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Review of *Music in Colonial Punjab: Courtesans, Bards, and Connoisseurs, 1800-1947*, by Radha Kapuria

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Radha Kapuria, *Music in Colonial Punjab: Courtesans, Bards, and Connoisseurs, 1800-1947*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 410 pages.

Radha Kapuria's *Music in Colonial Punjab* narrates the history of musical traditions in Punjab during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The book opens with the central role of courtesans and female bodyguard dancers in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1801-1839). Moving onto the colonial period, it excavates the accounts of *mirāsīs* (local performers) in colonial folklore ethnographies like Anne Wilson's *A Short Account of the Hindu System of Music* (1904) and various song textbooks written by female Christian missionaries in the local musical *ragas* for proselytization. It then describes multiple colonially-induced, urban, middle-class reformist movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which were bent on "purifying" the earlier musical traditions. Finally, the book's last section discusses the patronage of music in the courts of Patiala and Kapurthala during the early 20th century.

Bringing such diverse social locations and histories of musical traditions together has enabled Kapuria to provide a critical insight into variously enmeshed colonial, modern, religious, and cultural categories and identities that we have inherited today. For example, while female dance performers occupied a central strategic place in Ranjit Singh's court and popular shrine-related performances of piety in Punjab in the 18th century, the reformist movements like the Punjab Purity Association, inspired by colonial, anti-*nautch* gaze, were anxiously snubbing this "embarrassing," "immoral" cultural power of female performers by the end of the century (209).

Along with female dance performers, the *mirāsīs* were another group that was ubiquitous to the earlier musical landscape of Punjab and outlawed under this newly gentrified cultural order. Kapuria reads into colonial ethnographies to highlight the socially liminal space these *mirāsīs* occupied and to describe how routinely they would disrupt the boundaries of classical/folk, piety/sensuality, urban/rural, and Muslim/non-Muslim. Their liminality caused a threat to both the colonial order bent on fixing social identities and the reformist movements, like Arya Samaj, bent on making music more "respectable" and Hindu devotional (237).

It is these cultural obliterations, as entailed in the figures of female performers and *mirāsīs*, which led to the formation of new urban, “respectable” musical publics in Lahore, Amritsar, and Jalandhar during the early 20th century (278). Many schools also started emerging to train middle-class Hindu women to sing “purified” devotional songs/*bhajans*. The book situates reformist song-writers like Devraj Sondhi and Devki Sud and famous musicians like Pt. Vishnu Digamber Paluskar within these urban, reformist contexts.

Similarly, Kapuria indicates how the neighbouring court of Patiala, despite its more complex and hybrid engagement with the musical traditions, also started patronizing a more devotional, Sikh, *Gurbani*-oriented music by the early 20th century. The female performers who were markers of cultural and symbolic power in the court of Ranjit Singh were now replaced by male musicians who mostly performed “Sikh liturgical music” (338). Consequently, there was a shift from older terms like *mirāsīs* and *dhadhis* to the new terms of *ragi* and *rababi* in the employment records of the court. The century-long anxieties, embarrassments, and opprobrium for “sensuous” female performers and *mirāsīs* in the colonial ethnographies and reformist movements, assiduously captured by the book, had finally transformed the musical and cultural landscapes of Punjab by this period; the beast of music had finally been tamed into the categories of Hindu and Sikh, “respectability” and morality, etc.

By offering such a holistic overview of musical transformations in Punjab, Kapuria invites us to rethink the various cultural and social identities we have inherited today. Instead of taking these identities for granted, as natural and harmless, the book encourages us to critically reflect upon how they have been informed by colonial experiences and exclude other cultural expressions that do not fit into them.

Taking my own example, growing up as a Muslim in an urban center of Pakistani Punjab, I was taught by my school, mosque, and family that good *sharif* Muslims do not indulge in music. The figure of Junaid Jamshed, Pakistani pop icon turned evangelist, loomed large over my childhood for leaving the “sinful” world of music and pursuing the “righteous” path of Islam. Reading *Music in Colonial Punjab* reminds me of how musical traditions must have historically enriched and liminalized ideas of Islam in the past, ideas which are no longer available to me and so many other young Muslims growing up in today’s urban Punjab due to the colonial, reformist casting of music as “Hindu” and “Sikh” only.

The book encourages such a critical historical inquiry, which is especially appreciative because of the paucity of archives available to write such a history today. Scattered in various bordered locations worldwide, such as Pakistan, India, England, and North America, archives outside one’s geographical location can often be inaccessible. Moreover, most of the accounts about Punjab available today were written by British colonial officials and distorted by a colonial gaze. Lastly, previous works about the history of Punjab are often limited by their religious, communal, and/or nationalist focus.

Music in Colonial Punjab bravely tries to grapple with these issues by radically expanding its array of archives across languages and locations, on the one hand,

and using different ways of reading them on the other. It engages with manuscripts, paintings, colonial ethnographies, Punjabi poetry, pamphlets, song textbooks, court cases, music primers, court records, advertisements, law bills, and newspaper reports; sometimes situating them within their social contexts, other times using them to understand the social contexts; sometimes closely engaging with different parts of the same text in detail, other times analyzing only a line, a reference, a paragraph from it to tell the story. Therefore, Kapuria also suggests methods and archives that we can use to recuperate our lost, marginalized, colonized, and bordered Punjabi pasts.

Biography

Hamad Nazar was born and raised in Rawalpindi, Pakistan and holds an MA in History from the University of British Columbia focusing on the historical traditions of *vār* poetry. His research interests lie in the literary and cultural histories of North India, colonialism, Orientalism, and Islam in South Asia. Currently, he is working as a Program Coordinator at the South Asian Studies Institute, University of Fraser Valley.

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