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The changing fortune of *Baijee* tradition in colonial Bengal

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Abstract

The utmost visible transformation that occurred during the colonial period was the erosion and degradation of traditional performing communities into the colonial categorization of the common prostitute class. This article addresses the changing fortune of one of the traditional performing communities in pre-colonial period: the *Baijee* tradition. It has highlighted the sequential factors of British colonialism and its effects on the scenario of socio-economic reality where the so-called pre-colonial traditions of women performing community or public entertainers like *baijees* of Bengal who had once a glorious past but were coalesced or merged into "prostitute category" during colonial times.

Keywords: *Baijee*, common prostitute, bengal, colonial era, zamindars

Introduction

Baijees of Bengal were famed as being women of the singing and dancing community. Although the seedbed of *Baijis* was the court of Muslim rulers, particularly the later Mughals and Nawabs who started the tradition of employing *baijees* in the entertainment of royal courts, they continued to emerge as a notable section during the decadence of Mughal rulers and the rise of the regional kingdoms ^[1]. Similarly, *Baijee* tradition flourished in Bengal with the *nawabi* rule in the eighteenth century, but it has climbed the zenith in the early nineteenth century with the emergence of Calcutta as the capital of the British Raj.

In the early 19th century, most of the *baijis* of this city were non-Hindus. Some of these *baijis* were Anglo-Indians, some were Jewish, some were Armenians, and the rest were Muslims. They came from different areas of north India ^[2]. According to Rabin Bandhopadhaya, these non-Bengali *paschima baijis* were descendants of those women performers who sang and danced in the courts of the Muslim and Hindu rulers of north India from the 12th century ^[3]. Most of them these *baijees* lived in the Burrabazar area. However, the composition of *baijis* living in Calcutta changed with the rise of Bengali *Baijees*, who mostly came from red-light areas and entered this profession by acquiring multiple artistic talents like dancing, singing, poetry. Gopa Mukherjee said that unlike *paschima baijis*, Bengali *baijis* did not have a long legacy to carry. Their inclusion in the profession was no more than one to three generations old. These Bengali *baijis* lived in *Girish park* area, *Rupgachi*, and *Sonagachi* in north Calcutta. In other areas like in *harkata alley*, *chanapatti*, *janbazar*, *teriti bazar* etc., Bengali *baijis* lived alongside Muslim and non-Hindu *baijis* ^[4].

In the early nineteenth century, *Baijees* became a vital part of Calcutta's Bengali upper-class aristocracy who could afford the performances and thus were the chief patrons. Aristocrats and members of Hindu compradors of Calcutta used to arrange the *baiji* performances in their house, garden villas and *durga dallans*. The annual *Durga puja* festival celebrated with great pomp was a special occasion for *bai* performances. Even wealthy *zamindars* usually vied with one another in inviting famous *baijis* even from faraway Lucknow and Delhi. Invitations were issued through letters and cards couched in a florid style as well as through advertisements in the local press. At times, some influential *babus* succeeded in securing the presence of the governor-general, the commander-in-chief, or other high dignitaries at these celebrations ^[5]. Thus, in the early 19th century Calcutta, *Baijees* became a symbol of prosperity among rich people. It was considered necessary for elites to mark their standing in the top echelon of the social hierarchy. By showering wealth on the *baijees*, the rich *babus* of then Calcutta felt satisfied as it proved their economic prosperity to their peers. On the other

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hand, enjoying these *bai* performances gave those landed aristocrats and members of the Hindu compradors community a feeling of living the glamorous life of Mughal court officials and aristocrats. Thus, *baijis* became the darlings of the members of the high-class society in the early years of 19th century^[6].

But the situation changed gradually from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. In that period, Bengal faced a major shift both on the economic and social fronts. The older dandies of Calcutta had reached a dead end. The prevailing *babu* culture, which was maintained in previous decades, was challenged by the new socio-economic milieu ushered in by the Company era. *Baijees* lost their chief patrons who used to spend lavishly on such *Bai* performances^[7]. With the development of English education, these earlier *babus* were replaced by a new and different class of people, Bengali intelligentsia, with diffident attitudes. According to Tithi Bhattacharya, the emergence of *Bhadralok* ideology was the most noticeable development during that era^[8]. In this background, education and knowledge came to be seen as virtues that sharply criticized the opulence of the rich in Bengal and also the *Babu* Culture. From the 1830s onwards, newspapers, periodicals, and western-educated people started to taunt the overspending nature of the old *babus*. The tradition of arranging *bai nautch* in Durga puja was severely criticized^[9]. Thus, the shift from *Babu* to *Bhadraloke* had a tremendous impact on *Baijees* as well as *Bai* performances in Calcutta.

On the other hand, the changing colonial policy and attitudes also played an essential role in the erosion of the status of *Baijees* or *Bai* performances in Bengal. Earlier, company officials did not see any wrong in keeping native women as mistresses and enjoying *nautch* performances in the houses of native *zamindars*. Numerous references of *baijis* and *nautch* bodily attributes, grace, and art in the earlier days of the raj were recorded^[10]. But the situations gradually change from the mid-19th century. They tried to eliminate the oriental indulgences during this time and stigmatized them as 'disturbingly sensual,' even bordering on the disgusting. Nevertheless, the boldest strike to the profession of *Baijees* was the colonial law and its homogenous implementation. The Act erased the differences between *baijees* and other public women and created a homogenous class of commercial 'sex workers'^[11]. This categorization denied their artistic and aesthetic professional skill and forced them into a single sexual entertainer category. Besides, the anti-*nautch* movement and social purity movement held by Christian missionaries and Indian social reformers also played an important role in the social displacement of this performing community.

Apart from the oppression of indigenous society and colonial governments, two other developments also affected the profession and performances of *Baijees* in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was the arrival of theatre and gramophone that became an important medium of entertainment in contemporary society. With the coming of these mass medium, the performances performed by *Baijees* were gradually beginning to retreat for various reasons. For example, arranging a *mujrah* was a costly affair, whereas a theatre was affordable for even middle-class people. In addition, in theatre, a story was told through dialogues, songs, and dances. The tales sometimes celebrated vigor, sometimes love, or sometimes laughter, making it more entertaining than *Baiji* performances^[12].

Similarly, the rise of the Gramophone Company offered a new medium of expression for *Baijees*. The new customers could now enjoy a well-known *Baiji* song, sitting in his room, by playing a gramophone record. Therefore, the exclusivity of *Baijees* that attracted elite people to enjoy a *Baijee* performances became obsolete.

Thus roughly from the mid-19th century, the introduction of the materialistic social and cultural rule, changing nature and needs of their patrons, *Baijees* inclusion as a mere part of the larger flesh trade through legislation, brought about changes in their professional and personal life and forced them into a vulnerable situation giving them fewer options for nurturing their own talents of singing and dancing. To cope up with this challenging time, they had to change their professional ethics. They also changed their songs, style of dance, choice of patrons, and even their medium of expression. With the arrival of mass-approaching medium, they started to become a part of these changed circumstances via theatre, gramophone etc. It can be said that though they survived as performers, their exclusive identity as *Baijees* was lost, and their status was gradually equated with other public women where *baijis* and prostitutes were merged within a single term of '*veshya*'.

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