



Cinema as Historical Intervention: Heeramandi and the Rediscovery of Courtesans' Role in India's Freedom Narrative

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Abstract

Historical narratives of the Indian freedom struggle have long been dominated by the figures of masculine leadership and the "respectable" woman (the Bhadramahila), systematically erasing the contributions of marginalized socio-cultural groups. Among the most glaring omissions is the role of the Tawaifs (courtesans), who were not merely entertainers but pivotal political actors, financiers, and spies. This article examines Sanjay Leela Bhansali's web series *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* (2024) as a form of "historical intervention." Drawing on Robert Rosenstone's theory of "history on film," the paper argues that while *Heeramandi* employs an aesthetic of opulence, it effectively reclaims the Tawaif from the periphery of history, positioning her as a central, albeit tragic, patriot in the 1940s resistance against British colonialism.

Keywords: *Indian freedom struggle; marginalised histories; history on film; Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar.*

'Learning from history is never simply a one-way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.' EH Carr (1961:86). But history is often a narrative of silences. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, the respectable nationalist discourse of the early 20th century, influenced heavily by Victorian morality, systematically erased the contributions of the *Tawaif* or the courtesan community. Since time immemorial, courtesans have had a tempestuous reputation. In India, they were branded by different names, depending on their social location and the performances they did. From TAWAIFS, who performed in courts and salons in Mughal India, to BAIJIS and GAANEWALIS, who were the first recorded superstars, to LAVANI dancers performing at theatres across Maharashtra, courtesans remained an integral part of the subcontinent's cultural heritage. They were admired for their knowledge of Urdu and Persian society and literature, and for ages they catered to the Mughal era and nobility. But over time, courtesan culture and the people's identities became conflated, not only with each other but with sex workers – even though sex work may or may not be a part of the equation. ([Inzamam](#) and Qadri:2021)



Hence, it could be argued that courtesans were identified only in terms of possible sex work, or sexual relationships with patrons and never as vastly significant in the arenas of music, dance, poetry, etiquette, theatre, and film. They remained marginalized in the public sphere even when they were proactive and participated in cultural and political life. Public discourse deeply shaped this marginalization, including what we choose to remember and erase. None of our history books has attempted to acknowledge their nationalistic feelings, the contribution of the courtesans in the Indian independence struggle, the role they played in nation-building, and the sacrifices they made. However, a few individual writers, podcast series, movies, and research articles have highlighted the issue. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi* (2024) emerges as a flamboyant yet critical intervention into this silence. It narrates the lives of courtesans during the 1920s-40s during the British rule in India and portrays how these nautch women transformed into freedom fighters during India's fight for independence.

Cinema as Historical Intervention

Visual history has been older than oral history. For ages, visual art forms have created social memories. In the Palaeolithic age, the hunting community resorted to cave painting to share their feelings, activities, and even their daily lives. Along with the various archaeological sources like tools, utensils, coins, and ornaments, these cave paintings became immensely significant in understanding the lives of these communities. The preliterate societies in the Chalcolithic and Neolithic ages developed etching, sketching, painting, and sculpting models as means to preserve and leave behind records of their way of life. Archaeologists take these records as an important source of history. Further, rock carvings in many Indian architectural monuments like Konark, Ajanta, Ellora, Sanchi, the temples in Badami and Khajuraho, etc., play a significant role in depicting India's socio-economic life.

Even at the threshold of modernisation, portrait, still-life, landscape, oil paintings became very important for depicting the live the time. With the advent of the Renaissance, better pens, ink, paints and paper came. The artists took their help to create better artwork narrating the eulogies, victories and royal lifestyles of the kings and zamindars. With the arrival of the 18th and early 19th centuries and the Industrial Revolution, the printing press emerged. More reliance was placed on these visual narratives of history, with pictorial representations of the kings. The invention of the camera changed the entire history and historiography with texts and photography. Everything revolutionised with the commencement of the moving camera invented by Edison. With the beginning of the 21st century, historical documentaries that rely on archival footage, photographs, narration, expert commentary and visual narratives became popular. Very recently, acknowledging these visual narratives, Robert A. Rosenstone argued that the films should also be taken seriously as a legitimate form of historical representation. His concept of "Film on History," which posits that cinema does not merely reflect history but constructs a discourse that traditional text-based history cannot capture. Movies such as *Gandhi*, *Glory*, or *The Return of Martin Guerre* shape historical understanding even among academics. Rosenstone identified that History as drama is the most common form and includes popular narrative films set in the past. These films often blend real and fictional characters and events. While they have been criticised for inaccuracy, Rosenstone notes that they dominate public historical imagination and hence are an excellent intervention in the realm of history.



Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi*, staged in the twilight of the British Raj in Lahore, portrays the lives of courtesans during that period. "*Heeramandi* performs a vital socio-historical function: it transforms the courtesans from a tragic figure of the fallen woman into a revolutionary subject of the anti-colonial movement.

Who are courtesans?

Courtesans across the world were front-runners of the first professional women entertainers. They were in the entertainment business, which was intended for the enjoyment of select sections of society, or for society at large. They were celebrated and their position in society was inextricably linked with the overall position of women, in the separation of domesticity and childbearing from finer skills of influencing outcomes of significance. The domain of the courtesan was described as an oasis of refinement, pleasure, and contentment that the wealthy gravitated to, while the rulers of native Indian states sent their sons to imbibe both etiquette and culture. The courtesans were known for their graciousness, impeccable manners, refined customs, and proficiency in singing and dancing, extending to the sophisticated literary realm.

Courtesans were freed from domestic conventions but were mostly considered specialists in winning friends and influencing people, not just through their charm, but also through entertainment and persuasion. They were trained in literary and performing arts (though in a commercial way), and were independent and believed in free thinking. They applied these principles to all matters of life, including state and diplomacy. Courtesans - the devdasi or kothewali, accepted by both Hindus and Muslims, were accomplished musical and dance artists, some even became erudite scholars and were proficient in the art of conversation, persuasion, argument, debate, and discourse. (Sengupta:2014:124-125)

But the depiction of the characters of courtesans was extremely iconic. There were fictions about them, narratives about how they acquired in their ordinariness and everydayness an archetypal image. 'Tawaif, the term used for a courtesan, had accumulated over time moralistic, value-loaded connotations; in the popular mindset, it was equated to a whore, forcing these women performers into silence. But when they did speak, they had to reinvent themselves and reinforce their self-esteem through polite myths. However, society consistently battered them by referring to them as fallen and dangerous women. They had to constantly camouflage the personas, a crucial process to make them into the legends they were. By the end of the 19th century, tawaif had become an impolite word not used in genteel conversation; in the popular mindset, the tawaif was equated to a whore. Unfortunately, very few writings were dedicated to these women. Only a handful knew that they were considered to be the most educated women of their time. Many did write poetry, but even those seemed to have been censored from the literary canon. But the intentional silence of the scholars, left gaping holes in social history [Kidwai 2004]. Even in the writings of feminist scholars, these women have remained invisible. The feminists were limited by their own class bias and by their continued adherence to a "separate sphere" ideology that stressed women's purity, moral supremacy, and domestic virtues.) Singh-2007-1677.

Courtesans could practice their skills freely in the kingdom of Wajid Ali Shah. However, with the British takeover, even the king became a powerless prisoner in exile along with his influential courtiers. The British



government overlooked the artistic and creative element of the kothas and equated them with brothels. The identity of the courtesans was adversely affected. They were targeted by the same medical laws (Britain's Contagious Disease Act of 1864) to control venereal diseases afflicting European soldiers along with prostitutes, which were implemented for the prostitutes to regulate, inspect and control them. The provisions of Britain's Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 were incorporated into a comprehensive piece of legislation, Act XXII of 1864; it required the registration and periodic medical examination of prostitutes in all cantonment cities of the Indian empire. It became imperative that the courtesans and prostitutes of Lucknow, along with those in the other 110 cantonments in India where European soldiers were stationed, be regulated, inspected, and controlled [Talwar Oldenburg 1991:28-33].

Heeramandi and its Intervention in the Silenced Narratives of Indian Freedom Struggle

Cinema, as a public history, has the power to reach audiences that academic journals cannot. By using the "Bhansali Aesthetic" – grand sets, intricate costumes, and heightened melodrama – the series forces the modern viewer to acknowledge the dignity of a community that was systematically stripped of it. The *Tawaif's* resistance is not just through pistols and protests, but through the preservation of language (Urdu), dance (Kathak), and music, which the colonial state sought to categorise as obscenity.

Bhansali's *Heeramandi* reimagines the *Shahi Mohalla* as a micro-nation with its own power dynamics. The character of Mallikajaan represents the old guard, concerned with survival and prestige, while the younger generation, embodied by characters like Bibbojaan, bridges the gap between the *Kotha* and the revolutionary underground.

The series depicts Bibbojaan acting as a spy for the freedom fighters, providing information and refuge, helping revolutionaries with arms smuggling, too. When at the Congregation of the Courtesans Bibbojaan appealed to other courtesans' Ekbar Mujrewali Nahin mulkwali ban ke socho' (think once like citizens and not courtesans), it showed her commitment as a citizen of a country. This is not purely fictional; historical records suggest that courtesans like Azizunbai of Kanpur during the 1857 Rebellion played pivotal roles in supporting the rebels. By positioning the *Tawaif* within the Inquilab (Revolution) movement, the series challenges the binary of the 'pure mother/goddess' vs. the 'impure whore' that characterised nationalist iconography.

The series culminates in a collective political awakening. The transition of the *Tawaifs* from being 'entertainers of the elite' to 'daughters of the soil' marks a significant shift in historical perspective. In the final episodes, the *Kotha* becomes a site of open rebellion and ultimately Bibbojaan embraced imprisonment, demonstrating her commitment to her motherland. Hearing her arrest, her mother, MallikaJaan, proudly pronounced that for long they were the tawaifs, but with her daughter's arrest, they have become patriots of their homeland. This cinematic choice aligns with the arguments of Subaltern Studies scholars like Ranajit Guha, who suggests that the history of the Indian people is distinct from the history of the Indian elite (Guha, 1982).



Hence, to hear the unheard, to know the silenced narratives, this article rediscovers the courtesans' role in India's anti-colonial movements.

Courtesans and their role in nation-building and nationalism during India's struggle for Independence

Nationalism, as defined by Ernest Gellner is "... primarily a political principle... Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction... A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind" (Gellner:1983:1)

Nationalism places loyalty to the nation above all other forms of politics and identity, and one's loyalty and commitment towards the nation must be a natural corollary. Nationalism teaches that the nation is not only the site of loyalty, but it's the ultimate organisation for any political activity. Thus, the nation, a spatial entity, can legitimately claim property, lives, and any other sacrifice from its members residing there, to ensure the survival of the collective.

The notion of Indian nationalism is combined with the ideas of collective unity and collective development, yet India has hardly acknowledged the role of courtesans in shaping the nation and nationalism due to social stigma. During the 1857 rebellion, the brave 'Tawaifs' or courtesans of India played a significant role. But their stories of self-sacrifice had few or simply no listeners, with even fewer physical records. Consequently, their stories were inevitably lost or hidden between the wrinkled pages of history.

One such fascinating character was Azeezunbai. Her fascinating story found no place in regular history textbooks or any other conventional historical literature. However, it survived today mainly through some archival reports, oral narratives, and a research paper written by Lata Singh, an Associate Professor at the Centre for Women's Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. (Rao:The Dawn:2019)

Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was an immensely significant period in Indian history. The tension grew rapidly when the Indian soldiers rose against British officials all across the country. In June 1857, when the Indian soldiers tried to lay siege to Cawnpore (now known as Kanpur) surrounded the East India Company's British soldiers. A courtesan on a horseback disguised as a soldier and adorned in medals and armed with a brace of pistols joined the fighting soldiers and fought alongside them. She was Azeezunbai. (Subramaniam: The Hindu:2015). It was alleged that she had nothing to prove and held no personal grudges against the British, like many other women who had joined the uprising. But she took a proactive role because of her love and commitment to her motherland and was undeniably driven by passion for the nation.

In her article, 'Making the Margin Visible', Lata Singh argued that Azeezunbai was popular and a favourite among the second cavalry sepoy posted in Kanpur. She was also particularly close to one of the soldiers, Shamsuddin. Azeezunbai was so committed to the cause of the motherland that she offered her house as a meeting point for the sepoys. A women's group was formed. This group went around valiantly cheering the men in arms. They attended to their wounds and distributed arms and ammunition. The headquarters for her

work was set up in one of the gun batteries in Kanpur. During the siege of Kanpur, she accompanied the soldiers, whom she called her friends. She was always armed with pistols herself, too. (Safvi: *The Wire*: 2018) She was among the many courtesans who heroically fought and took a proactive role in India's struggle for independence, sometimes behind the veil and sometimes without it. In addition to Azeezunbai, Professor Singh mentions another nautch lady, Hossaini. She was alleged to be one of the key conspirators of the infamous Bibighar massacre, where over 100 captive British women and children were killed. (Rao: *The Dawn*: 2019)

Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, was a courtesan before marriage. Soumya Rao, in her article, 'Tawaifs: The unsung heroes of India's freedom Struggle' mentions that according to several accounts, Hazrat Mahal was a proactive member during the rebellion of 1857. She stepped in to fill the void left by her exiled husband, though briefly, and led the Indian soldiers to seize control of Lucknow. (Rao: *The Dawn*: 2019)

Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation movement and Tilak Swaraj Fund (in memory of Bal Gangadhar Tilak to raise funds for financing the Non-Cooperation movement) in 1920. He appealed to everyone to contribute to the fund. Gauhar Jaan, a courtesan, actively contributed to the Swaraj Fund to support the freedom movement. She organised a fund-raising concert which even Gandhi attended. She deposited Rs 12,000 of the Rs 24,000 she raised from her concert.

During the same time, a group of courtesans from Varanasi formed the Tawaif Sabha to support the independence struggle. Prof Lata alleges that Husna Bai, the chairperson of the Sabha, advised members of the group to adorn themselves in iron shackles instead of ornaments as a symbol of protest and boycott foreign goods.

Amritlal Nagar's 'Ye Kothewalian' (1958) was an account of the life of tawaifs. It included a letter from a courtesan, Vidyadhar Bai. It narrated details of her rendezvous with Gandhi in Varanasi. Amritlal mentions that after this, Vidyadhar appealed to her fellow courtesan friends to be more committed towards the motherland. Henceforth, some courtesans decided to start their musical performances with renditions of nationalist songs. One such song was written by her, Chun Chun Ke Phool Le Lo. (Rao_The Dwan: 2019)

Often, courtesans from other parts of the country, like Barisal in present-day Bangladesh and Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, met Gandhi and expressed their desire to join the Indian National Congress.

These make it evident that the courtesans indeed played a significant role in the Indian freedom narratives. But they were always looked at with raised eyebrows, judged as society's malice, and considered to be the 'nosto meye' (the spoiled or corrupt girls) and deliberately kept away from the mainstream society. Their love, their commitment, though, remained silenced for ages; directors like Sanjay Leela Bhansali, through his series *Heeramandi*, or say Srijit Mukherjee through his movie *Rajkahini*, have intervened well into history and manifested the unseen narratives and raised the unheard voices skilfully and successfully.

Conclusion

Cinema is rarely an accurate mirror of the past, but it is often a powerful lens through which the present negotiates with the past. *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* acts as a historical intervention by disrupting the sanitised, puritanical narratives of the Indian freedom struggle. While it may take liberties with dates and events, it captures the emotional and political truth of a marginalised community's yearning for agency. By placing the *Tawaif* at the heart of the India's anti-colonial movement, Bhansali's work ensures that the 'Diamond Bazaar' is no longer a footnote, but a central chapter in the rediscovery of India's pluralistic history.

A critical distinction must be maintained between visual history and cinematic historiography while analysing *Heeramandi*. Visual history pertains to the tangible traces and artefacts such as the cave paintings of Ajanta, Mughal miniatures, colonial-era photographs, and myriad archival records. These function as primary evidentiary sources, offering a static glimpse into the aesthetics and legal structures of a bygone era. They may be referred to as the historical data.

Conversely, cinematic historiography—a term popularised by scholars like Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White—is not merely a record but a discursive intervention. It is the active process of *constructing* a narrative about the past through the medium of film. While visual history provides the archive, cinematic historiography provides the interpretive agency. In *Heeramandi*, Bhansali does not simply present a museum of 1940s Lahore; he employs the cinematic medium to write a new history.

Courtesans known by various names- TAWAIFS in the North, DEVADASIS in the South, NAIKINS in Goa, BAIJIS in Bengal, and NAUTCH GIRLS for the Britishers, known only to incite a sense of obscenity. They were never credited with being strong and independent women with their intellectual and cultural contributions. Social ostracization prevented them from being involved in any kind of mainstream activities of the society. But discontented with the East India Company, the courtesans played an active role from during the 1857 rebellion. Their kothabaris became meeting zones for the nationalists and hideouts for rebels; many courtesans who gathered wealth funded the independence movements, too. But none of these were well documented in the history books.

However, while dispersed references of the *tawaifs* remained during the 1857 sepoy mutiny, with the rise of Gandhi and his visions on morality in the 1920s, the *tawaifs*, their notion on nation-building, nationalism, and their resistance, which were silent, gritty, and valiant, remained unacknowledged. Therefore, the nationalists wilfully abandoned them, and their contributions and the courtesans found themselves on the outside with their voices silenced. Since the non-cooperation movement, India has seen many female nationalists and freedom fighters. But to utter dismay, even the middle-class women who took proactive roles in freedom movements did not want to align with the courtesans. These incongruent anecdotes, when strung together, created a very gloomy picture of the role played by the courtesans in the nation-building process.

Bhansali's series moved beyond the silent artefacts of the *Tawaif* (the visual history) and created a dynamic discourse that challenges existing nationalist and colonial archives. *Heeramandi* suggested that the freedom movement was not just won on the streets by men in khadi, but also in the shadowed alleys of Lahore by women who had the most to lose. Their contribution was twice suppressed: first by the British, who criminalised them, and second by the post-independence state, which failed to recognise them as freedom fighters. Thus, in this case, cinema becomes a site where the silences of traditional text-based history are filled with voice, motion, and political intent.

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