representations of courtesans perpetuated Orientalist understandings of the East, and India more specifically, as an exotic and erotic Other through British constructions of gender, ethnicity, climate, and caste.

The term ‘nabob’ is an Anglicized transliteration of the word *nawab*, which meant ‘deputy,’ and was the title of aristocratic regional governors in the Mughal Empire, with associated responsibilities.\(^{74}\) *Nawabs* were able to amass local power throughout the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the Mughal Empire gradually became more decentralized. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the term ‘nabob’ underwent a distinctive shift. In the first half of the century, nabob continued to be a transliteration of the

\(^{73}\) *Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian*, August 18, 1838, Issue 787.

Indian title and solely referred to Indians with regional power. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the term ‘nabob’ became associated with the British in India and acquired different connotations.75 ‘Nabob’ began to be used during this period by domestic Britain to refer to their fellow countrymen in the subcontinent and critique their lifestyles, political power, and wealth.76 The growing pejorative nature of the term represents heightened levels of anxiety and criticism of British intervention, trade, and governance in India. ‘Nabob’ particularly illustrated domestic Britain’s fears of the increasing Orientalization of British subjects in India.

The historiography of nabobs illustrates significant shifts in the scholarship of British imperialism from the twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries. The works of early twentieth-century scholars, such as Percival Spear and Dennis Kincaid, are some of the first academic texts on British nabobs in the 1700s. These scholars adhere to the beliefs of eighteenth-century critics that viewed nabobs as opulent, fundamentally altered by their time in India, and willing to use their new-found wealth to enter into and destabilize the political system of England.77 The specific historical context must be considered in these works, as these scholars wrote on British imperialism in the subcontinent prior to India’s independence in 1947. This context contoured the ways in which these scholars analyze nabobs, and their concurrence with eighteenth-century critics, to minimize the period of Company-led British imperialism and focus on the more duty-centred periods of colonialism that ensued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the British Crown.

In contrast, more recent scholarship on this topic has significantly altered discourses on nabobs. Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips represent a shift in the scholarly narrative as they focus on...
on the broader societal atmosphere that produced animosity towards nabobs in the late eighteenth century.78 Tillman W. Nechtman and E. M. Collingham also explore the wider social, political, and economic factors that led to the characterization and stereotypical representation of nabobs in the late eighteenth century.79 This scholarship allows for a more nuanced understanding of nabobs and the impact they had on British society, as well as the influence that British society had on them and the governing of India. Specifically, Nechtman examines the material culture that was produced by nabobs returning to Britain, and how this fomented popular public hostility towards nabobs as they were seen to be the harbingers of a more globalized and imperial sense of Britishness, which was viewed as threatening traditional understandings of British identity in this period.80 Collingham focuses on the body, and the appropriate codes of behaviour embedded into them, of the nabob and the sahib81 to demonstrate the changing understanding of Britain’s goals and duties within the Indian subcontinent.82 Previously, British scholarship understood Indian history in an Orientalist manner that represented Islamic rulers of India, particularly the Mughal Empire, as creating a period of decline and stagnation in Indian civilizations.83 In contrast, recent

79 See Nechtman, Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Collingham, Imperial Bodies, for their detailed works on the representation of nabobs.
80 Nechtman, Nabobs, p. 16. Nechtman offers an influential analysis on the impact that the material culture of India, which was brought to Britain through the nabobs, had on public perceptions of the East India Company and Britain’s imperial project in India.
81 The term sahib, in recent scholarship and throughout this work, denotes the utilitarian and sober British official that ruled India in the nineteenth century, one that did not become Orientalized but rather maintained British values, norms, and lifestyles while in the subcontinent. See Collingham, Imperial Bodies, for an explicit examination of the sahib.
82 See Collingham, Imperial Bodies, for an analysis of the British body in India during the nineteenth century, in relation to both the nabob and the sahib, as well as the importance of the body as an historical source.
83 Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, A Concise History of Modern India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 2. This understanding was often described as the British Orientalist triptych of periodization for Indian history, which was popular during the colonial period and the early twentieth century. The first stage of Indian history was seen as the ancient and great Hindu civilizations, often associated with purity and a lack of corruption. The second was a period of despotism, corruption, stagnation, and decline due to the Islamic rulers of the Mughal Empire. Lastly, the period of British rule with enlightened leadership and progress, as well as a return to the glorious, ahistorical, ancient past. This triptych worked to justify British imperialism in the subcontinent, as well as ideas of British superiority over India and Islamic Indian rulers.
scholarship challenges the assumption of a stagnating Mughal Empire and instead argues that it was the culmination of long-term transitions in trade, economics, culture, politics, and society that enabled the British to gain the necessary resources to intervene and acquire territory in the subcontinent.84 This scholarship works to demonstrate that criticism of British nabobs was a reaction to the larger social fears and questions that metropolitan Britain was facing as an increasingly imperial and world power over the course of the eighteenth century.

**Political and Social Power in Eighteenth-Century Empire**

British nabobs were produced within a specific socio-economic and political context in British society in both the metropole and the colony. In the early eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire was wealthy, powerful, and controlled a substantial population. The administration was divided into regional areas of power through zamindars, local leaders; princely rulers; and nawabs. As Mughal centralized power declined throughout the eighteenth century, these regional leaders enhanced their local power and became increasingly autonomous.85 Though substantial political changes occurred during this period, other aspects of Indian society, such as its culture, arts, and economics, continued on similar trajectories in relation to larger global shifts. In Britain, the East India Company was established in 1600 and given a monopoly on the South Asian spice trade. Marshall argues that the British were militarily repulsed from gaining substantial territory in India until the 1740s, which had a direct impact on the development of the British nabob during the first half of the eighteenth century.86 By the mid-eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire was too politically and militarily decentralized to produce a united front against the British. Therefore, the British were increasingly able to utilize political situations and the

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84 Ibid., p. 3.
decline of Mughal power to enhance their trading opportunities, commercial enterprises, and territorial acquisitions through their intervention in Indian politics. For example, the instability of the Mughal Empire meant that between 1707 and 1750 the East India Company was able to negotiate directly with provincial leaders in Bengal, Awadh, Arcot, and Hyderabad. This allowed the British to insinuate themselves as another political actor into the rapidly shifting political climate of India. Shifting political power in the subcontinent influenced the British imperial project and the ways in which they manifested their power, as well as their representations of courtesans and the development of the British nabob.

There was also the widespread belief in Britain that the Mughal rulers of India in the eighteenth century were violent, anarchic, and despotic, which was based on British Oriental ideas concerning the Mughals as the reason Indian civilization had ‘stagnated.’ This correlated with British attitudes propagated throughout the Enlightenment and culminated in their stadial theory of the world, which created a sense of European superiority and ordered different cultures in the world into a hierarchy based on European standards and ideals. The perceived despotism of the Mughal Empire and the belief in British superiority propelled British political and economic interests in India, as well as justified their emerging colonial mentality. The replication of Mughal or Orientalized lifestyles in the form of the nabob was seen as requisite to the representations of power in India in the eighteenth century. At the same time, as the British gained power in India, nabob lifestyle was not seen as contradictory to British goals in India of more ‘enlightened’ rule.

In 1774, the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded in Calcutta under the direction of Warren Hastings (1732-1818), the first Governor-General of Bengal. The British Orientalist

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88 Marshall, The Eighteenth Century in Indian History, p. 21.
89 Nechtman, Nabobs, p. 25.
project, commissioned by Hastings, aimed to understand, document, and analyze Indian
civilization in the interest of both knowledge and rule. The works of leading British scholars and
Company civil servants such as William Jones (1746-1794), Charles Wilkins (1749-1836), H. T.
Colebrooke (1765-1837), and others opened the Western study and representation of India; and
is the basis of modern Indology. At the same time, in reality, British cultural perceptions
generalized the way Indian society operated. 90 British understandings of India could not be
separated from British views and self-representations of Europe’s evolution away from, and
superior to, India and the East. Orientalist scholarship did not judge India on its own terms,
rather it used Enlightenment modes of knowledge and British views of the East that easily
converted to justify British superiority and colonial expansion. 91 These Orientalist theories and
scholars were simultaneously fascinated by Indian culture and convinced of European
superiority. This mentality worked to justify the rising political power of the British in parts of
the subcontinent. In addition, this combination of scholarship and political power was influential
in developing the openness to, and interest in, high-caste Indian lifestyles that were integral to
the shaping of the eighteenth-century British nabob. Furthermore, the Orientalist project was also
undertaken with a purpose to better govern India. The ‘grant of the diwani’ by the Mughal
emperor Shah Alam II (1728-1806) in 1765 made the Company the government of Bengal; as
Mughal power recognized the new political reality. Therefore, Hastings’ initiation of the
Orientalist project was consistent with interests of rule.

The Nabob

The British nabob began to appear in India in close relation to colonial acquisitions in the
subcontinent. The majority of nabobs came from Britain’s middle-class, who gained significant

90 Metcalf and Metcalf, A Concise History of Modern India, p. 59.
91 Nechtman, Nabobs, p. 35.
wealth in India, beyond what their means would have been in Britain. However, the stereotype that every white man who entered India became wealthy beyond measure was untrue as only a few British men were able to fully achieve a nabob lifestyle. This was because the majority of British men in the subcontinent made little money as they were working-class soldiers and traders, or they died due to the high mortality rates of tropical diseases that were common amongst British persons in India. In many ways, stereotypical nabobs were few, far between and, subsequently, quite famous, such as Warren Hastings, Robert Clive (1725-1774), and Sir David Ochterlony (1758-1825). Their lifestyle in India was a distinct hybridization of Western and Eastern modes of living. Thomas Medwin (1788-1869) described nabobs as “neither English nor Indian, Christian nor Hindu,” due to their amalgamated lifestyles. This belief of a more culturally fluid person in the body of the nabob is reflected in recent scholarship as well, as E. M. Collingham also viewed the nabobs as being neither British nor Indian, but a combination of the two cultures.

Nabobs typically adopted aspects of Indian culture and traditions that they found agreeable and legitimized their power within the subcontinent. Thomas Williamson (c. 1758-1817) believed that the British “must coincide with the habits of the natives to a certain extent, if we mean to retain health, or to acquire comfort.” Williamson illustrates the British tradition of adopting, what they saw as, Indian customs that correlated with their Orientalist view of India and modes of living and rulership. This included smoking the huaqqa, wearing Indian-style clothing, attending nautch performances, and keeping a zenana, which the British associated

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93 Ibid., p. 226.
95 Collingham, Imperial Bodies, p. 13.
with Indian lifestyles. The lifestyle of the nabob is observable in paintings such as one likely depicting William Fullerton (Figure 2.1). The image shows Fullerton (d. 1805) seated on a rich carpet, surrounded by his Indian servants, smoking a *huqqa*, with a box of betel nut by his side.

Figure 2.1: Possibly William Fullerton seated, surrounded by his Indian servants, smoking a *huqqa*, c. 1760-1764.

Though still wearing British clothing, this image of Fullerton illustrates the ability of British officials to adopt, what they considered, an Indian lifestyle. The luxury-loving, decadent, and distinctly Orientalized British man demonstrates a stereotypical representation of the British in the subcontinent, as well as the ways in which India was seen to influence the lifestyles of imperialists in the eighteenth century. The figure of Fullerton and other nabobs illustrates the ways in which nabobs appropriated aspects of Indian culture to legitimize their political authority.

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97 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 36.
in the areas of India under British control during this period. In addition, the nabob lifestyle was a British stereotype of aspects of Indian lifestyle that the British facilitated and adopted as it magnified the pleasures and freedoms of their place in India, which was not representative of the realities of Indian lifestyles. The portrait of John Foote (1718-1768) depicts him in ‘Orientalized’ dress that was a combination of British views on Turkish and Mughal clothing, which would not have been worn by Indian rulers (Figure 2.2).

![Captain John Foote in ‘Oriental’ dress, 1761.](image)

This image conveys Orientalist stereotypes around Indian clothing and rulership that the British adopted based on their perceptions of Indian lifestyles. The portrait illustrated the stereotypical nabob lifestyle of excess, pleasures, and freedoms in India, as well as the British fascination with their erotic and exotic image of the East.

The lifestyle of the British nabob was represented as being luxurious. While seen as opulent by much of metropolitan Britain, this lifestyle of nabobism was viewed by the East India Company as coinciding with their Orientalist views on how to best rule in India. The British
adopted cultural aspects of India that they believed would help legitimize their rule of the subcontinent in the eyes of the Indian populace. Nabob lifestyles also correlated with the British view of themselves in the eighteenth century as the new Indian nobility. Furthermore, the assumption of numerous Indian cultural traditions, whether appropriately or properly adopted, demonstrates the various ways in which the British showcased their authority in the subcontinent. This was especially important for the British in the eighteenth century as their rule over India was neither complete nor guaranteed during this period. The assumption of various Indian cultural aspects and traditions such as clothing, hujqa smoking, and attending traditional entertainments such as the nautch, were ways of demonstrating power and legitimate rule through, what the British perceived to be, an Indian context. However, this context was heavily influenced by British Orientalists’ understandings of India and its socio-cultural traditions, clothing, history, and religions. In sum, the political and social context of limited military and political authority in which the British found themselves during the majority of the eighteenth century, required and enabled the development of the nabob.

**Nabobs, Bibis, and Nautch-Girls**

Nabobs were important figures of cultural contact, and their lifestyles and experiences influenced the ways in which the British interacted with, and related to, Indians. The changing perceptions of nabobs throughout the eighteenth century were closely interrelated to British understandings of gender, Indian women, and nautch performances. Nabobs heavily influenced the British perceptions of nautch-girls, and Indian women more broadly. The alterations in British acceptance of nabobs was integrally related to changing British constructions of gender and appropriate forms of femininity. This chapter explores the ways in which nabob masculinity

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98 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 17.
99 Ibid., p. 8.
and nabobs themselves interacted with Indian women, with a particular focus on nautch-girls and the impacts this had on gender constructions in India and Britain.

Orientalist scholarship and travel narratives created an enduring understanding of the East as the Other in the eighteenth century. In documenting and producing scholarship about the East, the British, and the West more broadly, came to shape a representation of itself as the ‘civilized’ norm. One of the most significant themes the West constructed was that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality. This was also understood in relation to constructions of Indians’ ethnic and cultural Otherness as, according to Ann Stoler, “sexuality is the most salient marker of Otherness and therefore figures in any racist ideology.” The sexual and ethnic Othering of Indians gave the British “their greatest justification” for the colonization of the subcontinent, as the superiority of imperialists and colonial rule was expressed in moralizing language surrounding Indian customs, particularly those associated with women. Cultural phenomena such as female child marriage and polygamy appeared to prove to the British that Indians were ‘naturally’ more lascivious than themselves. Moreover, this was proven by the emerging practice of pseudo-scientific climatic racism in the eighteenth century. For example, John Millar (1735-1801) argued that,

In warm countries, the earth is often extremely fertile, and with little culture is capable of producing whatever is necessary for subsistence…The inhabitants, therefore, of such countries, while they enjoy a degree of affluence…are seldom disposed to any laborious exertion, and thus, acquiring habits of indolence, become addicted to sensual pleasure.

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101 Ibid., p. 6. The other major theme Orientalist scholars produced about the East was India as a region characterized by inherent violence and, therefore, incapable of self-governance. However, in respect to physical limitations, this thesis will not explore the numerous applications of this construction in the imperial project.
103 Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” p. 66.
105 John Millar, The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks or, an Inqury into the Circumstances which give rise to influence and authority, in the different members of society (London: J. Murray, 1773), pp. 7-8, emphasis added.
This illustrates that the British constructed the East as inherently more sensu
tion than the West through understandings of climate-based racism. Furthermore, Orientalist scholarship produced a
stereotypical and enduring image of Indian women as inherently promiscuous and hyper-sexual,
which in turn constructed British women as non-sexual, domestic, and maternal figures.\textsuperscript{106} Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) contended that “the burning ardours, and the torturing jealousies of the
seraglio and the harem, which have reigned so long in Asia” were not present in Western Europe,
as “with an abatement of heat in the climate…it is changed into a spirit of gallantry.”\textsuperscript{107} These
constructions of the East as a place of heightened sexuality in comparison with Europe were used
by the British to justify colonial expansion in the subcontinent, as well as the sexual exploitation
of Indian women as mistresses, courtesans, and sex-workers. British constructions of Indian
women as inherently promiscuous and possessing “unlimited sensuality” justified to them this
exploitation as simply ‘natural’ and, therefore, not requiring validation.\textsuperscript{108} This demonstrates the
intersecting oppression of ethnicity and gender constructions that repressed Indian women within
the colonial matrix.

British society in India shaped the nabob stereotype and lifestyle in the eighteenth
century. At this time the British community in India was predominantly made up of young men,
as there were few children, women, or people over the age of fifty.\textsuperscript{109} The distinctive lack of
white, Protestant British women meant that many of these men and nabobs either married or
cohabitated with Indian women, known as the \textit{bibi}, some of whom would then integrate British
men, both nabobs and soldiers, into their extended family.\textsuperscript{110} This led to the belief that British
men were incorporated into Indian society and created genuine bonds between themselves and

\textsuperscript{106} Felicity A. Nussbaum, \textit{Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives}
\textsuperscript{109} Marshall, “British Society in India under the East India Company,” p. 90.
\textsuperscript{110} Collingham, \textit{Imperial Bodies}, p. 33.
Indians, though these were unable to transcend ethnic boundaries, Ronald Hyam suggests that these relationships created “a healthy” appreciation and affection across ethnic and cultural divisions. However, this belief often led scholars to represent eighteenth-century colonial India as a period of less cultural and ethnic prejudice that is heavily contested by other scholars. Durba Ghosh argues inter-ethnic conjugal relationships were influenced by unequal and intersecting power structures of class, ethnicity, and gender, which meant that these relationships were more “uneven and contested” than represented by previous scholarship.

_Bibis_ were a significant aspect of nabob lifestyle in India during the eighteenth century. The British often represented Indian women as inherently and excessively sexual, as well as available for their sexual consumption. This was related to British fantasies around their sexual liberty in India as well as Orientalist views of Indian women as erotic and exotic beings, which was fully encapsulated in the _bibi_ and British understandings of her sexual availability. The British understood the _bibi_ in a similar manner to other Orientalized aspects of Indian lifestyle, such as the _nautch_ or _huqqa_ smoking, as aspects of Indian lifestyle that harmonized with their view of themselves as rulers and fulfilled their fantasies of the East, which were fundamentally tied to the production of the nabob lifestyle in the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century it was the socially acceptable norm for elite British men to keep Indian mistresses. British men, though often disparaging of elite Indian men for having multiple wives and _zenanas_, they themselves frequently had “kept several women in a harem-like arrangement.” This demonstrates that the British adopted the nabob lifestyle in order to satisfy...

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112 Ghosh, _Sex and the Family in Colonial India_, p. 38.
113 Nussbaum, _Torrid Zones_, p. 170.
115 Ghosh, _Sex and the Family in Colonial India_, p. 3.
their own fantasies of the subcontinent, which were produced through Orientalist narratives and stereotypes about India. The unfinished family portrait of William Palmer (1740-1816) illustrates the sexual intimacy and cohabitation between British men and Indian women (Figure 2.3).

![Figure 2.3: Major William Palmer with his second wife, the Mughal princess Bibi Faiz Bakhsh, 1785.](image)

This image illustrates the imperial culture and nabob lifestyle of the eighteenth century that constructed an Orientalized view of Indian women as erotic and sexually available for British men. Furthermore, it demonstrates that British men were able to have multiple wives in India, which enabled them to take on aspects of Indian lifestyle that the British exaggerated and Orientalized to support their fantasies about India. Though popular throughout the eighteenth century, by the 1790s relationships between Indian women and British men would begin to cause social anxiety around ideals of ethnic purity and the political stability of the imperial project.

The construction of Eastern women as inherently promiscuous and sensual was predominantly created through British men’s interaction with _bibi_s and courtesans, as these were the main cohort of Indian women accessible to the British. Throughout the colonial period, the British did not comprehend the various levels of courtesanship within Indian society. The numerous social distinctions from the low-caste _randi_ to the highly accomplished _tawa'if_ and
ganika were subsumed under the category of nautch-girls, or dancing-girls.\textsuperscript{116} The term ‘nautch’ was an Anglicized version of multiple Indian vernacular words for ‘dance,’ which all derived from the Sanskrit root of nāc.\textsuperscript{117} Before the large-scale arrival of white British women, or memsahibs, in the subcontinent, courtesans were the first Indian women to interact “on an erotic plane” with British colonizers, and they formed an integral part of the cross-cultural social life of British nabobs in India during the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{118} Courtesan performances, nautches, were a culturally prestigious style of entertainment in the subcontinent that were popular during official interactions and social events between British colonial officials and wealthy Indians. This was illustrated by Jemima Kindersley (1741-1809) who wrote, “when a black man has a mind to compliment a European, he treats him to a notch.”\textsuperscript{119} Nautch performances became an important place of cultural interaction between the British and Indians in the early colonial period, constituting an arena of cultural interaction.

Many male British officials enjoyed nautches, as the British represented the performances and performers as the epitome of Eastern decadence, luxury, and sexual excess. Indian courtesans became fixed in British male fantasies and were seen as signifying Eastern debauchery and institutionalized sensuality.\textsuperscript{120} An example of this is the painting of a dancing-girl by British artist Tilly Kettle (1735-1786) (Figure 2.4). The painting depicts a nautch-girl ornately dressed, with extensive jewellery, holding a huqqa.

\textsuperscript{116} Indrani Sen, \textit{Women and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India (1858-1900)} (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), p. 45.
\textsuperscript{117} Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, \textit{Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 6. There is significant scholarly disparity surrounding the root of the word ‘nautch.’ Though all scholars agree that it is an Anglicized word, its root and derivative are debated. See Pran Nevile, \textit{The Nautch Girls of the Raj} (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 23 which argues that ‘nautch’ is an Anglicized form of the Urdu word ‘nach’ that was derived from the Sanskrit word ‘nritya’ which meant ‘dance.’ In essence, the origin of the word is debated, however, it appears to derive from Sanskrit roots and denotes a dance or performance.
\textsuperscript{118} Sen, \textit{Women and Empire}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{119} Jemima Kindersley, \textit{Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies} (London: J. Nourse, 1777), p. 230. In some early writings from European travelers, nautch was written as notch.
\textsuperscript{120} Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” pp. 71-72.
Portraits such as this were popular at the time and exhibited the decadence, wealth, and exotic imagery that surrounded courtesans in the British perspective. According to Ghosh, Kettle’s painting illustrated the unknown Indian woman as “one of several excesses of the orient.” 121 This image of the nautch and nautch-girls would be perpetuated by British narratives into the nineteenth century and become symbolic of the region. Anne Elwood (1796-1873), during her travels in India in the late 1820s, observed a nautch performance and described it as “so perfectly new and so completely Oriental, that I was much delighted.” 122 Elwood’s description of a nautch

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121 Ghosh, Sex and the Family in Colonial India, p. 65.
122 Anne Katherine Elwood, Narrative of a Journey Overland from England, by the Continent of Europe, Egypt, and the Red Sea, to India including a residence there, and voyage home, in the years 1825, 26, 27, 28 vol. II (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1830), p. 81
as “so completely Oriental” demonstrates how the British had come to represent this form of cultural performance as the epitome of the exotic and erotic East.

In addition to being symbolic of the East, nautch performances also represented the excessive and luxurious nabob lifestyle and the Orientalized Company servant. This is exhibited in the painting of Sir David Ochterlony, the first British resident in Delhi, which depicts him in Indian-style clothing, smoking a huqqa, and watching a nautch performance in his Delhi home (Figure 2.5).

![Figure 2.5: Sir David Ochterlony in Indian dress, smoking a huqqa, and watching a nautch in his house in Delhi, 1820.](image-url)

Figures such as Ochterlony illustrate the nabobism and Orientalized lifestyles of many early colonial officials. Ochterlony, who lived a lavish nabob lifestyle in Delhi, often held nautch parties for his European guests. Many rich British officials, as they increasingly emulated the luxurious lifestyles of Indian elites, maintained their own troops of nautch-girls in order to

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entertain their guests. The image of nabobs enjoying and experiencing nauches was integrally related to Orientalist understandings of Indian women as being sexually available to conquering and colonizing British forces. Subsequently, it was not unusual for a British nabob, who had his own troop of nauch-girls, to select one as his sexual partner as a “temporary bibi on a salary.” This demonstrates that nauch-girls, and the constructions that surrounded them as sexualized and racialized Others, played an important role in the representation of British nabobs in eighteenth-century colonial India.

Furthermore, the British outlook on India and nauch-girls was influenced by Enlightenment theories and the East India Company’s policy of non-interference in Indian culture and religious traditions. The lack of traditional British entertainment, such as balls, in India during the early colonial period, particularly before the nineteenth century, Company officials eagerly took part in Indian forms of entertainment, including the nauch. The British continued to patronize nauch performances, which caused many courtesans to move to British settlements and stations. Nauch-girls were also employed by the British army as entertainment for the soldiers. The British viewed Indian forms of entertainment, such as the nauch, in an Orientalist manner, similar to their perceptions of Indian lifestyle. The excess of the British nabob lifestyle was justified through Orientalist representations of India. Nauch performances were also politically significant for British officials to attend, as they demonstrated both the adoption of cultural aspects the British associated with Indian forms and symbols of political authority, as well as their increasing power within the subcontinent as nauch-girls began to enter

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124 Ibid., p. 27.
125 Ibid., p. 105.
their social circles. By assuming an Orientalized, or nabob, lifestyle, the British believed they were solidifying and validating their rulership. In addition, the British were most willing to adopt Indian practices, such as the *nautch*, that harmonized with their idea of themselves as Indian rulers. The British illustrated their growing political presence in the subcontinent through attending elite Indians’ *nautch* performances and having their own for wealthy Indians or other Company members. This was especially significant during the first half of the eighteenth century, as the British had limited territorial acquisitions and military presence in India. Subsequently, adopting cultural aspects of the region was necessary in order to gain political power and economic trade agreements. Consequently, the British adopted *nautch* performances, *nautch*-girls, and *bibi*s as forms of status symbols in the eighteenth century. The British did not solely assume an Orientalized lifestyle to legitimate their way of governing India. The nabob lifestyle was also adopted by the British for their own pleasures and individual purposes of fulfilling their fantasies around the wealth and luxury of the East and the sexual availability of the *bibi* and *nautch*-girl. These British constructions of Indian women and Indian forms of entertainment represented British Orientalist understandings of India and Indian lifestyles, which they adopted for their own pleasure in relation to British fantasies of the East and to justify the imperial project in the subcontinent.

The East India Company encouraged early colonial officials to adopt aspects of Indian lifestyles and partake in sexual relationships with Eastern women. The British believed sex with Indian women would help them acclimatize to the colonies and protect them from the illnesses that, supposedly, accompanied male abstinence. In addition, this occurred simultaneously to

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129 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 43.
130 Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power,” p. 219, during the eighteenth century the scientific understanding of sex was that men needed regular, although not excessive, sexual release or they would suffer effeminacy, lethargy, and illness.
the celebration of white, male heteronormative sexuality and sexual liberty in Britain.\textsuperscript{131} This encouraged the sexual excesses of the British in India based on their Orientalist views of Indian women as inherently sexual beings who were available for British sexual consumption. During this period the British were aware that courtesans’ lives were associated with sex-work. This was illustrated by the French Catholic missionary, Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois, who observed devadasis in South India and remarked “the dancing girls, who call themselves Deva-dasi, servant or slaves of the gods; but they are known to the public by the coarser name of strumpets.”\textsuperscript{132} Though courtesans engaged in a form of sex-work, it was one that involved extensive cultural significance and intercourse was not the dominant feature of their profession. For the British, the nautch and nautch-girls were the perfect combination of Indian culture, ‘Oriental’ allure, and sexual availability, therefore, nautches became a common and popular form of entertainment for the British in the eighteenth century. The British predominantly understood nautches as an entertainment style, for they did not fully conceptualize the cultural significance and power that courtesans held in Indian society. The British took their own understanding of sex-work, as being the profession of ‘fallen’ women from the lower classes, as was the stereotype and dominant trend in Britain at the time, and ascribed this to nautch-girls.\textsuperscript{133} This negated the cultural significance and agency of many courtesans because they were not viewed as obtaining political, financial or social influence in their own right as keepers and dispensers of courtly culture. In contrast to their previous roles, the British understood courtesans

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\textsuperscript{132} Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois, \textit{Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India; and their Institutions, Religious and Civil} (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1817), p. 401, emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{133} Hyam, “Empire and Sexual Opportunity,” p. 372. Hyam’s theoretical work in this article is often disparaged by other scholars, particularly feminists. See Mark T. Berger, “Imperialism and Sexual Exploitation: A Response to Ronald Hyam’s ‘Empire and Sexual Opportunity’” \textit{The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History} 17, no. 1 (1988): pp. 83-89 for one of the more famous responses to Hyam.
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as merely entertainers, performers, or sex-workers.\textsuperscript{134} Courtesans were culturally significant to the British as symbols of British wealth and political authority in the subcontinent. Therefore, though the British saw nautch-girls as ‘prostitutes’ and immoral, this imagery was of little significance during the eighteenth century. The British were more focused on solidifying their political position within India and attending or putting on nautch performances was an important aspect of styling themselves as the next rulers of India. The British validated their political authority by taking on the trappings of ‘Oriental excess’ and luxury through nautch performances, as well as other aspects of nabob culture, due in large part to the Orientalist views of India that were dominant at the time.

The representation of nabobs in the eighteenth century was integrally linked to the British construction of nautch-girls. The British symbolized courtesans as the epitome of sexual availability, ‘Oriental’ decadence, allure, and the exotic and erotic nature of India they constructed through Orientalist scholarship and climatic racism. Therefore, the figure of the nabob, as the Orientalized British man who partook in Indian forms of entertainment and culture, melded well with this understanding of nautch-girls. These representations were produced simultaneously and were dependent on each other. The courtesan could not be sexually available and symbolize ‘Oriental’ decadence without the British nabob to consume them sexually and experience their exotic entertainment and wealth. Therefore, British consumption of Indian entertainment, women, and wealth was fundamental to their understanding of legitimizing their colonial rule and representation as nabobs.

In conclusion, the political, economic, and social context of the eighteenth century was seminal in shaping the development of the British nabob in India. The political decentralization of the Mughal Empire, the rise of regional powers, and the increase in resources and military

\textsuperscript{134} Singh, “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl,” p. 179.
power of the British enabled their territorial acquisition of India. These territorial acquisitions were quite small until the 1740s, therefore, nabobs had to integrate more readily into Indian society as they did not have the territorial, military, or political power to maintain or impose their own lifestyle onto Indian society. This particular power situation directly influenced the development of the British nabob during the eighteenth century. In addition, British beliefs of Western superiority, Enlightenment ideals of order and classification, and Orientalist scholarship concerning the stagnation of the Mughal Empire produced a perceived need for British colonial rule in the subcontinent. Orientalist interest in Indian traditions, religions, and customs interacted with the ability for some men to become incredibly wealthy in India, as well as the integration of these men into Indian culture and families through their bibis, to create the nabob. Furthermore, Orientalist conceptualizations of Eastern women as inherently promiscuous and, therefore, sexually available for British consumption produced significant and enduring images of the East as penetrable and open to colonization. British representations of courtesans played a significant role in their adoption of Orientalized Indian cultural traditions and the validation of British political power throughout the eighteenth century. Though politically important in the first half of the eighteenth century, the British nabob, and their love of the naught, did not disappear in the latter portion of the century. Instead, as the political situation shifted, British nabobs came under increasing pressure to maintain a solely and completely British mentality and lifestyle in India. The nabob was an ideal British ruler of India for most of the eighteenth century. However, by the mid-eighteenth century the governing tactics of the East India Company and the lavish lifestyles of the nabobs began to face increasing criticism from metropolitan Britain.
Chapter 3
The Shift away from the Nabob, c. 1757-1790

The Gentlemen who have returned from India in some Years past, have acquired such an Independence from their wealth, and such Strength from their Numbers and Connection with each other, that they were become exceedingly formidable, and might perhaps have overturned the System of the House. This makes it absolutely necessary to SQUEESE them.\textsuperscript{135}

The above quotation from the \textit{Public Advertiser} newspaper illustrates the criticism British nabobs underwent from elites in metropolitan Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century. The British nabob was the dominant figure in the political landscape of colonial India and continued to patronize \textit{nautch} performances throughout this period. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a period of considerable change in British attitudes and understandings about India, the nabob, and the courtesan. Concerns about the political power of the East India Company and its influence on British domestic culture and values, alongside a new morality at home, would affect the perception of the nabob and courtesan. This chapter examines the historical situation of the late eighteenth century and the effects of the growing power of the East India Company on British social outlooks and attitudes to India. It examines the changing British perception of the nabob, the end of Orientalism as a lifestyle in India, and the shifting perception and growing negative image of the courtesan that changing British social attitudes engendered.

\textbf{Governing India as a Trading Company: The East India Company and Changes in Political and Territorial Power in the Mid-Eighteenth Century}

The changing political power of the East India Company partially explains the changing British views on the nabob. The Company’s power caused considerable anxiety in British political and social circles due to fears of the potential corruption and ‘degeneration’ of British social values. This anxiety was also apparent in changing perceptions of the nabob as British

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Public Advertiser}, May 26, 1773.
domestic society came to define the nabob as representing Eastern effeminacy, luxury, and corruption. Over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century, metropolitan Britain’s criticism of nabobs led to changes in how the British constructed ideas of difference and governance in India, as well as the eventual diminishment of anxieties concerning the power of the nabob and the Company. These changes are explored through the growing fears of decadence, the potential for political corruption, and changes to the governance structures and goals of the East India Company.

There has been substantial scholarly debate surrounding this period of study. Percival Spear argues that the eighteenth century was a period of intense social change, while the early 1800s was a period of continuity. More recent scholarship, including Bernard S. Cohn and P. J. Marshall, challenges these beliefs and argues that the 1700s was a period of continuity, while the early nineteenth century was a time of more drastic change. Though scholars such as Cohn and Marshall argue that the eighteenth century was a period of continuity, this thesis will demonstrate that it was also a time of change up to the early nineteenth century. Felicity A. Nussbaum argues that the late eighteenth century was an interim period in which the British shifted from their non-interventionist policy that dominated the first half of the century to increasing political and social domination of India, which would become the standard practice of the East India Company in the early nineteenth century. Though British nabobs continued to dominate colonial India during the second half of the eighteenth century, this period significantly

137 See Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), and P. J. Marshall, The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Revolution or Evolution? (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). These scholars are often associated with the Cambridge School of Thought on British imperialism in India, which is often critiqued for being apologists of empire that removes the agency and blame for imperialism from the British and places it more on Indians.
altered modes of behaviour and understandings of Britishness, which became solidified in the early nineteenth century.

The mid-eighteenth century was a period of British political and territorial expansion in India. This was part of a larger shift in imperial attitudes and the type of empire produced during the mid-eighteenth century. Nussbaum refers to this phenomenon as the move from the first type of British Empire, to the second. The first British Empire was focused on its colonies in North and Central America, which were based on imperial forms of mercantilism and slavery. Consequently, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the East India Company was predominantly a sea-based empire and “was established solely with a view to trade,” according to John Nicholls. In contrast, the second British Empire, which began to emerge in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was based on the commercial exploitation of Asia and Africa. As Edmund Burke (1729-1797) noted on February 15, 1788, “the constitution of the Company began in commerce and ended in Empire.” This illustrates the predominant popular view at the time, that the British Empire in India and other colonies was altering rapidly. The elites of domestic Britain observed this alteration with trepidation in relation to their political, economic, and social stability and superiority in their new empire.

In addition, the second half of the eighteenth century was a period of questioning the goals and purpose of the imperial project, which took place within the broader context of the British Empire. The American Revolution forced Britain to question its empire and led to a schism in political consensus and attitudes towards imperial expansion, particularly in relation to

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139 Ibid., p. 16.
140 Ibid.
142 Nussbaum, Torrid Zones, p. 15.
the changing nature of empire from simply a trading company to more substantive political control and colonization of India. In addition, this period experienced heightened moral questioning of slavery and the slave trade in the Caribbean, which furthered the political and social schism concerning imperial goals and governance structures in the empire. These moral and territorial alterations in the first area of British imperialism fed extensive debate in the metropole concerning the nature of British imperialism. Burke believed that the Company had been inadequate rulers of India and that “were we to be driven out of India this day, nothing would remain, to tell that it had been possessed, during the inglorious period of our dominion, by any thing better than the ouran-outang or the tiger.” Subsequently, the alterations in the structure and goals of the East India Company, as well as the territorial gains and increasing political power in the subcontinent, exacerbated these domestic anxieties around the stability and purpose of the imperial project in India.

The changing geographical and political power in India altered the state of the East India Company’s role and influence in the subcontinent. The Company progressively encouraged territorial acquisition and statecraft because trade was no longer its sole prerogative. There was also a substantial increase in the population of British soldiers in India during this period, which enabled this territorial conquest. Moreover, the Company had produced one of imperialism’s greatest innovations: the sepoy army. The sepoy was an Indian mercenary soldier trained by the Company to fight on its behalf. The sepoy would be the forerunner of the British Indian army. Subsequently, the Company began to become more militarily and politically involved in India in

order to protect and expand its existing territories and trading opportunities in relation to
competition in India, as well as with other European powers such as the Dutch, French, and
Portuguese.\textsuperscript{148} Between 1745 and 1756 the Company would go on to defeat its main European
rivals for dominance of India. In 1757 the British defeated the forces of the \textit{nawab} of Bengal at
the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to secure its political control of Bengal, which marked the British
conquest of India. The victory led to more widespread military operations in eastern India and
culminated in the East India Company being granted the \textit{diwani}, or sovereignty of Bengal by the
Mughals in 1765. Thereby the Company became more concerned with governance of its
territory, and the beneficial trading opportunities this entailed.\textsuperscript{149} This meant the Company began
to adopt more state-like institutions, including collecting taxes, acquiring a standing army, and
administering justice. Therefore, by the late eighteenth century, the East India Company had
raised its own Indian army, amassed a territorial empire, and gained land revenue and the ability
to administer justice from the grant of the \textit{diwani}.


The power of the East India Company created considerable political and social anxieties
in the metropole around the role of Britain in India and the possibility of an extensive empire in
the subcontinent. The figure of the nabob became symbolic of the power and political corruption
of the East India Company. Metropolitan Britain saw rapid empire-building in India as becoming
swiftly out of control.\textsuperscript{150} Nicholls illustrates the anxieties produced by the changing role of the
East India Company for “this Empire has been acquired by a Company of Merchants; and they
retained the character of exclusive trader, after they had assumed that of sovereign…Sovereign
and trader, are characters incompatible.”\textsuperscript{151} Nicholls’ disdain of the East India Company’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[148] Nechtman, \textit{Nabobs}, p. 17.
\item[149] Ibid., p. 8.
\item[150] Lawson and Phillips, “‘Our Execrable Banditti,’” p. 232.
\item[151] Nicholls, \textit{Recollections and Reflections}, pp. 249-250.
\end{footnotes}
governance demonstrates the wider fears of British society in relation to the political authority of the Company in India. This illustrates the small and relatively slow changes that occurred during this period in the Company’s empire, which led to more extensive changes in governance structures in the next century.

These anxieties around the changing imperial system were worked out most succinctly on the body and stereotype of the British nabob. During the eighteenth century, as the British continued to consolidate their political and territorial power, the Orientalized nabob remained a central figure in validating the British imperial presence in the subcontinent. However, the nabob also came to represent the changing governance structure of the East India Company, and symbolized the concerns of corruption and decadence of Britain from its Indian Empire. Therefore, elite domestic Britain saw nabobs as threatening both as individuals and as representative of the East India Company. Furthermore, as the British consolidated their territorial and political power during the second half of the eighteenth century, the image of the nabob became less helpful in validating political power, and instead was understood as threatening the British position in India.

In addition to the territorial expansion during the mid-eighteenth century, which altered the governance structure of the Company and enhanced its state-like institutions, the Company was increasingly seen as mismanaging its governance of India. While individual British men, often stereotyped as nabobs, continued to make their fortunes in India, the 1750s and 1760s were a period of decline in the Company’s profits and an increase in its costs. The excesses of profit and wealth made often by tribute, theft, and corruption alarmed domestic Britain and its perception of the nabob and how the Company operated in India. This was exemplified by Burke

who stated that “the ruin of [India] has fallen into our hands’ and England has thought proper to look on unconcerned.” Furthermore, after gaining direct political control of Bengal in 1757, there was a famine from 1769 to 1770 that killed one fifth of the population of Bengal. This exacerbated popular and parliamentary opinion that the Company was mismanaging its governance of India, a sentiment that only increased in the subsequent decades. In the 1770s the belief that nabobs were a corrupting influence on Britain and the Company was ruling India in a despotic manner entered the public and popular imagination in full force. Therefore, domestic Britain viewed the Company’s form of aggressive and militaristic trading and political strategy as morally wrong and a threat to the stability of the imperial project.

British elites were concerned with what they saw as the increasingly despotic governing style of the East India Company and its subsequent potential corruption of the metropole and its constitution. Burke, and other members of Parliament were concerned that they were “not able to contrive some method of governing India well, which will not of necessity become the means of governing Great Britain ill.” This demonstrates domestic Britain’s concern that the Company’s style of rule would influence the manner in which Britain itself was governed. Moreover, the British viewed the changes in the Company as its officials becoming corrupted by India and ‘Indian’ governance styles of despotism and decadence. This belief became manifest through Enlightenment ideals and beliefs of Western superiority, as well as climate-based racist views produced through Orientalist scholarship that the warmth of India created luxury and opulence, which subsequently produced a greedy and corrupt governance structure. Alexander Dow (1735-1779) argued that “Nature herself seems to have denied liberty to the inhabitants of the torrid

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154 Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 5, p. 114.
This was seen to be responsible for the, supposedly, despotic governance system of the Mughal Empire. The governance system of the Company adopted and continued certain attributes of the Mughal Empire, and did not dismantle, only took over, its political system. Domestic Britain believed this adoption of the ‘despotic’ Mughal political system caused “violence, war, and desolation.” This caused the British to believe that the Company was corrupted by Indian influences and, therefore, was governed despotically, without a sense of responsibility for Indian inhabitants or the British constitution. The concerns of Parliament with Company practices in India came to a head in 1772 with a parliamentary inquiry that turned into the trial of Robert Clive, who was accused of criminal greed and personal corruption. Clive survived the censure, but Company rule came under government supervision two years later with the Government of India Act of 1774. The ‘nabob’ began to represent the possibility that Britain, instead of improving India through returning its original and ancient laws and governance structures, would itself be tainted by Eastern luxury and decadence. Therefore, the wealth and excess embodied in the figure of the nabob was seen as threatening and importing Eastern ‘despotism’ to Britain, which was a particularly concerning possibility after the political turmoil of the seventeenth century. The changing governance structures of the East India Company, and its adoption of Indian aspects of governance produced social anxieties that were transformed and embodied in the figure of the nabob during the mid-eighteenth century, and led to a social backlash against the Orientalized British.

Nabob Nightmares II: The Fear of the Nabob in Society

162 Nechtman, *Nabobs*, pp. 91-92
The actions of the individual nabob, furthermore, alarmed domestic Britain. Burke argued that the East India Company was governed by “Young men (boys almost)… without society, and without sympathy with the natives. They have no more social habits with the people, than if they still resided in England; nor indeed any species of intercourse but that which is necessary to making a sudden fortune.”¹⁶³ This demonstrates the fears in Britain that the corrupt, decadent, and oppressive methods of rule practiced by Company men in India could potentially corrupt Britain and become the national order through the social influence of the nabob. Throughout the mid-eighteenth century, nabobs came under increasing public scrutiny in Britain. This began with British men who returned to England and spread to all perceived ‘nabobs’ in India, which reflected the social anxieties around the East India Company’s governing strategies and political power in the subcontinent.

One of the greatest fears metropolitan Britain had concerning nabobs was that they would corrupt both the political and social world of England. Domestic Britain saw nabobs as having been corrupted by India’s luxury and opulence, which was believed to produce greed and a lack of morals. William Huggins, an indigo planter, demonstrates this fear of British corruption by Indian lifestyles in that after:

A long residence in India, they are deeply imbued with its manners… in the notions of [their] self-importance. Accustomed to a luxurious style of living, which equals that of noblemen in England; to authority over a numerous population; to flattery and submission from underlings, they often acquire a despotic habit of thinking and acting, totally inconsistent with genuine freedom.¹⁶⁴

The British feared that nabobs, influenced by the luxury of India, would bring this ‘Asiatic despotism’ to Parliament and threaten both the constitution and the moral values of Britain.¹⁶⁵

This was illustrated by Burke during his speech on the opening of the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings on February 15, 1788 that “It is well known that great wealth has poured into this country from India; and it is no derogation to us to suppose the possibility of being corrupted by that by which great Empires have been corrupted.” The fear of political corruption was most palpable during local elections, as it was believed that nabobs were forcing their way into British politics through their extensive Indian fortunes. In a letter to Horace Mann in 1761, an election year, Horace Walpole expressed his dismay that “West Indians, conquerors, nabobs, and admirals attack every borough.” Walpole’s anxiety of nabobs in Parliament was also expressed in numerous newspapers and created feelings of antagonism towards returned British subjects. The Public Advertiser newspaper demonstrated these feelings in 1776 when it aggressively stated that “these Gentlemen are Nabobs…Let us hunt a Nabob! There is no Sport equal to the Hunting of a Nabob! With all my Heart, Gentlemen, hunt as many Nabobs as you please.” This social antagonism reflects the rising anxieties of domestic Britain towards the wealth and potential political corruption that was represented by the figure of the nabob.

Furthermore, the belief that nabobs were returning to Britain and infiltrating the Parliament was so prevalent that it was a scholarly assumption about nabobs into the early twentieth century. Spear argues that nabobs first began returning to Britain after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, where they “entered Parliament in force at the election of 1768.” The academic community has subsequently disproved the panicked belief that nabobs were overrunning the House of Commons during the mid-eighteenth century. Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips demonstrate that there was only a small number of British nabobs in Parliament during

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166 Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 6, p. 277.
168 *Public Advertiser*, February 20, 1776.
this period. In 1761 there were twelve nabobs and by 1780 there was a slight increase to twenty-seven members of Parliament who had been to India. However, these men did not represent a coherent political force within the House of Commons.\textsuperscript{170} As previously examined, only a small percentage of returned British men were nabobs, and this demonstrates that an even smaller portion became involved in the political sphere in Britain. However, the widespread fear of nabobs and the overall impact that they had on British society demonstrates that the nabob was an influential social figure within eighteenth-century Britain. The animosity towards returning nabobs also illustrates the anxieties of domestic Britain to the increasing influence of its Indian Empire on its own society.

The British government attempted to police the nabob through political avenues. Throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, various Acts were passed in attempts to curtail the overwhelming power of the East India Company in the subcontinent and place it under Parliamentary control. The Regulating Act of 1773 attempted to reform the Company by bringing their activities under Parliamentary supervision.\textsuperscript{171} In addition, the British government and society targeted individual nabobs, such as Robert Clive and Warren Hastings in order to maintain traditional British hierarchy and the imperial project in India.\textsuperscript{172} Hastings and Clive were vilified in the British press and underwent criminal trials in relation to their personal fortunes and supposed mismanagement of the East India Company and its Indian territories. The political print by James Gillray (1757-1815) demonstrated the view of nabobs corrupted by India’s wealth (Figure 3.1).

\textsuperscript{170} Lawson and Phillips, “‘Our Execrable Banditti,’” p. 228.  
\textsuperscript{171} Ghosh, \textit{Sex and the Family in Colonial India}, p. 6.  
\textsuperscript{172} Nechtman, \textit{Nabobs}, p. 107.
This image depicts Hastings sitting on the throne of England handing bags of money to the politicians Edward Thurlow (1731-1806) and William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806) while King George III (1738-1820) and Queen Charlotte (1744-1818) are on the ground amidst piles of gold coins. Edmund Burke viewed nabobs, such as Hastings, as the epitome of the idea that Britain was moving away from an empire of political liberalism to a more oppressive form of global domination. This was illustrated during his speech on Charles James Fox’s (1749-1806) India Bill on December 1, 1783, “that every means, effectual to preserve India from oppression, is a guard to preserve the British constitution from its worst corruption.”

Warren Hastings became one of the most infamous nabobs due to his eight-year impeachment trial that ended with his acquittal in 1795. Throughout Hastings’ trial his main opponent, Burke, represented Hastings as a true nabob, fully infected by the ‘Oriental vices’ of greed, luxury, and despotism. Burke referred to Hastings as being “puffed up…with the insolence of Asia,” and

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174 Ibid., p. 17; Nechtman, Nabobs, p. 118.
175 Gosh, Sex and the Family in Colonial India, p. 7.
that “Mr. Hastings comes before your Lordships not as a British Governor, answering to a
British Tribunal, but as a Soubahdar, as a Bashaw of three tails. He says: I had arbitrary power to
exercise; I exercised it.”

This demonstrated the manner in which the British nabob was
associated with symbols and traditions of British views of the East and ‘Oriental’ despotism.
Though Hastings was acquitted, he and other infamous nabobs, came to symbolize the corrupted
nature of the East India Company. In addition, the India Act of 1784 increased the parliamentary
supervision over the Company and separated the military and civil administration of the
Company’s presidencies from commercial enterprises, which worked to decrease the tension
between the Company’s role as both a merchant and sovereign of India. These Parliamentary
alterations in the late eighteenth century worked to produce a negative public image of the nabob
that would quickly be replaced in the early nineteenth century by the British sahib. The sahib
was an ideal ruler that conformed to British understandings of themselves and maintained
ethnicity, gender, and class-based hierarchies in a more British manner than the body of the
Orientalized nabob had done throughout the eighteenth century.

In sum, nabobs were seen as a proverbial ‘boogey-man’ that would negatively impact
Britain in its social, political, and economic sectors through moral depravity, political corruption,
and luxurious lifestyles. Burke accurately described the social fear of nabobs during his same
speech on December 1, 1783, as “They marry into your families; they enter into your senate;
they ease your estates by loans; they raise their value by demand.” This demonstrates the
image of the nabob inspired fear in metropolitan Britain. Though the number of nabobs in
Britain, as well as in India, was in actuality quite small, the above demonstrates that they had a

176 Burke, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, vol. 6, p. 353, 346. The Bashaw is an anglicization of pasha
a Turkish title of honour and rank of three horse tails would be equivalent to a wazir of the Ottoman Empire,
illustrating Burke’s portrayal of Hastings as an example of how the British in India had been fully ‘corrupted’ by the
East.
177 Gosh, Sex and the Family in Colonial India, p. 7.
significant influence on metropolitan Britain’s cultural understandings of India and the social anxieties that stemmed from the stereotypes of the subcontinent being a place of luxury, opulence, and corruption - stereotypes that were seen to be negatively impacting the political and moral underpinnings of Britain and understood through the body of the nabob. Furthermore, the body of the nabob and the animosity towards them represented the prevalent fears that domestic Britain had concerning the East India Company’s power and governance in the subcontinent. These changes in the political and territorial situation within India during the second half of the eighteenth century would alter conceptualizations of both nabobs and courtesans, as well as lead to substantial social changes around constructions of gender, ethnicity, and class in the early nineteenth century.

**Policing and Punishing Nabobs Through Gender, Ethnicity, and Class Constructs**

In relation to the fears of the British public, metropolitan society punished the nabob for representing, what they viewed to be, the corrupting influence of the Indian subcontinent. This occurred through mid-eighteenth century popular culture, including literature, plays, political cartoons, and paintings, in which nabobs were stereotyped and represented as fat, vain, lazy, cowardly, and foolish.\(^{179}\) They were also depicted as flamboyant and effeminate men who willing incorporated Indian culture and attributes into their self-identity.\(^{180}\) Consequently, nabobs quickly became one of the most notorious tropes in mid- and late eighteenth-century British society.\(^{181}\) Over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century nabobs were increasingly subject to societal pressures to revert back to appropriately British behaviour and reject Indian influences. Social pressure took the form of mocking British nabobs as emasculated and ethnically inferior British subjects, who attempted to better their social standing through wealth,

\(^{179}\) Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 13.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., p. 3.

\(^{181}\) Nechtman, *Nabobs*, p. 118.
in order to maintain traditional understandings of Britishness and stabilize their superiority within the subcontinent. This mainly demonstrated that Britain was anxious due to the blurring of social barriers and conceptualizations of the Self and the Other through the body of the nabob, which symbolized the fluidity of these cultural markers of difference.\textsuperscript{182} Therefore, elites in metropolitan Britain were most anxious about this fluidity, which they saw as potentially emasculating and ethnically ‘degenerating’ the metropole, as well as the newfound social mobility of the East India Company servants who threatened the traditional social order of Britain.

Fears of nabobs entering and influencing British politics were intrinsically related to the larger historical context of the American Revolution, as well as the increasingly religious critique of luxury and decadence in Britain during the mid-eighteenth century that was, in part, fueled by returning nabobs.\textsuperscript{183} Luxury that derived from Britain’s imperial expansions was seen to be the primary threat to the social and political stability of the country. These fears of societal breakdown were expressed and publicly discussed most succinctly in the body of the nabob, with its physical ‘corruption’ of British clothing, forms of entertainment, class, and morals. In addition, the belief that India was an emasculated and ethnically degenerated region was intrinsically linked to British and Enlightenment understandings of ethnic superiority and climate. John Millar argued that “the difference of heat and cold, of moisture and dryness, or other qualities of the climate, have a more immediate influence upon the character and conduct of nations, by operating insensibly upon the human body, and by effecting correspondent alterations in the temper.”\textsuperscript{184} During the eighteenth century, the British believed that the climate of various regions had fundamental impacts on the ethnicity, ethnic degeneration, moral

\textsuperscript{182} Nechtman, Nabobs, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., p. 225.
\textsuperscript{184} John Millar, The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks or, an Inquiry into the Circumstances which give rise to influence and authority, in the different members of society (London: J. Murray, 1773), p. 8.
character, and strength of the people who inhabited the area. The British believed in the “Superiority which the harder sons of our Northern Climates have over the lazy Race of the East.”\textsuperscript{185} Therefore, India was constructed as having a climate that produced subsistence with little work on behalf of the inhabitants, which was seen to be the opposite of Britain. In turn, the rich climate of India created indigenous inhabitants that were unaccustomed to hard work, became lazy and corrupt, and were therefore ethnically inferior to the white, British population.\textsuperscript{186} This climatic racism was prevalent during the eighteenth century in relation to Enlightenment ideals and British understandings of their own superiority.

Nabobs, with their Orientalized dress and lifestyle, were understood to be ethnically degenerated by the climate and subsequent culture of the subcontinent, to the point of practically becoming Indian. It was strongly believed during the second half of the eighteenth century that “Europeans…degenerate when transplanted to the East.”\textsuperscript{187} This climatically-produced ethnic degeneration was also observable in popular culture through satirical political prints, such as the one by James Gillray entitled ‘Count Rupee in Hyde park’ (Figure 3.2).

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Public Advertiser}, December 20, 1776.
\textsuperscript{186} Nechtman, \textit{Nabobs}, pp. 51-55.
\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Public Advertiser}, December 20, 1776.
The British nabob in the print represented the Company official Paul Benfield (1742-1810), who was depicted as becoming so Orientalized and corrupted by India that his skin colour had darkened. This directly linked India’s climate and inferior ethnic status to the body of the nabob. In addition, this type of imagery illustrated domestic Britain’s view of India as a corrupting, dangerous, and ethnically degenerating place that could negatively impact Britain. This imagery socially punished nabobs by suggesting that they were ethnically degenerated and inferior to British persons who had remained at home. In addition to punishing nabobs’ behaviour and Orientalization, the ethnic degeneration of nabobs demonstrated Britain’s fear of the decline of the entire population’s supposed ethnic superiority, due to their continued and increasing contact with the East as their empire rapidly expanded in India during this period.\textsuperscript{188} The punishment of nabobs through their representation as socially and ethnically inferior, further illustrated elite

\textsuperscript{188} Collingham, \textit{Imperial Bodies}, p. 34.
metropolitan Britain’s fears of the corrupting power of the East, as well as the contemporary management of the Indian Empire through the East India Company.

Furthermore, gender was utilized to police and punish the behaviour of nabobs, as well as the broader East India Company, during the second half of the eighteenth century. Constructions of gender were, similarly to ethnicity, intrinsically related to conceptualizations of the influence of climate on people during this period. Temperate climates, such as Britain, were believed to breed “strong independent types, full of manly vigour” whereas the hot and tropical climate of India was seen to produce lazy and effeminate people. Some sectors of the public believed that there was “a strong Proof that the Asiatic Effeminacy” could not corrupt or “oppose European Fortitude.” However, there was a prevalent stereotype at the time that British men in India had become effeminate in the mid-eighteenth century. Nabobs’ effeminacy was policed and mocked by British society in order to re-establish British ideals of masculinity. The concept of British men having numerous servants to do simple tasks for them was seen as the epitome of this “effeminacy, or luxury,” that permeated the social life of British nabobs. While portraying nabobs as effeminate worked to punish their Orientalized manners and lifestyles, this also demonstrated the social anxieties that metropolitan Britain had concerning, what they saw, as the emasculating nature of India. Furthermore, fears of the influence that India could have on Britain, through the corruption of its political and moral underpinnings, was also expressed through this effeminate view of India and nabobs.

Domestic Britain also policed nabobs through class, as it was concerned about the class mobility created by the exorbitant wealth of returned nabobs. Much of metropolitan Britain understood nabobs to be Orientalized and despotic, as illustrated by the London Chronicle

189 Ibid., p. 25.
190 Public Advertiser, August 30, 1781.
newspaper that described them as “Asiatic plunderers, who have accumulated their wealth by fraud, plunder, and famine.”\textsuperscript{192} The British viewed nabobs as obtaining and maintaining a great fortune in an aggressive and negative manner that was linked with the moral debasement and corruption of nabobs. This was seen to be caused by their Orientalized lifestyles and experiences in the subcontinent. Furthermore, the wealth of nabobs was seen to be beyond their appropriate social status. The majority of nabobs were from the middle class, yet their time in India enabled them to become wealthier than their status in Britain would have allowed. Therefore, nabobs were seen as crossing class boundaries and gaining status and power through wealth, which led to British society punishing them for their class mobility.

In addition, the nabobs’ wealth was criticized in relation to the Company’s mismanagement of the Indian subcontinent, and the anxieties of potential corruption that it fomented. Nabobs were caricatured in the public imagination as unscrupulous and having an insatiable lust for wealth.\textsuperscript{193} They represented the corrupting influence of India and were seen as a potential threat to British morals and political behaviour. This was demonstrated by a Company army officer, Alexander Dow, who believed that the decline of Bengal began when it “fell under the dominion of foreigners; who were more anxious to improve the present moment to their own emolument, than, by providing against waste, to secure a permanent advantage to the British nation.”\textsuperscript{194} Dow illustrated the prevalent negative view of nabobs as ruining India through mismanagement in order to obtain and maintain their own personal fortunes. Furthermore, it was widely believed that when nabobs returned to England their wealth overrode the economic factors of supply and demand that maintained low prices, causing the prices for property and provisions to increase drastically in the mid-eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{195} Walpole wrote that the actions

\textsuperscript{192} London Chronicle, April 15-18, 1775.
\textsuperscript{194} Dow, The History of Hindostan, p. lxxvii.
of the East India Company nabobs “almost raised a famine at home by the luxury occasioned by their opulence raising the prices of everything, till the poor could not purchase bread!”  This demonstrates the public anxiety and animosity directed at returning nabobs; they were seen as possessing the negative attributes of political corruption and excessive wealth, which was exhibited by their Orientalized clothing and behavioural attributes that were associated with the subcontinent.

Additionally, British society punished nabobs and attempted to police their behaviour through ideas of class. India was seen as inverting the social order, as lower levels of British society could become significantly wealthy and style themselves upon return as more aristocratic and elite than their position would have been had they remained in Britain.  This was illustrated by Burke who stated that “In India all the vices operate by which sudden fortune is acquired; in England are often displayed, by the same persons, the virtues which dispense hereditary wealth. Arrived in England, the destroyers of the nobility and gentry of a whole kingdom will find the best company in this nation.”  Domestic Britain was often concerned that returning nabobs would obtain social mobility through their wealth and fundamentally alter the class system in England. Therefore, these British nabobs were castigated for their humble origins and were characterized as being “low born social climbers,” which held wide appeal to the British public as a form of critique. Nabobs were frequently mocked in popular plays for being the sons of carpenters, cheesemongers, and inn-keepers. Likewise, this social punishment and policing of nabobs illustrates the anxiety that the British landed elite had concerning the rising wealth and influence of East India Company servants and its governing of India.

197 Collingham, Imperial Bodies, p. 21.  
200 Ibid.
In conclusion, the punishment and policing of nabobs’ behaviour and lifestyles took the form of demonstrating their ethnic degeneration, effeminacy, and ill-begotten wealth. Moreover, the manner by which nabobs were mocked by the British public illustrates their own social anxieties concerning the emasculating and ethnically degenerating nature of the Indian climate and luxury, as well as their fears of nabobs’ social mobility. These fears demonstrate that the British were unsure of their new empire in India, and the manner in which they attempted to gain and maintain ideals of Britishness in relation to the changing goals and management strategies of the East India Company and the British Empire more generally. Though the British needed the body of the nabob to validate their political power in India throughout the eighteenth century, the British became increasingly concerned with the nabobs’ fluid cultural adoption and Orientalized lifestyle. In addition, as the power of the British increased during this period the ideal of the nabob was no longer needed in the empire and was subsequently policed and punished in order to reassert new ideals of Britishness in the imperial project.

Fears of the Nabob and the Sensual Indian Woman

The changes in domestic Britain’s representation of nabobs were also seen in the changing understandings and views of courtesans. Courtesans were increasingly portrayed as negative and associated with sex-work. This began in the late 1700s and became more solidified in the early 1800s. Though the British view of courtesans was mixed and rarely uniform, the dominant narrative began to shift from courtesans as symbols of Indian cultural acceptance, in order to validate British political power, to degraded, sensual women who threatened the imperial project and corrupted British men through their sensuality. In addition, this section explores how the social fears of the British nabob, and the underlying concerns around effeminacy, ethnic miscegenation, and class mobility that led to their disparagement were also represented through constructions of courtesans. The second half of the eighteenth century was a
period of decline in the social, political, and financial status of courtesans, as well as an increased prevalence in negative constructions of nautch-girls as sex-workers who threatened the stability of the British Empire in India. This section demonstrates that the changing representations of nabobs and nautch-girls were informed by the same social anxieties around a changing political structure of the East India Company, as well as the fears around ethnicity and class-based social mobility through personal and sexual interactions between British men and Indian women.

Courtesans and nautch performances continued to be patronized by the British during the second half of the eighteenth century. While the level of patronage and intimate relations with nautch-girls did not significantly alter during this period, the imagery around courtesans was beginning to degenerate. The increasingly negative British representations of nautch-girls appeared in their travel narratives, journals, and letters. These documents, once published in the metropole, perpetuated the Orientalist imagery of Indian women as inherently sensual and morally lax. The change to more negative British representations of courtesans as sex-workers rather than important cultural figures was rooted in the second half of the eighteenth century and would become increasingly solidified and significant in the early nineteenth century. This demonstrates the linked nature of the representations of courtesans and nabobs during this period. While the nabob was criticized in metropolitan Britain, the representation of the courtesan was also degenerated and constructed as a problem for the British in India. The British became increasingly concerned with the behaviour of their countrymen in the subcontinent and they required a group to blame for the Orientalized nabob. The courtesan, due to her ‘Oriental’ behaviour and overt sensuality, was a significant aspect of British social life in India and was subsequently the primary figure constructed as corrupting British men. This illustrates that these
representations were linked and experienced a similar period of cultural deglamorization and deprecation throughout the second half of the eighteenth century.

The rising political and territorial power of the East India Company during the second half of the eighteenth century impacted many sectors of Indian society. As the Company conquered more land, it disturbed courtly centres of power that had supported courtesan culture in the pre-colonial period. Indian rulers, including nawabs, zamindars, and princes, subsequently lost political and financial power in these regions. This caused courtesans to lose patronage and professional positions in courts across the subcontinent, which diminished the cultural and financial power of courtesans. However, many of these women maintained some social agency in colonial India because Indian elites and British officials continued to hold nautch performances for each other in the second half of the eighteenth century. The British, throughout this period, retained their enjoyment of nautch-girls and attendance at nautch performances. However, during this period, courtesans became increasingly associated with sex-work and were viewed by the British as simply performers, which exacerbated their loss of social prestige and power. Though courtesans faced mounting losses of social influence, they survived as a minimized, cultural entity in the second half of the eighteenth century, which demonstrated their continued agency under British imperialism.

The second half of the eighteenth century experienced a slow, but distinctive and building, alteration in the British views and understandings of nautch-girls. In the early 1700s the British understood that courtesans were tied in some manner to forms of sex-work. However, this was less problematic for the British in the eighteenth century as they believed it was beneficial to

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202 Ibid.
203 Spear, *The Nabobs*, p. 35.
attend *nautch* performances and patronize *nautch*-girls in order to validate their political power and colonial presence within the subcontinent. British attendance of *nautch* performances related to the general Orientalized British culture in India. The nabob lifestyle encouraged the adoption of some Indian cultural traditions that the British believed harmonized with their view of themselves as rulers of India and that fulfilled their personal erotic and exotic understanding of the East.

However, the rising political and territorial strength of the British Empire in India meant that the association of courtesans with sex-work was increasingly dominant in British narratives concerning Indian forms of entertainment. Throughout the late eighteenth century there was a popular association of dancing-girls, or courtesans, with “prostitution and licentiousness.”\(^{204}\) Jemima Kindersley was in India from 1765 to 1768 and was one of the first British woman to write about a *nautch*.\(^{205}\) The majority of scholars utilize Kindersley’s writings to demonstrate that the British of the mid-eighteenth century were fond of and socially relaxed about *nautch*-girls.\(^{206}\) However, her writings demonstrate a clear and strong assumption that *nautch*-girls were associated with sensuality. In describing a *nautch*, Kindersley wrote “it is their languishing glances, wanton smiles, and attitudes not quite consistent with decency, which are so much admired; and whoever excels most in these is the finest dancer.”\(^{207}\) This demonstrates that the British viewed *nautch*-girls, and Indian women more generally, as being inherently sensual and potentially immoral. This construction of courtesans as the ‘Oriental’ and sensual Other continued from the early 1700s and the Orientalist scholarship produced throughout the century. The British representation of *nautch*-girls as exotic and erotic Indian women was consistent throughout the colonial period. However, courtesans’ sensuality was understood to be an

\(^{206}\) This sentiment is observable in Nevile’s *The Nautch Girls of the Raj*, p. 30 and Spear’s *The Nabobs*, p. 35.
\(^{207}\) Kindersley, *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies*, p. 231.
increasingly problematic issue in the colony as the British enhanced their influence in the subcontinent. While attending nautches was previously understood to be a way for the British to validate their political power, these performances, the dancing-girls, and their sensuality were slowly represented in a more negative manner and as a threat to colonial stability.

Throughout the colonial period, the British perceived courtesans as being the personification of Eastern decadence and ‘Oriental’ sensuality. Vijay Prakash Singh argues this representation was linked to the British often lacking the necessary language skills to fully understand the surrounding music and songs of nautch performances. Hence, the British could only rely on the visual aspects of the performance and the nautch was stripped of its linguistic nuances and emotional significance.\(^{208}\) Singh argues that this reduced the courtesan to an object intended for the British male gaze, particularly as the British were predominantly unaware and unable to appreciate the cultural heritage and importance of the courtesan and her performance.\(^{209}\) This lack of understanding enabled the further negative perceptions of courtesans to foment and amplify. The misunderstanding about these women from the British perspective was confirmed to each other through the writings of British officials and travellers. British travel literature, an influential aspect of popular culture, played an important role in the production of knowledge throughout the colonial period and provided the public with an illustration, distorted by their own beliefs, of India as the Other.\(^{210}\) British travel literature was demonstrative of European values rather than indicative of Indian society, and thereby produced the Self through their construction of the Other as foreign and exotic.\(^{211}\) These narratives would often explore nautch-girls and were fundamental in producing representations of them as the

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\(^{209}\) Ibid.


\(^{211}\) Ibid., p. 142.
erotic Other. In addition, there was a formulaic nature of travel writing as a genre that encouraged borrowing and created a “chain of errors,” which were expounded upon and constructed the ‘truth’ that produced stereotypes about India and Indians.\textsuperscript{212} This was also the case for Indian courtesans in their representation as being affiliated with sex-work and, therefore, they were constructed as the apex of ‘Oriental’ sensuality.

Britain’s changing representations of the \textit{nautch}-girls were explicitly linked to its social anxieties around nabobs in the late eighteenth century. It was predominantly the level of cultural assimilation, and subsequent loss of Britishness, in the 1700s that caused metropolitan Britain’s fear of cultural and ethnic miscegenation.\textsuperscript{213} The prevalence of courtesans in British colonial social life related to growing concerns that the proximity between the British and Indians had to be regulated and diminished in order for the British to retain their political authority in the subcontinent. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, few British women were in empire, particularly India, due to the hardships of the seven month voyage around the tip of the African continent that was believed to be too difficult and dangerous for women.\textsuperscript{214} The lack of British women meant that the Company encouraged British men to maintain sexual relationships with Indian women.\textsuperscript{215} However, by the late eighteenth century, British officials were increasingly discouraged from keeping \textit{bibis}, many of whom were courtesans, because of pseudo-scientific fears of ethnic degeneration. Moreover, lower-class soldiers and Company officials were allowed to turn to Indian sex-workers on a more short-term basis in order to “satisfy their heterosexual impulses.”\textsuperscript{216} British attendance at \textit{nautch} performances in the late

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{212} Ibid., p. 147.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Collingham, \textit{Imperial Bodies}, p. 34.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Caplan, “Iconographies of Anglo-Indian Women,” p.865; Sen, \textit{Memsahibs’ Writings}, p. xiii
\item \textsuperscript{215} See Gosh, \textit{Sex and the Family in Colonial India}, pp. 1-34 for an in-depth exploration of the various systems of oppression that operated in sexual relationships between British men and Indian women, as well as the ambivalent and contested manner in which these relationships altered over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Ibid., p. 8.
\end{itemize}
eighteenth century was increasingly seen as a sign of social and ethnic hybridity, which no longer validated British political authority, but rather threatened the ethnic purity and stability of the colonial power. Consequently, the social anxieties around proximity with Indian women was related to maintaining a sense of Britishness in a foreign environment and validating British political authority. Indian women, particularly the close social contact of British men with courtesans, in the late eighteenth century were beginning to be understood as a threat to Britishness because they disrupted the idealized understanding of the appropriate social and cultural life of the colony.

Therefore, though courtesans were still represented and understood as being sexually available to British men, they also demonstrated the building social anxieties of metropolitan Britain in relation to social mixing, ethnic miscegenation, and the blurring of class structures manifested in returned British nabobs. Subsequently, British society began to firmly believe in this period that social distance between themselves and Indians was essential for maintaining authority in the subcontinent. The British understood courtesans as the epitome and impetus for this social mixing. Nautch-girls’ sensuality and sexual availability represented the possibility of miscegenation, their continuous presence at British events illustrated the social mixing with Indians present in the colony, and, lastly, the ability for both upper and middle-class British men to access a nautch and nautch-girls was demonstrative of the blurring of class lines by nabobs in the subcontinent. Consequently, courtesans were increasingly understood during this period as potentially threatening figures to British stability in India, as well as encouraging or causing the Orientalization of British nabobs.

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217 Ibid., p. 36.
In sum, the late 1700s was a period of distinct and building changes in the political and social atmosphere of the British colony in India. However, it was also predominantly a period of continuity from the cultural norms and morals of the first half of the century. British nabobs were still significant in demonstrating cultural acceptance of Indian traditions, climate, and entertainment. The attendance of the British at naughtes given by Indian elites or British officials was still a significant way in which to validate social and political authority. While these aspects of the Orientalized British nabob remained important during the second half of the eighteenth century, they were also increasingly criticized by elite metropolitan Britain because of the anxieties they produced around class mobility and ethnic degeneration. The British nabob was represented as an ethnically, culturally, and politically degenerated figure who threatened the stability of the British imperial project in the subcontinent. The increasingly negative constructions of nautch-girls as the impetus for the degradation of British men was linked to the social anxieties around the nabob. This illustrates that as the Company gained political and territorial power in India, along with the increasing population of soldiers in the region, it no longer required the adoption of Indian traditions, clothing, and entertainment in order to justify its presence in the region, or to rule in what the British believed to be an Indian manner. Furthermore, the adoption of Indian traditions began to be seen as a dangerous threat to political stability, as well as ethnic and social understandings of Britishness. Therefore, the figure of the nabob came under attack during the second half of the eighteenth century and correlated with the increasingly negative view of Indian courtesans. Though the nabob during this time was a more problematic figure to the metropole, the constructions of courtesans would experience further depoliticization and degradation later, once the nabob was no longer a threat to British political stability in India. These representations informed each other, one did not create the other, they occurred simultaneously as the British altered their understanding of their empire in India and
produced new and different modes of legitimacy that became solidified during the early decades of the subsequent century. Therefore, throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, the character of the nabob began to disappear as the image of the ideal Company servant and ruler of India and was eventually replaced by the figure of the *sahib*, which would lead to increasing popular interest in courtesans as well as their representation as sex-workers by the British.
Chapter 4
The Memsahib and the Courtesan, c. 1790-1857

The Nautch girls of Northern India…the equivocal character of whose evolutions has excited so much horror in the mind of virtuous Europe. 219

The London-based newspaper, *The Morning Chronicle*, demonstrated in this 1838 issue that *nautch*-girls were seen as sexually tempting and, therefore, of dubious and threatening character to Britain’s imperial project in the subcontinent. The early nineteenth century was a period of distinct change as the British solidified both their political power, as well as their cultural influence over colonial India. This chapter explores these changes as the figure of the British nabob disappeared in the late eighteenth century and was replaced by the image of the *sahib* as the ideal ruler of India. In addition, it examines the rising population of British women in the subcontinent to illustrate the development of the idealized image of the British woman as *memsahib*. This chapter demonstrates how constructions of courtesans and *memsahibs* were mutually dependent on one another and informed the production of each other, as well as the significance of courtesans to colonial discourse on proper modes of British rule. In the early nineteenth century courtesans were more frequently represented as dangerous and sensual women who corrupted British men and threatened the stability of the imperial project. The British believed courtesans’ sensuality created the potential for miscegenation and subsequent ethnic ‘degeneration’ that challenged the political stability of the British as they justified their colonial rule based on the belief of their inherent ethnic superiority.

Furthermore, this chapter examines the cultural shifts in Britain and the British community in India through the rise of Evangelical and liberal philosophies; Victorian ideals around gender, ethnicity, and class; and the enhanced political power of the East India Company through the idealized representations of the British *sahib* and *memsahib*. The *sahib* period of the

early nineteenth century came to represent the rule of India in a more firmly British manner that entailed more socially rigid hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and class. The travel narratives of British men and women are utilized throughout this section to illustrate the changing views of nautch-girls throughout the early nineteenth century. Lastly, this section examines the various representations of nautch-girls in this period and the impact these had on the diminishment of courtesans’ cultural, financial, and political agency in Indian society.

There is scholarly debate over what period of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries constitute the nabob or the sahib period. E. M. Collingham argues the nabob period dominated the early nineteenth century, while the sahib period began after the Rebellion of 1857. However, this periodization is challenged by scholars such as Durba Ghosh, who instead argues that the standard system of rule that represents the sahib period began to be unevenly implemented in the late eighteenth century and was solidified by the mid-nineteenth century. This thesis uses the periodization outlined by Ghosh and argues that the sahib period occurred from c. 1790 to 1857.

**Evangelicalism, liberalism, and the Anglicized British Community in India**

Over the course of the early nineteenth century, there was a cultural shift towards Evangelical and liberal ideals in Britain, which were political and moral philosophies that influenced the production of the figure of the sahib as the ideal British ruler of India. This shift altered British justifications for empire in India and solidified ideas of difference and superiority, which had been blurred with the advent of the nabob in the 1700s. In the eighteenth century the British justified their imperial project in India through Orientalist scholarship. Scholars, such as William Jones (1746-1794), produced understandings of India’s ancient Hindu civilizations. This

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enabled the British to validate their rule of the subcontinent by arguing that they were restoring India to its once great past, and also represented European sympathies to Indian religious traditions as well as interests in Indian languages and civilizations.\textsuperscript{222} However, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries experienced a hardening of British opinion towards Hinduism, particularly by committed Christians.\textsuperscript{223} In this period, it was “no longer fashionable…to profess an interest in Persian poetry or Hindu metaphysics” as it had been throughout the majority of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{224} This related to the shifting, separate, and contradictory ways in which the British perceived India’s past. The first, which was more popular during the eighteenth century, was produced by Orientalist scholars who reconstructed a vision of India’s past and ancient civilizations as a golden age. In contrast, the rise in Evangelicalism and liberalism focused on nineteenth century India, representing it as ‘backwards’ and in need of reform, which emphasized the low status of Indian women.\textsuperscript{225} Furthermore, Evangelical and liberal ideas informed and developed in relation to the rising confidence of British rule in India, and the subsequent assumption that colonial rule brought material and moral progress to India and Indians.\textsuperscript{226} The idea of restoring India to its ancient ‘golden age’ of civilization was pushed aside in the early nineteenth century and replaced with more aggressive beliefs in the social, political, and moral benefits of contemporary British civilization. Britain was conceived as a place of liberty, prudence, and productivity, while India was represented in opposition as the despotic, luxurious, superstitious, and indolent Other.\textsuperscript{227}

\textsuperscript{222} Collingham, \textit{Imperial Bodies}, p. 15.
This imagined image of India meant that it was constructed as a place that both could and should be conquered by the British in order to justify their colonial presence by ‘modernizing’ Indians and India.\textsuperscript{228} Subsequently, the British believed they should rule more in a British manner than an Indian one, which in part led to the replacement of the nabob, as an Orientalized British ruler, with the figure of the \textit{sahib}, who conformed to British Evangelical, liberal, and Victorian ideals of the British ruler of the subcontinent.

In the early 1800s, there was a distinct political and cultural shift towards Evangelical Christianity and liberalism. These beliefs, combined with changes in ideals of morality and the economic concept of free-trade, fundamentally altered the way in which the British perceived and ruled India. Liberal and Evangelical ideas were prevalent in India at this time because there was a shift in the type of British person who went to India. Increasingly, Evangelicals and liberals went to India in the early nineteenth century. In Britain these individuals were often non-conformists and the colonies were more open places for them and their beliefs. Hence, liberalism, while in competition with Conservatism in Britain, had greater influence on the cultural and political atmosphere of India and the British community there. Evangelicalism and liberalism became increasingly popular and dominated the social and political culture of colonial India from the 1830s to the 1850s.\textsuperscript{229} The ideology of liberalism centered on the perfectibility of the human state and the belief that institutions fundamentally shaped human beings. Liberals believed that if the institutions, predominantly those of education, morality, and religion, were altered, people would subsequently change. These ideologies conceptualized India as being decadent, ‘Oriental,’ and in need of social reform.\textsuperscript{230} Lord Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859), in his speech ‘Minute on Indian Education,’ on February 2, 1835, believed in the “intrinsic superiority

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid.
of the Western literature,” and famously stated that he had never found someone “who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India.”

Evangelicals and liberals believed they could reform India through changing its institutions. Therefore, they attempted to reform India and Indians through Westernized education, with the particular goal of educating Indian women. John Bentley argued that,

> the importance which the inhabitants of Europe attach to a sound and judicious education, especially with regard to the female sex, is founded on the unerring deductions of reason and experience. Without it, the whole frame of modern society, so superior to any thing the world has previously witnessed, would quickly lose its dignity and refinement. What idea are we to form, then, of the state of society in India, where the education of females is invariably and systematically neglected.

Bentley demonstrates the importance placed on educational reforms in India, specifically those focused on Indian women. The British believed that their social and political institutions were more civilized than Indian forms of education, morality, and religions and, therefore, attempted to alter them to change Indian society.

In addition, the pressure for Westernized education systems in India was based on policies that wished to undermine and break the bonds between Indians and their culture, while simultaneously encouraging conversion to Christianity. Prior to the early nineteenth century, the East India Company did not allow missionaries to enter India in relation to its policy of non-interference concerning Indian religious beliefs and cultural customs. Missionary lobbying at the time of the renewal of the East India Company charter proved victorious and in 1813 the Company allowed missionaries to enter India.

Evangelical reformers also turned their attention towards a more ‘civilizing’ mission in India, as education was seen to be synonymous with ideas

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of Westernization. Emma Roberts (1794-1840) was quite adamant about the need for education in order to ‘advance’ Indian society, particularly Indian women, as she believed that “it is the women of India who are at this moment impeding the advancement of improvement; they have hitherto been so ill-educated…that they have had nothing to amuse or interest them excepting the ceremonies of their religion.” This demonstrates the prevalence and importance placed on education as a means of ‘civilizing’ Indian people, especially women, and separating them from their religious traditions. Furthermore, education was related to gendered ideas of ethnic superiority and the maintenance of colonial power in India.

Evangelicalism was influential in the shift to rule India in a British context in order to bestow the supposed benefits of British civilization and society onto India. The British conceived themselves as morally superior to Indians. This belief was used to justify the British presence in the subcontinent and enabled the British to critique, and attempt to change, Indian society in a moral manner. Missionaries and liberals were stimulated by the rise of Evangelicalism during the first half of the nineteenth century and encouraged subsequent social purity movements, which attempted to alter aspects of Indian society that the British viewed as immoral, such as sati, female infanticide, and child marriage, as well as encouraging the representation of courtesans as sex-workers. These social purity movements were often supported by sectors of elite Indians who increasingly stigmatized courtesans and were influential in their treatment and public perception in the nineteenth century. Evangelicalism was a significant aspect of the early nineteenth century imperial project as it influenced the ideal of the sahib, in that the British now

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236 Ballhatchet, Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj, p. 5.
encouraged social reforms of Indian society in order to echo Western markers of education, civilization, and culture.

Evangelicalism was closely related to the rise of, and political shift towards, liberalism in Britain and its subsequent influence on the imperial project. Similar to Evangelicalism, liberalism and its advocates saw India as a luxurious and decadent place in need of social reform. In addition, India and Indian culture were understood to be inherently inferior to the British.\(^{238}\) Indian governance systems were seen as stereotypically ‘Oriental’ and despotic, as well as the root of Indian degradation. Liberals wished to reform India through changes in law and administration in order for India to be more Western and British in its political make-up and practice. James Mill (1773-1836) was a prominent liberal thinker and wrote *The History of British India*, in which he argued that “the Hindu form of government, that despotism, in one of its simplest and least artificial states, was established in Hindustan.”\(^{239}\) Mill believed this despotism meant that “the Hindus, in mind and body, were the most enslaved portion of the human race.”\(^{240}\) Therefore, liberals believed it to be imperative that the Company implement legal and administrative reforms in India in order to change its institutions. These social reforms were viewed as making India more similar to Britain and, therefore, more ‘civilized’ and ‘modern.’ Evangelical and liberal attitudes to British rule in India became popular and influential by the 1820s and impacted aspects of the Company’s administration. William Bentinck (1774-1839), who was Governor-General from 1828 to 1835, implemented many social reform policies that were influenced by Evangelical and liberal thought. These included reforms of the judicial system, education system, as well as instigating movements against *sati* and female

\(^{238}\) Sen, *Memsahibs’ Writings*, p. xv.


\(^{240}\) Ibid., p. 237.
infanticide. The early nineteenth century became a period of increasing social reform, which correlated to the figure of the sahib becoming the ideal British colonial ruler in India, while the nabob and Orientalized lifestyle became an obsolete symbol of British decadence and excess in India.

These shifts created more permanent and assertive understandings of British superiority and justified their imperial rule of India in a British idiom in order to benefit Indians. In the colonial context, Britishness was conceptualized through a dialogue with difference. The eighteenth century utilized culture as a marker of difference in relation to the perceived level of a civilization through Enlightenment ideologies around stadial theory. Therefore, the marking of Otherness was more diffuse in the eighteenth century and operated through difference in manners, languages, politics, and religious practices. The nabob period blurred these understandings of difference through British adoption of Indian lifestyles, clothing and entertainments, which threatened the superiority on which the British based their justification for colonial rule. Consequently, the use of culture as a marker of absolute difference was seen as inadequate for constructing Otherness and fell out of use in the early nineteenth century. In contrast, the nineteenth century utilized pseudo-scientific polygenesis, with new modes of classification that had the necessary permanence of moral law, scientific knowledge, and sealed bloodlines, as the basis for their understanding of ethnicity, which enabled the British to validate

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241 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 52.

242 See Nechtman, *Nabobs*, p. 231 which explains stadial theory as an Enlightenment ideology that organized the world into recognizable and hierarchized categories. These categories were utilized as an imperial tool that created a socio-historical timeline of human progress and development, which essentially demonstrated through culture how Britain had become developed while other regions had not. This theoretical framework was used throughout the eighteenth century in order to validate Britain’s imperial project in the subcontinent. However, nabobs’ Orientalized lifestyle illustrated the blurring of cultural difference that threatened the apparent superiority of the British and, therefore, understandings of difference altered in the nineteenth century in order to maintain representations of the Self and the Other, as well as continue to justify Britain’s empire in India.


their presence in India through the belief of their inherent superiority. By rigidifying conceptualizations of British superiority and Indian inferiority, this cultural shift decreased the social and political threats posed by the cultural openess and political corruption of nabobs in the eighteenth century.

The End of the Nabob and the Rise of the British Sahib

In addition, the late 1700s and early 1800s experienced a decline in the social anxieties concerning the East India Company and nabobs because the nature and composition of the British Empire in India altered, which created a more stable understanding of Britishness in colonial society and changed the approach taken by the British to colonialism in India. Such changes lessened anxieties around the Orientalized body of the British nabob. The increase in the British population in India, enhanced military, political, and territorial power; as well as the decline in the communication distance between the two regions enabled a more Anglicized identity to be imposed on colonial society. The rise of Evangelical and liberal ideals in Britain and its colonies, as well as the increasing confidence in British rule in the subcontinent, illustrate the declining fear of the nabob. The nabob mode of British imperialism focused on militarized territorial acquisition, intercultural consumptions, and inter-ethnic exchange through British male officials acquiring numerous Indian wives and concubines. This lifestyle was slowly replaced with a more dutiful, trade-based East India Company servant that maintained bourgeois ideals of efficiency, ethnic purity, morality, and liberalism. The British consolidated their power during this period, which enhanced their ability to impose their own cultural values and ideals on the subcontinent and subsequently diminished the social anxieties around the nabob.

The attitudes and social anxieties towards nabobs explored in the previous chapter worked to punish and police their behaviour and lifestyles, as well as the governing style of the East India Company. These attitudes from the late 1750s into the 1770s, according to Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, laid the groundwork for critiques of the empire in India and contributed to the ideals of imperial responsibility that became popular in the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{248} This included the 1784 India Act, as well as the political and social reforms implemented by Charles Cornwallis (1738-1805), who was Governor-General from 1786 to 1793, which developed more systematic imperial ideologies of conquest and colonial rule.\textsuperscript{249} In addition, these reforms fought against, what Cornwallis saw as, the immorality and corruption of the Hastings-era and the prevalence of nabobism in India.\textsuperscript{250} These alterations in the governing structure and overall power of the East India Company worked to diminish the fears of elite, metropolitan Britain in relation to the social mobility of nabobs and the influence of the Company. This also decreased the fear of nabobs having the wealth and power in India to return to Britain and corrupt its political system.

Furthermore, nabobs began to be understood, in part due to their negative treatment in British popular culture in previous decades, as people who were already corrupt, or more susceptible to the corruption of a luxurious lifestyle, before they left Britain and went to India. The British believed that if the ‘right’ type of people were sent into colonial India, they would not be morally, ethnically, and politically corrupted.\textsuperscript{251} In 1781, the Public Advertiser implored that “If our Officers in that Part of the World were to attend to their Duty as Men of real Virtue our Settlements in that Part of the World would be established on the most solid Foundation, and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ghosh, Sex and the Family in Colonial India, p. 8.
\item Lawson and Phillips, “‘Our Execrable Banditti,’” p. 107.
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Britain would reap the Advantages, without incurring the Imputation of Tyranny.”

William Huggins encouraged, in 1824, that the type of person who should be involved in the colonial project was “a man educated in Britain, who has lived in Britain, who justly appreciates the value of liberty, is requisite to restrain the despotic temper which prevails in India.”

This British construction of the ‘right’ type of person governing and administering colonial India diminished the representations of India’s power and influence on British people, which decreased anxieties surrounding the corrupting power of nabobs and India and worked to produce the figure of the sahib as the ideal British ruler of the subcontinent. Therefore, the Orientalized nabob’s influence on Britain was minimized as the British gained more power within the subcontinent and encouraged an altered, and more Anglicized, behaviour that conformed to British ideals and standards of Britishness.

In conjunction with the increased control of the British government over the East India Company, the nature of the British community in the subcontinent was altered. The overall population of the British was increasing in India. In addition, by the first few decades of the nineteenth century, advancements in technology enabled faster communication between Britain and India. The journey to the subcontinent also decreased from between five and eight months to thirty-five or forty days due to the introduction of steamers by the 1830s. Furthermore, territorial acquisitions had been consolidated and expanded upon, which meant the British were more firmly entrenched in their political power in the subcontinent. Lord Richard Wellesley (1760-1842) in 1798 increased military activity in India until, by 1818, Britain was the “master

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252 Public Advertiser, August 30, 1781.
253 William Huggins, Sketches in India: Treating on Subjects Connected with the Government; Civil and Military Establishments; Characters of the European, and Customs of the Native Inhabitants (London: John Letts, 1824), p. 62.
255 Collingham, Imperial Bodies, p. 50.
of India.”

The change in communication time and the overall increase in population created a British community in India that was more tightly integrated into British society and cultural forms of Britishness. This enhanced the confidence of British imperialists in India and consolidated ideals of Britishness in the community, which helped to decrease the fear of Orientalization that was represented by the body of the nabob. These social, political, demographic, and territorial factors diminished British fears of the Orientalized British and replaced the nabob with the sahib as the ideal British ruler of India. The body of the sahib was seen as the embodiment of ethnic superiority that worked to legitimize British rule in the subcontinent because Indians were understood as naturally inferior and, therefore, open to colonization. In addition, the construction of the sahib was intrinsically related to the representation of both British and Indian women, particularly memsahibs and courtesans, as explored later in this section.

The cultural, social, and political transition of the British imperial project in India during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries largely eradicated the public fear of nabobs in Britain. By the 1820s, the anxieties around the cultural imports and political corruption of Britain by nabobs had predominantly faded. The stereotypical nabob no longer had a social impact on Britain as the East India Company had been placed under the more direct supervision of the government, which made it appear as though the nabobs’ social mobility, political corruption, and morally questionable methods of obtaining vast fortunes had been controlled by those who had traditionally possessed elite positions in British society. Therefore, the image of the effeminate, wealthy, corrupt, and Orientalized nabob was replaced in the early nineteenth century with the sober, bureaucratic, and firmly British sahib as the ideal British imperialist in

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the subcontinent. Macaulay, in a speech delivered to the House of Commons on July 10, 1833, exhibited the changing nature of British rule and the opposing figures of the nabob and the *sahib*. Macaulay stated that he saw

a large body of civil and military functionaries resembling in nothing but capacity and valour those adventurers who, seventy years ago, came hither, laden with wealth and infamy, to parade before our fathers the plundered treasures of Bengal and Tanjore. I reflect with pride that the doubtful splendour which surrounds the memory of Hastings and of Clive, we can oppose the spotless glory of Elphinstone and Munro. I contemplate with reverence and delight the honourable poverty which is the evidence of rectitude firmly maintained amidst strong temptations.

This statement demonstrates the disparagement of the nabob and the veneration of the *sahib* as the ideal British ruler in India. The British metropole represented the *sahib* as being characterized by, what they viewed as, British qualities of energy, integrity, and manliness.

Significantly, the *sahib* was understood to embody the idea of the inherent superiority of the British over India. Therefore, British men, and also women, were under pressure to preserve British manners, values, and customs. This was in order to maintain the imperial project and stability of the empire, as the British understood its rule in India in the early nineteenth century as being based on British ideals of moral integrity. In sum, the *sahib* represented the Anglicization of the nabob that was understood as more appropriate to the new, more aggressively British, style of rule in India.

**The Memsahib: Keeper of British Civilization**

Colonial India experienced a substantial social shift in the early nineteenth century due to the advent of British women in the subcontinent. This section explores the rise in the female British population, as well as the impact it had on the culture of the colony, British men, and

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259 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 3.
260 Macaulay, *Speeches*, p. 137. Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) and Thomas Munroe (1761-1827) were the Governors of Bombay and Madras, respectively, and were seen as the ideal version of a British ruler, or *sahib*, by Macaulay.
261 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 53.
representations of courtesans. There is scholarly debate on the role of British women in this period. The standard historical narrative espoused throughout much of the twentieth century is that the advent of British women in India created increasingly rigid understandings of ethnic difference between colonizers and colonized peoples. On opposite ends of twentieth century academia, scholars such as Percival Spear and Ronald Hyam argue that British women were to blame for, what they saw as, the lessening of inter-ethnic respect between the British and Indians that characterized the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{262} The surge in the population of British women was believed to end the ‘utopian’ period of ethnic equality and cultural sharing, and instituted the rigid social structures in the early nineteenth century that “increased the widening racial gulf.”\textsuperscript{263} Therefore, it meant \textit{memsahibs} were often represented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as snobbish, prejudiced, and frivolous.\textsuperscript{264} In contrast, Indrani Sen argues the that \textit{memsahibs} were “merely echoing [their] own community’s ethnic prejudices and intolerance of other cultures.”\textsuperscript{265} Ann Stoler corroborates this and argues that the presence of British women was used to clarify ethnic lines and perceived ethnic threats to British prestige and stability within the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{266} Sen demonstrates that the increasingly racist colonial policies of social and sexual separation were not solely the prerogative of British women, but were more firmly based on the changing social values of metropolitan Britain that were echoed by \textit{memsahibs} in India.\textsuperscript{267} Furthermore, Durba Ghosh argues the mentality of ethnic superiority over Indians were in formation from the middle of the eighteenth century and, therefore, were not solely based on the


\textsuperscript{263} Spear, \textit{The Nabobs}, p. 140.


\textsuperscript{265} Sen, \textit{Memsahibs’ Writings}, p. xix.


\textsuperscript{267} Sen, \textit{Memsahibs’ Writings}, p. xix.
advent of increased numbers of British women in the subcontinent in the early 1800s.\textsuperscript{268} This scholarship on British women in India allows for a more nuanced view of the \textit{memsahib} as a figure who both benefitted from colonialism because she was a member of the ruling ethnic group, and was simultaneously oppressed due to patriarchal constructions of gender.

The rise of Victorianism took place in India, in relation to constructions of gender, ethnicity, and class in Britain during the 1830s. The gender ideology of Victorian England filtered into the colonial space and was imposed on both British and Indian women as the ideal form of womanhood.\textsuperscript{269} \textit{Nautch}-girls, as performers, were unsettling figures to the British, as their mobility in the public sphere disrupted the foundational moral distinction between the private and public spheres, which were so integral to Victorian gender ideals and norms.\textsuperscript{270} This distinction of gender roles also meant that courtesans were understood to be outside of the private versus public divide and were, therefore, constructed as dangerous women who threatened Victorian ideals. In relation to the potent mixture of Evangelicalism, liberalism, and Victorianism, courtesans were represented as a threat to the popular Victorian ideals of domesticity. Subsequently, courtesans were represented as endangering the stability of the British Empire in India through this challenge to social norms.

The early nineteenth century enhanced the eighteenth-century view of the climate that attributed ethnic degeneration with tropical spaces, which was tied to polygenic theory that assigned different ethnicities unique climatic locations and subsequent levels of civilization.\textsuperscript{271} Climatic theory supplemented British beliefs of their ethnic superiority as well as the threat of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Sen-2002} Indrani Sen, \textit{Women and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India (1858-1900)} (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), p. 190.
\end{thebibliography}
‘degenerating’ in India. The prevalent colonial discourse was that the tropical regions of India were hazardous to Europeans as a ‘race’ because it damaged their constitutions, which were seen as fundamental to the maintenance of their whiteness and Britishness.\textsuperscript{272} The popular belief amongst medical professionals and British elites in the first half of the nineteenth century was that if Europeans remained in India for more than three generations they would lose their ethnic identity and degenerate, therefore becoming an ‘inferior’ ethnicity, similar to Indians.\textsuperscript{273} A key aspect of this idea of ethnic degeneration was the association of the tropics with laziness and the diminishment of British vigour. Emily Eden (1797-1869), on her arrival in the Indian plains, demonstrated this belief of indolence and degeneration through the climate when she stated that she could “already feel what the languor is that this climate produces.”\textsuperscript{274} Eden demonstrates the belief of climatic and, therefore, ethnic ‘degeneration’ in India that was a source of concern for the East India Company.

Until the early nineteenth century, British men dominated the early colonial period in India, which produced a male-centred and masculine social atmosphere that was essential to the creation of the nabob.\textsuperscript{275} In the eighteenth century the East India Company discouraged British women from entering colonial India because it was believed that women had weaker constitutions and would consequently ‘degenerate’ faster in India’s climate. This understanding continued to dominate medical discourses throughout the nineteenth century. The British physician Edward John Tilt (1815-1893) believed that though “not aware that an attempt has been made to estimate how long an average Anglo-Saxon constitution can stand India without

\textsuperscript{274} Emily Eden, “\textit{Up the Country}” \textit{Letters Written to Her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India} (London: R. Bentley, 1866), p. 377.
breaking down…I think it is rightly admitted that women break down sooner than men.”

Edward John Tilt’s opinion on British women’s health in India demonstrates the prevailing belief during the nineteenth century that women were naturally weaker and more fragile than men, which made them unfit to go to warmer climates in a colonial capacity. The presence of British women in India increased colonial narratives and anxieties around ethnic degeneration as threatening to Britain’s ethnic superiority and political stability because the strength of the imperial project was understood to be integrally linked to the ethnic superiority of the British. Consequently, the numbers of British women in India were limited by the East India Company until the 1830s. It is estimated that fewer than two hundred British women were in Bengal throughout the eighteenth century, as the Company actively discouraged British women from travelling and living in India throughout the early colonial period.

In addition, representations of British women in empire were often quite contradictory. Though British women were understood to be too weak to be in India, as well as enhancing the degeneration of the British ‘race,’ due to their weaker constitutions, they were also increasingly represented in the early nineteenth century as being required in the colony to protect the imperial project and British ethnic purity. The necessity of memsahibs being in India was related to the metropole’s increasing social censure of conjugal relationships between British men and Indian women. Through the changing, more puritan, beliefs on morality in Britain, the British in India had to lead more circumscribed and traditional sex lives to avoid censure by colonial authorities.


Note: Nechtman, Nabobs, p. 194. See Joan Mickelson-Gaughan, The ‘Incumberances’: British Women in India, 1615-1856 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 3-4 for the example of William Keeling (1578-1620) who in 1615 attempted to smuggle his wife, Anne, aboard his ship headed for India, she was discovered by the East India Company and sent back to England. This was the standard strategy of the Company in the early colonial period, and this limited the population of British women in India until the changing policies of the early nineteenth century increased their numbers.
in the metropole.\textsuperscript{279} This mainly took the form of no longer cohabitating with Indian women and, instead, marrying British women. British women were encouraged in the early nineteenth century to enter the imperial project to protect British men from Indian women and the British ‘race’ from miscegenation. The increased presence of British women in the subcontinent was seen as a way to minimize these relationships, as British men would then marry women from Britain, experience the “calm delights of wedded life,” according to Emma Roberts, and no longer be involved with Indian women.\textsuperscript{280} This enabled the population of British women to rise in India over the course of the early nineteenth century. Nechtman argues “it would be impossible to estimate the exact ratios [of British men to women] in the eighteenth century” and, therefore, it is difficult to numerically track the increased population of British women in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{281} However, the proliferation of sources written by British women in this period demonstrates an increase in their overall population in the subcontinent. In addition, P. J. Marshall suggests the British male to female population ratio was around 100,000 to 35,000 by 1861.\textsuperscript{282} Therefore, though exact numbers are difficult to acquire, the population of British women increased in the early nineteenth century, although the population of British men continued to be higher throughout the colonial period.

Although British women were seen as a threat to imperial stability, they were simultaneously believed to encourage British men to more rigorously adhere to European social norms.\textsuperscript{283} This was particularly related to the increasingly influential Victorian norms of public and private spheres, gender roles, concepts of ethnic purity, and social distance from Indians.

\textsuperscript{281} Nechtman, \textit{Nabobs}, p. 194. In addition, the lack of census information on the British population in India during this period was a limitation for this thesis.
\textsuperscript{283} Nechtman, \textit{Nabobs}, p. 217.
Furthermore, British women were represented as the keepers of British civilization in India and “the bearers of a new redefined colonial morality” based on Evangelical, liberal, and Victorian ideals. Their presence was seen as Anglicizing British men, who could be corrupted into taking on more Orientalized lifestyles of the eighteenth-century nabob due to their relations with Indian women, particularly courtesans and nautch-girls. The increase in British women in the subcontinent was believed to bring British men more firmly within European gender, ethnicity, and class norms, as well as proliferating Victorian ideals of domesticity.

Metropolitan elites increasingly viewed relationships between British men and Indian women as problematic due to the fear of miscegenation and the subsequent threat it would have on the stability of the imperial project. These beliefs coincided with the increased popularity of Evangelical and racist philosophies at the time. Anglo-Indians, often the children of British men and Indian women, were understood as a threat to the British in India because they confused ethnic categories. They were a particularly potent threat because the British justified ruling India in relation to a belief in their innate ethnic superiority, and the subsequent inferiority of Indians. Anglo-Indians were dangerous to the imperial project because they had potential to bridge the political and cultural gap between colonizer and colonized through demanding political recognition or better treatment based on their ethnic heritage. Therefore, British women in India were constructed as significant actors in enabling the maintenance of British ethnic superiority by minimizing relations between British men and Indian women. This was accomplished through British men marrying memsahibs and being brought more firmly into British social norms and ideals of domesticity. Emma Roberts saw unions between British men and women as “often the means of preventing extravagance, dissipation, and all their

286 Ibid.
concomitant evils."\textsuperscript{287} Thus, the presence of British women as wives in India was seen to diminish the potentially rakish and immoral behaviour of British men that had dominated the nabob period in the previous century.

While the Company discouraged inter-ethnic relationships, the opposite of the stance they had taken in the preceding century, British men continued to have relationships with Indian women throughout the 1800s, although the prevalence of these unions decreased throughout the century, the children of these unions were seen as the most problematic aspect of this form of union.\textsuperscript{288} These fears were allayed in part through changes in Company policies, for example the reforms by Cornwallis in 1793, which barred Anglo-Indians from holding high positions within the civil or military operations of the Company.\textsuperscript{289} The perception that the stability of the British imperial project in India was threatened by inter-ethnic relationships was integrally related to social anxieties concerning British men and women crossing ethnic, sexual, gender, and class lines in India. This was due to the wealth of the subcontinent and the belief that India’s climate degenerated the British constitution, while simultaneously enhancing the libidinousness that could produce miscegenation. Therefore, the British conceived British women as being the bastions of ethnic and sexual purity through Victorian and Evangelical gender and ethnicity-based norms in an attempt to police and control the sexual and social behaviour of the British in the subcontinent. Consequently, British women were often constructed as asexual, pure, and chaste in opposition to the representation of Indian women as inherently sexual and immoral. The conceptualization of British and Indian women in this manner constructed the Self and the Other in an attempt to police the sexual behaviour of British men in the subcontinent.

\textsuperscript{287} Roberts, \textit{Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan}, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{288} Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 10. However, see Banerjee, \textit{Under the Raj}, p. 49 which argues that inter-ethnic relationships had essentially disappeared by the mid-nineteenth century due to the increase of British women in the subcontinent.
\textsuperscript{289} Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 10.
The fear of miscegenation meant that the impetus was placed more firmly on British women to ‘re-civilize’ British men and return them to relations with white women, which would subsequently decrease social and sexual interactions with Indians. Emma Roberts demonstrated the importance of British women’s presence in India, for when British women came together “the gentlemen follow in their train, very few preferring the jovialities of their own exclusive circle to the attractiveness of a feminine coterie. The fruits of domestication amid the ladies…are of incalculable value.” Roberts illustrates the importance of British women in creating and maintaining gender and ethnicity-based systems of colonial dominance in India. Furthermore, these attitudes created more rigid social structures and barriers between colonizing and colonized groups. The political threat of miscegenation, which enhanced the significance of British women in maintaining the ethnic purity, and subsequent superiority, of the British in India. Therefore, British women entered India and the imperial project in a period when the social foundation of difference was shifting around ideas of ethnicity; Victorian gender roles; and the increasingly rigid understandings class, religion, and civilization posited by liberal and Evangelical social philosophies.

In conclusion, the rise of Evangelical thought in England transferred to India in changes of governance style and a greater focus on societal reform through education. This occurred at the same time as the rising prevalence and popularity of European theories on ethnic purity and superiority, which permeated through the rest of the nineteenth century. These two ideologies combined to create a highly gendered and racialized set of beliefs concerning India and Indians, and effectively set up British women, or memsahibs, as the bastions of ethnic purity and Victorian gender ideals of domesticity in India. This demonstrates the highly gendered and

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ethnicity-based hierarchies that were created in colonial India in order to perpetuate British dominance over the region. Ideas concerning gender and ethnicity were highly interrelated to conceptualizations of the Orient and produced images and constructions of the Other in colonial discourses. Oriental despotism, sensuality, and splendour were the major stereotypes and ideas that the West maintained about the East in a manner that exhibited the greater strength and rationality of the West. Subsequently, the production of an ethnic Other in colonial discourse constructed colonized Indians as a population of degenerates on the basis of ethnic origin. This construction of ethnic hierarchies worked to justify the conquest and colonization of India and Indians, particularly as being in need of the British in order to ‘morally progress.’

**Early Nineteenth-Century Nautch-Girls**

The early nineteenth century shifted British perceptions of nautch-girls in relation to constructions of memsahibs and sahibs. The constructions of courtesans and memsahibs were produced in opposition to each other and were dependent on one another. The scholarship on nautch-girls mainly focuses on the increased ‘degeneration’ of courtesans throughout the early nineteenth century. Vijay Prakash Singh and Erica Wald conform to this dominant scholarly narrative about courtesans during this period. There is a scholarly push for a reclamation of nautch-girls from this narrative of ‘degeneration’ by examining courtesans in a manner that does not solely focus on their relationship to sex-work. Margaret E. Walker explores courtesans through their dance traditions in the nineteenth century in order to re-centre nautch-girls without

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294 See Singh, “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl,” pp.177-194 and Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” pp. 5-25 who both explore the ‘degeneration’ of courtesans from their cultural, political, and financial agency within pre-colonial Indian societies to their association with commercial sex-work in the nineteenth century and the essential destruction of the courtesan tradition by the mid-twentieth century.
solely concentrating on their relationship to the imperial project. This section predominantly examines the ways in which representations of British memsahibs and Indian courtesans were explicitly linked in colonial discourse on idealized notions of femininity, whiteness, and sensuality for the maintenance of British political authority in India. Therefore, it utilizes recent scholarly narratives that examine the ‘degradation’ of courtesans, as well as works that re-centre courtesans as figures with individuality and agency in order to generate a nuanced understanding of how British colonialism impacted the construction of courtesans in relation to British political power in India.

_Nautch_-girls were symbolic of the East and were represented as sensuous and dangerous temptresses in opposition to British women, who were understood as the embodiment of Victorian domesticity and the bastions of ethnic purity. In this period, courtesans were amalgamated from various caste, regional, and religious differences into a more simplistic understanding of the nautch-girl, as well as the subsequent representation of these women as commercial sex-workers. This illustrates the ‘degradation’ of courtesans from important cultural figures to their amalgamation into a monolithic group, which negatively impacted their cultural, political, and financial agency and power within colonial society.

Evangelical, liberal, and Victorian ideals influenced British persons’ enjoyment of the _nautch_ and appreciation of _nautch_-girls. Spear demonstrates that from the 1790s into the early nineteenth century the British attitude towards the _nautch_ had altered from “slightly guilty appreciation or naïve enjoyment to frank incomprehension, boredom, and finally disgust.” The alteration of the British ruling style in the subcontinent meant that forms of Indian entertainment, such as the _nautch_, which were previously associated with symbols of rulership, were viewed

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296 Spear, *The Nabobs*, p. 35.
with repulsion and constructed as sensual and inappropriate performances. British travel writers, particularly the *memsahibs*, produced narratives around the tediousness, wildness, and wealth of *nautch* performances. Elizabeth Fenton (d.1875), upon deciding that the *nautch*-girl she saw was “a mad woman,” whose performance contained “little to see that could please an European eye,” returned home, “cured for ever of all curiosity respecting native entertainments.” Furthermore, due to the rise in these political and cultural philosophies, as well as the enhanced British territorial and political acquisitions in colonial India, the British decreased their dependence on, and use of, Indian modes of political legitimacy in the early nineteenth century. This particularly included attending *nautch* performances and patronizing *nautch*-girls, although it also expanded to *huqqa* smoking and other forms of Indian entertainment. The diminished political and cultural significance of courtesans and their dances as symbols of authority and legitimacy encouraged the British in India to disparage these performances. Subsequently, this would enhance the slow ‘degradation’ and amalgamation of the courtesan into the category of a commercial sex-worker as the century progressed.

The lure of *nautch*-girls to British men decreased in the early nineteenth century as the number of British women in India swelled, increasing marriages between British *sahibs* and *memsahibs*. However, the social anxiety around *nautch*-girls, and the constructed perception of their ‘Oriental’ sensuality, increased during this period. This related to the rise of Evangelical, liberal, and Victorian popular culture and thought in the metropole and the subsequent imposition of these gender, ethnicity, religion, and class-based values onto the British community in colonial India and Indian society. These ideas and anxieties around Indian

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297 Collingahm, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 54.
298 Elizabeth Fenton, *A Narrative of her Life in India, the Isle of France and Tasmania during the years 1826-1830* (London: Edward Arnold, 1901), pp. 243-244.
299 Singh, “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl,” p. 182.
Courtesans were integrally linked to fears of miscegenation and the crossing of ethnicity and class-based social boundaries that had abounded in the subcontinent during the previous century. *Memsahibs* and courtesans were both significant figures in colonial discourse. Enlightenment-based, polygenesis theory, and Victorian gender ideals worked concurrently to develop understandings of the place and role of women within civilizations. Throughout the colonial period, across the globe, women were understood to be a significant marker of civilization that represented the level of “progress a culture and people had reached.”

John Bentley argued that “Of the superior advantages which have raised the nations of Christendom to so high a pre-eminence above all others, there is none of greater prominence and greater importance than the cultivation of the female mind, and the elevation of woman to her just rank and dignity in society.” This demonstrates that the British understood the status of their women as inherently linked to their level of ‘modernity’ and civilization. Bentley demonstrates that the British represented European women as the most enlightened and educated women in the world and, therefore, Britain as the apogee of world civilizations. Along with other concepts, such as forms of government, religious beliefs, and types of education, the British understood India’s place within their world order as being fundamentally linked to the status of women in Indian society. While British women represented the superiority of European civilization to the British, “among all other nations, whether Pagan or Mahometan, the female sex is held in a state of degradation, and in no instance allowed to share in those privileges which the men reserve exclusively for themselves.” Therefore, the British characterized India as being a less civilized and a more ‘barbaric’ place than Britain due to the status of Indian women. This representation was increasingly significant during the early nineteenth century, for it enabled the British to

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301 Bentley, *Essays Relative to the Habits, Character, and Moral Improvement of the Hindoos*, p. 163.
302 Ibid.
justify their domination of India as a benevolent act of educating and advancing the place of women in Indian society. Specifically, this would take the form of social reforms based on Evangelical and liberal philosophies. The British predominantly focused on the reform of the cultural tradition of *sati* in the early nineteenth century. However, over the course of the period this focus would shift to courtesans, although more tangible political action would not occur until the second half of the nineteenth century, the narrative altered in this period and was the impetus for later action.

In relation to Evangelical social reforms, British women wished to educate Indian women, especially elite Indian women, in order to ‘advance’ them and Indian society. However, courtesans were seen to impede the encouragement of female education in the subcontinent. The British writer Mary Martha Sherwood (1775-1851), who was in India from 1805 to 1815, expressed that courtesans’ “education consists in singing, dancing, and playing on a sort of guitar or small harp. Some of the higher ranks of them are taught to read, on which account it is considered disgraceful for respectable women in the East to learn.” This illustrates that courtesans were represented as obstacles to British women’s ‘civilizing mission’ of Indian society through the education of Indian women. Courtesans, due to their association with sexwork, were seen as markers of civilization in a negative manner. Though courtesans were educated, the British negated this aspect of their identity due to the ‘immorality’ of their sexual lives, while the lack of literacy amongst elite Indian women was seen as illustrative of their subjugation. Therefore, Indian women, as the marker of Indian civilization, were continuously constructed during the nineteenth century as being fundamentally lower than British women and,

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304 Mary Martha Sherwood, *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood: (Chiefly Autobiographical) with extracts from Mr. Sherwood’s journal during his imprisonment in France and residence in India* (London: Darton and Co., 1854), p. 422.
therefore, in need of Britain’s imperial project and colonial presence in order to ‘modernize’ the subcontinent through the advancement of Indian women, which justified the British imperial project.

The early nineteenth century experienced a hardening of social boundaries that worked to widen the gap between colonizers and colonized peoples in the subcontinent. However, the East India Company continued to encourage cross-cultural sharing during this period, albeit in a more limited manner in order to diminish the perceived threats of nabobism and miscegenation. Consequently, nautches formed an integral part of cross-cultural colonial social life and the British continued to attend these performances throughout the period. This was demonstrated through artwork such as the painting depicting Mahadaji Sindhai (1730-1794) entertaining British officers with a nautch that was produced around 1815 to 1820, which illustrates the continued presence of British officials at Indian forms of entertainment (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Mahadaji Sindhai entertaining a British naval officer and military officer with a nautch, c. 1815-1820.

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Though the British were increasingly encouraged to avoid patronizing and attending *nautch* performances from the 1830s onwards, the practice remained popular among many British elites in India.\(^{306}\) This establishes that the imagery surrounding *nautch*-girls as symbols of ‘Oriental’ wealth, luxury, and sensuality persisted as a representation of Indian courtesans and India. The opulence and exoticism of this imagery attracted the continued attendance of the British at these performances. Elizabeth Fenton expressed the British fascination with *nautches* as “Like many other Europeans I had a violent curiosity to see a Nautch. These native assemblies are much frequented about Calcutta.”\(^{307}\) Her interest in attending a *nautch* performance, as well as admitting that many Europeans continue to attend them in Calcutta, illustrates the persistent allure and fascination with *nautch*-girls in the early nineteenth century. In addition, this demonstrates the prevailing power that the imagery of ‘Oriental’ luxury and sensuality had over the British understanding of Indian women.

**Representations of Courtesans in British Writings**

*Nautches* continued to be a common form of entertainment in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. Invitations for *nautch* festivities were sent out in letters and cards, as well as advertisements in local newspapers.\(^{308}\) These advertisements often appeared in newspapers such as the *Calcutta Gazette*, which stated on October 20, 1814 that “Baboo Gopee Mohun Dab…to contribute to the amusement of the public, has besides a selection of the most accomplished *nautch*-girls.”\(^{309}\) This demonstrates that *nautch* performances continued to be popular forms of entertainment in the early nineteenth century. Therefore, many British travellers, missionaries, as well as civil and military officials in India described *nautches* in their travel narratives, letters,

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\(^{306}\) Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj*, p. 123.


\(^{308}\) Nevile, *The Nautch Girls of the Raj*, p. 34.

While the British continued to patronize nautch performances, the overall social atmosphere that was imported from the metropole increasingly discouraged British attendance at these events. This was often attributed to the increased presence of British women in the subcontinent and subsequently the rigid representation of the ideal memsahib, as well as solidifying understandings of gender, ethnicity, and class-based social hierarchies. However, for British women the nautch was one of the few sites of accessible gendered interaction they could have with Indian women. Therefore, memsahibs’ descriptions of dancing-girls, their clothing, jewellery, and performances became popular in the metropole during this period. These writings often took the form of travel narratives, journals, and letters that were written originally as private communication and were later published for popular consumption in Britain. In addition, these narratives frequently influenced colonial policy and mentality, especially when they served to support the power structures of the British imperial project. This was particularly potent as memsahibs often wrote on the situation and status of Indian women while focusing extensively on the need for the social reform of India in relation to Evangelical and liberal beliefs. These attitudes, expressed through British women’s travel writings, altered and hardened representations of courtesans from influential cultural figures, to performers in the form of nautch-girls, to sex-workers, to maintain the stability of the imperial project in India.

The intersection of ethnicity and gender in India had influential consequences on the ways in which British officials and memsahibs represented Indian women. British conceptualizations of Indian women, their bodies and behaviour, were significant in colonial

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311 See Sen, *Memsahibs’ Writings*, pp. xii-xiii. Another form of interaction with Indian women available to British women was meeting high-caste women in the zenana. While completely closed to British men, British women were able to intermingle with these women. However, the nautch remained a more accessible form of social interaction between British and Indian women.
312 Ibid., p. xxv.
discourses and influential in the negotiation and justification of the imperial project in the
subcontinent. Throughout the colonial period, the British represented nautch-girls as the epitome
of Eastern decadence, as well as a form of institutionalized sensuality. Nautch-girls and their
sensuality were specifically understood to occupy a space outside of the domestic sphere, which
threatened Victorian gender ideals of women’s proper roles and the subsequent social divide
between the public and private spheres. Moreover, in the early nineteenth century gender
norms and values became progressively rigid and sexual desires were more repressed in relation
to ideas of private and public spheres. This informed British understandings of courtesans and
their association with sex-workers and representations as temptresses, based on their own
cultural understandings of sensuality and domesticity.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of disquiet concerning inter-ethnic
relationships, specifically between white, British men and Indian women. Therefore, Indian
women were constructed as agents of ethnic degeneration for the British population and were
viewed as a threat to British dominance in the subcontinent. In contrast, British men saw
themselves as protecting Indian women and their sexual honour from, what they saw, as sexually
degenerative and oppressive Indian men. Gayatri Spivak succinctly describes this as “white
men saving brown women from brown men.” The ideas concerning Indian women’s sexuality,
and subsequently the threat they posed of ethnic degeneration, informed the travel narratives of
many memsahibs. Though white, British women were sexually subordinate in imperial society,
they were ethnically dominant in India and this privilege worked to influence the ways in which

314 Singh, “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl,” p. 182.
317 Steven Patterson, The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 57.
318 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by
they represented and understood Indian women. In many ways, memsahibs saw Indian women as overly and overtly sexual, which implicitly demonstrated and idealized memsahibs’ own sexual purity. In relation to the perceived sexual and ethnic degeneration of Indian women, British women were constructed in contrast to these images as purveyors of ethnic and sexual purity.

Memsahibs wrote extensively, and in great detail, on the nautch performances that they witnessed in the early nineteenth century. The descriptions they wrote formed a rich and detailed, though often prejudicial, record of courtesans’ performances in this period. Until the 1830s, the British women who wrote on nautches attended these performances. However, by the 1850s, memsahibs were not often present at these events due to the increasingly negative connotations attached to the dances and the performers, as well as the social pressure from colonial society to not attend them. This meant that the stereotypes around Indian women and nautch performances were often repeated from earlier writers and, therefore, perpetuated beliefs about courtesans. However, these narratives were not monolithic representations of nautch-girls and their performances. British women, as individuals with various experiences and beliefs, did not possess a uniform female gaze; rather, they had a plurality of opinions on the nautch and courtesans. These viewpoints complicated the narrative and subsequent representations of courtesans produced by British colonial society in the early nineteenth century. However, there were patterns within these representations that often constructed some aspect of the nautch in a manner that conformed to the various, and often conflicting, narratives of courtesans as symbols of ‘Oriental’ sensuality and decadence, as victims, or as dangerous temptresses. Memsahibs often focused on the clothing of nautch-girls, their dances, songs, and music, as well as the perceived

319 Patterson, The Cult of Imperial Honor in British India, p. 57.
320 Sen, Memsahibs’ Writings, p. 1.
321 Ibid., p. xxvii.
presence or absence of modesty in the women or their performances. British narratives on nautch-girls also explored their apparent victimization as ‘fallen’ women, or sex-workers, and their danger to British men through their ‘Oriental’ sensuality, sexual availability, and the subsequent threat they posed to the imperial project through miscegenation.

British travel narratives, mainly written by memsahibs although British men also wrote about nautches, described the performances in great detail. These descriptions frequently focused on the courtesans’ movements, clothing, and jewellery, as well as the musical accompaniments. These aspects of nautch-girls’ performances that the British explored illustrated their constructions of ‘Oriental’ luxury, wealth, and sensuality, as well as the differences between Indian and British society. Memsahibs appeared to be particularly interested in the clothing worn by nautch-girls. Julia Charlotte Maitland (1808-1864), who was in India between 1836 and 1840, positively described the dancing-girls she witnessed at a nautch as being “most graceful creatures, walking, or rather sailing about, like queens, with long muslin robes from their throats to their feet.”  

Emily Eden, who was in India between 1837 and 1840 with her brother, the Governor-General George Eden the first Earl of Auckland (1784-1849), commented on the richness of the nautch-girls’ clothing, as they were “dressed in gold brocades, some purple and some red, with long floating scarfs of gold gauze.” Emma Roberts, who travelled in India from 1828 to 1832, gave a detailed description of the clothing worn by courtesans at a nautch. Roberts viewed nautch-girls as presenting, very picturesque figures, though somewhat encumbered by the voluminous folds of their drapery. Their attire consists of a pair of gray-coloured silk trowsers, edged and embroidered with silver, so long as only to afford occasional glimpses of the rich ancles...Over the trowsers a petticoat of some rich stuff appears...having broad silver or gold borders, finished with deep fringes of the same. The coortee, or vest, is of the usual dimensions, but it is almost hidden by an immense veil, which crosses the bosom several times.”

These descriptions demonstrate the interest with which British *memsahibs* approached courtesans and *nautch* performances, particularly in relation to their clothing. The clothing of these women was seen to represent the decadence of Indian women and the subcontinent more broadly, as well as the stereotypical and different ways in which they dressed themselves in comparison to Europeans. These descriptions of clothing created an understanding of courtesans and India as being inherently different from Britain, in ways that represented the East as luxurious.

In addition to clothing, *memsahibs* often described the jewellery of *nautch*-girls as representative of Eastern wealth and opulence. *Nautch*-girls, according to Maitland, wore a significant amount of jewellery as “They were covered with gold and jewels, earrings, nose-rings, bracelets, armlets, anklets, bands round their heads…and rings on all their fingers and all their toes.”

Roberts also depicted the plethora of jewellery displayed by *nautch*-girls during their performances as “The hands, arms, and neck, are covered with jewels, sometimes of great value, and the hair is braided with silver ribands…the diameter of the nose-ring is as large as that of a crown-piece; it is of gold wire, and very thin; a pearl and two other precious gems are strung upon it, dangling over the mouth.”

This demonstrates that *nautch*-girls were bedecked in extensive amounts of jewellery for their performances. In addition to the general splendour this created, British women understood that courtesans could be individually quite wealthy. Roberts wrote that “Many of the *nautch* girls are extremely rich, those most in esteem being very highly paid for their performances,” some women even made “1,000 rupees (£ 100) nightly.”

Courtesans were quite wealthy throughout the colonial period, even into the second half of the nineteenth century when they were under increasing levels of social censure and were losing employment and patronage. On the civil tax ledgers in Lucknow between 1858 and 1877,

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325 Maitland, *Letters from Madras*, p. 27.
327 Ibid., p. 192.
courtesans were in the highest tax bracket and had some of the largest individual incomes in the city. The descriptions of jewellery and clothing alluded to the wealth of the nautch-girls. In addition, these narratives constructed nautch-girls as symbols of ‘Oriental’ luxury and meant that courtesans were represented as the epitome of Eastern stereotypes concerning India’s opulence and wealth. Therefore, memsahibs’ representations of courtesans and their performances perpetuated the construction of the East as the Other in relation to its decadence and wealth, which was an image that was produced in the nabob period and persisted throughout the colonial period.

British writers, upon experiencing a nautch, frequently gave detailed descriptions of the performance; the dancing, singing, and accompanying music. Nautches were understood to be different from British forms of entertainment at the time, particularly operas, theatre performances, and balls. The British often described the movements of the courtesans as gliding, not as dancing. Anne Elwood, while she was in Bombay from 1825 to 1828, described the movements of the nautch-girls when, “At length they began, not to dance, but to move gracefully, and slowly, throwing their arms about and waving their drapery, which they twisted round them, or let fall in becoming folds, whilst the musicians behind them made a tremendous, though not unharmonious noise with their vins.” Emma Roberts believed “the dancing is even more strange, and less interesting than the music; the performers rarely raise their feet from the ground, but shuffle, or to use a more poetical, though not so expressive a phrase, glide along the floor, raising their arms, and veiling and unveiling as they advance or describe a circle.”

331 Anne Katherine Elwood, Narrative of a Journey Overland from England, by the Continent of Europe, Egypt, and the Red Sea. to India including a residence there, and voyage home, in the years 1825, 26, 27, 28 vol. II (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1830), p. 81.
332 Roberts, Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, p. 190.
the British saw the dancing as different from their own forms of movement, the singing and musical accompaniment of the *nautch* were more often firmly ridiculed in their writings. Maitland described the singing as “bawling like bad street-singers – a most fearful noise, and no tune.”\(^{333}\) Roberts wrote that “the *nautch* girls of India are singers as well as dancers; they commence the vocal part of the entertainment in a high shrill key, which they sustain as long as they can; they have no idea whatsoever of modulating their voices.”\(^{334}\) In addition, Roberts disparaged the music as “the instruments which form the accompaniment are little less barbarous; these consist of two nondescript guitars, and a very small pair of kettle-drums…making sad havoc with the original melodies.”\(^{335}\) Few *memsahibs* seemed to enjoy the music or form of the *nautch*. Elizabeth Fenton, who was in India between 1826 and 1828, described a performance by a *nautch*-girl as when “The musicians…commenced a native air, merely a repetition of four notes; she advanced, retreated, swam round, the while making frightful contortions with her arms and hands, head and eyes. This was her ‘Poetry in motion’; I could not even laugh at it.”\(^{336}\) These descriptions worked to represent the fundamental difference between Britain and India through their types of performance and entertainment tastes. In addition, these descriptions placed greater value on British forms of entertainment than Indian ones.

Though there were some exceptions, British *memsahibs* and *sahibs* typically found *nautch* performances and Indian dancing to be boring, rather than exciting, forms of entertainment.\(^{337}\) Maitland found the *nautch* particularly tedious as she defied “any one to have watched this girl’s dull, unvarying dance long, without going to sleep.”\(^{338}\) Roberts echoed these

\(^{333}\) Maitland, *Letters from Madras*, p. 27.
\(^{335}\) Ibid.
\(^{336}\) Fenton, *A Narrative of her Life in India*, p. 243.
\(^{337}\) Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj*, p. 159.
sentiments concerning *nautch* parties, as she wrote that “to European spectators, the performance soon grows exceedingly tiresome.”[^339] She argued it was the sameness of the dances and dancers that contributed to the dullness of the performance as,

> the same evolutions are repeated with the most unvarying monotony, and are continued until the appearance of a new set of dancers gives a hint to the preceding party to withdraw…A *nautch* given by a great person generally concludes with an exhibition of fire-work, a spectacle in which native artists excel, and affords a very acceptable gratification to eyes wearied with the dull sameness of the dancers.^[340]

Maitland and Roberts’ descriptions demonstrate the view of many *memsahibs* as to the dullness and unvarying nature of *nautch* performances. However, these views were often related to the lack of knowledge that the British had of courtesans and their artistic traditions. The British, largely due to their ignorance of Indian languages, did not understand the songs that accompanied the courtesans’ dances, which meant that they were unable to appreciate the context in which the performance was given.^[341] This limited the presentation to a simple routine that the British perceived to be intended purely for entertainment, rather than to express a range of emotions and a larger, more nuanced, story.^[342]

Some *memsahibs* were able to recognize that a greater story was being told beyond simply the movements of the dance; however, this did not necessarily encourage their enjoyment or comprehension of the spectacle. Amelia Herber, who was in India in the early 1820s with her husband Reverend Reginald Herber (1783-1826), described a *nautch* as,

> the nâch, or dancing-girls, – if dancing that could be called which consisted in strained movements of the arms, head, and body, the feet, though in perpetual slow motion, seldom moving from the same spot. Some story was evidently intended to be told from the expression of their countenances, but to me it was quite unintelligible.^[343]

[^339]: Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*, p. 188.
[^340]: Ibid., pp. 191-192.
[^342]: Ibid.
Amelia Herber recognized the potential of a broader context and story to the *nautch*; however, this did not mitigate her general distaste for the performance, nor the tediousness with which she felt it possessed as she found “the whole exhibition was fatiguing and stupid, nearly every charm but that of novelty being wanting…I returned home between twelve and one much tired, and not the least disposed to attend another nāch.”\(^{344}\) Herber, Maitland, and Roberts demonstrate the conventional feeling of many early nineteenth-century colonizers in India who experienced *nautch* performances and found them to be dull and tedious. The lack of understanding calcified representations of the *nautch* as all the same and boring, which limited the ability of the British to nuance their conceptualization of these performances and women. This was a significant aspect of the amalgamation of courtesans because the British did not understand the differences between these women and their performances, which meant that they were seen as being the same as one another. The ‘sameness’ of the *nautch* contributed to the cultural amalgamation and subsequent degeneration of courtesans and Indian entertainment styles in the nineteenth century.

However, there were some exceptions to the overall rule of *memsahibs* finding *nautch* performances monotonous and tiring. Anne Elwood found *nautch*-girls and their routines to be quite interesting and entertaining. Though “many persons complain of the sameness of a Nautch” she found them to be so fascinating that it was “surprising that a regular set of Nautch girls has never been imported for the English stage, for they would be far more interesting than the Elephant of Siam, or the Siamese Youths, and the novelty and splendour of a Nautch would recommend them for a season at least.”\(^{345}\) This interest with *nautch*-girls and their performances was often related to ideas around ‘Oriental’ splendour and the *nautch* as symbolizing the epitome of Eastern Otherness. Mary Martha Sherwood illustrated the ‘Oriental’ exoticism of the *nautch* in that she “was astonished, fascinated, and carried, as described in fancy, to the golden halls of

\(^{344}\) Ibid.

\(^{345}\) Elwood, *Narrative of a Journey Overland from England*, vol. II, p. 82.
ancient kings.” This demonstrates that the overall factor of appeal for the British concerning the nautch was its relation to the stereotypes of wealth, luxury, and opulence that had been integrally associated with the Indian subcontinent from previous centuries and perpetuated through the Orientalist scholarship of the 1700s. Emily Eden also expressed this view when she described the nautch as “the whole thing was like a dream, it was so curious and unnatural.” In addition, memsahibs’ conceptualization of the nautch and nautch-girls as decadent was related to the concept of their Otherness and difference, particularly their exoticism. Hence Eden’s focus on courtesans’ ‘curious’ and ‘unnatural’ dance, music, and clothing. The British understood the entirety of the performance as symbolizing the vast difference between themselves and Indian culture, arts, and traditions, as well as the ways in which they represented India as naturally exotic and erotic.

British men enjoyed the performances of nautch-girls, particularly in the eighteenth century, although this continued into the early nineteenth century. Francis John Bellew (1799-1868), in his quasi-fictional account of his service in the East India Company during the first few decades of the nineteenth century, described a man, upon seeing a nautch as being “in raptures; he considered nautches superior to all the operas in the universe, and thought he could hardly have enough of them.” However, increasingly over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century sahibs, especially missionaries, were increasingly negative about nautch performances and courtesans. Reverend Herber experienced a different nautch compared to his wife, however, he was of the same opinion in that their performance was “as dull and insipid to any European taste as could well be conceived. In fact nobody in the room seemed to pay them any attention, all being engaged in conversation, though in an under voice, and only with their near

neighbours.” The decrease in interest in nautch performances and nautch-girls was linked to the rise of British women and British culture in the subcontinent. Pran Nevile argues this occurred because more equal ratios of British men and women enabled British forms of entertainment, such as balls, to ensue within the colony. However, in the early nineteenth century, British and Indian forms of entertainment often occurred simultaneously, as demonstrated by Roberts in that “deference to European taste has occasioned those [parties] at Moorshedabad to be of mixed character; the nautch is frequently performing in one apartment while quadrilles are going on in another.” This demonstrates the mixing of Indian and British forms of entertainment during a period of cultural shifting as British ideals, art, and performance were increasingly imposed on colonial India and replaced Indian forms of entertainment, including the nautch. In sum, British women had many, varying, views of courtesans and the nautch, however, their writings often adhered to British narratives ascribed to Indian women as sensual symbols of ‘Oriental’ decadence.

The Courtesan as Temptress: The Threat of the Colonized Woman to the Imperial Project

The British understood the nautch and nautch-girls in a variety of ways, some approached the nautch as a cultural tradition that they understood as representative of India and the East. In these instances, British sahibs and memsahibs often focused on the dances and the perceived modesty and beauty of the nautch-girls. Anne Elwood described the clothing of nautch-girls as being the epitome of modesty as “the saree so completely covers the whole of the person, and so effectually conceals the figure of the wearer, that it is likewise infinitely more modest and delicate than our style of dress.” This demonstrates that some memsahibs saw

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349 Herber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India*, pp. 102-103.
nauck-girls’ clothing as being more modest than many European styles at the time. Courtesans were often quite physically covered in clothing, with nothing but their face, hands, and feet being exposed, which enhanced the imagery of their modesty by European standards.\textsuperscript{354} Amelia Herber, the wife of a minister, believed the clothing of the nauck-girls “was modesty itself, nothing but their faces, feet, and hands being exposed to view.”\textsuperscript{355} In addition, Elwood believed the dance and pantomime sections were perfectly acceptable for polite and modest society as “the most fastidious prude might have witnessed [them], without running the risk of any offence to her modesty.”\textsuperscript{356} This view of courtesans’ modesty demonstrates the fascination and curiosity with which many memsahibs examined nauck performances.\textsuperscript{357} However, Herber and Elwood expressed the progressively less popular opinion on the modesty of Indian nauck-girls in the early nineteenth century.

Throughout this period, the view of courtesans as modest was replaced because the British increasingly represented courtesans as immodest, immoral, and overtly sexual women in order to associate them with commercial sex-work and construct nauck-girls as endangering the political and cultural authority of the British imperial project in the subcontinent. This alteration in the representation of nauck-girls correlated with the rising strength of Victorian gender ideals and pseudo-scientific racism that occurred by the 1830s. The image of the chaste and passive British woman required the immodest and sexual Indian woman to create the dichotomy that maintained British women’s sexual superiority over colonized women. The British increasingly represented nauck-girls as embodying the inherent sensuality that they attributed to all Indian women. This coincided with British climatic and Enlightenment-based understanding of India and the ‘Orient’ as a place that was inherently lascivious, which connoted that Indian women

\textsuperscript{354} Nevile, \textit{The Nautch Girls of the Raj}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{355} Herber, \textit{Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{357} Sen, \textit{Memsahibs’ Writings}, p. 1.
were more sexual than their European counterparts and sexually available for British male consumption. Subsequently, the British constructed nautch-girls as signifying Eastern decadence and sensuality.\textsuperscript{358} Therefore, nautch-girls and their performances were constructed as erotic and immodest in some British memsahibs’ travel narratives. Though Evangelical ideals did not fully imbue into colonial society until the 1830s, Mary Martha Sherwood exhibited these values earlier in the 1810s.\textsuperscript{359} Upon viewing a nautch Sherwood exclaimed, “For who can tell the utter depravity of these unhappy women?”\textsuperscript{360} Pran Nevile argues it was the more puritan British population, such as Sherwood, that represented the nautch as indecent and were disturbed by the interest many of their countrymen displayed towards these performances.\textsuperscript{361} Emma Roberts implied the sensual nature of nautch-girls was dependent on the audience, for “in the presence of European ladies, the dancing of the nautch girls is dull and decorous: but when the audience is exclusively masculine, it is said to assume a different character.”\textsuperscript{362} Captain Godfrey Charles Mundy (1804-1860) validated Roberts’ assumption concerning nautch-girls as he wrote that “European ladies not unfrequently attend these spectacles; and, when the dancers are warned beforehand, they only witness a graceful and sufficiently stupid display.”\textsuperscript{363} However, he also warned of nautch-girls that “if thrown off their guard by applause, there is some danger of their carrying the suppleness of their body and limbs quite beyond the disgraceful and even bordering on the disgusting.”\textsuperscript{364} The view expressed by Mundy, Roberts, and Sherwood demonstrates that the British increasingly represented nautch-girls and their performances as inherently sexual and

\textsuperscript{358} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{359} Ibid., p. xv.
\textsuperscript{360} Sherwood, \textit{The Life of Mrs. Sherwood}, p. 423, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{361} Nevile, \textit{The Nautch Girls of the Raj}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{363} Godfrey Charles Mundy, \textit{Pen and Pencil Sketches, being the journal of a tour of India} vol. I (London: John Murray, 1833), p. 91.
\textsuperscript{364} Ibid.
as symbolizing the sensuality of Indian women and the East in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In addition, the British constructed the sensuality of Indian courtesans as a corrupting influence and dangerous to the health of British men in the early nineteenth century. This was specifically linked to representations of nautch-girls as sex-workers because courtesans did not fit within the prevailing British models of sex and morality that developed in relation to the rise of Evangelical, liberal, and Victorian gender ideals and moral philosophy.365 Elizabeth Fenton was told of the sensuality of the nautch and that “the true Hindoostanee nautch, as it is exhibited in the higher provinces, is such as no lady could witness.”366 In addition, the British had little to compare in metropolitan society to courtesans’ roles and their political, cultural, and financial significance in Indian society.367 Therefore, British writers, particularly memsahibs, unhesitatingly associated the profession of the nautch-girl with sex-work.368 This meant that the British increasingly placed courtesans under the misleading and inaccurate category of sex-worker in the early 1800s.

The understanding of courtesans as sex-workers meant that the British often represented them as sexual and immodest. Francis Buchanan (1762-1829), who was a doctor in India between 1807 and 1814, believed that among courtesans’ “chastity…might be considered as doubtful.”369 In addition, the kothas that were previously associated with artistic and creative

365 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 6.
366 Fenton, A Narrative of her Life in India, p. 241.
367 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 6.
369 Francis Buchanan, A Journey from Madras Through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar, performed under the orders of the most noble The Marquis Wellesley, Governor General of India, for the express purpose of investigating the state of Agriculture, Arts, and Commerce; the Religion, Manners, and Customs: the History Natural and Civil, and Antiquities, in the Dominions of the Rajah of Mysore, and the countries acquired by the Honourable East India Company, in the late and former wars, from Tippoo Sultaun, vol. III (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1807), p. 66.
culture in the pre-colonial period, were equated with brothels under the colonial government.\textsuperscript{370} Sherwood could hear the music from the \textit{kothas} and,

\begin{quote}
often sat by the open window, and there night after night, I used to hear the songs of the unhappy dancing-girls…and many were the sad reflections inspired by these long-protrated songs. All these Englishmen who were beguiled by this sweet music had had mothers at home, and some had mothers still, who, in the far distant land of their children’s birth, still cared, and prayed, and wept for the once blooming boys who were then slowly sacrificing themselves to drinking, smoking, want of rest, and the witcheries of the unhappy daughters of heathens and infidels.\textsuperscript{371}
\end{quote}

Sherwood demonstrates the increasingly prevalent views in the early 1800s that \textit{nautch}-girls used their sensuality to corrupt British men. \textit{Nautch} performances, \textit{nautch}-girls, and \textit{kothas} were associated with this sexual behaviour, which enhanced social anxieties about this institution as sexually threatening and culturally destabilizing.\textsuperscript{372}

British women became progressively anxious in their writings around the sensuality expressed by \textit{nautch}-girls and their subsequent corrupting influence on British men.\textsuperscript{373} Sherwood was particularly concerned about the corrupting nature of courtesans’ sensuality, for she wrote that,

\begin{quote}
the influence of these Nautch girls over the other sex, even over men who have been bred up in England, and who have known, admired, and respected their own countrywomen, is not to be accounted for…This influence steals upon the senses of those who come within its charmed circle not unlike that of an intoxicating drug, or that of what is written of the wiles of the witchcraft, being the more dangerous to young Europeans because they seldom fear it; for perhaps these very men who are so infatuated remember some lovely face in their native land, and fancy they are wholly unapproachable by any attraction which could be used by a tawny beauty.\textsuperscript{374}
\end{quote}

These narratives worked to represent \textit{nautch}-girls as fundamentally sensual, tempting, and corrupting of British men. This representation enabled the British to impose their gender norms around modesty and chastity on Indian women. In addition, it constructed courtesans, and Indian

\textsuperscript{370} Singh, “Retrieving Voices from the Margins,” p. 102.
\textsuperscript{371} Sherwood, \textit{The Life of Mrs. Sherwood}, pp. 423-424.
\textsuperscript{372} Sen, \textit{Women and Empire}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{373} Sen, \textit{Memsahibs' Writings}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{374} Sherwood, \textit{The Life of Mrs. Sherwood}, p. 422.
women more generally, as the dangerous, sexual Other, which subsequently produced British women as the safe, chaste, and pure Self. Therefore, the British used courtesans’ bodies as a foil to positively define themselves and their role in the imperial project.\textsuperscript{375} These constructions were created in opposition to each other while simultaneously being dependent on one another. The representation of Indian women as inherently sensual and corrupting threatened the stability of imperial project. However, British women were able to control courtesans’ ‘Oriental’ sensuality by producing narratives about \textit{nautch}-girls as degraded sex-workers.\textsuperscript{376} Therefore, the production of this hegemonic narrative of modesty and sensuality enabled the British to control the supposedly dangerous sexuality of Indian women.

The British maintained that ethnic degeneration and effeminacy, due to \textit{nautch}-girls, had already happened to the Portuguese when they traded in India. Reverend William Tennant (1758-1813) argued that the Portuguese,

> Chiefs, and principal officers, retained a multitude of those singing and dancing women, with India abounds. Effeminacy introduced itself into their houses and armies. The officers marched to meet the enemy in palanquins. That brilliant courage which had subdued to many nations, existed no longer among them.\textsuperscript{377}

Tennant demonstrates the perceived threat that ethnic ‘degeneration’ and effeminacy posed to British understandings of their political stability and influence in India. The British believed that miscegenation threatened middle-class morality and manliness, which endangered the basis on which the British justified their colonial presence in India.\textsuperscript{378} Therefore, courtesans, as the primary producers of ethnic mixing, were understood to threaten the underpinnings of the imperial project.

\textsuperscript{375} Bhattacharya, \textit{Reading the Splendid Body}, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{376} Ibid., p. 132.
\textsuperscript{378} Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power,” p. 234.
Nautch-girls were a particularly potent symbol and threat of miscegenation, especially to memsahibs, as they were understood as moving easily among men across ethnic and class lines through nautch performances. Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller (1851-1900), an American missionary, saw the mobility of courtesans as problematic to British ethnic ‘purity’ and the stability of the imperial project because nautch-girls were introduced into respectable circles in open day-light, and men freely associating with them, while the ladies of the house were watching the scene from a distance as spectators and not taking part in the social pleasures going on before them, in which the dancing-girls were the only female participators. Could any thing more detrimental to the cause of morality be conceived?

Subsequently, memsahibs attempted to portray nautch-girls in a negative manner by associating them with commercial sex-work, and the various and derogatory connotations that ‘prostitution’ had in a British context, in order to control Indian women’s sexuality and encourage British men to solely maintain conjugal relationships with white, British women. British women became the custodians of ethnic distinctions and the protectors of British men’s masculinity in relation to metropolitan bourgeoise ideals of respectability and morality. Therefore, memsahibs’ protection of ethnic superiority was intertwined with the protection of British manhood and national identity through colonial acquisitions and the preservation of the empire. Consequently, memsahibs were important figures in the maintenance of the imperial project through hegemonic narratives around chastity.

British memsahibs were also anxious about the sensuality and perceived sexual availability of courtesans in relation to domestic ideals. British women were understood in

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379 Battacharya, *Reading the Splendid Body*, p. 142.
381 Caplan, “Iconographies of Anglo-Indian Women,” p. 864. In many ways, this meant that British women in India became the site of metropolitan anxieties around their ethnic purity, morality, and sexual ‘safety’ from Indian men, see Indrani Sen, *Women and Empire*, p. 9. Due to spatial limitations, this thesis does not examine these facets of British women’s experience in India, but rather focuses on their idealized representation as sexually and ethnically pure in contrast to Indian courtesans.
metropolitan society to be the staunch upholders of ethnic distinction in the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{383} The Victorian domestic image of the wife as the keeper of the home, and in empire the protector of civilization, was threatened by the existence of *nautch*-girls and their potential, and actual, relationships with British men. Courtesans were understood as threatening this domestic bliss and it “was of no rare occurrence; for it was said many an English wife lost her life from the jealousy of native favourites.”\textsuperscript{384} Mary Martha Sherwood demonstrates the belief that courtesans were both a physical threat to British women, as well as a social and political danger to them, their roles, and the imperial project. This narrative perpetuated the British urge in the early nineteenth century to control and create social distance between themselves and Indians. The social distance was seen as necessary in order to maintain their political authority in the subcontinent, as well as their own ethnic and sexual ‘purity.’\textsuperscript{385} Courtesans, who crossed gender, ethnicity, and class-based boundaries through their profession, were seen as particularly threatening to the imperial project.\textsuperscript{386} Therefore, *memsahibs* upheld hegemonic narratives concerning the association of courtesans with sex-work in order to maintain the gender and ethnicity-based hierarchies required to validate the British colonial presence in India.

British missionaries were particularly negative in their views of *nautch*-girls and their danger to the imperial project. Missionary groups, as they became increasingly popular throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, created reform movements that cast a stigma upon *nautch*-girls.\textsuperscript{387} They often constructed *nautch*-girls as sex-workers and stigmatized them as ‘fallen’ women who threatened the imperial project. While the majority of the British in India did not see courtesans as sex-workers, missionaries in the 1820s and 1830s encouraged the

\textsuperscript{384} Sherwood, *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood*, p. 423.
\textsuperscript{386} Bhattacharya, *Reading the Splendid Body*, p. 143.
\textsuperscript{387} Singh, “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl,” p. 182.
representation of nautch-girls as inherently sexual and immoral. Reginald Herber, who was the Bishop of Calcutta from 1823 until his death in 1826, expressed this view when he saw some women whom he believed, based on their “gaudy dress and forward manner seemed pretty clearly to mark their profession as the nāch girls of the place.” This illustrated the Evangelical belief at the time that associated courtesans with sex-work. The representation of nautch-girls as sex-workers occurred because missionaries wished to enhance the imagery of India and Hinduism as being ‘degraded’ and corrupting the character of Indians, which would increase the monetary support of missions in the subcontinent from Britain. This representation became increasingly prevalent and dominant in popular literature and imagery around courtesans as the century progressed, which influenced the amalgamation of the various cultural levels of courtesans into the singular entity of the commercial sex-worker. The association with sex-work furthered the disempowerment of courtesans’ through the loss of their political, financial, and cultural agency.

The Amalgamation of the Courtesan

The numerous variations of the courtesan were increasingly amalgamated into the single image of the nautch-girl in the early nineteenth century and throughout the colonial period. British representations of courtesans as singularly sex-workers or immoral entertainers intensified this amalgamation. In the nineteenth century courtesans lost royal patronage as the British took over more territory, which diminished their cultural and political power in India. Courtesans also lost financial agency due to the lack of royal patronage, the vacuum this created, and the colonizers’ inability to fill this void as they progressively avoided the nautch as a form of

388 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 19.
389 Herber, Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, p. 113.
390 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 19.
entertainment. Subsequently, the overall cultural significance and agency of courtesans was diminished as they became less important as symbols of political authority, which was integrally related to the growing association of courtesans with sex-work. The association of courtesans with sex-workers reduced the British attendance at nautches as more puritan and Victorian ideas around appropriate forms of social and sexual intercourse developed during this period. This was exhibited by the missionary Alphonse François Lacroix (1799-1859), who stated in a letter to the London Missionary Society that “the disgraceful exhibition of prostitutes dancing before an idol, which the wealthier natives adopted in order to attract European guests to the presence of the images had suddenly disappeared. Nautches (dances) were exhibited the week before last, in only two houses.” Lacroix illustrates how the representation of courtesans as sex-workers worked to limit the levels of British attendance at nautch performances. In addition, under colonial law the British understood all courtesans, from tawa’if to randi, to be simply ‘prostitutes.’ Through the representation of courtesans as sex-workers, the British associated nautch-girls with the negative connotations that they understood to be attached to the sex-workers in their own society, especially as the British did not have a cultural equivalent of courtesans in Britain. Therefore, the closest comparison they could make was with the commercial sex-workers in their own society. This comparison reduced the cultural allure of courtesans and subsequently limited their agency and influence in colonial society.

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395 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 6.
The representation of courtesans as being synonymous with sex-workers amalgamated the various forms of courtesans, who had different levels of social mobility, financial power, and political influence, into a singular group. This process was “painfully disempowering” for these women and the cultural institution of nautch performances and courtesanship. The image of the courtesan as a cultural artist was replaced by her representation as a ‘prostitute.’ The British took the small sexual component of courtesans’ professional lives and, due in large part to the rise of the social values espoused by Evangelicalism and Victorianism, constructed this as the sole objective and role of courtesans in India. The representation of courtesans as ‘prostitutes’ was a significant factor in their amalgamation into a single entity over the course of the colonial period. There had originally been a form of understanding among the British that there existed numerous types of courtesans. The most obvious difference was understood between the southern devadasis, who had been dedicated to Hindu temples, and the northern tawa ‘if who were members of courts, part of kothas, or in troops employed by wealthy, elite Indians. This acknowledgement diminished over the first few decades of the nineteenth century, until courtesans were understood to be a single entity, which was predominantly related to their newly defined status as ‘prostitutes.’

Courtesans’ association with sex-work was an important factor in the amalgamation of their cultural variety and their subsequent loss of political, financial, and social agency in the early nineteenth century. However, this association worked concurrently with British understandings of caste and Indian socio-economic organization in the amalgamation of courtesans into nautch-girls. The British believed that courtesans formed their own caste and,

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396 Singh, “From Tawaif to Nautch Girl,” p. 178.
397 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 19.
398 Ibid.
therefore, their profession was purely hereditary. Thomas Williamson argued that Indian society did not attach negative implications to courtesans because “the profession of a prostitute is devoid of that stigma annexed to it in Europe…This is entirely owing to the profession being hereditary, the same as other sects.” The British belief that courtesans were a single caste worked to integrate these women into a singular entity in purpose, power, and roles. Previously, in the pre-colonial period, courtesans came from various caste-backgrounds, and their social mobility, due to their artistic achievements, was a significant aspect of their agency within Indian society. While the social position of courtesans was hereditary in many ways, it was also firmly based on skill and training, therefore, they were not technically their own caste, but rather more similar to a guild. This social mobility continued into the colonial period, however, it threatened British superiority in the subcontinent, as it enabled courtesans to cross both ethnicity and class-based boundaries in the colonial period. Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, the British were significant actors in encouraging and perpetuating the rigidification of Indian caste ideas and distinctions. Whereas caste had been more fluid in pre-colonial Indian culture, the rigidification of caste distinctions occurred in part due to Orientalist scholarship in the eighteenth century, which focused on Brahmin forms of knowledge and law in their study of Indian law, customs, and social organization. This enabled Brahmin notions of caste hierarchy and social privilege to be imposed on Indian culture, which was far less Brahmin-dominated than the British supposed. Therefore, the British helped to create a more inflexible and stratified caste

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402 Bhattacharya, *Reading the Splendid Body*, p. 143.
403 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 18.
404 Ibid.
405 Ibid., pp. 18-19.
system. The rigidification of the caste system occurred simultaneously to the British understanding of courtesans being members of a single caste, which worked to limit courtesans’ social mobility and furthered the diminishment of their power and agency within Indian society. This marginalized courtesans and kept them within a lower social order, which decreased their social mobility and the subsequent threat they posed to the political stability of the imperial project in the subcontinent.

Another aspect of the amalgamation of courtesans into a single entity was their representation in British travel narratives and, therefore, the social constructs of nautch-girls. Courtesans were rarely understood or represented as individuals; rather, they were portrayed as being so similar that they were indistinguishable. This was portrayed in memsahibs’ writings on nautch performances in their commentary on the dances. British writers did not observe any variation between the dances or the nautch-girls themselves. Julia Maitland believed that the dance of nautch-girls “consisted of sailing about, waving their hands, turning slowly round and round, and bending from side to side: there were neither steps nor figure, as far as I could make out.”406 This demonstrates that while Maitland described her view of the dance, she also exhibited her own lack of comprehension of the dance form as it was different from British conceptualizations of dance. In addition, Maitland saw both Muslim and Hindu courtesans at a nautch and simply described the change to a Hindu dancing-girl as “her dancing was very much like that of the Mahometans, only a little more difficult.”407 Maitland was not the only British memsahib who felt that nautch-girls were all too similar. Emma Roberts also found nautch performances and nautch-girls to be indistinguishable from one another, she claimed that “the only novelty presented by a fresh band of dancers is the colour of dress, or the value of the

406 Maitland, Letters from Madras, p. 27.
407 Maitland, Letters from Madras, p. 28.
ornaments; the performances are precisely the same.”\textsuperscript{408} The British framed courtesans, and
Indian women in general, as “homogenized and monolithic collectives.”\textsuperscript{409} British men also felt
this way, which was demonstrated by Reginald Herber who saw another nautch later in his
travels, and described them as, “some dancing-girls came in, whose performance differed in no
respect from those whom I had seen at Bullumghur.”\textsuperscript{410} This suggests that the British had
difficulty in producing specific understandings of non-Western women. These representations of
the sameness of the nautch and the lack of individuality of nautch-girls worked to amalgamate
courtesans into one social entity and object. Courtesans acted simply as narrative tools in British
writings to demonstrate memsahibs’ purity and domesticity, which was used to illustrate Indian
women’s ‘degeneracy’ and, therefore, validate the British colonial project in the subcontinent.
The amalgamation of courtesans through their lack of individuality and as members of a single
caste in British representations were significant in their association with sex-work and their
disempowerment over the course of the early nineteenth century.

Though the British constructed courtesans as indistinguishable during the early
nineteenth century, which was fundamental to their integration into a singular entity associated
with sex-work, there was an exception to the general rule in this period. The nautch-girl, Nikki,
was a famous courtesan in early nineteenth-century colonial India and accrued enough cultural
significance as to appear in the writings of memsahibs. This included Emma Roberts who wrote
that “European eyes and ears being unable to distinguish any superiority in the quality of voice
or the grace of the movements. By the natives, however, different dancers are held in different
degrees of estimation; the celebrated Nickee, of Calcutta, has long held the rank of \textit{prima donna}
of the East [sic].”\textsuperscript{411} This demonstrates a level of individuality attributed to a courtesan by a

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{408} Roberts, \textit{Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan}, p. 191.
\item \textsuperscript{409} Bhattacharya, \textit{Reading the Splendid Body}, p. 145.
\item \textsuperscript{410} Herber, \textit{Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India}, p. 36.
\item \textsuperscript{411} Roberts, \textit{Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan}, p. 191.
\end{enumerate}
*memsahib.* However, Roberts herself does not view the difference between Nikki and other *nautch*-girls; she instead references the estimations of “the natives” who recognized Nikki’s greater skill and performance level. Therefore, though Nikki was famous enough to be mentioned in the writings of Emma Roberts, the above passage demonstrates that she was an exception that maintained the overall objectification of other *nautch*-girls during the first half of the nineteenth century, as the British could not recognize the variation in the skill or performances of different courtesans. This amalgamation of courtesans is also observable in the use of the term ‘*nautch*-girl’ and the lack of British recognition as to the many different forms and levels of courtesans and their associated terminology.⁴¹² This continued the amalgamation of courtesans into the single entity of performers and sex-workers that limited their social agency and cultural power within Indian and colonial society.

This chapter illustrates the changing and solidifying nature of colonial society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The figure of the nabob was replaced in this period with the *sahib* as the idealized British man and ruler in the subcontinent. The changing constructions of courtesans in this period demonstrated the political stability of the British in India. The British no longer needed the Orientalized body of the nabob that was required as they consolidated their power in the region. The body of the *sahib*, as the symbol of Britishness and British values in India, legitimized their rule as the embodiment of ethnic superiority over ‘inferior’ Indians. Furthermore, the rise in Evangelical, liberal, and Victorian moral philosophies and ideals worked to construct images and modes of behaviour for the *sahib, memsahib,* and courtesans. The surge of British women in India, and as members of the imperial project, illustrated the changing nature of empire and gender, ethnicity, and class norms in both Britain and India. The rise of the *memsahib* and the *sahib* altered the representations of courtesans in the

early nineteenth century. The travel narratives of British men and women demonstrate the continued understanding of nautch-girls as the epitome of ‘Oriental’ decadence, wealth, luxury, and sensuality. However, they also exhibit the increased British focus on the sensuality of courtesans in relation to the threat they posed to the political stability of the imperial project, which occurred through the danger of inter-ethnic relationships and miscegenation as the British justified colonialism through the belief in their inherent ethnic superiority. British narratives in this period attempted to control the threatening ‘Oriental’ sexuality of courtesans by associating nautch-girls with sex-work in order to minimize their social power and their interactions with British men. This worked to amalgamate the various positions of courtesans into the single category of ‘prostitution,’ which was accomplished through associating dancing-girls with sex-work. In addition, courtesans were represented as a single, hereditary caste that lacked individuality, whose profession was sex-work. These British narratives around courtesans in the first half of the nineteenth century worked to diminish the social power and allure that nautch-girls held in the British imagination in order to control their ‘Oriental’ sensuality and protect the strength of the imperial project in India.
Chapter 5
Courtesans in Cantonments, c. 1857-1883

The dancing girls…their profession, indeed, requires of them to be open to the embraces of persons of all casts; and, although originally they appear to have been intended for the gratification of the Brahmans only, they are now obliged to extend their favours to all who solicit them. Such are the loose females who are consecrated in a special manner to the worship of the gods of India.413

Abbé Dubois, though writing earlier in the nineteenth century, illustrated the representation of courtesans as sex-workers and the association of their behaviour with immorality. The second half of the nineteenth century was a significant period in relation to the representations of courtesans, their amalgamation, and ‘degradation’ into commercial sex-workers. This chapter examines the relationship between sex-work and courtesanship in mid- to late nineteenth-century India. British narratives around ‘prostitution’ are examined in relation to their representation of Indian women as inherently sexual, and sexually available, beings. Courtesans were simultaneously understood as threats, criminals, and victims during this period. The association of courtesans with sex-work and the policing instituted of ‘prostitutes’ through the Cantonment (1864) and Contagious Diseases (1868) Acts created the representation of nautch-girls as degraded and dangerous criminals.

The second half of the nineteenth century underwent a sharpening of the British representation of sex-workers as victims within Indian society. The victimization of courtesans worked to validate Britain’s colonial presence in the subcontinent during the period of the British Crown as emerging Hindu nationalist movements began to question British rule in the subcontinent. The representation of courtesans as sex-workers and, therefore, victims enabled the British to construct Indian society as fundamentally flawed and oppressive in order to justify colonial rule, as well as construct the narrative of the British as chivalric ‘saviours’ of Indian

413 Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois, Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India; and their Institutions, Religious and Civil (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1817), p. 401.
women. In this manner, courtesans continued to be the sexualized, oppressed Other, which helped construct the British ‘Self’ and validated the imperial project in India.

Recent scholarship on courtesans during the second half of the nineteenth century departs from scholarly work on nautch-girls in previous periods. Academia shifted to explore the institutions, symbols, and narratives around sex-work instead of courtesanship. While scholars often recognize that courtesans were a significant part of sex-work and representations of sex-workers at this time, they are less central to the scholarly narrative. Phillipa Levine identified the presence of courtesans working as sex-workers in military cantonments in the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{414} Scholars, such as Lata Singh and Jo-Ann Wallace, focus more extensively on the laws and legal codes implemented to police sex-workers and instances of venereal disease in the British military.\textsuperscript{415} The shift in scholarly concentration maintains the narrative of the courtesans’ ‘degradation’ and the “gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution” in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{416} The degradation narrative is present in much of the scholarship surrounding this time period and topic of sex-work, particularly as academia shifts from exploring the performances of nautch-girls to the “stripping it of its cultural function” in the control of sex-work and the dehumanization of courtesans.\textsuperscript{417} This alteration in scholarship illustrates the gradual disempowerment of courtesans in the second half of the nineteenth century.


A number of scholars examined throughout this section, including Indrani Sen, Frances Mannsaker, and Elizabeth Collingham, argue that there was a definitive split in colonial policy and attitude concerning Indian women after the Rebellion of 1857 and the subsequent seizure of imperial power in the subcontinent by the British Crown. This was particularly related to sexual relations between British men and Indian women. Mannsaker argues that “the post-Mutiny mood…led to the belief that the Indian and English races had to remain separate where the pre-Mutiny reforming zeal had led equally inescapably towards ethnic intermingling.”

However, though inter-ethnic relationships continued, the early nineteenth century was a period of increasing social censure and the gradual decline in the number and acceptance of conjugal relationships between Indian women and British men. Therefore, this thesis argues that these changes did not drastically shift after 1857; rather they happened slowly over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Representations of courtesans in the second half of the nineteenth century built upon those in the early 1800s. The increasingly negative British attitude towards nautch-girls and their performances was fundamentally linked to the gender, ethnicity, and class ideals and hierarchies produced by Evangelicalism, liberalism, and Victorianism in the first half of the nineteenth century.

**Courtesans and the Rebellion of 1857**

The Rebellion of 1857, or the “first struggle for independence,” was a significant political turning point for the British in India. Upon the completion of the rebellion, the Mughal Empire

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419 Mannsaker, “East and West,” p. 50.


officially ended and the British assumed direct control of the subcontinent. Thereafter, the British Crown replaced the East India Company as the political power and governance system in India and the empire was established in 1858, at which point the British were at the pinnacle of their power and “imperial glory.” The British Crown would continue to rule over the subcontinent until India’s independence in 1947. The political shift to direct rule altered the military, as the British had to enhance their standing army in the subcontinent in order to protect and maintain order in the colony. Changes to the political and military situation exacerbated British concerns around Indian women’s sensuality and social status, which were expressed by many *memsahibs* and missionaries, in the early 1800s.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, courtesans experienced an increasing decline in their patronage and employment opportunities. Due to the Rebellion, Nawabi Wajid ‘Ali Shah of Lucknow (1822-1887) was removed from power, which exacerbated the loss of aristocratic patronage for the many courtesans in his court. Cultural and political attitudes towards courtesans also appeared to change after the Rebellion of 1857. In Lucknow there was a widespread belief that courtesans had played a significant role in financing and encouraging the revolt. In addition, it was believed that some courtesans acted as spies against the British army during the Rebellion. Though courtesans were not combatants in the Rebellion, the British still punished them for their involvement in financing, what they saw as, ‘mutinous’ activities. Courtesans were fined and their names appear on lists of property, including houses, orchards, as well as manufacturing and retail places for food and luxury items that were confiscated by the

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British in retaliation for their involvement in the events of 1857. The role of courtesans in the Rebellion exacerbated the concern the British felt towards the power that Indian women’s sensuality held over them, as well as the danger this sensuality posed to their political stability within the subcontinent. The Rebellion also illustrated the financial and political power that courtesans had in Indian society, which enhanced the British imposition of Victorian gender norms onto India in an effort to police the behaviour and independence of these women. The Rebellion intensified Evangelical and liberal narratives that social distance was a requisite for the proper and successful rule of India and the stability of the imperial project, which the wealth and influence of courtesans was perceived to threaten. Courtesans’ roles in the Rebellion enhanced the representation that nautch-girls were engaged in criminal behaviour, which added to the belief that dancing-girls’ sensuality and behaviour endangered the political stability of the British imperial project in India. Therefore, in the period after the Rebellion of 1857, courtesan culture was increasingly targeted by British official political and social policy. This heightened the vulnerability of courtesans in Indian society and enhanced their degradation under British rule.

Sex-Work under the East India Company

In colonial India the institution of sex-workers, and the negative connotations surrounding them, manifested more strongly under direct Crown rule. Pre-colonial India had a more open and nuanced understanding of women and their sexual roles within society; therefore, sex-work was not regarded as a criminal offence at the time. In contrast, metropolitan Britain attached negative connotations to sex-work and saw sex-workers as ‘fallen’ women and “a

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428 For the purposes of space, as well as the focus on Indian women in this thesis, the experiences of, and narratives around, white, European sex-workers in colonial India will not be explored. Therefore, when referring to sex-workers, this thesis specifically means female, Indian sex-workers.
429 Wald, “From Begums and Bihbs to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 15.
national disgrace,” due to the popular moral discourse around Victorian marriage and gender ideals.430 Until approximately the 1830s, the East India Company’s prevailing, though unofficial, policy was for British officials and soldiers to enter into conjugal relationships with Indian women, many of whom were courtesans and subsequently the British associated them with sex-work.431 The Company allowed these partnerships because conjugal relationships were understood to be necessary in India to protect soldiers’ “at risk” heterosexuality and masculinity.432 According to Stoler, sex-workers were seen at this time as a “necessary evil” to minimize, what the British believed to be, the more dangerous sexual relationships between male, British soldiers.433 Furthermore, there was a strong belief that men required regular sexual release to maintain their masculinity, as well as their mental and physical health.434 This was particularly important because the British regarded India as a degenerative place that negatively impacted their health. Therefore, in order to maintain the physical health of their soldiers, the British often enabled conjugal relationships between their men and Indian women.

In addition, the British believed that the practice of sex-work was a naturally occurring phenomenon in tropical climates because they were associated with rampant and uncontrolled sensuality. Adam Ferguson believed that the climate of India created “the melting desires, or the fiery passions, which…take place between the sexes.”435 Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the British understood Indian courtesans as a hereditary caste of sex-workers. Company officials and military professionals rationalized that ‘prostitution’ was a hereditary, caste-based aspect of

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431 Wald, “From Begums and Bihs to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 8.
Indian society and subsequently was not immoral by Indian standards to justify their employment of sex-workers for the army.\textsuperscript{436} This belief continued into the second half of the nineteenth century, as demonstrated by Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller who argued that “The nautch-girl is a recognized caste” and that she “is born into her profession, and must follow it just as a carpenter, goldsmith, or farmer is born into his caste and follows the trade of his father.”\textsuperscript{437} This idea worked to solidify the belief that sex-work was an unchanging and static practice in the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{438} The ahistorical agelessness of sex-work in India was specifically related to ideas of religious ‘prostitution’ in the form of the \textit{devadasis}. Stephen Meredyth Edwardes (1872-1927) argued that “the system of religious prostitution is of great antiquity” and referred to \textit{devadasis} as “the caste of temple-women.”\textsuperscript{439} The British understood \textit{devadasis} as sex-work under the guise of religious devotion, which solidified for them that the practice and institution of sex-work was ancient in India and produced a caste of sex-workers.\textsuperscript{440} In addition, British conceptualizations of gender and ethnicity meant that the sexual availability of courtesans, due to their profession, were compounded with the belief that colonized women were more sexually available, willing, and conquerable than white women.\textsuperscript{441} Therefore, the British were able to justify their patronage of ‘prostitutes’ and concubines in the colonial period. The construction of sex-work as a hereditary, static, and ‘natural’ profession in India was necessary for the East India

\textsuperscript{436} Indrani Sen, \textit{Women and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India (1858-1900)} (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), p. 46.
\textsuperscript{437} Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller, \textit{The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood} (New York: Young People’s Missionary Movement, 1900), p. 145.
\textsuperscript{438} Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” p. 66.
\textsuperscript{440} Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 5.
\textsuperscript{441} Indian women’s sexuality was often constructed in contradictory ways. The British understood Indian women as sexually available and, therefore, conquerable. However, they also represented Indian women as having an ‘unbriled’ sexuality that made them unconquerable. Indian women were seen as inherently sexual in both constructions, but their sensuality was both passive and conquerable as well as dangerous and unconquerable. These contradictory representations illustrate the exotic and alluring aspect of India and Indian women, as well as the British perception of India as a dangerous and corrupting place.
Company to maintain their representation of sex-work as unproblematic and acceptable for British soldiers to experience at the time.

Through the construction of Indian courtesans as members of a hereditary, ancient profession of ‘prostitution,’ the British were able to maintain their masculinity, heterosexuality, and ability to procure sexual release in a place where British women were rare. Moreover, this enabled the British to control the sexuality of their soldiers as the Company was particularly concerned about the working-class soldiers in their employ. The Company deemed the existence and patronage of sex-workers a necessity because metropolitan beliefs around class were integrated into their policies. British elites believed that working-class people, due to their socio-economic standing and subsequent ‘inferiority,’ did not possess the intellectual and moral resources for sexual restraint.\(^{442}\) This related to the narrative that British elites were superior and, therefore, able to control their sexual passions.\(^{443}\) The British working-class population was constructed similarly to people from tropical climates, as naturally licentious and unable to control their sexual urges. In addition, the heat of tropical climates was believed to further reduce the sexual restraint of British men; therefore, working-class soldiers were seen to be doubly incapable of controlling their sexual passions in India.\(^{444}\) With the rise in puritan Victorian gender ideals, social anxieties increased around ethnic miscegenation. However, these fears were predominantly focused on elite British men in India. British officials in India and the metropole were not concerned with ethnic mixing between lower classes of white men and Indian women and continued to encourage soldiers to partake in conjugal relations with sex-workers.\(^{445}\) In

\(^{442}\) Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj*, p. 2.
\(^{444}\) Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 182.
addition, the Company, and later the British Crown, continued to arrange British soldiers’ access to Indian sex-workers.  

The Crown, Cantonments, and the Contagious Diseases Act

Throughout the colonial period, especially after 1857 and the increased presence of soldiers in the subcontinent, the dominant issue the British had with sex-work was the prevalence and spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The frequent contact between sex-workers and soldiers meant these diseases spread rapidly amongst both groups in military cantonments. The number of sex-workers also increased in relation to the growing number of British troops throughout the nineteenth century. British officials were aware of STDs in Britain since the fifteenth century, and amongst military personnel in India since the mid-1700s. However, the British became increasingly concerned as the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries experienced heightened rates of STDs among the British military. Therefore, in an attempt to control the spread of these diseases, the system of lal bazaars and lock hospitals was proposed by medical professionals and army officials. Lal bazaars were a section in military cantonments that was dedicated to regimental and regulated ‘prostitution’ with Indian sex-workers. Lock hospitals were hospitals dedicated to the ‘treatment’ of STDs, which forcefully detained Indian women until they were ‘cured’ of their illness or infection. These institutions existed as of the late 1790s, as noted by Thomas Williamson that,

with the view to prevent the encrease of a certain disorder, which proceeds with rapid strides in that hot climate, it is customary to appoint a committee every month, at each great station, for the inspection of such dulcineas [sex-workers] as may be resident within the bounds of the cantonments: such as appear to be diseased are instantly confined to a small hospital [sic].

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446 Sen, Woman and Empire, p. 46.
448 Banerjee, Under the Raj, p. 63.
449 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 13.
This demonstrates the beginning of lock hospitals and the stricter political and military regulation of sex-work in India. The first four lock hospitals were established at Baharampur, Kanpur, Danapur, and Fategarh in 1797.\textsuperscript{451} However, these early attempts at regulatory lock hospitals failed to decrease cases of STDs amongst soldiers and cases continued to increase until one in four British soldiers was infected by the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{452}

Therefore, due to puritan moral discourses, the increase of STDs, and the failure of regulatory measures in the early nineteenth century, the British felt the need to expand their definition of ‘prostitute.’ This term began to include groups of women, mainly \textit{nautch}-girls, \textit{devadasi}, and concubines, who had not been a part of previous British regulation attempts. Courtesans had formerly been beyond the control of the British army; they were now frequently constructed as spreaders of STDs, which placed them more firmly under British jurisdiction as they simultaneously lost the patronage of elite Indians and their courts.\textsuperscript{453} Subsequently, the British Crown implemented new laws in order to control Indian women’s bodies and sexual relations. The first instance of legal change was the Indian Penal Code of 1860. The implementation of this Code meant that Indian ‘prostitutes’ were assumed to be in a criminal category and dedicating a girl under the age of eighteen to be a \textit{devadasi} became a punishable offence.\textsuperscript{454} This worked as an attempt to minimize the number of women who could become \textit{devadasis} and was one of the first instances of the British moving beyond their social construction of courtesans as sex-workers and implementing legal documents that criminalized this cultural institution and tradition. These legal changes worked to degrade \textit{nautch}-girls and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{451} Wald, “From \textit{Begums} and \textit{Bibis} to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 13.
\item \textsuperscript{452} Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” p. 260; Wald, “From \textit{Begums} and \textit{Bibis} to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{453} Wald, “From \textit{Begums} and \textit{Bibis} to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 14.
\end{itemize}
portray them and their profession as criminal behaviour, an image that became increasingly popular in British official understandings of courtesans.

In the mid-nineteenth century the British became more knowledgeable about the importance of sanitation and hygiene. They altered water drainage, ventilation, and the placement of military barracks in relation to these new understandings. In addition, British officials discouraged soldiers from visiting Indian sex-workers in the lal bazaars. Two Acts were passed that worked to further criminalize and control courtesans’ sexuality, employment opportunities, and individual agency. The Cantonment Act of 1864 stated in Clause VII of Section XVIII of the Rules and Regulations that the cantonment had to provide “For inspecting and controlling houses of ill-fame and for preventing the spread of venereal disease.” In addition, the Act stated in Section XXV that,

Whenever it shall appear necessary for the protection of the health of the Troops in any Military Cantonment, it shall be lawful…to extend to any place outside the limits of such Military Cantonment and in the vicinity of such Cantonment all or any of the Rules and Regulations made for such Cantonment under Clause 7 of Section 18.

This enabled the military to organize the sex trade within and around military cantonments, which resulted in enhanced control of courtesans’ bodies and behaviour, as well as the production of classes of sex-workers that were based on British understandings of class and ethnicity-based superiority. The gorachakla were brothels that catered to British army officers; the lalkurtichakla were for white infantry soldiers, who were from the working class; and the kalachakla served only Indian soldiers, who were barred from entering the other chaklas or employing the services of the women in those establishments.

455 Collingham, Imperial Bodies, p. 165.
456 Cantonment Act, 1864, 18 Vic, vii.
457 Cantonment Act, 1864, 25 Vic.
The Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 was enacted for the supervision, registration, and medical inspection of female Indian sex-workers in cantonments, cities, and ports.\textsuperscript{459} In addition, it made the medical examination and registration of sex-workers compulsory.\textsuperscript{460} However, only the sex-workers who came into contact with British soldiers had to register with the cantonment and experience the highly invasive and compulsory, monthly medical exams. Any sex-workers who were believed to have an infection or disease were immediately confined within lock hospitals until they were ‘cured.’\textsuperscript{461} This was directly related to the British attempts to regulate and decrease the levels of STDs in the military, as well as maintain the ethnic ‘purity’ of the British in India. Furthermore, this Act broadened the definition of ‘prostitution’ to include courtesans and concubines in order to control these groups of women who the British constructed as sex-workers and were seen as spreaders of STDs.\textsuperscript{462} The Contagious Diseases and Cantonment Acts solidified the general social understanding of the British that courtesans were commercial sex-workers, which allowed them to disregard the cultural traditions and political authority that courtesans had embodied in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. These Acts, by limiting the agency of courtesans, also decreased the British utilizing their attendance at \textit{nautch} performances as symbols of their political authority in India.

The British produced the Cantonment and Contagious Diseases Acts based on ethnicity, gender, and class hierarchies in order to maintain colonial and political power in the subcontinent. Metropole and colonial officials knew that STDs physically degenerated the health of the soldiers and were, therefore, a direct threat to the stability of their empire in India. These

\textsuperscript{460} Kumar, \textit{The History of Doing}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{461} Bryder, “Sex, Race, and Colonialism,” p. 817.
\textsuperscript{462} Kumar, \textit{The History of Doing}, p. 36; Singh, “Retrieving Voices from the Margins,” p. 102.
fears were based on the assumption that a strong army was a necessary precondition for maintaining their political stability and colonial dominance. The British army was at its largest during the second half of the nineteenth century, as a large standing army was believed to be necessary after the Rebellion of 1857 and the subsequent shift from the East India Company to the direct rule of the British Crown. These views correlated with Victorian society’s focus on hygiene and the need to keep soldiers healthy. Unhealthy soldiers, who were physically degenerated from sexual encounters and drinking, were seen as threatening the stability of the empire. As mentioned above, the British viewed miscegenation as another threat to the stability of the empire and they subsequently encouraged British elites to avoid sexual relationships with Indian women. However, this ethnicity-based anxiety interacted with the belief that lower-class British soldiers were incapable of controlling their sexual urges, as well as unable to afford their white wives’ presence in the subcontinent. The strict norms of sexual behaviour that the Acts imposed on British soldiers and Indian sex-workers were reinforced by Victorian concepts of gender domination in the metropole at the time. Male control over sexual relations was codified in the second half of the nineteenth century by pseudo-scientific terms of male superiority and female inferiority, which governed the treatment of sex-work in the metropole. These ideas were exacerbated in the colonies as understandings of gender hierarchies interacted with constructions of ethnicity, which maintained Indian women’s inferiority based on both gender and ethnicity. In addition, the British representation of courtesans as their own caste meant that they were constructed as lower-caste women. Lastly, the British solely viewed Indian women as the spreaders and contractors of STDs and, consequently, they saw Indian women as the problem, not their male soldiers. The Acts attempted to maintain

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463 Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” p. 72.
464 Banerjee, Under the Raj, p. 68.
465 Ibid.
the health of Indian sex-workers in order to secure the continued well-being of British soldiers and enable their ‘natural’ need for regular sexual release.\textsuperscript{466} Therefore, \textit{nautch}-girls experienced intersecting levels of oppression through gender, ethnicity, class, and colonial domination.

**Sex-Workers and Sexually Transmitted Diseases: The Policing of ‘Prostitution’**

Though the British continued to write fictional novels and travel narratives about the \textit{nautch}, few \textit{memsahibs} and \textit{sahibs} attended these performances by the mid-nineteenth century. The reduced British presence at \textit{nautch} performances was predominantly due to the increased British population in India, significant social censure of Indian forms of entertainment, and the importation of a more Europeanized lifestyle in the colony.\textsuperscript{467} This alteration was demonstrated by Mary Carpenter (1807-1877) who, between 1860 and 1876, was in India four different times. Carpenter was invited when a “native gentleman gave a large party at his house, in honour of his English friends,” while at this event, she experienced “some excellent native music,” however, she “of course, withdrew at about eleven o’clock, before the \textit{nautch} dancing commenced.”\textsuperscript{468} Carpenter demonstrates the shift in British society in India that increasingly associated the \textit{nautch} with negative connotations of ethnic corruption, miscegenation, and sex-work, and the subsequent avoidance of these performances.

Though the British did not attend \textit{nautches} with the same regularity as they had in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, \textit{nautch}-girls and their performances persisted in exercising “an erotic power” over the British imagination in India.\textsuperscript{469} \textit{Memsahibs’} travel narratives continued to be intrigued by the clothing, jewellery, and dance forms of courtesans. Anna Harriette Leonowens (1831-1915) described the clothing of the \textit{nautch}-girls as,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[466] Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” p. 76.
\item[467] Ibid., p. 72.
\item[469] Sen, \textit{Women and Empire}, p. 46. This can be seen in the plethora of British novels produced during the second half of the nineteenth century that explores the ‘Oriental’ luxury and sensuality associated with \textit{nautch}-girls.
\end{footnotes}
bright-colored silk vests and drawers that fitted tightly to the body and revealed a part of the neck, arms, and legs...over this a saree of some gauze-like texture bound lightly over the whole person, the whole so draped as to encircle the figure like a halo at every point, and, finally, thrown over the head and drooping over the face in a most bewitching veil. The hair was combed smoothly back and tied in a knot behind, while on the forehead, ears, neck, arms, wrists, ankles, and toes were a profusion of dazzling ornaments.\(^{470}\)

In addition to the interest in the clothing of nautch-girls, Leonowens also exhibited the continued fascination memsahibs had for nautch performances. Leonowens described the splendour of the nautch and the overall ‘Oriental’ nature of them, she described one such nautch as

> A burst of wild Oriental melody flooded the pavilion, and all at once the Nauthnees started to their feet. Poised on tiptoe, with arms raised aloft over their heads, they began to whirl and float and glide about in a maze of rhythmic movement, fluttering and quivering and waving before us like aspen-leaves moved by a strong breeze. It must have cost them years of labour to have arrived at such ease and precision of movement. The dance was a miracle of art, and all the more fascinating because of the rare beauty of the performers.\(^{471}\)

This exhibits the British captivation with the nautch as infused with ‘Oriental’ splendour and foreignness. The British continued to lack a monolithic view of nautch-girls and their performances. However, the narrative shifted over the course of the 1800s as the majority of memsahibs viewed the nautch as overtly sexual and threatening to the stability of the imperial project, which was originally espoused by missionaries and had grown popular since the early 1800s.\(^{472}\) However, some British memsahibs still attended nautch performances and found them to be interesting and modest affairs. Elizabeth Cooper (1877-1945) was captivated by the nautch and believed that “the dancing is extremely modest, as the dancer is fully clothed, and it is the graceful, languorous poses of her slim body, the waving of her arms heavily laden with bracelets, and the slow moving, gliding steps that keep time to the tinkle of the anklets, that charm her


\(^{471}\) Ibid.

\(^{472}\) Sen, *Memsahibs’ Writings*, p. 2.
admirers.” Both Leonowens and Cooper demonstrated the continued British fascination with the nautch and nautch-girls, as well as the unrelenting symbolization of courtesans as the epitome of Oriental luxury, decadence, and sexuality.

The population of British women in India continued to grow over the second half of the nineteenth century. This was due to the reduced journey time, the proliferation of matrimonial opportunities with British men, and the increasingly popular view from the first half of the century that British women were important in India for the continuation of the “imperial identity” and maintenance of colonial rule. The demographic shift led to significant alterations to relationships between British men and Indian women. Over the course of the nineteenth century, especially by the 1850s onwards, there was a distinct decline in long-term, monogamous relationships between Indian women and British men due to the increasing social censure of inter-ethnic relationships. Subsequently, there was a corresponding increase in short-term sexual transactions with sex-workers around military cantonments. This directly led to the rise in the number of Indian sex-workers, as well as the legal and social policing of their bodies and behaviour through British representations.

The British produced narratives that continued to represent nautch-girls as inherently sexual beings and symbols of ‘Oriental’ decadence and sensuality. However, courtesans were also increasingly constructed as either criminal ‘prostitutes’ or victims in British travel writings in the second half of the nineteenth century. These new constructions of courtesans worked to

475 Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 5.
476 Ibid.
477 British women also wrote about a sense of adventure away from British and colonial society that often centered around the nautch-girl. See Charn Jagpal, “‘Going Nautch Girl’ in the Fin de Siècle: The White Woman Burdened by Colonial Domesticity,” *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 52, no. 3 (2009): pp. 252-272 for an analysis of this body of literature and the allure of the financially and culturally independent nautch-girl in *memsahibs’* literature. Travel narratives from this period often focused more on the victimization of courtesans as sex-workers and not on their social and economic freedom outside of the domestic sphere.
maintain and validate the political and colonial presence of the British in India. Courtesans were represented as criminals due to their association with sex-work, military cantonments, and the Contagious Diseases Act. However, this also produced the image of their victimhood and degraded status in society that required intervention from British philanthropists and missionaries. Though these representations did not fully reflect the actual and varied experiences of courtesans during this time period, they were significant to British understandings of their own power and stability within India. The British in India viewed courtesans as sex-workers, however, the representations of sex-workers altered amongst the British population. British official and military records, as well as some sahibs and memsahibs, portrayed courtesans as criminals due to their association with sex-work and STDs. In contrast, missionary literature, and memsahibs who espoused more Evangelical views, depicted these Indian ‘prostitutes’ as victims in need of saving by the British. This demonstrates that these representations, though at times contradictory, both worked to validate the imperial project in the subcontinent.

British civil and military officials, as well as some memsahibs, represented courtesans as criminals and, therefore, threatening to the political stability of British colonial rule in India. This was linked to the older construction of courtesans as symbolizing ‘Oriental’ luxury and sexual availability, as well as corrupting British men through their sexuality and decadence. Evangelical and Victorian gender ideals became increasingly solidified in the mid-1800s, which caused sexual intercourse outside of companionate marriage to be associated with corruption and political instability. In addition, this intersected with concerns of ethnic miscegenation that produced the image of courtesans as doubly corrupting, due to their association with sex-work and their ‘inferior’ ethnic status in colonial discourse. The corruptive power of courtesans was

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478 Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” p. 78.
480 Levine, Prostitution, Race, and Politics, p. 193.
demonstrated by Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller who argued that “many a family’s happiness has been ruined, and estrangement made complete between husband and wife, by the husband coming under the power and influence of the nautch-girl.”\textsuperscript{481} This demonstrates the opinion of many memsahibs in this period, that courtesans were dangerous and corrupting figures who negatively impacted the Victorian ideal of companionate marriage. Furthermore, this association worked with new British views of hygiene and disease. Courtesans and sex-workers were believed to be spreaders of STDs, while British soldiers were represented as the victims of these diseases and not associated with their propagation in any manner.\textsuperscript{482} Though the British knew of the existence of STDs amongst its military in India in the 1700s, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that they developed the narrative of Indian women as the origin and spreaders of these infections and diseases. This exacerbated the official policy of blaming and punishing Indian women for the proliferation of STDs.\textsuperscript{483} Hence, the Contagious Diseases and Cantonment Acts attempted to regulate the spread of STDs through the controlling, inspecting, and containing of Indian women’s bodies. These Acts, and the general social belief that sex-workers spread STDs, created the construction of courtesans as diseased and dangerous women. Therefore, the image of the sensual, beautiful, and beguiling ‘Oriental’ woman that was personified in the eighteenth-century nautch-girl, had been replaced by the mid-1800s with the image of a diseased Indian woman whose sensuality fundamentally threatened the political stability of the colonial project in the subcontinent through disease, ethnic miscegenation, and threatening Victorian ideals of companionate marriage.\textsuperscript{484}

The policing of courtesans and sex-workers’ bodies was inherently related to conceptualizations of ethnicity and class in relation to the stability and superiority of British rule.

\textsuperscript{481} Fuller, \textit{The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood}, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{482} Wald, “From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 6.
\textsuperscript{483} Banerjee, \textit{Under the Raj}, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{484} Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” p. 75.
in India. There was an inherent contradiction between how military authorities provided soldiers with sexual relations with sex-workers and how colonial authorities attempted to discourage conjugal relationships between elite British men and Indian women.\textsuperscript{485} This contradiction was distinctly concerned with preserving the structure of colonial rule in India because “power relationships show how sexual relations and the control of them helped to maintain the empire.”\textsuperscript{486} Therefore, colonial power and the control of sexual relations were inherently linked to one another, which meant that courtesans were integral to the production and preservation of imperial power. The split between elite officials and soldiers was predominantly based on class, which constructed lower-class men as unable to control their sexual urges. This contradiction existed because of the supposed necessity of protecting heteronormative masculinity and strength in the British army, which required male access to sexual release with colonized women. The other was ethnicity-based ideas of superiority that became increasingly solidified after the direct rule of India was assumed by the Crown. British elites were required to maintain both social and ethnic distance from the colonized population in order to preserve the colonial discourse on inherent ethnic superiority, which the British utilized to justify their political and cultural rule of the subcontinent. This was due to the belief that ethnic ‘degeneracy’ through miscegenation was linked to the political instability of imperial rule.\textsuperscript{487} Therefore, the criminalization and control of courtesans as sex-workers was integral in the continuation of colonial power in India because ‘prostitution’ enabled the British to maintain their standing army’s virility, while simultaneously protecting the ethnic ‘purity’ of the British elite through the increased presence of memsahibs and subsequent minimization of inter-ethnic social and sexual relationships.

\textsuperscript{485} Ballhatchet, \textit{Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj}, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{486} Bryder, “Sex, Race, and Colonialism,” p. 807.
Courtesans continued to be important components in British representations of India and Indians as less ‘civilized’ to justify their colonial presence in the subcontinent. British women portrayed Indian women as unfree and subjugated in order to symbolize India as inherently oppressive in its social norms and cultural traditions, which furthered the narrative of India requiring British interventionist policies and colonization in order to ‘civilize’ the subcontinent.\(^{488}\) Anna Harriette Leonowens, though fascinated with nautch-girls, also conformed to the narrative of their victimization. She often portrayed courtesans as victims, such as the time she saw a nautch-girl whose mouth had “an expression of dejection and sorrow lingering about the corners which told better than words of weariness of the life to which she was doomed.”\(^{489}\) She continued to be impacted by this as “every now and then I found myself trying to picture her strange life, wondering who she was and how her parents could ever have had the heart to doom her to such a profession.”\(^{490}\) Leonowens perpetuated the representation of nautch-girls as victims as she believed that the average life of a courtesan was difficult and they “generally died young.”\(^{491}\) The belief of colonized women as victims was particularly vital in the construction of courtesans in this period, as it portrayed Indian men as degenerated despots who oppressed their countrywomen. In addition, this representation established British men and women as the saviours of Indian women through the imposition of British gender ideals and norms, as well as the protection of Indian women from their own culture.\(^{492}\)

The Indian woman-as-victim narrative enabled British women, particularly proto-feminists, to construct themselves as the saviours of Indian women in order to push through


\(^{489}\) Leonowens, *Life and Travel in India*, p. 177.

\(^{490}\) Ibid.

\(^{491}\) Ibid., p. 190.

social reforms that conformed to Victorian gender ideals. The ‘reclamation’ of sex-workers was a major preoccupation of Evangelical reformers in England in the nineteenth century and was imported to the subcontinent by the mid-1800s to ensure the ‘moral salvation’ of courtesans and Indian women more generally.\footnote{Meredith Borthwick, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 303, 308.} Therefore, courtesans were constructed as the Other through ideas of their victimization, subjugation, and moral degeneracy. Consequently, memsahibs were implicitly conceived as the Self in their sexual chastity and conforming to Victorian gender norms, which illustrated the need for them in the colonial enterprise in order to import these values to India and ‘civilize’ Indian women. Memsahibs were specifically focused on female sex-workers at this time because they fulfilled both the image of the ‘fallen’ woman in need of ‘saving’ and the narrative of India being an oppressive and immoral place.\footnote{Uma Chakravarti, “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past,” in Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 34.} These rescue narratives and projects aimed to restore sex-workers to their “pre-fallen state of virtuous morality and asexual purity” in relation to middle-class Victorian gender ideals for white women of purity, chastity, and morality.\footnote{Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” p. 78.} The saviour narrative intersected with ideas of ethnic superiority that made the social reform movement increasingly paternalistic, which meant British women often constructed Indian women as children who were dependent on European women to teach and ‘save’ them from their ‘backwards’ culture.\footnote{Barbara Ramusack, “Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945,” Women’s Studies International Forum 13, no. 4 (1990): p. 319.} The portrayal of Indian women as victims created the image of British women as mothers, which infantilized Indian women and minimized their political and cultural agency.

The dominant method that memsahibs used to ‘uplift’ and ‘civilize’ Indian women was education. This built on the popular Evangelical notions that women were the markers of
civilization, which became the prevalent belief of the mid-1800s. Mary Carpenter argued that education was key to ‘uplift’ Indian women as “all acknowledge that the present condition of woman, and her utter ignorance of everything that should exalt her nature, is the great barrier to the elevation of the natives.” Memsahibs believed that the gradual reform of the ‘social evils’ of Indian society, such as sati, female infanticide, courtesanship, and child marriage, could be accomplished through education. This form of education was predominantly focused on the imposition of Victorian gender ideals and the model of companionate marriage onto Indian society. These ideals imagined marriage as the only acceptable place for sexual intercourse, as well as the image of the wife as the domestic angel of the house and an intelligent, yet subordinate, companion for her husband. The memsahibs’ goal of encouraging Indian women to conform to the ideals of the Victorian domestic angel was also internalized by many elite Indian men by the late nineteenth century, which led to the rise of Hindu nationalist social reform movements that focused on the education of elite Indian women. This was expressed in a speech on August 1, 1870, by Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884), a Bengali social reformer, who encouraged British women to go to India and teach Indian women, in order for them to receive “an unsectarian, liberal, sound, useful education…an education calculated to make Indian women good wives, mothers, sisters and daughters.” This demonstrates the British and elite Indian perception of Western-education for Indian women that imposed Victorian gendered ideals upon courtesans and other Indian women as a means to ‘civilize’ and ‘save’ them.

498 Carpenter, Six Months in India, p. 76.
*Memsahibs* constructed *nautch*-girls as threatening their attempts to ‘uplift’ Indian women through education. Courtesans, as mentioned previously, were primarily the only literate women in India during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Therefore, the British believed that many Indians connoted education, especially literacy, with courtesans. Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller argued that “For centuries dancing-girls had the monopoly of all the education among women. They were the only women that were taught to read and sing in public in the country; and hence these two accomplishments were so associated with the *nautch*-girl as to be considered disreputable for respectable women.”\(^{502}\) Furthermore, Fuller believed that “one of the stock objections of the opposers” to female education “was: ‘It is not respectable for girls to be educated’…you may still find an old person that clings to that feeling and associates learning in his mind with the *nautch*-girl.”\(^{503}\) In addition, the British saw the practice of *purdah* among high-caste women to be a major obstacle to their ‘civilizing’ mission in India. Conversely, *nautch*-girls were present and visible in public society as they were able to, according to Elizabeth Cooper, “come and go freely, mingling with both men and women. They are found at all feasts and public ceremonies, and have a very definite and honourable place in Indian society.”\(^{504}\) Therefore, courtesans were seen as being more socially mobile and present in Indian society, similarly to British women, which was what the British were attempting to accomplish for elite Indian women. This was exhibited by Cooper who believed that *nautch*-girls had “the only real freedom given to Indian women.”\(^{505}\) *Memsahibs* represented courtesans’ connection with sex-work as threatening their education programs because the British believed that many elite Indian men did not want their women to be associated with skills possessed by sex-workers.

\(^{502}\) Fuller, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, pp. 128-129.

\(^{503}\) Ibid., p. 129.

\(^{504}\) Cooper, *The Harim and the Purdah*, p. 98.

\(^{505}\) Ibid.
Subsequently, courtesans threatened British women’s ‘civilizing’ mission, while simultaneously being a target for the social reform of sex-workers in India.

The social reform of Indian women in the second half of the nineteenth century became a strategic tool of colonial ideology. The ‘rescue’ of Indian women from oppressive social practices perpetuated the myths of Victorian chivalry and the image of the British as saviours, which helped to justify their continued colonial presence in the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{506} There was a proliferation of elite Indian men who received Western education and internalized many British values from middle-class Evangelicalism. This encouraged the social reform of Indian women and society as well as, more problematically for the British, nationalist movements in India, which threatened the colonial rule of the British in the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{507} Therefore, the British utilized the image of the victimized Indian sex-worker and the uneducated elite woman to demonstrate the ‘backwardness’ of Indian society. Indian women became a significant component of the British narrative around their ‘civilizing’ mission in India and their rescue of Indian women from, what the British saw as, the oppressive bonds of Indian culture.\textsuperscript{508} Subsequently, the British image of courtesans as victimized sex-workers solidified the political stability of the imperial project by constructing the British as necessary for the ‘advancement’ of Indian women and society.\textsuperscript{509} In sum, the images of courtesans as victims and as criminals functioned simultaneously as constructions that justified Britain’s colonial presence in India in the second half of the nineteenth century.

\textbf{The Degradation of Courtesans}

\textsuperscript{507} Borthwick, \textit{The Changing Role of Women in Bengal}, p. 303.
\textsuperscript{508} Mary A. Procida, \textit{Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 166.
\textsuperscript{509} Ibid.
The ‘degradation’ of courtesans continued throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. In the nabob period the British gained territorial and political power that subsequently diminished the power of local Indian elites. Subsequently, many courtesans lost the patronage of Indian courts and moved to British settlements in order to survive.\textsuperscript{510} This shift caused courtesans to become increasingly dependent on British patronage; however, over the course of the nineteenth century British Victorian and Evangelical influences decreased the social popularity of nautch performances. Therefore, courtesans lost political and social power in Indian society, which led to their destitution. The loss of patronage meant that there was an exodus of courtesans from temples and courts to military cantonments as commercial sex-workers to survive in the colonial period.\textsuperscript{511}

Furthermore, British colonialism and a more capitalist-centered economy altered the status of courtesans in Indian society as the British created sex-workers purely for sexual purposes, which stripped courtesans’ of their cultural and artistic importance.\textsuperscript{512} Therefore, the “only marketable component” of courtesans’ role in the late nineteenth century “was the sexual one.”\textsuperscript{513} In addition, the British imposed their moral views of ‘prostitution’ on courtesans that were supported by Victorian ethical norms and gender ideals. This continued the ‘degradation’ of courtesans into sex-workers, as the British created the demand in relation to the health of their soldiers and constructed them as problematic aspects of Indian culture, which criminalized and alienated courtesans from the rest of society.\textsuperscript{514} Therefore, colonial practice and policy worked to impoverish many courtesans and lower their social standing, economic power, and cultural agency in the second half of the nineteenth century and left courtesans in a highly vulnerable

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513 Wald, “From \textit{Begums} and \textit{Bibis} to Abandoned Females and Idle Women,” p. 17.
\end{flushright}
position under British rule.515 Furthermore, the criminalization and loss of patronage of courtesans furthered their amalgamation into a single entity and identity as sex-workers because the British did not differentiate between caste, region, or religious-based differences, which had been significant variations in courtesanship during the pre-colonial period. In sum, the second half of the nineteenth century solidified courtesans’ loss of patronage, which drastically reduced their power and agency within Indian society and led to their further ‘degradation’ into commercial sex-workers in order to survive in the colonial period. Though the British continued to be fascinated by nauch performances in the late nineteenth century, these women were increasingly marginalized in Indian culture due to British gender, class, and ethnicity-based norms and values.

Repealing the Contagious Diseases Act and the Anti-Nauch Campaign

British proto-feminists vehemently opposed the Contagious Diseases Act and rallied against its implementation in the metropole and the colonies in the 1870s.516 Josephine E. Butler (1828-1906) was the most well-known advocate against this Act in the late nineteenth century and she campaigned for its repeal in both England and India.517 Butler believed that the policing produced by the Acts “could not be carried on without involving the certain degradation and oppression of many innocent women.”518 Significantly, the construction of sex-workers as victims permeated throughout British society in India and did not correspond with the Contagious Diseases Act’s criminalization of courtesans and the image of the diseased ‘Oriental’ woman. In addition, reformers such as Butler were against the Contagious Diseases Act because

516 Levine, “Venereal Disease, Prostitution, and the Politics of Empire,” p. 582. The scholarship predominantly focuses on the ways in which British women resisted and organized around repealing the Contagious Diseases Act. See Oldenburg “Lifestyle as Resistance” p. 261 for descriptions on the manner in which Indian courtesans actively resisted the implementation of this Act such as bribing police and medical officials in order to avoid medical examination.
they believed it “virtually legalized prostitution.”⁵¹⁹ British reformers believed that this ‘legalization’ of sex-work threatened Britain’s claim of moral superiority, and subsequent political control, over India.⁵²⁰ The British had previously understood ‘prostitution’ to be a hereditary caste and ancient profession in India. Therefore, reformers constructed the control of sex-workers through the Contagious Diseases Act as the metropole allowing and encouraging this practice, which was constructed as emblematic of India’s oppressive and ‘backwards’ society. This endangered the narrative of moral superiority the British used to justify their colonial presence in the subcontinent. The risk to their moral superiority also threatened the belief that the British colonized to help ‘civilize’ Indians, which was a necessary aspect of their justification of the imperial project.⁵²¹ The Contagious Diseases Act, therefore, was seen as tarnishing the British image of themselves as the ‘white saviours’ of India. Due to the overwhelming political organization against the Contagious Diseases Act, it was repealed in 1883.⁵²²

However, this did not stop British soldiers from patronizing lal bazaars, and the ‘prostitution’ of Indian women continued in the late nineteenth century in military cantonments, as the army continued to provide sexual release for its soldiers. Nevertheless, the British became less involved with the legal and social censure of courtesans in the 1890s. This was the period of anti-nautch campaigns in which Indian men and women of upper castes actively worked against the social production and attendance of nautch performances. The anti-nautch campaign was linked to Hindu nationalist movements, reform movements, and Western-based middle-class gender norms that had been internalized by elite Indians. This produced the idealized image of the ‘New Woman’ in Indian society, who protected traditional Indian culture and yet maintained

⁵¹⁹ Kumar, The History of Doing, p. 35.
⁵²⁰ Banerjee, Under the Raj, p. 177.
⁵²¹ Ibid.
⁵²² Chatterjee, “Prostituted Women and the British Empire,” pp. 77-79.
more Victorian-style gender ideals. The anti-\textit{nautch} campaign period was a significant aspect of courtesans’ representations because elite Indian society increasingly internalized British gender and class values in order to support the nationalist movement. A \textit{nautch}-girl was believed to have “Hell…in her eyes. In her breast is a vast ocean of poison. Round her comely waist dwell the furies of hell. Her hands are brandishing unseen daggers ever ready to strike unwary or wilful victims that fall in her way. Her blandishments are India’s ruin. Alas! her smile is India’s death.” Indian elites understood \textit{nautch}-girls as contradicting the values of the New Woman and, therefore, posing a significant threat to the nationalist movement. The Punjab Purity Association encouraged “all young men and old men, to all bachelors and married men and widower, run away at once from this demon [\textit{nautch}-girls] that is ever and anon vomiting hell-fire.” In the late nineteenth century, elite Indian men encouraged British officials and Indians to no longer attend \textit{nautch} performances. Therefore, Indian nationalists and reformers idealized the image of the New Woman and denigrated the courtesan as a way to combat British political and economic dominance in India, similarly to how the British used \textit{nautch}-girls to justify their colonial presence earlier in the century. In both cases, courtesans were used as symbols to validate gendered ideals and political power. This thesis does not examine the anti-\textit{nautch} campaign period in-depth because its primary focus is exploring British representations of courtesans to investigate the connection between constructions of colonized women and British understandings of their political stability and power in India.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{523} Vijaisri, \textit{Recasting the Devadasi}, p. 137.
\item \textsuperscript{524} Punjab Purity Association, \textit{Opinions on the nautch question. Collected and published by the Punjab Purity Association} (Lahore: New Lyall Press, 1894), p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{525} Ibid., p. 3.
\end{itemize}
Though under increasing social pressure to no longer patronize the *nautch*, the British continued to attend these performances at public functions and private parties in the late nineteenth century.527 This demonstrated the prevailing British fascination with *nautch*-girls and Indian forms of entertainment. In addition, the continued presence of the *nautch* at official events was a part of the British ruling style in the subcontinent, which based their claim to political legitimacy on a belief of inherent superiority that took the form of lavish displays of power and regalia.528 These were dependent on a melding of Indian and British understandings and representations of political symbolism. Therefore, the *nautch* continued to be an important aspect of validating British political authority in the subcontinent. The late 1880s and 1890s was a period of significant anti-*nautch* feelings from both elite Indian social reformers and British missionaries, proto-feminists, and temperance unions.529 However, British officials continued to patronize *nautch* performances in an official capacity and maintained the East India Company-inspired policy of non-interference in religious and cultural traditions. Therefore, colonial authorities were cautious about supporting the anti-*nautch* campaign and continued to utilize *nautch* performances as a means of political legitimization.530

In sum, the second half of the nineteenth century continued the ‘degradation’ of courtesans into sex-workers. The Cantonment and Contagious Diseases Acts, as well as civil and military officials, criminalized courtesans and created the image of *nautch*-girls as dangerous ‘prostitutes’ who were the origin and propagators of STDs. The construction of *nautch*-girls as criminals allowed the British to police and contain Indian women’s sexuality, which was understood to be a dangerous and corrupting force since the eighteenth century. In addition, this also minimized the threat courtesans posed to the political stability of the imperial project. The

528 Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 128.
529 Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi*, p. 147.
530 Ibid., p. 148.
containment of sex-workers through these Acts ensured that elite British men were distanced from them and, therefore, the danger of miscegenation was limited during a period in which concepts of ethnic superiority were paramount to the justification of empire. In contrast, the writings of *memsahibs* often represented courtesans as victims of an oppressive Indian culture. This enabled British women to construct themselves as the ‘saviours’ of Indian women and the providers of ‘civilization’ to the subcontinent. The British belief that they were ‘saving’ Indian women and fostering Western ideals of ‘civilization’ and ‘modernity’ subsequently worked to validate the imperial project in India. Furthermore, the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act demonstrated the shift from legal control of sex-workers to their social censure by the Western-educated elite conservatives and Hindu nationalist in the 1890s. Therefore, the various constructions of courtesans in the second half of the nineteenth century policed their sensuality and worked to justify the imperial project in a manner that supported the British notion that they were ‘civilizing’ India and Indians by ‘saving’ Indian women.
Conclusion

In sum, this thesis has explored the changing perceptions and representations of courtesans, the East India Company, and the British imperial project in India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The construction of courtesans illustrates British conceptualizations of, and responses to, their empire in India, as well as the ways in which they justified their colonial presence in the region. Throughout this period, the British conceived courtesans as the epitome of ‘Oriental’ luxury, wealth, and decadence. Courtesans were understood to be inherently sensual and available for British men’s sexual consumption. This image of the sexually available, erotic, and exotic courtesan correlated with the political rule and figure of the British nabob. The nabobs of the eighteenth century illuminated the Orientalist Indian lifestyles, cultural openness, and British fascination of India during the early imperial period. Equally, the criticism of the nabob in Britain reflected in personal writings, images, and newspapers demonstrated British fears and anxieties of early empire. The power of seemingly unaccountable institutions such as the East India Company, and the infiltration of foreign values on British political and social life were fears created in Britain by the figure of the nabob. The use of gender, class, and ethnicity to punish nabobs also illustrates these anxieties and explores the use of these categories as methods of punishing and policing the behaviour and lifestyles of the British in the colonial sphere. Lastly, the decline of the nabob and the rise of the *sahib* demonstrates the increasing power of the British government over the Company, as well as the rise in Evangelical and liberal beliefs of British superiority and justification for empire. In essence, the eighteenth century was a period in which the British justified their rule through Orientalized images of India, which caused anxiety in the metropole. This was replaced with the imperial rule of India in a more firmly British manner by the early nineteenth century. Though the nabob was a small percentage of the British population, their influence throughout the
eighteenth century was extensive and illustrates the changing understandings of empire in Britain throughout this time period.

The early nineteenth century also shaped the image of the courtesan. Courtesans were representative of the supposed sexual availability of Indian women and were the symbol of ‘Oriental’ sensuality, luxury, and wealth. The imagery of the courtesan altered due to the propagation of Evangelical, liberal, and Victorian gender, ethnicity, and class norms and ideals. In addition, this thesis expresses the importance of the increased population of British women in India. Though memsahibs did not create racist divisions within the colony, they reflected metropolitan views of ethnic superiority. Furthermore, the early nineteenth century was a period of heightening social hierarchies around gender, class, and ethnicity that were imported into colonial India due to the strengthened connection between metropolitan Britain and the subcontinent, as well as the belief of inherent ethnic superiority as a justification for imperial rule. During this period memsahibs became fascinated by nautch performances and described them in great detail, with extensive focus on the clothing, jewellery, and dance forms of the courtesans. Memsahibs including Elizabeth Fenton, Mary Martha Sherwood, and Emma Roberts illustrated the increasingly popular representation of courtesans as dangerous temptresses. Nautch-girls were constructed as corrupting influences on British men and as threats to the ethnic ‘purity’ of the British. This was seen as challenging the political stability of British rule in India through miscegenation, which endangered British validation of the imperial project.

This thesis illustrates that the British representations of courtesans altered slowly over time, while continuously maintaining the symbolism of nautch-girls as the epitome of ‘Oriental’ sensuality and sexual availability. The social anxieties around the courtesan as a corrupting temptress were exacerbated in the second half of the nineteenth century. The British military represented courtesans as sex-workers and, therefore, as corrupting criminals who propagated
sexually transmitted diseases. The prevalence of STDs in British soldiers in India was blamed on nautch-girls. Consequently, courtesans were seen as threatening the physical health of British men and, therefore, their political legitimacy and rule of India. However, memsahibs and social reformers such as Mary Carpenter and Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller portrayed sex-workers as victims of, what they saw as, an oppressive Indian society. The victimization of courtesans enabled the British to validate their colonial presence in the subcontinent through the narrative of ‘saving’ Indian women from their cultural traditions. Therefore, though courtesans threatened British political legitimacy, they were also utilized to validate the imperial project in India and maintain the stability of British colonial rule in the mid-nineteenth century.

In addition, this thesis demonstrates British representations of courtesans in relation to their political power in the subcontinent. The British utilized nautch-girls as symbols of their power in India and to validate their position as rulers of Indian society, although they were also constructed as threatening the political stability of the imperial project. This thesis examines the gradual loss of social influence, political agency, and financial power that courtesans experienced over the course of the colonial period due to the imposition of British gender, ethnicity, and class ideals. The experiences of courtesans were not monolithic; however, the lack of sources in their own voices creates difficulty in understanding their own perception and experience of the colonial period. Courtesans possessed significant levels of social power and agency within the subcontinent during the pre-colonial period, though this altered depending on their variations in caste, religious beliefs, and region. Though courtesans continued to have patronage throughout the colonial period, they also experienced a loss of cultural significance that negatively impacted their financial, political, and cultural agency in Indian society. This ‘degeneration’ from courtesans, to nautch-girls, to sex-workers was intrinsically linked to British representations of these women, as well as the imposition of British gender, ethnicity, and class
ideals onto Indian society. Courtesans often deviated from these norms because they were financially independent women involved in the public sphere, who rarely married, and had significant caste-mobility. Therefore, they went against British ideas of Victorian companionate marriage, class rigidity, and ethnic separation. Subsequently, the British attempted to police courtesans’ bodies, sensuality, and behaviour in order to maintain their social norms and colonial power in the subcontinent.

In conclusion, Indian women were predominantly portrayed in three different, and often contrasting, ways in colonial discourse, which were worked out on the bodies of elite Indian women and courtesans. The majority of scholarship has focused on these representations in relation to elite women; however, this thesis examines the ways in which these constructions were produced in relation to courtesans. In the eighteenth century, *nautch*-girls were represented as the epitome of ‘Oriental’ sensuality. They symbolized the wealth, decadence, and luxury of the East, particularly during a period of territorial acquisition and political ascendency for the British. At this time, the British required Indian symbols of power in order to justify their colonial presence in the subcontinent. *Nautch*-girls were significant and accessible Indian symbols of political power, which the British adopted in order to illustrate their presence and power in India. This imagery would continue to hold significance throughout the colonial period. However, the representation of courtesans as symbols of ‘Oriental’ sensuality was challenged and contained negative connotations in the nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century courtesans were constructed as temptresses whose ‘Oriental’ sensuality threatened the masculinity and ethnic purity of British men in India and, therefore, the political stability of the imperial project. This alteration occurred in relation to the growing political and territorial power of the East India Company at the time. The British attempted to police the behaviour of both courtesans and British men through the representation of *nautch*-girls as temptresses, as well as
through the increased population of white, British women in the subcontinent. This was in an
effort to encourage British men’s adherence to metropolitan ideals around ethnicity, gender, and
class.

The period of the Contagious Diseases Act reinforced the threatening image of the
courtesan as temptress through representing courtesans as carriers of sexually transmitted
diseases. Therefore, courtesans became increasingly dangerous to British men and the larger
imperial project. In addition, the narrative of ‘saving’ Indian women altered this construction in
the second half of the nineteenth century. Elite Indian women were constructed as victims in
colonial discourse, through cultural traditions such as sati and child marriage, in the early
nineteenth century. However, by the second half of the 1800s, courtesans were also portrayed as
victims due to their association with sex-work and their representation as ‘fallen’ women. This
was related to the Contagious Diseases Act and the ahistorical British belief that courtesans had
been sex-workers for the entirety of Indian history. The construction of courtesans as victims
enabled the British to justify their continued colonial presence, in a period of growing nationalist
dissention, as ‘rescuing’ Indian women from Indian society and ‘saving’ courtesans from sex-
work. Therefore, the representation of courtesans as the epitome of ‘Oriental’ sensuality in the
eighteenth century continued throughout the nineteenth century, however, this narrative shifted
in relation to the political power of the British and their own alterations in gender, class, and
ethnicity-based social norms and hierarchies. This thesis demonstrates that the shift in British
representations of courtesans was distinctly related to their understanding of their political power
and stability in the subcontinent. The British constructed courtesans in different ways in the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to justify their colonial presence and rule of India.
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