

History Failed to Recall Dharmman Bibi's Contribution to the 1857 Revolt: A Courtesan of Babu Kunwar Singh

Prof. Ranjana Mishra* Prof. Shama Mahmood**

* Former HOD History, SMDSMC affiliated to SNTD Women's University, Mumbai, 400049

**Professor, Department Of Medieval and Modern History, University of Lucknow, Lucknow

Article History:

Received: 11-08-2025

Accepted: 04-09-2025

Published: 30-09-2025

Keywords:

Jagdishpur, Dharmman Bibi, Arrah, Abdul Halim Sharar, Mirza Hadi Ruswa, Saba Dewan, Tawaiifnama.

Page No.: 118-126

Article code: V2025013

Access online at:

<https://veethika.co.in>

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None declared

Published By: Pt. R.S.T.M. Society,
Lucknow, India

Corresponding Author:

Prof. Ranjana Mishra,

Former HOD History,
SMDSMC affiliated to SNTD
Women's University, Mumbai,
400049

Email:

ranjanamishra10@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Dharmman Bibi of Jagdishpur, Bihar was a popular and respected tawaif (courtesan) in the mid-19th century, who was known for her beauty, wit, and talent in singing and dancing. She was the usual conveyer of an exceptional and intricately sophisticated culture. Dharmman Bibi, was one of the unsung heroines of the first revolt of Indian Independence and revealed the true contribution and status of courtesans of India. During colonial rule, it was established that these women were first and foremost entertainers and worked for money. But in reality, they had creative flairs for singing, dancing music, poetry, and literary skills and were connoisseurs of culture. The research paper is descriptive, historical, and based on empirical studies. This research monologue demystifies the enigmatic lives of the courtesans in general and Dharmman Bibi in particular. The Research monologue is based on primary as well as secondary data. The personal visits to Arrah and Jagdishpur by the authors, the interactions with professors like Dr. Hira Prasad Singh, Ex-HOD of PG Department History at Kunwar Singh University Arrah, Dr. M. D. Niyaz Hussain, HOD Maharaja College Arrah, Mr. Murli Manohar Srivastava, Senior Media Co-ordinator of Chief Minister, Mr. Raj Kumar Singh, Director Guidance IGNOU, Rakesh Kumar Ojha, Clerk, Yadav Vidyapeeth and two Arrah Zila School teachers and non-teaching staff and quite a few prominent local people provided various information related to Babu Kunwar Singh's personal life and his contribution to 1857 revolt. The visit to archives, local museum, Dharmman Bibi Square, and Dharmman Bibi mosques substantiated the hypothesis that her contribution was no less than other protagonists who participated in the revolt. Various books like Saba Dewan's Tawaiifnama, Mirza Hadi Ruswa's Umrao Jaan, Veena Talwar Oldenburg's Lifestyles of Resistance, Abdul Halim Sharar's Guzishtha Lucknow, Munshi Prem-Chand's literary works serve as a secondary source and help in getting materials related to Dharmman Bibi and Kunwar Singh's life. Various articles related to topics from peer-reviewed journals and local folk dramas and songs related to the topics help to substantiate the fact that Dharmman Bibi like other tawaiifs remained an unsung heroine of the first revolt of Indian Independence.

1. Introduction

Dharmman Bibi of Jagdishpur, Bihar, was a prominent and respected tawaif (courtesan) during the mid-19th century, renowned not only for her striking beauty but also for her sharp intellect and exceptional talent in horse riding and fighting. Amidst an era often marked by colonial dominance and socio-political upheaval, she stood out as a symbol of an intricate and sophisticated cultural tradition. Far from being mere entertainers, these women were custodians of a rich cultural heritage, often exercising considerable influence in society. Dharmman Bibi represents one of the many unsung heroines of the first great struggle for first war of independence.

Contrary to the stereotypical and often tragic portrayal of courtesans by writers like Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa, the reality was that many tawaifs were empowered women of substance (Ruswa, 2007, pp. 10-12). They possessed not just artistic and cultural knowledge but also command over finances and political connections, which enabled them to actively participate in the resistance against British rule (Oldenburg, 1990). Rather than being subjugated figures, these women played significant roles, both direct and indirect, in resisting colonial oppression and supporting the revolt of 1857. Dharmman Bibi was closely allied with Babu Kunwar Singh, Zamindar of Jagdishpur, who emerged as one of the leading figures in the 1857 uprising. Despite being in the vulnerable postpartum phase, she lent him unwavering support, demonstrating immense courage and loyalty. Like Dharmman Bibi, numerous courtesans extended their support to the revolutionaries, risking and often losing their lives in the process.

The invisibility of courtesans in the freedom struggle narrative is stark. While male freedom fighters like Babu Kunwar Singh are widely remembered, the women who supported them especially courtesans have largely been marginalized. Yet, literary works and colonial-era records provide glimpses into their influential roles. For instance, Rudyard Kipling's "On the City Wall" mentions numerous courtesans who engaged in anti-British activities during the 1857 revolt. Folklore recounts many bhatiyarins (innkeepers) who sheltered rebels, acted as channels for secret communications, disseminating intelligence and even financing rebel activities. For example, a group of courtesans from Varanasi, led by Husna Bai, formed the Tawaif Sabha encouraged members to boycott British products and don iron shackles instead of traditional ornaments in solidarity with the freedom movement. Their activism, symbolic as well as practical, signalled a powerful form of resistance woven into their cultural identity ("Tawaifs: The Unsung Heroes", 2019). Prominent courtesans like Asghari Begum, Azeezan Bai, Habiba, Akbari Begum, and Husna Bai, along with over 225 other tawaifs, were penalized for their involvement, ranging from instigating rebellion to providing financial aid to the insurgents (Chawla & Safvi, n.d.). Such brutal repression reveals how threatening the British found the influence of these women. Nevertheless, post-revolt colonial policies and narratives sought to diminish the cultural and political stature of courtesans, pushing them into social obscurity and stigma.

Earlier, courtesans had been revered as accomplished performers in classical Indian music and dance, enjoying patronage from nobility and a broad admiring audience.

According to sociologist Veena Talwar Oldenburg, tawaifs represented a lifestyle of confrontation that was marked by a combination of socio-cultural prestige, financial independence, and even physical autonomy (Oldenburg, 1990).

However, during the late 19th century, as British colonial rule deepened, the professional status of these women was systematically eroded. The demarcation between courtesan and prostitute became blurred in public discourse and legislation, undermining the complex identities and roles that tawaifs had historically maintained. Colonial perspectives reduced them primarily to entertainers who sold their services for money, ignoring their creative contributions in music forms like Dhrupad and Dhamar, and later in genres like Khayal, Ghazal, and Mushaira gatherings (Bajpayee, 2015, p. 1). Many historians and scholars today prefer the term “courtesan” to capture this layered identity, though even this word falls short of fully representing their cultural stature. Feminist scholars such as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue that these women’s reputations and warmth transcend conventional categories, urging us to recognize the courtesans as vital contributors to India’s cultural heritage and freedom movement. By revisiting figures like Dharmman Bibi, we bring to light the courage, agency, and artistry of the courtesans, thereby enriching our understanding of the multifaceted history of India’s quest for independence (Tharu & Lalita, 1991, pp. 78-95).

2. Research Questions

1. What specific roles did Dharmman Bibi play in supporting Babu Kunwar Singh during the 1857 Revolt, and how did her actions reflect the broader contributions of courtesans to India's independence struggle?
2. How have historical narratives and colonial policies contributed to the marginalization and stigmatization of courtesans like Dharmman Bibi in mainstream historiography?
3. In what ways did the cultural and artistic skills of tawaifs enable them to exert political influence and participate in anti-colonial resistance?

3. Research Objectives

1. To investigate and document the life, contributions, and legacy of Dharmman Bibi as an unsung heroine of the 1857 Revolt.
2. To analyze the socio-cultural status of courtesans in 19th-century India, challenging colonial stereotypes and highlighting their roles as cultural custodians and political actors.
3. To address historiographical gaps by integrating primary and secondary sources, including folklore and empirical data, to elevate the visibility of women like Dharmman Bibi in narratives of India's freedom movement.

4. Methodology

The research paper employs a descriptive, historical, and empirical methodology to illuminate the lives of courtesans, with a particular focus on Dharmman Bibi, a prominent figure associated with the 1857 Indian revolt. The study combines both primary and secondary sources for a comprehensive understanding.

Primary data was collected through field visits to Arrah and Jagdishpur, where the authors engaged with local experts, historians, and prominent community members. These include professors like Dr. Hira Prasad Singh and Dr. M. D. Niyaz Hussain, officials such as Mr. Murli Manohar Srivastava and Mr. Raj Kumar Singh, and local school teachers and staff. These interactions provided valuable insights into Babu Kunwar Singh's personal life and his revolutionary contributions, corroborated by visits to archives, museums, Dharmman Bibi Square, and Dharmman Bibi mosques. These efforts supported the hypothesis emphasizing Dharmman Bibi's significant, though traditionally underrecognized, role in the revolt, comparable to other key participants. Secondary data encompasses extensive literature on courtesans and the historical period, including works by Saba Dewan, Mirza Hadi Ruswa, Veena Talwar Oldenburg, Abdul Halim Sharar, and Munshi Premchand. Peer-reviewed journal articles, local folk dramas and songs were studied to enrich the cultural context and emphasize Dharmman Bibi's status as an unsung heroine of the 1857 uprising. The research underscores courtesans' involvement, thereby filling historiographical gaps left by mainstream accounts. This blend of empirical inquiry and historiographical analysis facilitates a nuanced understanding of courtesans' roles in India's struggle for independence.

5. Historical Background of Courtesans in India

Dance as a vocation in India can be traced back to pre-common era through classical texts and poetry, with references to Apsaras. During the 6th and 7th centuries, the Devadasis in southern India were regarded as priestesses consecrated through dance and music. Their duties extended beyond performance, including temple rituals (Dewan, 2019). In medieval India (1526-1857), the role of these dancers transformed from sacred duties to public entertainment. They came to be known as tawaifs (Soneji, 2008, pp. 23-56). Historian Veena Talwar Oldenburg noted that courtesans quietly challenged social hierarchies, offering refuge for underprivileged women across caste and religion (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 25-54). According to Gulbadan, a head tawaif in Lucknow, the kotha (courtesans' residence) was a sanctuary for marginalized women and men alike, offering freedom and peace ("How Tawaifs Fell from Grace", n.d.).

Courtesans received lifelong pensions from Nawabs, and some wielded significant influence. For instance, Hakim Mahdi, who rose to the prime ministership of Awadh, credited his success to a concubine who supported him financially (Waheed, 2014, pp. 986-1023). Unlike European prostitutes or geishas of Japan, Indian courtesans were regarded socially as cultured and respectable artists rather than being merely sex workers (Strzelecki, n.d.). Jennifer Mason highlights in her book *The Nautch Girls* that these dancers were admired for artistry until British colonial attitudes stigmatized them (Mason, 2021, pp. 1-9). Courtesans were divided into categories such as Deredars, Dumini and Dhadhee who sang during family ceremonies and public events after the time of Emperor Akbar. They were skilled in traditional songs like Sariya, Sohar, Banara, Gari, and Gazal. The head courtesan or Chaudhrayan held administrative roles, managing estates, training dancers, selecting musicians, and maintaining the kotha's staff. Before British rule, the art of dance and performance by courtesans was revered. The term "nautch," derived from the Hindi/Urdu

word nach (dance), came to describe their performances. Early British colonists appreciated these performers, sometimes considering their art superior to Western theatrical traditions. James Forbes described them as embodying perfect beauty and grace. British officials and settlers would pool resources to enjoy nautch parties, showing fascination and patronage.

However, the introduction of Victorian morality by British colonizers altered perceptions drastically. The 1857 revolt fostered British mistrust of courtesans for supporting rebels, leading to punitive measures like higher taxes and the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, which required registration and medical exams for prostitutes in cantonments. The courtesans lost royal patronage and societal respect, increasingly being viewed as immoral.

Courtesans made efforts to reclaim their cultural heritage through organizations such as the Madras Devadasi Association, despite their efforts, the anti-nautch sentiment grew stronger. With the decline of princely states and the rise of Victorian-influenced social reformers, the tawaif tradition and art suffered a steep downfall. In post-independence, some courtesans moved to Mumbai and joined the film and theatre industry, while many others remained marginalized.

6. Dharmman Bibi Through Folklore

Dharmman Bibi, also known as Dharam Devi, was a paramour or tawaif of Babu Kunwar Singh, a zamindar of Jagdishpur, a small town in present-day Bihar, India. She was known for her attractiveness, acumen, and charming personality and was highly respected because of her closeness with Babu Kunwar Singh. Kunwar Singh's popularity in Arrah, is known not only from the local gazetteers or police files but also through folklore. The Rajput aristocracy in Shahabad had long been part of the Mughal political, administrative, and social edifice. Keeping tawaif was very common among the Zamindars. The Zamindars and local leaders' wives looked after the eases of husbands, their children, and relatives, and observed appropriate religious rituals and fasts for their husband's well-being (Dewan, 2019). The Rajput aristocracy in Shahabad had long been part of the Mughal political, administrative, and social edifice. Kunwar Singh had once organized at his fort in Jagdishpur, a mahfil for some white officials. At that time Dharmman Bibi was at Jagdishpur but she was not programmed to perform in the sundown mehfil (Dewan, 2019, pp. 50-51). Babu Kunwar Singh never wanted his paramour to dance so he asked another popular tawaif to dance. The officer desired to see the presentation of Dharmman Bibi as he had heard a lot about her. She saved Kunwar Singh from an embarrassing situation with a British official by cleverly getting the official drunk and sending her maid in her stead, thereby protecting Kunwar Singh's honour and maintaining his hospitality towards colonial guests without compromising her own dignity. Dharmman Bibi, longing for motherhood, adopted a two-year-old girl through legal purchase, as only tawaifs could adopt at the time. British authorities were unsympathetic to such adoptions, and soon police visited, but Kunwar Singh's influence deterred inquiry. Tragically, the child died of fever, devastating Dharmman, who then fell ill and soon discovered she was pregnant (Dewan, 2019, pp. 55-56).

Thousands of folk songs were devoted to convey peoples' commitment to the events and brave combatants, and broke the myth of 1857 that it was led by the elites. In mainstream history. Kunwar Singh was considered a rebel leader on the brim of insolvency and in danger of losing his inherited lands in 1857 but the folklores give some positive aspects of the rebelled leader as how through his leadership kept the British at bay for almost one year before succumbing to injuries on 26 April, 1858. The discontent among people was strong because of the annihilation of the Indian industries, handicrafts, and agriculture (Varghese, 2016, p. 26). Bhartendu explains how all trade and crafts have been destroyed and the people impoverished through the following verse.

*By their machines they plunder us,
Wealth declines every day and sorrows multiply,
We cannot do without thin cotton and muslin,
We are slaves of foreign weavers,*

Every day they are loaded onto ships and brought here (Varshneya, 1941, pp. 246-247).

Similar views have been expressed by Dr. Tara Chand, and other sociologist scholars Ramachandra Guha, who have documented over 110 different colonial-era peasant revolts (Varghese, 2016, p. 26). During this time Dharmman Bibi played a key role in supporting Babu Kunwar Singh, by providing financial and material support to Kunwar Singh's forces, and helped to mobilize other women in the area to join the rebellion (Dewan, 2019, pp. 60-61).

7. Dharmman Bibi's Patron Kunwar Singh's Contribution in 1857

The revolt that began at Meerut in 1857 spread swiftly to Bihar, witnessing significant uprisings. British officials, aware of unrest, reported increasing discontent. In Patna, Pir Ali led an early rebellion, turning his bookshop into a hub for rebels ("Peer Ali Khan", n.d.). After his associate Maulvi Mehdi was executed without trial, Pir Ali attacked the government office at Gulzar Bagh, killing a British officer ("Martyr Peer Ali Remembered", 2010). Pir Ali and many of his followers were soon arrested and executed publicly, further inflaming rebellious sentiments. The Danapur uprising followed, with native sepoys refusing British orders and marching to join Kunwar Singh, a prominent local zamindar. Kunwar Singh, supported by family and followers, captured Arrah, releasing prisoners and burning government records (Dewan, 2019, pp. 65-68). In battle, Kunwar Singh's forces inflicted heavy losses on the British, temporarily forcing them to retreat (Forbes-Mitchell, 1893, pp. 138-139). Although the British recaptured Arrah, Kunwar Singh continued guerrilla resistance, even after suffering defeat and injury ("Kunwar Singh — Bihar Zamindar", n.d.). Kunwar Singh, aided notably by Dharmman Bibi, whose contributions remain under-recognized who, fought valiantly, eventually dying from battle wounds ("Danapur Mutiny", n.d.). Leadership passed to his brother Amar Singh, who also led persistent resistance. Their heroic efforts are celebrated in folk songs, though women like Dharmman Bibi are yet to receive full historical recognition.

8. Dharmman Bibi in Oblivion

Dharmman Bibi actively participated alongside Kunwar Singh in fighting the British during the 1857 uprising, supporting the rebel effort materially and inspiring loyalty among people around her. While Kunwar Singh's role as a leader in the rebellion is well recognized, Dharmman Bibi's contributions have been largely unacknowledged in mainstream history, despite her significance. She inspired the local resistance against British forces. She was a skilled swordswoman, and horse rider, known for her bravery alongside Kunwar Singh during the 1857 Battle of Jagdishpur. She reportedly killed British soldiers and remained loyal to Kunwar Singh, despite personal conflicts and her love for Dalip Singh. After the rebellion's defeat, Bibi went into hiding. She entrusted her newborn twins to relatives for safety and disappeared from history, her fate and legacy remaining largely unknown.

Thus, the relationship between Dharmman Bibi and Babu Kunwar Singh was both personal and political, marked by partnership, respect, and shared involvement in resisting British colonial forces.

9. Conclusion

Dharmman Bibi's story exemplifies the overlooked contributions of courtesans to India's first war of independence in 1857. As a tawaif allied with Babu Kunwar Singh, she provided not only emotional and personal support but also material resources, intelligence, and active participation in the resistance, including mobilizing women and engaging in combat despite her postpartum vulnerability. Her actions challenge the colonial narrative that reduced courtesans to mere entertainers, revealing them as empowered figures with agency, cultural influence, and political acumen. Through folklore, local testimonies, and historical records, it becomes evident that Dharmman Bibi's bravery—such as her clever evasion of British demands and her unwavering loyalty—played a pivotal role in sustaining the revolt in Bihar for nearly a year. Yet, her legacy has been eclipsed by patriarchal and colonial historiographies that prioritize male leaders, marginalizing women from non-elite or stigmatized backgrounds.

This research underscores the need to reinterpret the 1857 Revolt as a multifaceted movement involving diverse actors, including courtesans who defied social norms to contribute to the anti-colonial cause. By integrating empirical data from site visits and interactions with local experts, alongside secondary sources like folk songs and literary works, the study demystifies the enigmatic lives of tawaifs and positions Dharmman Bibi as a symbol of resistance. Her invisibility in mainstream history reflects broader systemic erasures of women's roles in national narratives, perpetuated by post-colonial biases and Victorian moral frameworks that blurred the lines between artistry and immorality. Elaborating on her contributions enriches our understanding of the revolt, highlighting how courtesans' financial independence, networks, and cultural platforms enabled subtle yet powerful forms of defiance, such as boycotts, espionage, and funding insurgents.

Ultimately, Dharmman Bibi's tale is a vital thread in the tapestry of India's independence struggle, reminding us that freedom was forged not only by celebrated heroes but also by unsung heroines whose stories demand reclamation. Recognizing figures like her fosters a

more inclusive historiography, honoring the intersection of gender, culture, and politics in shaping national identity.

10. Suggestions

1. Future research should prioritize digitizing and analyzing local folklore, archives, and oral histories from regions like Bihar to uncover more details about lesser-known participants in the 1857 Revolt, particularly women from marginalized communities.
2. Educational curricula in India should incorporate modules on the roles of courtesans in anti-colonial movements to challenge stereotypes and promote gender-inclusive history teaching.
3. Preservation efforts, such as restoring sites like Dharmman Bibi Square and mosques, along with community-led initiatives like folk drama festivals, could help commemorate her legacy and raise public awareness.
4. Collaborative studies between historians and feminist scholars are recommended to explore comparative analyses of courtesans' roles across different Indian regions during colonial resistance, using interdisciplinary approaches like cultural anthropology and gender studies.
5. Policymakers and cultural institutions should support exhibitions, documentaries, and publications focused on unsung heroines to bridge.

References

- Ali, M. (1994). *The beauty of my beloved*. Taj Magazine, Lucknow edition.
- Anagol, P. (2006). *The emergence of feminism in India (1850-1920)*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Bajpayee, R. K. (2015). *Lucknow ki tawaifayen*. Uttar Pradesh.
- Ballhatchet, K. (1973). *Race, sex and class under the Raj: Imperial attitudes and policies and their critics (1793-1905)*. St Martin's Press.
- Ballhatchet, K. (1980). *Race sex and class under the Raj: Imperial attitudes and policies and their critics 1873-1905*. St. Martin Press.
- Chandra, M. (1973). *The world of courtesan: Sensuous women who practiced love as an art and profession*. Delhi.
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.
- Chawla, B., & Safvi, R. (n.d.). *The forgotten women of 1857 Azizun Bai, Asghari Begum, Habiba*. The Milli Gazette. <https://www.milligazette.com/news/Family-Kids/15010-the-forgotten-women-of-1857-azizun-bai-asghari-begum-habiba/>
- Danapur mutiny. (n.d.). About-patna.blogspot.com. <http://about-patna.blogspot.com/2011/11/danapur-mutiny.html>
- Dewan, S. (2019). *Tawaifnama*. Context.
- Forbes-Mitchell, W. (1893). *Reminiscences of the great mutiny, 1857-59*. Macmillan.
- How tawaifs fell from grace and came to be known as prostitutes. (n.d.). Ranasafvi.com. <https://ranasafvi.com/how-tawaifs-fell-from-grace-and-came-to-be-known-as-prostitutes/>

- Jagpal, C. K. K. (2011). I mean to win: The nautch girl and imperial feminism at the fin de siècle [Doctoral thesis]. University of Alberta.
- Kunwar Singh — Bihar zamindar who chopped off his arm while fighting British during 1857 mutiny. (n.d.). ThePrint. <https://theprint.in/theprint-profile/kunwar-singh-bihar-zamindar-who-chopped-off-his-arm-while-fighting-british-during-1857-mutiny/931053/>
- Martyr Peer Ali remembered. (2010, July 7). Times of India, Patna edition.
- Mason, J. (2021). The nautch girls: India's forgotten dancers. Calcutta.
- Oldenburg, V. T. (1989). The making of colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877. Oxford University Press.
- Oldenburg, V. T. (1990). Lifestyle as resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India. *Feminist Studies*, 16(2), 259-287.
- Peer Ali Khan: The unheard story of an Indian freedom fighter. (n.d.). OralHistory.ws. <https://oralhistory.ws/resources/peer-ali-khan-the-unheard-story-of-an-indian-freedom-fighter/>
- Ruswa, M. M. H. (2007). Umrao Jan Ada: The courtesan of Lucknow (K. Singh & M. A. Hussaini, Trans.). Orient Paperback.
- Soneji, D. (2008). Memory and the recovery of identity: Living histories and the Kalavantulu of Coastal Andhra Pradesh. Oxford University Press.
- Strzelecki, Z. (n.d.). Prostitute or artist? The truth about geishas. Manchesterhistorian.com. <https://manchesterhistorian.com/2014/prostitute-or-artist-the-truth-about-the-geishas/>
- Tawaifs: The unsung heroes of India's freedom struggle. (2019, June 20). DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1489351>
- Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (Eds.). (1991). Women writing in India: 600 B.C. to the present (Vol. 1: 600 B.C. to the early twentieth century; Vol. 2). Feminist Press.
- Varghese, A. (2016). British rule and tribal revolts in India: The curious case of Bastar. *Modern Asian Studies*, 50(5), 26.
- Varshneya, L. S. (1941). Adhunik Hindi sahitya. Allahabad.
- Waheed, S. (2014). Women of ill repute: Ethics and Urdu literature in colonial India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(4), 986-1023.