

Illicit dancing

On Tuesday 16 July 2013, the Supreme Court in Mumbai upheld a high court verdict from 2006, which had quashed the Maharashtra state government's order to ban dance bars in the state. This fact, and the research that will undoubtedly follow it, are all sequels to Anna Morcom's brilliant new book, which went to press before the Supreme Court had reached its verdict. After seven years of being banned, dance bars were allowed to open again. This was certainly good news for the tens of thousands of women who had been employed in these bars, and whose loss of livelihood as performers had catapulted many of them into the very sex work from which the ban was supposed to save them.

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INDEED, BOTH DEFENDERS AND OPPONENTS of the ban used similar imagery to make their case to be one of 'saving' the women from victimhood: while the ban's advocates said that dance bars were a cover for prostitution and trafficking rackets, those against the ban claimed that without legal places to dance, most of these women would end up as transactional sex workers. In both sides of the debate, therefore, the dancers' right to lifestyles that could meet the various criteria of respectability in bourgeois society was paramount.

Skilled or victim?

Anyone familiar with the history of the *tawaif* in North India and the *devadasi* in the South will spot the uncanny similarities with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century campaigns to gentrify the performing arts, turning them into palatable cultural forms that could be mobilized for the nationalist endeavor. As with the dance bar ban, in the earlier debates the art of dancing was largely if not entirely removed from its context of being a hereditary *skill*, and was reframed as a victimizing activity in which women were forced to flaunt their bodies and be akin to, or actually be, prostitutes. The perceived connection between dance and prostitution has been widely discussed in various scholarly works on the performing arts in South Asia. Morcom's analysis of the dance bar ban acutely reveals how the debate surrounding female performers and dance has not actually moved on much in over a hundred years. Although what used to be the moral issue of 'prostitution' is now the development issue of 'sex work' and HIV/AIDS, in many ways the debate remains framed in terms of women having improved lives if they do not have to dance. This framing of dance as part of sex work entirely denies the reality that for most of the performers, dancing is their trade, their labor, their skill, their family tradition, and indeed has been for centuries.

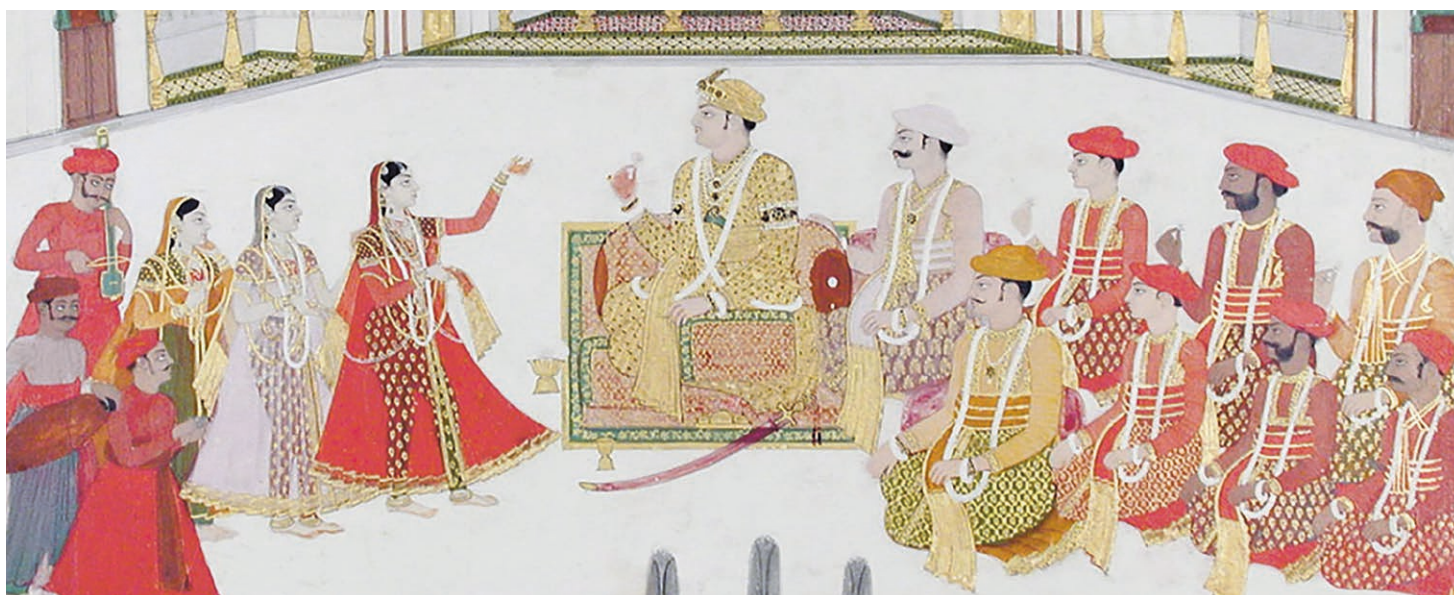
Woman(-identified) performers

The book starts with a somewhat disappointing introduction. While most of us who teach or present on courtesan culture have used movies to give our audience a taste of what performance may have looked like, opening a book of this caliber with an analysis of the film *Pakeezah* seems superfluous. However, by the end of the introduction it is entirely clear

that this is a book based on rigorous and broad scholarship. Morcom includes a historical overview of female hereditary performers in chapter one, an analysis of the castes and communities of these performers in chapter two, and in the third chapter she introduces her reader to transgender and women-identified performers in a historical context. She then shifts the focus to the twenty-first century, and examines in chapter four how even sexy Bollywood dancing has made it into the acceptable realm of the middle-classes, juxtaposing this with the ongoing stigmatization of hereditary performers. In chapter five we learn about the bar girls, the ramifications of the dance bar ban, and the necessity to frame arguments both for and against the ban in terms of labor and human rights. In her final chapter, Morcom returns to women-identified performers and the way their lives and livelihoods have been affected by NGOs, community-based organizations, and an increasing globalized awareness of 'gay rights'.

One of Morcom's radical additions to scholarship on dance in India is that she includes in her analyses *kothis*, a term she never fully defines but which usually refers to woman-identified assigned-at-birth men who live as men in their daily lives but present as women when performing. *Kothis* are increasingly conflated with *hijras* (transgender women who were born assigned-at-birth men), in part because *kothis*' lack of access to appropriate performing spaces leaves them in need of other

Below: Section of 'Shahriyar-al Mulk, Mansur-al Mulk and courtiers watch a dance'. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, ca. 1800, Deccani School, Andhra Pradesh, India. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection. Photo reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of the Asian Curator at The San Diego Museum of Art on Flickr.



leading *ulama* in Patani as Indian or Arab, they were more mixed, bringing knowledge from the Muslim world to Patani, but also returning with Southeast Asian knowledge to produce new syntheses. One particularly impressive chapter is Francis Bradley's study of the Siamese conquest of Patani. Bradley uses primary sources to document this violent episode, but also places these findings in a convincing theoretical shell, challenging the long-standing idea of low-casualty traditional warfare in Southeast Asia. From this point, the chapters progress more or less chronologically, concluding with Duncan McCargo's insightful analysis of militant leaflets.

Despite several wonderful chapters, the book as a whole suffers from some shortcomings. One drawback is its repetition, as several chapters recount the same historical events. For example, Kobkua Suwabbathat-Pian's chapter on recent Patani nationalist writing begins with an overview of Patani history. It is not that the overview is not well-written, but it was not necessary this late in an edited volume, taking space that could have been used to extend the author's impressive research. Related to this, several historical documents, namely *Hikayat Patani* and Ibrahim Syukri's *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani*, are analysed anew by several chapters.

Each chapter repeats the background of the texts and the authors fail to build from previous chapters. Such organizational issues are laid bare in Dennis Walker's sprawling chapter on national formation. The chapter once again relates historical events, but also jumps between past and present. More substantively, it can be difficult to distinguish between the nationalist texts reviewed and the author's own position, especially in statements such as "the Thai military and intelligence are acutely aware of what strength the Patanian psyche draws from the oneness of Islam with the memory of a glorious past" (206). The chapter's chaotic organization is exemplified by a long section on the final conquest of Patani, which wanders to include a paragraph on Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, a contemporary politician. While the chapter includes some impressive and interesting discussions, it was difficult to locate a take-away point.

A second concern is how the volume links to the present, especially since this link is used to centre the entire collection. The back cover reads that historical relations between Malays and the Thai Kingdom rest "at the heart of the ongoing armed conflict", a sentiment echoed throughout the book. No evidence is provided for this assertion beyond the lone chapter on the current violence by Duncan McCargo, which shows how anonymous leaflets credited to the militants mention historical events. Perhaps a more accurate statement would be that ongoing ethnic tensions and mistrust among Thai and Malay communities are premised on divergent understandings of history, but this is not the same as a violent conflict characterized by anonymous terrorist strikes. The violence in Patani is treated as if it is led by a traditional ethno-secessionist rebel group, such as those in Aceh, Mindanao, or even

earnings, which they can often acquire through association with *hijras*. Morcom's inclusion of women-identified and transgender performers alongside cisgender female dancers is quite revolutionary, and very much appreciated. Although Morcom herself occasionally stumbles on terminology (her uncritiqued use of the term 'effeminate' is somewhat grating, and terms such as 'transvestite', used to distinguish from 'transgender', could have been explored more), her work also highlights how unhelpful 'Western' and development-related language can be. The term MSM (men who have sex with men) is often used in discourses on non-Western societies, allowing for the fact that the term 'gay' and attendant identity politics are irrelevant in many cultures. However, as Morcom points out, the term MSM nevertheless ties itself to the binary gender division of male/female, a division that many *kothis* do not recognize. Modern feminist discourse may want to take note of how Morcom includes all women-identified dancers in her analyses, and while she does separate her discussion into cisgender (a term which, incidentally, she never uses) and transgender performers, her narrative flows easily and inclusively, without any hint of sensationalism.

Sense of déjà-vu

Anyone working in the field of South Asian performing arts needs to read this book, as should those interested in the lives of female and women-identified performers. However, Morcom's scholarship reaches far beyond the arts, and this book reveals the contradictory forces of modernity in illuminating yet, actually, predictable ways. Morcom herself refers to her 'shock' (27) at realizing that there continues to exist a dimension of Indian culture that involves hereditary female performers. However, more surprising than many of Morcom's conclusions as to the ongoing detriment of the post-colonial project to hereditary female-identified performance is the fact that so many of us who work in this field had not realized or verbalized it before. In that sense, the experience of reading Morcom's book is similar to watching a movie you have seen but which no longer lingers in your consciousness: a sense of déjà-vu combined with not being all that surprised at any of the revelations. Morcom shows that history unfortunately does repeat itself, though she also offers positive interpretations and analyses. This book is a unique addition to the scholarship on performance, and Morcom has written it in a highly erudite, well-researched, yet extremely readable manner.

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Patani in the 1970s. It is not clear how a conflict which lacks an identifiable insurgent group, and where Malays are targeted as much as Thais, can be assumed to be a conflict over competing interpretations of history. Related to this, the contributors fail to gauge the extent to which the historiographies they analyse really matter. Who is reading these essays and blogs? While not the case for some texts, such as Ibrahim Syukri's widely-read polemic, the magnitude and readership of nationalist historiographies are not clear. It is one thing to identify ghosts of the past, but we need to know who sees them and who is haunted by them.

Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand is notable for its sophisticated use of primary historical sources. Those interested in southern Thailand, Southeast Asian history, or historiography should read this book. The individual chapters are interesting and exceptionally well-researched. Taken as a whole though, the volume may fail to live up to the expectations generated by its list of gifted authors.

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