

CALL FOR PAPERS:

South Asia's Courtesan, Hereditary, and Temple Performers: Expanding Discourse and Disrupting Histories

A Special Issue of *Dance Chronicle*

Edited by Sinjini Chatterjee and Shriya Patnaik

questions for editors, please email: chatterjee.199@osu.edu and shriya.patnaik@graduateinstitute.ch

word count for articles: 6,000 to 10,000 words (including bibliography and notes)

[Link to Author Guidelines.](#) Submit articles to [Dance Chronicle's portal](#)

Deadline for submissions: November 1, 2025

South Asia is a vast and varied region, home to communities of dancers who have performed in temple, courtesan, and hereditary contexts. Research with and about these dancers typically takes into consideration the caste locations, colonial oppressions, gender, and performance cultures of the artists. However, most of the academic studies have been centered in the context of the female temple performers of the South of India (Kersenboom 1987; Soneji 2011; Ramberg 2014; Pillai 2018; Thakore 2022, 2023; Meduri 1996, 2018; Krishnan et al. 2024). This focus obscures the multiple kinds of female performing communities that have existed across South Asia and the complex ways in which they have evolved and operated.

For example, studies highlighting female performers in the South of India reveal that these women mostly belonged to oppressed caste communities, and this profession was hereditary in nature. An examination of the Mahari system in Odisha reveals contradictions to this pattern of temple performing communities. Scholarship on the Devadasis of Odisha, colloquially known as Maharis, reveals that only women from dominant castes were permitted to become Maharis, with the system largely sustained through the adoption or donation of young girls (Marglin 1985; Banerji 2012). Similarly, a study of the Naikins, a prominent community of women performers in Western India, highlights their resistance to being legally classified as 'common prostitutes,' emphasizing caste-based notions of respectability (Priyambada, 2023). In contrast, research on the Baijis of Bengal, Bihar, and Benaras underscores their significant contributions to Hindustani Classical music and their deep expertise as performers. Their dancing sheds light on how female performing communities that operated beyond the religious framework of Hinduism established their own networks and identities (Muhuri 1986; Purkayastha 2021).

Outside of India, an exploration of Pashto female dancing communities in Pakistan's Swat Valley reveals that these performers were central to Pashtun cultural life from the 16th century until 2007. For centuries, they remained the only group in the region where women could freely pursue dance as a profession. However, the rise of the Taliban and the growing influence of radical religious politics in Pakistan led to the stigmatization of these dancers, portraying them as symbols of moral decline. This shift in perception resulted in severe physical violence against them. The case of Pakistan illustrates how, beyond the legacy of European colonialism, ethnic violence and gender-based oppression were sanctioned and perpetuated by indigenous radical religious movements (Buneri, 2011).

This Special Issue seeks to bring forth the histories and performative cultures of female hereditary,

courtesan, and temple performance communities in South Asia. We hope to illuminate communities from lesser researched regions such as Delhi, Maharashtra, Assam, Manipur, and Odisha from India, and also communities from larger South Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. In doing so, we aim to present a heterogeneous picture and showcase a multiplicity of voices that have shaped these practices and communities in the South Asian subcontinent. We look forward to scholarly contributions that incorporate depictions of artists through photographic, oral, archival, and recorded sources, as well as interviews and testimonials, that span colonial and postcolonial archives. Ultimately, the issue aims to bring to light a multiplicity of archival representations and ethnographic perspectives of female temple dancers, courtesan communities, and other hereditary performative traditions from across South Asian and diasporic contexts.

Possible topics for submission:

- Histories of performative communities, such as the Devadasis, Tawaifs, Baijis, or Naikins, and/or communities in Bengal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Odisha, Kashmir, Maharashtra, and the Northeast of India
- Female performers—hereditary, temple, and/or courtesan—and relationships between dance and illegitimacy and/or categorization as ‘prostitutes’ under state-centric discourses
- Shifts in the social, cultural, and economic positioning of these dancers with the advent of colonial modernity and postcolonial state formations
- Intersections of dancing and agency, with special attention to what sources beyond official records piece together as counter-histories or “alternative” narratives
- Methodological interventions that incorporate oral testimonies or recorded music and dance performances that can both contribute to and destabilize archival representations
- Diasporic performances by contemporary artists on international stages that inform and/or disrupt hegemonic nationalized discourses
- Case studies and/or biographies of individual actors or regional communities, such as the life story of a single or multiple Devadasi or Tawaif figures
- Histories of caste regulation, gendered forms of segregation, and sexual disciplining that have surrounded such communities under colonial and postcolonial state structures
- Assimilations, Incorporations, or Modifications of temple and courtly performance traditions into the contemporary classical dance cultures of Odissi, Kathak, Manipuri, Sattriya Nritya, and other performing traditions of South Asia
- Depictions of female hereditary, court, temple performers within early postcolonial

Bibliography

- Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique. *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Banerji, Anurima. "Dance and the Distributed Body: Odissi, Ritual Practice, and Mahari Performance." *About Performance*, no. 11 (2012): 7–39.
- Buneri, Shaheen. "Dancing Girls of the Swat Valley." *World Policy Journal* 28, no. 3 (2011): 73–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0740277511425358>.
- Kersenboom-Story, Saskia C. *Nityasumaṅgalī: Devadasi Tradition in South India*. 1st ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.
- Krishnan, Hari, Daves Soneji, and Nrithya Pillai. "Caste, Class, Aesthetics, and the Making of Modern Bharatanatyam Dance." In *Music and Dance as Everyday South Asia*. Oxford University Press, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197566237.003.0014>.
- Muhurī, Rebā. *Ṭhumrī o bāījī*. Kalikātā: Pratibhāsa, 1986.
- Pillai, Nrithya. "The Hereditary Artists of Naatyam." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2018.
- Priyambada, Pratichi. *Colonial Labels and Dancers' Voices a Study of Indian Women Performers in Nineteenth- Century Bombay Presidency*. University of California, Irvine, 2023. Dissertation.
- Purkayastha, Prarthana. "Outing Pleasure and Indulgence: Indubala's Scrapbook and the Red-Light Dances of Calcutta." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 31, no. 1–2 (2021): 14–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2021.1878502>.
- Ramberg, Lucinda. *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376415>.
- Soneji, Devesh. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226768113>.
- Thakore, Yashoda, Shoaib Ul-Haq, and Nimruji Jammulamadaka. "Hidden Archives of Kalavantulu Bodies." In *Managing the Post-Colony South Asia Focus*, 271–89. Singapore: Springer, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2988-5_14.