NEGOTIATING SHAME & HONOUR, CASTE & CLASS: WOMEN IN PUNJABI THEATRE OF EAST PUNJAB

by

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Abstract

Few females participated in early forms of Punjabi theatre until the 1940s and there is a dearth of information available on their contributions in the area. This dissertation examines reasons that prevented females from entering this field, and the stories of women who have. I focus on the life stories of four women who have made significant contributions to Punjabi theatre, Neena Tiwana, Rani Balbir Kaur, Navnindra Behl and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, whom I interviewed over a period of three months (February to April) in 2017, to understand what enabled and hindered their success.

The dissertation begins with the history of women in performance within the Indian subcontinent in general, and the Punjab region of Northern India, in specific. I then investigate gendered norms within Punjabi society and their connection to ideas of shame and honour, which lead to a “script” which traditionally barred women from areas of performance in public spaces. Finally, I consider the success of the aforementioned females, looking again at ideas of shame, as well as the support of male relatives and dynamics of caste and class privilege as factors that enabled their ascendence within Punjabi theatre. Overall the dissertation seeks to understand the presence of shame and stigma for women in the theatre, and analyze how we can understand the emergence of these four women in a field that is otherwise dominated by men.
Lay Summary

Few females participated in early forms of Punjabi theatre and there is a dearth of information available on their contributions in the area. This dissertation focusses on four women who made great contributions to Punjabi theatre, Neena Tiwana, Rani Balbir Kaur, Navnindra Behl and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry. I interviewed these women in 2017, seeking to understand their success in a field dominated by men. I provide a history of women in performance within the Indian subcontinent in general, and the Punjab region of Northern India, in specific. I then investigate gendered norms within Punjabi society and their connection to ideas of shame and honour, which lead to a “script” which traditionally barred women from areas of performance in public spaces. Finally, I consider the success of the aforementioned females, examining the factors that contributed to their success within Punjabi theatre.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Ranbir Kaur Johal. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 2-4 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H16-02594.
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Dedication

For my father, Hardial Singh Johal (1948-1999); I know he would have been proud of me.

For my mother, Kashmir Kaur Johal, the first woman to share her stories with me.

For the wonderful woman who shared their lives with me, Neena Tiwana, Rani Balbir Kaur, Navnindra Behl and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I wish to set the stage for this dissertation with a personal anecdote shared by Rani Balbir Kaur, who is considered a pillar in Punjabi theatre for her work over the past 40 years.

When I started directing and acting … at times I came back [home] in the middle of the night. And I knew. I expected it as I enter[ed], that my mother is going to be there and abuse me or even hit me. And once, I remember Pran, who is a famous Bollywood actor, he used to come here. There was an Ammi ji who would hold a musical darbar (gathering) and he would attend it, as he was a devout follower of Ammi ji. I had an old friend who was Pran’s cousin sister, her name was Nirupma Bali. She took me too …. We got [back] late [and] I remember …. the door opened, in front of Pran, in front of everybody, my mother gave me two, three tight slaps. [T]hey tried to talk, intervene, but no, she would not listen. She pulled me and banged the door.

This incident occurred in the 1970s, when Rani Balbir Kaur (RBK) was approximately 30 or 31 years old, the mother of two young girls and working as a lecturer in the Department of Indian Theatre at Panjab University, Chandigarh. While her mother may have been a little overprotective because RBK was separated from her husband at this time, when separation and divorce were still quite taboo, the seclusion of Rani Balbir from the opposite gender and a restriction on her presence in public spaces (especially the stage) had been present for many years prior. It is also not an aberration: it has operated as an accepted norm in Punjabi communities. This restriction of Punjabi women from performative spaces, particularly theatre, is the topic that I shall be exploring in my dissertation. I will attempt to understand how and when these restrictions function, as well as how and when these restrictions have been overcome – or, perhaps, have even been encountered at all.
Organized Punjabi theatre has a relatively recent history; many scholars (Gunjeet Aurora, Kamlesh Uppal, Atamjit Singh) have argued that there was no real tradition of Punjabi theatre until the early 20th century, when Norah Richards encouraged young students in Lahore, Punjab to write plays in their mother tongue.¹ Richards, known as “the grandmother of Punjabi theatre,”² was an actress born in Ireland in 1876. She moved to the Punjab in 1911 when her husband was offered a job teaching English at Dyal Singh College, in Lahore. In the Punjab, she first staged some English language plays, and then, in subsequent years, she initiated playwriting competitions in Indian languages. In 1913, she sponsored a Punjabi language playwriting contest which was won by a young I. C. Nanda for his play *Suhaag (Husband)*, also known as *Dulhan (Bride)*, about child marriage. In 1914, the same contest was won by Rajinder Lal Sahni, for his play *Deene di Barat (Deene’s Wedding Procession)*. Nanda and subsequent Punjabi playwrights chose women as a focus for their works, writing about issues such as female education and widow remarriage. Winning plays were staged at the College and in 1915, Richards founded the Saraswati Stage Society.³

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¹ Some of these works include, Ishwar Chander Nanda’s *Suhaag (Husband)* also known as *Dulhan (Bride)*, 1913; *Bebe Ram Bhajni*, 1914, *Subhaddra*, 1920, *Var Ghar or Lily da Viah (Lily’s Wedding)*, 1929; *Shamu Shah*, 1928; and *Social Circle*, 1949, which was a collection of three one-act plays.
After her husband’s death in 1920, Richards returned to Europe, but found her way back to the Punjab in 1924, where she resumed her work with Punjabi theatre. After the partition of India in 1947, she moved to Andretta, in Himachal Pradesh, a state neighbouring the Punjab, where she owned 15 acres, known as the Woodlands Estate, in an idyllic setting within the Kangra valley. It was here that she made her home, in a simple cottage, and where she set up an acting school. She organized an annual theatre festival as well.

Figure 1.2 Norah Richards in Andretta, undated.\(^5\)

\(^4\) https://www.divyahimachal.com/2017/12/andretta-needs-patronage/

\(^5\) http://123himachal.com/nora/norah.htm

file:///Users/ranbirjohal/Desktop/Norah%20Richards%20%20Avnish%20Katoch%20%20Flickr.htm
Richards was also a prolific writer, writing many plays about life in the Punjab – all of which were also staged in the Punjab. She also wrote many pamphlets and booklets about theatre, including playwriting and production. Her contribution to Punjabi culture, especially drama, was vast and recognized by writers and thespians alike. In 1970, a year before she passed away at the age of 95, Punjabi University, Patiala (East Punjab) conferred an honorary degree of Doctor of Literature upon her.

Despite the central role of a woman, Norah Richards, in encouraging Punjabi language playwrights and establishing a theatre group, women have somewhat paradoxically been scarce in the development of modern Punjabi theatre, both as writers and as performers. As will be discussed in chapter two, the early years of Punjabi theatre saw no female performers – men played all female roles – and women were rarely seen on the Punjabi stage until the 1950s, and seldom in following decades. And, as reflected in the anecdote from RBK, there have been strong cultural restrictions on women's participation.

How did it happen that women in the Punjab were relegated to the private space but a woman is one of the most well-known personalities in Punjabi theater? Did Norah Richards transgress the limitations placed on gender because of her whiteness? We will see a similar dynamic in Chapter 2 (History of the Actress in India), where the first actresses in Indian theatre, were non-Indian females in Marathi theater. “They” were allowed to be on stage because they were the “other.” The issue was not that Indian men had a problem with women doing theater - they had a problem with their women doing theatre. We shall see that the restrictions associated with gender can be intensified by class and other factors, such as race. Therefore, relative privilege in one area can help an individual to overcome restrictions in another area.
As noted by Inderpal Grewal⁶ and Kamala Visweswaran⁷, it is dangerous to characterize females only in their roles as women; it is important to also see them as independent individuals and as parts of other communities. Women do not only face women’s issues, they also face issues connected to class, caste and community. Therefore, issues of gender and the negotiation of patriarchy are also affected by other factors, such as, class, caste and race. A privileged position in one of these factors can supersede any restrictions constructed by other factors. For these reasons, the obstacles Richards may have faced as a woman, in Europe, did not necessarily occur in the Punjab, where her association with the colonial ruling class before Partition, and “foreign status” after it, afforded particular kinds of privilege. Possible obstacles could have been assuaged due to her privileged position as a white person in a British colony; this position offered her greater freedom and power than the Punjabi women in India at that time.

The origin of theatre in the Punjab region is also more complex than the tidy narrative of Roberts’ contribution. As will be discussed at length in chapter 2, Punjabi theatre did not simply “begin” with Richards’ arrival in Punjab and her subsequent sponsorship of a Punjabi playwriting contest. “Folk” traditions, such as the naqqal and bhand, also contributed to the formation of Punjab theatre, we cannot simply cast these traditions aside. It is in the contexts of both these traditions (the rural, folk and the urban, modern) that we see that women’s roles were traditionally restricted. This shall be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Theatre is associated with behaviours traditionally considered shameful for women in Punjabi society. It requires women to be present in the public space, a domain traditionally denied to them. A performance tradition such as theatre also requires her to interact with men, who dominate in the genre. In addition, as discussed above, historically, communities of entertainers in South Asia have been regarded as having low status, as compared to high-caste groups such as Jatts\(^8\) and Brahmins. Female performers, were deemed to possess loose moral characters. Further complicating the situation was that when Indian women did join the stage in large numbers in other parts of India, many of them were courtesans or sex workers. Indeed, even people belonging to castes associated with performance (such as Mirasis) generally disallowed their female relations from joining them on the stage. Therefore, women associated with the stage and performance inevitably also found themselves associated with shame.

When a smattering of Punjabi women finally appeared onstage in the 1950s, these actresses were usually drawn from the families of the playwrights, and there were still no female playwrights, directors, or producers. However, a handful of women were able to create a niche for themselves in this male dominated genre in subsequent decades. In the 1960s and 70s, Rani Balbir Kaur, Neena Tiwana, Navnindra Behl and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, contributed to Punjabi theatre as actresses, playwrights, and directors. Understanding what allowed these women to enjoy success in a field that largely excluded females was the central concern of the research I conducted from February to April of 2017. If we consider the success of these women in theatre, given the history of women's participation in performance that we have seen, one question emerges: what, if any, role did shame play in the lives of these women as they attempted to participate in theatre?

\(^8\) Although the Jatt caste enjoys a high economic and social status in Punjab, it is not so in the rest of India, where it belongs to the lowest group in the varna system, the Shudra.
We shall see, in Chapter Three that although the concept of shame was a strong presence in their lives, the majority of the co-participants were able to transgress it.

**Living Gendered Norms**

My interest in this subject and my motivation for exploring this question arises from my personal experiences. My own childhood and youth, growing up in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia in the 1980s and 1990s was governed severely by a restriction from public space. My father, a first-generation Jatt Sikh immigrant, who came to Canada in 1973, never permitted any of his three daughters, or his wife, to dance in public, even if it were at a close family gathering. My sisters and I were not allowed to visit any of our friends’ homes, nor to attend any birthday parties, playdates or sleepovers. However, our brother, who was the youngest, was granted all these privileges.

For many years, my father would not even allow my sisters or me to enter any of the local Hindi/Punjabi video rental shops, as it was usually only men who worked at and frequented these places of business. I also recall his misogynistic attitudes towards local media personality, Sushma Dutt, who hosted a weekly IndoCanadian show on the Multicultural Channel. One evening as we were watching the show he divulged that this lady was a shameful woman who had abandoned her husband (who worked in a sawmill) and her four children so that she could pursue a career on television. I found out years later that this was false gossip which had been fed to my father through his male-dominated social circles. Sushma Dutt was divorced, but her husband had not worked in a mill, and she had only one child, a son, who lived with her.

Although my mother did not completely agree with my father’s restrictions on our movement in public spaces, she did echo his sentiments regarding women and young girls who
performed on the stage, especially as dancers. I recall that in the 1990s, a trio of young women, named *Teen Deviyan* (Three Goddesses), would perform at community events or be hired as entertainment at private family functions. At one such function, some intoxicated male members of the audience began to hurl lewd remarks and obscenities at the performers. The young women abandoned their performance and left the premises. The incident was a hot topic in local IndoCanadian newspapers (such as *The Link* and *The Voice*) and amongst members of the local Punjabi community in the week after the event. My mother was also discussing the incident over the phone one day and I was disturbed to hear her say, “Well, they have to expect that, if they do that kind of thing.”

Thankfully, my parents’ views progressed immensely over the years, as did the views of Rani Balbir Kaur’s mother. However, there are many in the Punjabi communities of India, Pakistan, Canada, and all over the world who still echo similar sentiments. The stigma of the stage remains. In 2010, my husband, who had a Punjabi folk dance school in Surrey, BC, shared with me his perplexity about an incident at work. He was preparing for the school’s annual performance, in which all the classes perform on stage. At the end of one class, he was approached by the fathers (who were brothers) of four of the young girls in the class. They told him that their daughters would not be participating in the performance. They explained that the only reason they had enrolled their daughters was for them to feel comfortable dancing with their family at parties. However, performing on a stage in public was out of the question. My husband, born, raised and educated in Punjab, India, who immigrated to Canada at the age of 28, could not understand this view of little girls performing a dance on stage.

The centuries-old perception of the performing arts as the work of low caste peoples and the prohibition of female from ‘male’ public spaces continues and has been slow to change. At the
same time that RBK was yearning to sing on stage, my own mother was a young Jatt Sikh girl in a Punjabi village who was not permitted to go to the local village school until her younger brother became old enough to go, at which point he was enrolled with three of his elder sisters. In the eyes of their father, it was only the presence of a male chaperone (as young as he was) which legitimized their presence in the school community. Similarly, when the brother decided he did not wish to continue his studies after fifth grade, his sisters were forced to withdraw too.

Then, in the 1960s, when RBK was fighting to enter the world of theatre, my mother, (chaperoned by another brother and some cousins) was sneaking off, through the fields, and in the dark, with a group of village women and girls, to watch a movie in town. They did not want their fathers and husbands to find out. However, at the same time, there were young girls and women in other villages and towns, encouraged to pursue further studies and explore the world beyond. There was not one single set of norms being imposed, and values and norms have changed over time.

We can see how things do change in another instance that I am reminded of: my father’s reaction to the birth of his third daughter. At the time of my younger sister’s birth, my father was hospitalized with severe burns due to an accident. While he was recuperating, my mother was giving birth on another floor of the same hospital; the stress of her husband’s accident had caused her to go into premature labour. When he found out that his third child was also his third daughter, he did not hang his head in despair, as might be expected in Punjabi contexts, where there is considerable son preference. He was elated and excited, so much so, that he snuck out of his hospital room so that he could go downstairs and see his wife and child. Although extremely traditional in his views, my father loved his children – daughters and son alike – passionately.

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Once he was released from the hospital my father decided to celebrate his daughter’s birth by inviting a number of relatives and friends over to the house for a celebration. An older lady from my father’s village was scandalized by this celebration and openly chastised my father for drinking in merriment at the birth of a daughter. My father, in turn, blew up at her and told her to leave his house.

This incident is in sharp contrast to the one described by Navtej K. Purewal at the instance of her birth. She shares that her father “repeatedly” told her the story of how he was “disappointed” at her birth. Purewal does explain that his reaction was more of a “personal confession” meant to show the “dated” ideas of gender norm at that time. Ironically, however, in contrast to my father’s strict adherence to gender norms for his children, Purewal’s father was more cognizant of the need to address his gender bias and, therefore, encouraged his daughter’s choice of hobbies and interests. For my father, it took close to two decades.

It is important, therefore, not to homogenize the Punjabi community and to appreciate that its experiences are vast and diverse: my experience and the experience of my family are just one of many; they do not stand for all families and individuals. There are many Punjabi communities, not just one. As I have reflected on my own experience, and engaged with the women at the centre of this project, I have been struck by the difficulty in choosing the correct terminology and vocabulary. When I speak of women, in general, or, more specifically, Punjabi society, and Punjabi women, I risk the danger of reductionism. Indeed, amongst the female pioneers in Punjabi theatre whom I interviewed, it was only Rani Balbir Kaur who encountered such severe shaming from family members in regards to performance in public. The other three women remained

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10 Purewal, Navtej K. *Son Preference*, xi.
11 Ibid.
relatively unscathed by the old Punjabi prejudice against performance in the public, although they were impacted by patriarchal norms that dictated the subordination of their own interests in favour of those of their husbands. Although others may have had negative perceptions of their activities on the stage, their immediate families were supportive of their action – however, their in-law families were not always so. This difference is important, and reveals the need for attention to the diversity of experience, alongside the commonality. It is necessary at times to make some generalizations in order to analyze, and see commonalities across individual cases, however it cannot be denied that there exists a need to adhere to expectations in patriarchal societies.. The goal here is not to homogenize the individuals under examination; but instead to assert that many individuals face similar experiences and adversities in their lives. That is the story I tell here.

The Co-participants

Let us now turn our attention to the women who achieved accolades in the realm of Punjabi theatre: Neena Tiwana, Rani Balbir Kaur (RBK), Navnindra Behl and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry are all women who have been felicitated for their contribution to Punjabi theatre. They are women who are noteworthy not only because they are females who made a name for themselves in a field which had traditionally been restricted from women, but also because of their contributions to Punjabi theatre in East Punjab, regardless of gender. I had originally planned on including women from West Punjab (Pakistan) in my research, including, Huma Safdar and Madeeha Gauhar, however it was not possible. I only had three short months to complete my interviews; travel to Pakistan, and conducting interviews in West Punjab as well as in East Punjab was not logistically possible. Therefore, I had to disappointingly abandon this desire and focus upon women in East Punjab. Of the aforementioned four women, Tiwana, and her husband,
Harpal, were among the first to bring the tradition of Punjabi theatre to Punjabi cities and villages and are often credited for establishing professional theatre in the Punjab, with their drama troupe, *Punjab Kala Manch*. Behl made great contributions in terms of research and academics as well as performance in and production of plays, as did Rani Balbir Kaur, who also still runs a theatre group in Chandigarh. Finally, Chowdhry has won accolades for bringing Punjabi theatre to the international stage. All but Behl have been acknowledged by the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* (India’s National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama). Chowdhry was recognized for her direction in 2003; Tiwana was recognized for acting in 2011; and RBK was recognized for her overall contribution to Theatre in 2015.

**Neena Tiwana**

Tiwana’s childhood experiences were quite unique for a young girl, born in 1939 to a lower middle-class family. She was born as Narinder Grewal into a Jatt Sikh family in a small village in West Punjab, moving to East Punjab after Partition. Although her family belonged to the prestigious Jatt (or farming/landowning) caste, her father did not farm or own much land. Tiwana often spoke of the fact that the family was not financially well off. Her father was a *ved* – a practitioner of Ayurvedic medicine - which provided a somewhat erratic income for his family which included two daughters and two sons, as well as three widowed sisters. Tiwana described her father almost as a type of *fakir*, someone who was very spiritual and detached from worldly objects and affairs. He could not even be convinced to marry until he was impressed by a young woman doing *kirtan* (singing religious hymns) on stage. He would go on to marry that young woman.

Tiwana’s mother was somewhat of an anomaly amongst traditional Punjabi mothers of the time. Not only did she greatly emphasize the importance of education for all her children,
especially her daughters, she also insisted that they be active in activities such as debates and public speaking. Tiwana explains that the experiences of her widowed aunts may have been a reason as to why her mother encouraged the financial independence of her daughters, as well as activities on stage which increased their self-confidence. However, Tiwana did not participate in theatre until her early twenties, after she met her future husband, actor and director Harpal Tiwana. Neena Tiwana became very active in theatrical activities; her siblings, her sister\textsuperscript{12} and both brothers, also participated in theatrical productions in varying degrees.

After completing her Master’s degree in Punjabi Literature at Government Mohindra College, Patiala, Tiwana secured a job as a translator in the same department and applied to the National School of Drama, in Delhi, for the following year. That summer (1965) she married her fiancée, Harpal Tiwana, who had already completed a year at the National School of Drama (NSD). They moved into simple accommodations in Delhi, and, upon their graduation, began to act in Punjabi productions in the city, including productions by well-known Punjabi playwrights and directors, Kapoor Singh Ghuman and Harcharan Singh. Tiwana laughed as she recalled that Kapoor Singh’s young daughters (which included Navnindra Behl) used to run around in little frocks during their rehearsals. Neena and Harpal Tiwana’s first child, a daughter, Luna, was also born at this time, but after a few years, at the request of Harpal’s parents, the small family relocated to Patiala to live in the Tiwana family home. Tiwana added that it was her husband’s desire to bring theatre to the people of Punjab that brought them back to the state, where they established the Punjab Kala Manch theatre group in 1967. The displeasure of the elder Tiwanas at their son and daughter in law’s chosen vocation compelled the younger Tiwana’s to leave the family home.

\textsuperscript{12} Tiwana’s sister, Balinder Johal, eventually married and settled in Vancouver, British Columbia, where she taught for many years before retiring and pursuing acting full time. She is a recognizable face in many Punjabi and English language theatre, tv and film productions.
for a few years, but they eventually moved back after Harpal’s father passed away. By this time, they also had a son, and were able to leave both children with their paternal grandmother when they travelled.

Tiwana often ignored her own contributions whilst lauding her husband’s achievements. However she played an equal role in the establishment of professional Punjabi theatre in the Punjab. In addition to playing the lead female role in all productions, she translated the Hindi versions of classic plays by Sophocles, Henrik Ibsen and Arthur Miller into Punjabi. She was also the costume designer for all the productions, and contributed to scripts and direction, though this was always uncredited. She was involved in every last production detail, alongside her husband, recalling how, in early years, she would accompany her husband, and go door to door attempting to sell tickets for their shows to individuals and businesses.

Although Harpal held the official title of director, he frequently turned to Tiwana for advice, and even if he disagreed with a suggestion, she would not rest until he saw her point of view. For example, during a specific production during their early days in Delhi, Tiwana felt that the young actress playing the female lead was not able to capture the vernacular of rural Punjab, despite specific direction in numerous rehearsals. The actress was born and raised in Delhi, spoke in an urban style which did not suit the character. Tiwana felt that her neighbor, a young housewife, was perfectly suited to the role. Tiwana’s husband was aghast at the suggestion and refused to consider it; however, Tiwana met with the young woman, preparing her so well that Tiwana’s husband had to admit to her talent.

This discovery of new talent was not an anamoly. The young couple was constantly discovering and training new talent, and these efforts, no doubt, contributed, albeit slowly, to the acceptance of females on the stage. In the 1960s and 1970s (and even the 1980s), it was still
difficult to find actresses to perform on stage. Tiwana and her husband often visited colleges in an attempt to find new talent amongst the young women there. They would then meet with the parents of young women in order to assure them that all work involved was completely respectable and that they, as a married couple, would always be there to act as chaperones, responsible for the wellbeing of their daughters. Despite these attempts, however, Tiwana often had to turn to relatives and convince them to allow their daughters to participate.

Tiwana also laughingly recalled that she was the stronger student of the two, during their time at the National School of Drama. Many instructors, frustrated with Harpal’s lack of academic success would complain about him and compare him to his wife. Tiwana’s academic accomplishments led to employment at the newly formed Department of Theatre at Punjabi University, Patiala, where she worked as a lecturer in acting, voice and speech from 1967-1973. After her husband’s demise, she founded the Harpal Tiwana Foundation and she is currently the honourary resident director of the Harpal Tiwana Centre for Performing Arts in Patiala.

**Rani Balbir Kaur**

Rani Balbir Kaur (RBK) was born in 1943, in West Punjab, to a prominent Tulli (Khatri caste) family, who had converted to Sikhism a couple of generations earlier. The family moved to Delhi after Partition, eventually settling in Chandigarh in 1952, where she grew up. Her father

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13 Rani Balbir Kaur spoke at length about her relationship with her religion. She relates that her paternal grandfather, Lala Din Dyal Rai, was a Hindu but he had married a woman who was a “devout Sikh”. At the age of 32, Dyal Rai became dangerously ill, with an intestinal infection. Many doctors were consulted but they all had the same diagnosis, that Dyal Rai would not survive. According to RBK, her grandmother prayed at home and at the local gurdwara, held an *akandpath* (uninterrupted reading of the Sikh holy scriptures, the *Adi Granth*), asking God to make her husband’s life longer than her own, and finally proclaimed that, if God were to spare her husband’s life, she would ensure that the entire family would convert to Sikhism. On that day, the man who could not digest a spoonful of water, was able to eat and keep down some parshad. He recovered and, consequently, all seven children were raised as Sikhs and all ensuing progeny were also followers of Sikhism.
was one of Chandigarh’s first builders and she identifies herself as one of the city’s “first citizens”. She was a much-loved and even pampered daughter amongst four brothers. She shared that if she ever received a gift, such as an item of clothing or a piece of jewelry, it would never be a single item, but a set of five. However, although she enjoyed much love, she also endured severe restrictions. Singing was RBK’s first love and she wished to pursue it professionally, however, her mother was very much against this. Although RBK’s mother eventually allowed her daughter to pursue music as a subject of study, she was never happy with her daughter singing on stage. Nor did anyone take her aspirations seriously, as school was secondary to what her family considered most important to RBK’s future – her marriage.

RBK’s mother wished to finalize her marriage after she completed her matriculation (tenth grade). It was only after much pleading and convincing, as well as a great deal of luck, that RBK managed to delay her marriage until she had completed her MA in music. Unfortunately, the marriage brought its own challenges as her husband was extremely abusive, both mentally and physically. RBK returned to her natal home with her two young daughters Sonia, aged 2 and Komal (called "Esha"), aged 1. Although they never divorced, RBK and her husband remained separated for the rest of his life (he passed away in 2015). They would meet intermittently throughout the years but he never played a major role in his daughters’ lives.

Upon returning to her parents’ home, RBK was concerned about her own future, as well as that of her daughters. Her father was also going through a period of financial difficulty. Therefore, RBK decided to return to university to undergo training which would lead to a job. RBK decided to enroll in Panjab University’s one year post graduate diploma in theatre and this was her introduction to the world of theatre. She stated that she found theatre immensely therapeutic and she was hooked.
However, in the mind of a mother who had vehemently opposed her daughter’s pursuit of a career in singing, the idea of theatre was even worse. Thankfully RBK had her father’s quiet support so her mother backed down, but not before declaring that RBK should not expect any support from her in raising her daughters. In addition to the struggles of single parenthood (she has two daughters) and a disapproving mother, RBK also dealt with the added struggles of parenting a child with mental illness. RBK’s elder daughter, Sonia, was quite needy and clingy from childhood, but she was not diagnosed with a bipolar disorder until many years later. Despite all these adversities, however, RBK shone in her profession.

During the 1970s, when RBK was a student, and beginning her professional career as an actress, theatre was slowly becoming more legitimized, helped in part by the establishment of departments of theatre at both Panjab University, Chandigarh, where she was enrolled, and Punjabi University, Patiala. She first acted in productions by her teacher and mentor, Balwant Gargi, in productions such as Antigone and Mirza Sahibaan, going on to work with renowned directors such as Amal Allana, B. V. Karanth, Sheila Bhatia and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. She was also the Punjabi actress to perform on Broadway, when she travelled the U.S. in the title role of Rani Jindan (Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s wife).

In 1975, also RBK established her own theatre group, the Folk Theatre Workshop, in which she is still active. In 1982, she received her PhD for her thesis, *The Nature and Dramatic Function of Music in Traditional Indian Theatre with Special Reference to Raslila*, later publishing a book entitled, *Music: The Soul of Drama*. In addition to acting in and directing numerous plays, she served as a professor and chairperson in the Department of Indian Theatre at Panjab University, Chandigarh for thirty years, retiring in 2004. She also acted as Chairperson of the Chandigarh
Sangeet Natak Akademi. She achieved notable success in her career, being awarded with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for lifetime achievement in 2015.

Her training in Hindustani and classical has greatly enhanced and contributed to her works; not only has she sung in productions, she has also composed music. Most significantly, RBK produced plays on Punjabi folk songs and qisse (epics). One of RBK’s great accomplishments is the adaptation of original Sufi epics, such as Heer Ranjha, into full-length plays. Earlier works, such as those by Sheila Bhatia, were adaptations of the original epics which incorporated some lines from the originals. All the dialogue and songs from RBK’s production came from the original. She has also penned many original works, which have yet to be published, including a play entitled, Kasturbha, Mahatma Gandhi’s wife. She asserts the importance of sharing with the world the story of this woman who, she states, actually “gave the philosophy of ahimsa” to Gandhi. Another project that she has worked on is a dramatization of the experiences of her female family members during the Partition, as well as a script on honour killings.

Navnindra Behl

Navnindra Behl, born in Delhi in 1949 to a Jatt Sikh family, was the only one of these female pillars of theatre born into a family connected to Punjabi theatre. Her father, Kapoor Singh Ghuman, was a noted Punjabi playwright and her mother Manjit Ghuman acted in many of her husband’s productions. Behl herself first appeared on stage when she was only two years old, on the lap of I. C. Nanda, one of the earliest practitioners of modern Punjabi theatre. She also began to write and direct plays during grade school, gathering neighbourhood children together to rehearse a play which they would later stage for their parents. Behl would engage in similar activities in secondary school and college. She became a lecturer, and eventual head of the
Department of Theatre at Punjabi University, Patiala, where she taught for 25 years. Behl also crossed into television and movies, in Punjabi, Hindi and English, and she remains active writing, directing and acting in plays. One of her most recent endeavours has been a play about the life of Norah Richards. Behl’s husband, Lalit Behl, is an active theatre and film artist and she has one son, Kanu Behl, a writer and director.

Behl has been prolific in Punjabi theatre, not only acting and directing, but also writing. Some of her original works include Kashmir Diary and Aakhiri Natak (The Last Play). One of her more recent endeavours was writing a play, Norah, about the life of Norah Richards (2016) in which she also enacted the lead role. She has adapted many pieces of Punjabi literature for the stage and for television, including those by noted Punjabi authors Dalip Kaur Tiwana, Veena Verma, Waryam Sandhu, Baldev Dhaliwal and Gurbaksh Singh Preetlari. She has also adapted many non Punjabi works into Punjabi, including The House of Bernarda Alba (Bruhon Paar Na Jayin) and the Hungarian play Totek amongst others.

Behl has also published many books on theatre including, Abhinay Kala (The Art of Acting), Nataki Sahit (Dramatic Literature), Bharti Theatre (Indian Theatre), Rangmanch Ate Television Natak (Theatre and Television Plays). Other publications include translations of works such as Aawan, a Hindi novel by Chitra Mudgal, and three works by Swedish playwright, August Strindberg, including Miss Julie, Mahamarg (The Great Highway) and Takdi Dhir (The Stronger).

Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry

Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, was born in Amritsar, in 1951, into a highly educated upper middle-class Sikh family. Her parents migrated from Rawalpindi, West Punjab, after Partition. Chowdhry’s father was Dr. Man Singh Nirankari, a renowned ophthalmologist and principal of
Amritsar’s Medical College. Her mother, a housewife, also held a graduate degree in English. Roughly five of Chowdhry’s formative years during childhood, in the late 1950s, were spent in England, when her father took the family there. They returned to Amritsar when she was ten or eleven. She completed her schooling in a convent school in Amritsar and then pursued her MA in the History of Fine Arts in Punjab University, Chandigarh.

Chowdhry recalls that she was not as bright academically as her brother and sister – not having a penchant for the sciences or mathematics, or memorization – but her parents encouraged her artistic endeavours when she was young, including what she terms her “dabbles” in painting, writing and theatre. However, she also stated that no one in her family took theatre seriously either – it was more of a hobby. They became interested in arranging her marriage when she was 16 or 17, but were not overly distressed by her unmarried status until she had passed the age of 21. Chowdhry recalls that at this point she did feel a slight pressure to marry, as she had no wish to distress her parents who were vulnerable to negative comments made by relatives who stated that nobody would marry Chowdhry since she was in theatre.

Chowdhry confessed that she never had an interest in theatre until eminent Punjabi playwright and director, Balwant Gargi, visited her university classroom to ask for volunteers for a play that he was directing. This was to be her first venture into acting. That same year she volunteered backstage for two plays, Othello and Jasma Odan staged by the National School of Drama (NSD) and directed by veteran theatre director Ebrahim Alkazi. Chowdhry states that “I was completely overwhelmed with excitement and joy because I’d never seen such visual imaginary, such incredible acting, such intellectual vigour that I saw in these productions. Somewhere I felt I had to drop everything and follow this.”
Chowdhry then joined the National School of Drama, completing her studies there in 1976. She was married a few months after her graduation and moved to Mumbai to live with her husband and his extended family. She admits that at this point she still lacked confidence in theatre, remaining on the periphery, “always the observer, the watcher, never somebody who plunged center stage.” She became involved in children’s theatre and eventually assisted in costumes and other backstage help during rehearsals for the theatre company, Majma, which she had formed with her NSD seniors, such as Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah and Rohini Hattangadi.

It was not until 1979, when she had secured a job at the newly formed multi-arts complex, Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal that she realized her true passion and talent in theatre. At first Chowdhry was resentful of the move, necessitated by her husband’s transfer. However, her employment at the newly founded Bharat Bhavan, working alongside eminent theatre personality B. V. Karanth14 proved to be an excellent opportunity. Her duties at this workplace included teaching, stage and costume design, as well as directing. She also had the opportunity to meet guests such as director Peter Brook and renowned musician Ravi Shankar. However, she was again forced to move from this idyllic environment when her husband was transferred yet again, this time to Chandigarh, in 1984.

Chowdhry is now settled in Chandigarh where she runs a theatre troupe named, The Company (The Center of Music and Performing Arts, Natya Yatris). Chowdhry is noted for the “fusion type” theatre she produces in which classic international works are adapted to a Punjabi stage. The majority of the scripts are penned by noted Punjabi poet, Surjit Pattar, with whom

14 Babukodi Venkataramana Karanth (1929-2002), an alumnus of the National School of Drama, was an actor, director and musician of modern theatre in Kannada and Hindi. However, he also directed plays in many other languages including English, Punjabi, Urdu, Tamil and Telugu. Later in his career he was also director of the NSD, as well as a pioneer of new wave cinema in India.
Chowdhry has had a long working relationship, s. Women are also a primary focus in her chosen scripts, be it *Fida/Phaedra’s* Rani Fida, who falls in love with her young step-son,  (echoing the character of Loona in the Punjabi folk tale *Pooran Bhagat*); or the actress reminiscing about her life in *An Unposted Love Letter*; or *Yerma*’s childless title character, violently obsessed with the goal of having a child. The action in the majority of these plays also occurs in domestic spaces, routinely associated with females, such as *Kitchen Katha*, in which the story is unfolded amidst the main character, Chand Kaur’s execution of recipes, or *Naga Mandala*, in which the young wife Rani, is trapped in an abusive marriage by a husband who locks her in the house.

Also noteworthy in Chowdhry’s productions is her work with practitioners of the traditional *naqqal* theatrical form. Chowdhry states the following about her work with them:

> In trying to revive in the traditional performer an interest in his own dramatic roots, The Company combines traditional and urban performers. Working closely with a group of ten Naqqals (female impersonators) we manged to collect from the vast fund of their experience and memory, a rich, intricate and complex pattern of hidden skills, texts, musical scores and patterns of movement which extended the meaning of their stories.
>
> We encouraged the Naqqals to recollect various aspects of their heritage while helping them retain their traditional skills. Wherever possible we used modern stage craft to heighten and underline the aesthetic and creative elements of their art. By working together, we hoped to re-establish our own regional identity – a process which has acquired a deeper meaning in the context of the traumatic crisis of language, culture and emotional development that our state is going through at the moment.\(^{15}\)

Chowdhry has also taught in and acted as chairperson of the Department of Indian Theatre at Punjab University, Chandigarh where she worked from 1990 to 2015. In 2016 the university honoured her with the status of Professor Emeritus. She has also completed teaching residencies

at the University of California in Los Angeles and the University of North Carolina. In addition, she is a member. Her accomplishments have garnered her the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in Theatre Direction (2003), as well as the Padma Shri in 2011.

The Dissertation

While I have noted that not all of the women who are the focus of this dissertation have experienced the same level of restriction and shame about their involvement in performance as RBK did, this did not mean that the other women remained entirely unscathed from the stigma and shame of the stage, whether on it or behind it. If they did not feel shame from their immediate families, they did experience it at one time or another from within the general community, or from within their husband’s family. Even Navnindra Behl, the daughter of a prominent playwright and director, felt the effects of shame due to her career choice. She commented on the strict nature of her father, explaining that he was perhaps “extra” strict because he knew how society viewed “theatre” people and he wanted to ensure that no one could “point a finger at his daughter” and her character. She recalls that he was especially strict about her appearance, even slapping her one time for wearing earrings. This dissertation seeks to understand this presence of shame and stigma for women in the theatre, and analyze how we can understand the emergence of these four women in a field that is dominated by men.

The next chapter of my dissertation, “Into the Public Realm: The Actress in Indian Theatre Traditions” begins with a look at the history of women in performance within the Indian subcontinent in general, and the Punjab region of Northern India, in specific. I begin with a discussion of the public and private spaces which have been clearly delineated in South Asian society, since precolonial times, designating separate spaces for men and women. Many scholars
agree that female artists responsible for cultural traditions such as song and dance were permitted in the public sphere to a limited degree in precolonial times. They were allowed in the respectable confines of the upper-class courts and temples, as courtesans and devadasis (temple dancers). However, as will be discussed, scholars have argued that the limited social prestige of these upper-class entertainers changed with British colonial influence and reformist traditions in the nineteenth century, so that the presence of any women in the public sphere became taboo. This continued with the beginnings of modern Indian theatre, in which all roles were enacted by men. When women first entered these stages, they were usually non-Indians or from backgrounds of “ill repute,” and it was only when women of the upper classes began to join theatre, and eventually film, that actresses first achieved respectability.

I next discuss the connection of class to respectability. Some actresses were able to shed the stigma of appearing in the public eye, but only if they belonged to the upper classes. We can see the continuing stigma attached to present-day actresses involved in what is branded as “lower forms” of theatre, especially if they come from lower-class backgrounds. I discuss the stigmatization and shame experienced by modern-day actresses involved in popular forms of theatre, such as nautanki and Tamil special drama theatre, as well as certain types of popular theatre in Pakistan. The women are aware of the shame involved in their participation in this type of theatre and often try to alleviate the shame by using strategies to negotiate the societal boundaries that they transgress.

After this general discussion of the role of women in theatre, I examine the case of Punjabi theatre, to excavate how actresses carved a space for themselves in this largely patriarchal world. Finally, I examine the development of Punjabi theatre specifically, in order to see how actresses carved a space for themselves in this largely patriarchal world. I begin with a discussion of
Punjab’s folk performance traditions followed by a look at the beginnings of modern Punjabi theatre, which, ironically, were encouraged by an Irish former actress. We see that the presence of women in Punjabi theatrical productions mirrored other Indian theatrical traditions, in that the presence of upper-class women gave legitimacy to the entry of females in the very public sphere of the stage. However, once again, this legitimacy was limited to females involved in “higher forms” of theatre, who ostensibly came from the higher ranks of society themselves. Women from the lower classes, especially from castes associated with performance traditions, usually had only one type of stage available to them: the one that was determined by the upper echelons of society to be of a lesser quality and lower status. Today, most Punjabi actresses in elite contexts enjoy a level of respect, however those involved in lesser forms of theatre are still stigmatized as women of “loose morals”.

The third chapter, “Women ‘Behaving’: Gendered Norms, Honour and Shame,” investigates the gendered norms within Punjabi society, looking at the idealized characteristics and roles of Punjabi females, as well as the regulation of female bodies and movements, leading to their exclusion from public spaces. These ideals and norms are heavily connected to ideas of shame and honour which will also be discussed in this chapter. We also look at how women regulate their behaviour so that it fits with the roles that are dictated to them by society, so that their families can continue to be “happy objects.”

I begin by sharing some anecdotes which illustrate how the concepts of honour and shame regulate female behaviour in the Punjab and restrict the movements of women outside of the

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private domain. I introduce the work that Silvan Tomkins\textsuperscript{17} and Elspeth Probyn\textsuperscript{18} have done on the affect “shame” and how responses to shame from infancy teach an individual what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, so that an individual learns to identify the normative from her childhood, and to recognize the importance of adhering to this norm, or risk being shamed and ostracized. I also examine the pressures that females in Punjabi society face in terms of regulating one’s behaviour even if it means the sacrifice of their own goals or happiness so that the happiness of their family is met.

I then share specific episodes from the lives of these female pillars of Punjab theatre. I first discuss how some of them experienced a restriction from public spaces and interactions with males, even if they were their own brothers. Next, I examine the presence of the concepts of honour and purity in their lives and in the lives of women of South Asia in general. The connection of chastity with the ideas of honour and purity is also discussed, as is its connection to the idea of the importance of controlling female sensuality, through the regulation not just of female movements, but also of their bodies, such as in what they wear. I also discuss how the concept of honour weighs so heavily upon Punjabi families that it has led to a skewed sex ratio in Northern India, including the Punjab, and even accompanies Punjabi families when they migrate out of the region of Punjab to other countries, including Canada.

I continue my examination of honour and gendered norms through analysis of the life stories of these women of Punjab theatre. I examine how these women’s lives were affected and molded according to the roles expected of them at different stages of their lives. I begin by examining their experiences with education. Although all of these women achieved post-


\textsuperscript{18} Elspeth Probyn, \textit{Blush: Faces of Shame} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
secondary education, including graduate degrees, this occurred at a time when higher education was still a rarity for Punjabi women, unlike today, when this is not uncommon. A virtually inevitable stage in all Punjabi females lives, after education, is marriage: that is the next stage of life which I examine. I investigate the role of women as, what Sara Ahmed terms, the “happy housewife” and then, as mother, both roles for whom sacrifice for the sake of the family’s happiness is taught as a norm.

The fourth chapter, “Conquering Shame and Achieving Success” will consider the success of these females, looking again at ideas of shame and scripts, as well as the support of male relatives and ideas of caste and class privilege as factors in their ascendency within Punjabi theatre. I begin with a discussion of more recent female participation in theatre, and how, even today, males outnumber the number of females who enroll in theatrical departments in colleges and universities. In addition, many theatrical groups lament that while there are a few females who remain dedicated to theatre as a lifelong profession, since large numbers of them abandon the career once they are married.

I next return to “script theory” to which we are introduced in Chapter three. Whereas theatre has traditionally been considered a shameful activity for many Punjabi females, this was not the case for three out of four co-participants in this research. After an examination of script theory in general, I examine the role of scripts and shame in the lives of these women of theatre. For most of these women theatre was a normative activity, not something to cause shame, at least not in their immediate families; although it did cause some strife in the married lives of Neena.

19 It should be noted that this is typical in all fields. Many a time a promising researcher has had a career cut short by marriage; however, a difference in theatre is that many females “switch over” to a career that is determined to be “more appropriate” for a married woman.
Tiwana and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry. It was only in the life of Rani Balbir Kaur that presence on a public stage was ingrained as a “shameful” act from childhood.

I then look at the ideas of caste and class in South Asia in general and in Punjab specifically. I examine the co-participants’ relationship with caste and class, explaining why I would characterize them as members of the upper middle class, if not upper class. I suggest that these women were able to produce a position for themselves within “legitimate” theatre because they themselves belonged to upper castes and classes and were therefore able to “carry” their legitimacy with them. My final section considers the role of patriarchal support in their success. I suggest that a reason these individuals were able to continue with their theatrical careers was due to the support of influential males in their families; for Neena Tiwana, her husband was also active in theatre, Rani Balbir Kaur spoke of her father’s support as being the only thing that quieted her mother, both Navnindra Behl’s father and husband were active in theatre, and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry’s husband also fully supported her endeavours.

Methodology

My intention here is not to suggest that all Punjabi women are oppressed, nor that they are more oppressed than North American females. Indeed, women in different cultural domains face many similar issues and situations as varied as the number of individuals. Inderpal Grewal thus emphasizes the importance of avoiding “the ethnocentrism” of homogenization practices and this can only be accomplished "by using discourses of diversity and pluralism". This is important within India too, as the experiences of these four individuals do not necessarily represent the reality

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of every individual within similar groups, be they socioeconomic, gender, or caste groupings. Swati Arora, writes about a powerful performance, *Thoda Dhyaan Se*” (*Be A Little Careful*), by Mallika Taneja, an upper caste, middle class Delhi-based artist. Arora states that the performance speaks to the “‘responsibility’ of every woman to ‘protect’ herself by following certain unwritten rules”.\(^{21}\) However, Arora also recognizes that this play is written for middle- and upper-class audiences. She points to the shortcomings of this performance by stating that “the concerns of Taneja’s performances are the concerns of urban women like her – middle-class, educated, liberal, English-speaking, university-bred, financially independent, and living in the capital city of Delhi”\(^{22}\) thereby overlooking the concerns and experiences of minority women.\(^{23}\)

The co-participants in this study also belong to this aforementioned group. They are all firmly situated within the upper middle class, or upper class. In addition, they all had the opportunity to pursue their education, obtaining both graduate and post-graduate degrees; all but Tiwana also obtained doctoral degrees. In addition, they are also liberal, English-speaking and financially independent women living in major cities of the Punjab or, in the case of Behl, now in Mumbai. As Sikhs, they belong to a minority religious group in India, however this group is the majority within the state of Punjab which is where they lived for the majority of their lives and where most of their work is and was situated.

This work involves a qualitative study of the oral histories of four female pillars of Punjabi theatre. The life stories of the co-participants, Rani Balbir Kaur, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, Navnindra Behl and Neena Tiwana, were recorded during interviews which took place mostly in

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 9.
\(^{23}\) Of course, elite male theatre is similarly exclusive in its interests, yet while “minority” theatre is criticized for not representing all minority perspectives, the elite male theatre manages to escape such criticisms.
Northern India, either in the city of Patiala, in the state of Punjab or in the city of Chandigarh, which is a union territory, and a shared capital of the states of Punjab and Haryana. The exception was Navnindra Behl, who previously worked in Patiala and is now situated in Mumbai. I also interviewed other female actresses, playwrights and directors living in the Punjab and have included reflections on my own experiences as an emerging Punjabi writer and playwright, comparing the struggles I have faced with those of other women in the field.

Peta Stephenson has argued, “When dealing with marginalized communities and experiences, the most reliable sources are rarely books written by outsiders … they are the stories that outsiders within have to tell.”24 The contribution of specific male individuals in the area of Punjabi theatre has been lauded and written about for years. However, very few have written about the women who have done the same, and almost no one has written about them in English. No one else has told the story of these women, so here is an opportunity for them to tell it themselves.

Data collection occurred via in-depth personal interviews, although I am hesitant to use the term “data”, as it suggests a devaluation of the individual and emotional component of the life stories. The personal interview (specifically, the “life story” approach) was the primary research approach. The interviews were conducted in either Punjabi or English (often, both) depending upon the comfort level of the participant and were then transcribed and translated into English, if necessary.

I conducted a series of interviews with my co-participants, over the course of three months, from February to April 2017. Prior to this period of interviewing, I had hoped to initiate some introductory meetings in order to establish a relationship with my co-participants, which was not

always possible due to their busy schedules. I also received permission to film the interviews – with the opportunity to turn the camera off at any point – and to make them public, therefore beginning needed documentation of the contribution of women to Punjabi theatre. This will provide valuable archival material for anyone who is interested in work on gender, theatre and Indian society. These recordings will be beneficial in keeping these stories alive and in assisting in any future research which will be done in this or related fields. I have already mentioned that there is a dearth of research in this field and a slow but regular accumulation of resources is necessary. Anyone not participating in the study was not recorded. The co-participants knew from the outset that their “life stories” would be shared with the public, as they will form the basis of my thesis and may eventually be published in a journal or as a book. However, I also made it clear that if they were to change their mind about publishing something shared during the interview, then their privacy would be respected. Transcripts of all interviews were shown to the co-participants before being included in the dissertation, so that the participants had the opportunity to delete anything that they had decided against sharing. All of this was detailed in a consent form, which was available in both English and Punjabi.

My networking with members of the Punjabi literary community through my membership in two Punjabi writers’ groups in the lower mainland of British Columbia (The Punjabi Lekhak Manch and the Punjabi Lekhak Kendri Sabha) assisted me in gaining entrée into the field, as did my experiences as a playwright and member of a BC-based bilingual (Punjabi and English) theatre group, Rangmanch Punjabi Theatre. My husband’s contacts as an alumnus of the Department of Theatre, Punjabi University, in Patiala, Punjab and further contacts at the Department of Indian Theatre, Punjab University, Chandigarh, Union Territory were extremely beneficial as well.
Although I received some assistance in the initial transcription of some of the interviews, I went through all of them in order to ensure that there were no mistakes or omissions. I also translated all of the interviews with due consideration to the delicate nature of cross-cultural communication. Joseph Kaufert and Robert Putsch point out that a translator or interpreter is “a gatekeeper who has the power to elicit, clarify, translate, omit or distort messages.” Svetlana Shklarov has stated that “Language translation is not a simple linguistic exercise,” and there are many cultural nuances and elements of nonverbal language which may not come across in translation. I am a Punjabi Canadian woman, born and raised amidst the Lower Mainland’s large and vibrant Punjabi community, who is also a Punjabi language instructor at a post-secondary institution, (Kwantlen Polytechnic University). In addition, I have also spent a great deal of time living in the Punjab, including one year from August 1999 – August 2000 and have also been involved in many Punjabi to English and English to Punjabi translation projects. Thus, being aware of the aforementioned cultural nuances and the challenges posed in translation I felt it was best for me to handle this portion of the work myself.

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27 I had hoped to conduct follow up interviews 3-4 weeks later, so that I could show the participants transcriptions of the interviews as well as the video recordings, so that they could have a chance to add, omit or clarify anything. However, I had not known what a slow, painstaking job it would be to transcribe the interviews. Even more difficult was finding people who would transcribe them for me while I was in Punjab. Often people refused the job at the outset, stating that it was too difficult. Twice, I found a person willing to take on the task and gave them a deadline; unfortunately, when I contacted them on the due date, they stated that they had found the work too difficult or cumbersome and had given up after an initial attempt. I was able to hire two different people but they were both quite slow; one of them stated that she transcribed the entire interview by hand, and then typed it out. The other made so many mistakes that I did not retain her for any future transcriptions. I had more success in securing transcribers when I returned to British Columbia. I transcribed as many as I could myself, and then came the long and tedious task of translating them – which was also work that I did myself.
The personal interview method was chosen because stories “are powerful for the research participants as they are able to tell their stories in their own terms.”28 Valerie Yow has also stated that “[p]ersonal testimony allows the researchers to understand the meanings and interpretations of the lives of individual persons …[which] will ‘only come to life when there are people, to explain, to comment and to elaborate on them.’”29 After the collection of my “data,” I used a method of narrative analysis in order to understand it. I chose this approach rather than another, such as grounded theory data analysis, because I feel it is important for the participants to hold the power over the meaning they wish to convey through the stories that they tell.

In grounded theory data analysis, although one engages in a close reading of the interview data, narratives are coded and placed into categories in order “to synthesize, to explain and to understand”30 the data. This type of data analysis also includes a memoing component. This component attracted me due to its reflexive nature of asking questions, summarizing through description and including key quotes.31 However, I was hesitant to use “coding” and pick apart my interviews into categories. The strong link between, and the cyclical nature of coding and memoing, seemed to draw the focus away from the individual stories and to center it on ideas and categories, which the participants may not even have considered or wished to focus upon. In contrast, with a narrative analysis the focus remains upon the overall story itself, not the individual, picked apart lines. The use of the narrative analysis allowed me to focus upon how the “participants

31 Hesse-Biber, “Feminist Approaches to In-Depth Interviewing,” 396.
represent their lived reality in a story form.”\(^{32}\) I did, however, engage in memo writing throughout the fieldwork.

Also present in the process were what Sharlene Hesse-Biber terms “issues of power and control over the interpretation process.”\(^{33}\) Hesse-Biber states that there are “important power dynamics within the interviewer/interviewee relationship that can affect the interpretation of research results.”\(^{34}\) Michelle Fine has written:

> Traditional social sciences have stubbornly refused to interrogate how we as researchers create our texts … That we are human inventors of some questions and repressors of others, shapers of the very contexts we study, coparticipants in our interviews, interpreters of others’ stories and narrators of our own, is sometimes rendered irrelevant to the texts we publish.\(^{35}\)

For this reason, I decided to use the unstructured or nonstandardized interview, which began with a general question which was accompanied by a list of topics that could be covered during the duration of the interview(s). I helped to begin the conversation or prompt with specific questions such as: "When did you first become interested in Punjabi theatre? Did anyone encourage you to enter theatre? Did anyone discourage you?" General topics included information about their life, including their family, background, schooling and their introduction to and involvement with theatre and any other type of performance. However, these questions were only used if there was an unusually long pause in the conversation, or if the participant had difficulty in deciding where to begin.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 397.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 398.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
I am also acutely aware of the tremendous privilege it is to have these women share their life stories with me. Kirin Narayan and Kenneth M. George have stated that, “[i]n receiving stories, we are often receiving gifts of self; it is incumbent on us as researchers to handle these gifts with respect as we pass them onward in our scholarly productions.” I offered the participants copies of the thesis and the video recordings as well as an honorarium for their time, however all of them declined this remuneration.

Due to the very nature of theatre work, very full schedules and “laid back” Punjabi attitude towards time and schedules, there was some disorganization on the part of interview scheduling. Some interviews were cancelled or rescheduled due to various reasons. In the end, I was successful in interviewing Navnindra Behl once, Neena Tiwana and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry twice and a total of five interviews for Rani Balbir Kaur.

**Neena Tiwana**

Establishing initial contact with Neena Tiwana was difficult because all communication had to be carried out by email or phone with her son, Manpal Tiwana. Although he was friendly enough on the phone I was never able to speak to her directly prior to my trip to India. Although I understood this may be due to filial concern for an aging parent who has occasionally suffered from poor health, it was often frustrating to not be able to speak to her directly. He welcomed me to come to meet his mother but could not provide an exact date, stating only that they were going to be in Patiala (their home) in February and March, although they may be travelling in April. Whenever I asked if I could speak to Mrs. Tiwana directly I was told that she was out, or that she was resting. Consequently, when I finally secured an interview on March 2\(^{nd}\), she did not fully

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comprehend why I was there. Having given countless interviews previously regarding her husband, or other actors who had previously worked with her theatre group (including Om Puri, Raj Babbar, Nirmal Rishi, all of whom are well-known film personalities), she thought I was there to ask her about them. When she realized that I was there to ask about her own personal experiences she exclaimed loudly, “He didn’t tell me that. He just told me this morning that someone was going to interview me today at eleven o’clock.” Her son responded, “Mumma, I told you, you forgot.”

The interview occurred in a bright room off of the large sitting area in the Tiwana’s large two story house surrounded by carefully maintained gardens and a well-manicured green lawn situated in a large area of land that also housed a small preschool in the back. When I arrived the door was opened by a servant, and whilst interviewing Tiwana, another servant brought us drinks and snacks.

The room we were in seemed to be a study. It housed a computer and bookcases which included awards in Harpal Tiwana’s name. During the first interview, Tiwana’s son, Manpal, remained in the room, working on the computer. He stated that he had to complete a document in relation to his theatre troupe’s upcoming trip to Canada. I began to suffer some anxiety of “feminist ethnography as failure” along the lines of what occurred when Kamala Visweswaran and a colleague attempted to interview a woman who had been involved in India’s Freedom Movement. The attempt had been foiled by, among other things, a lack of understanding by the woman of why they were there, as well as an overly zealous son who spoke for his mother. However, good to his word, Manpal Tiwana left the room after approximately 20 minutes.

During the interview process I understood that, due to her age, Tiwana most likely had forgotten about our scheduled interview. Indeed, during her interviews, at times it was difficult to

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37 Visweswaran, “Feminist Ethnography as Failure,” 95.
follow her train of thought, as she had trouble sharing episodes chronologically. Very often she referred me to the book she had written about her husband, Harpal Tiwana’s life, stating that “I would find all the information that I needed there”.

![Image](image-url)

Figure 1.3 Neena Tiwana at her home in Patiala, Punjab, India, March 2017.

**Navnindra Behl**

Navnindra Behl’s interview proved to be the most difficult to arrange. After Behl’s retirement from Punjabi University, Patiala, she relocated to Mumbai where she enjoyed great success in the role of a grandmother and matriarch of the Oberoi family in the teleserial (soap opera) *Ishqbaaz*. Her schedule is also busy with roles in films. We had organized our first interviews for early March, when she would be in Patiala for a day, followed by a day in Chandigarh. I organized my travel plans to Patiala for that time, so that I could also interview Neena Tiwana on the preceding dates. Unfortunately, Behl’s visit in Patiala kept her too busy to meet with me, and she mistakenly gave me the incorrect date for her visit to Chandigarh. She was to be there on March 3rd, instead of 4th. Because I had already booked an interview with Neena Tiwana in Patiala, I was unable to meet Behl in Chandigarh. It was only after flying to Mumbai myself that I was able to interview her. Her schedule was so busy that I was only able to interview her for one day, on the set of her tv serial.
Arriving at the set proved to be quite an effort as well. When told to meet her at the studio where she was shooting, I had assumed a posh place in some part of the metropolis; it was, in actuality, in a village, Kharodi. I secured the services of an Uber to get me there, however, the driver dropped me off at the outskirts of the village, stating that “It was just there.” However, as I advanced into the village and enquired about the address I was informed that the studio was another 15-minute walk. The proprietor of a small business showed some concern, however, stating that it was not the best of areas and offered to have his assistant drop me off on his motorcycle. He understood my hesitation at accepting a ride from a strange man, so he told a young boy to accompany me and show me the way to the address. As I walked through the streets which were generously littered with garbage, I could see used syringes and cursed myself for wearing sandals. I ultimately reached the studio, thanked the young boy, and entered the studio. I found myself in a large room housing a fake, movable staircase, chandeliers and different types of fancy furniture. This was where the scenes were shot. There were several smaller rooms which operated as dressing rooms for the cast. It was in one of these smaller rooms that I interviewed Navnindra Behl.

Figure 1.4 Navnindra Behl at a production studio in Mumbai, India, April 2017.
Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry

Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry was extremely generous with her time. However, her busy schedule and unforeseen events severely limited her availability. Her interview was the first I conducted, just a day after I arrived in India. Her home was situated in an affluent area of Chandigarh, in a neighbourhood of posh homes and grand estates. I was met at the door by a servant who asked me to wait at one of the seated areas just outside the front entrance. This little seated area was beautifully decorated with artifacts and paintings that I admired until Chowdhry arrived and suggested that we relocate to another sitting area on their large and lush green lawn.

I had arranged for this first meeting to be a time when I could introduce myself and explain my research, however just a few minutes into the conversation she said “Sure, you can begin now.” To be honest I was a little unprepared, and dealing with jet lag, the result of which was that I was unable to figure out the zoom on the camera, so that the video of the February interview consists of an unusually large closeup of her face. In addition, I will also confess that I was a little intimidated by the elegance and muted grandeur of her residence. It had sizable green spaces both in the front and behind the house, large enough to accommodate outdoor furniture in two separate areas of the front yard. When I first arrived, I was unsure which of the open doors was considered the front entrance, so I found myself almost circumambulating the expansive property, peeking in to see if there was anyone I could hail down with an “excuse me” until a servant redirected me to the first entrance.

My first interview occurred outside, but the second interview occurred in one of the large sitting rooms in her residence. Although her home was only one story, it consisted of many rooms, which were large and spacious and decorated beautifully with artwork, handicrafts and, elegant furniture. And then there was the presence of the woman herself – elegance personified, with kohl
encircled eyes, a smooth, earthy voice which unfaultable diction and pronunciation and assured self-confidence – only this could have been the renowned Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry.

Figure 1.5 Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry and myself, outside her home in Chandigarh, UT, India, February 2017.

After my initial interview with Chowdhry she told me that she would be unable to meet for a few weeks as she was having extensive dental surgery. Due to differing schedules and travels we were unable to meet for another 6 weeks; when we did meet, however, she was always very kind and generous with her time and in her manner.

**Rani Balbir Kaur**

Rani Balbir Kaur (RBK), with whom I recorded a total of five interviews, was extremely generous with her time and very forthcoming with details about her life. Although retired from her position with Panjab University’s Department of Indian Theatre, she still had quite a full schedule. RBK has her own theatre group and travels frequently, for both personal and professional reasons. In addition, she also has the greatest domestic responsibilities; she lives with
her daughter Sonia, who suffers from mental illnesses, including bi-polar personality disorder, and also has the responsibility of maintaining a large home without any domestic help.

On my first scheduled interview, I arrived 15 minutes early. My Uber left and I stood at the gate wondering whether I should venture in and knock or just try to kill the fifteen minutes outside the gate. I did not want to interrupt the family in case they were in the midst of their lunch. As I stood there, a woman, most likely in her mid 40s, exited the house, walked over to a swing in the front lawn, and proceeded to sit and smoke a cigarette. She caught a glimpse of me standing by the gate, as I wondered who she might be.

“Who is it?” she called out and I stammered out a reply that I was there to interview RBK. “Go up to the entrance and ring the bell.” She told me. I still hesitated a little, wondering if I should mention that I was early, but, my hesitation seemed to irritate her. She again told me, in a more agitated tone, to go to the door and ring the bell. Her authoritative and no-nonsense tone led me to do as she asked, but upon reaching the front door I again hesitated for a few seconds at the door, as I prepared myself for my introduction to Rani Balbir Kaur. This third hesitation proved to be too much for the individual on the lawn because she now yelled loudly in an angry tone, “Don’t you understand Hindi? I told you to ring the bell.” At this point I heard a someone in the home yell, “Sonia!” in admonishment and saw the door open and an apologetic RBK appeared before me. “Please don’t mind her,” RBK stated, “She’s not well” gesturing to her head.

This was my first introduction to Rani Balbir Kaur and her eldest daughter, Sonia. I would get to know both RBK and her daughter Sonia over the next few weeks. I always found RBK extremely warm and kind. Sonia would occasionally cause delays to and interruptions during the interviewing; however, other times she would also be very friendly, even offering to make me tea or offering lassi (buttermilk) a couple of times.
Most days I was only able to interview RBK in the afternoon, after she had completed the chores for the day. In addition, at the time of these interviews, renovations to her home also frequently disrupted her schedule. I remember walking into the house one day, for a scheduled interview and seeing her move large pieces of furniture, including a large mattress either by herself, or with one of the workers. In addition, a few times when I began a scheduled interview, I noticed that she was distressed about something; in such cases, we abandoned the interview and just had a small visit.

Figure 1.6 Rani Balbir Kaur at her home, Chandigarh, UT, India, April 2017.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. Part of its value lies in its documentation of the lives and experiences of the women under study. With this study, we will uncover voices which were “hidden” for many years; although some information is available through the theatrical works of these women, there has been little in the way of biography. Further, prior scholarship has not addressed the question of how these women emerged triumphant in their war against the shame of
performance for women, where so many others had failed. Whatever their relationship with that shame is, or was, it is important that it is shared with others. This will allow for greater understanding of the conditions that can promote the presence of women in the public space, more broadly, and allows that presence to become its own norm, eliminating, or at least diminishing, the association of shame with women and the public space.

This work will also contribute to a re-evaluation of what it means to collect ethnographic “data” (for lack of a better word). The material that is being gathered is not data but personal narratives – lived experiences that hold significance to the narrator. To reduce such significant experiences to a simplified list of topics and categories is to commit an injustice to the stories and the storytellers. I am reminded of Kirin Narayan’s work, Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon,38 in which not only does Narayan credit her consultant, Urmila Devi sood, as a co-author, but in which she also shares Devi’s personal stories with sensitivity and finesse, connecting them to topics and themes discussed in the different folk tales which were also narrated by her.

CHAPTER 2: INTO THE PUBLIC REALM: THE ACTRESS IN INDIAN THEATRE TRADITIONS

In 2002, Punjabi actress, Nargis, a producer and versatile performer of Punjabi comedy dance shows on the Pakistani stage was assaulted by “‘ex’-police who cut her hair, shaved off her eyebrows, and inflicted 39 wounds on her body.” Fearing for her life, Nargis subsequently fled the country, to Canada, and did not return to her home until 2004. Contrary to what one might expect, this episode was ignored by human rights and women’s rights organizations. Nargis’s arrest was one of a multitude of arrests of female theatre artists in 2002. However, none of their male counterparts was ever arrested. Nor were the female artists who performed in upper class theatrical traditions.

Figure 2.1 Nargis after her assault during dance raids in 2002.


40 Ibid.
Part of the stigma attached to actresses such as Nargis, stems from broad perceptions of performers as belonging to lower castes and being debase, immoral and of easy virtue, as was mentioned in the last chapter. Nargis did not participate in what was considered to be a “higher form of theatre”; her stage shows were comprised of light hearted and uncomplicated comedy interspersed with dance numbers choreographed to popular songs. In this chapter, I will explore how, although actresses have come to be accepted on the stages of what is determined to be “higher forms of theatre” by the middle and upper classes, women performing in traditions usually associated with groups considered by society to be of lower social standing, such as the mirāśis, still experience a deep stigmatization.

Figure 2.2 Nargis performance from a CD prior to the 2002 attacks.41

As will be seen, the stigma attached to performance related to its public nature, which for women is attached to a set of judgements about women's purity and honour; the latter will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3. Anshu Malhotra has shown how, in the colonial period, women were enjoined not to draw attention to themselves by anyone other than their husbands and to restrict themselves to the domestic world.42 An ideal woman was supposed to keep “[her] eyes

low and [her] voice sweet”\textsuperscript{43} and remain in the house. In contrast, a woman who was “gaudily attired and heavily bejeweled”\textsuperscript{44} was seen as shameless and her movement outside of the house was viewed as a sign of promiscuity. For example, Malhotra refers to a colonial period pamphlet printed by an influential religious organization, the Khalsa Tract Society (established in 1894). In the pamphlet, women were encouraged to “maintain a sense of shame by adhering to its code through inscribing it on their bodies, or acting it out in their behaviour. Just as women had to become invisible in order to protect themselves from men’s gaze by covering their persons, similarly women had to continue to imbibe the code of shame.”\textsuperscript{45} Malhotra cites examples of writers such as Lala Devraj, in 1896, asking women “to carry shame in their eyes.”\textsuperscript{46} To even show one’s face or even the slightest form of one’s body was unacceptable, so how would society accept a woman who “paraded” on stage so that everyone had a view of the full body and face?

Women in Public and Private Spaces

Women’s Spaces Prior to British Rule

Some scholars, such as Doris. Srinivasan and Amit Srinivasan\textsuperscript{47}, have argued that in India, since before colonial times, the female has been firmly situated within the private, domestic sphere and prohibited from entering the public domain, which is generally reserved for men. Susan Seizer states that this distinction and separation “has long been central to the maintenance of a woman’s,

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} It is important to note that the research of these two scholars is from different disciples. Doris Srinivasan is an art historian specializing in art from the Mathura period. In this particular essay, (“Royalty’s Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives: Keepers Of Culture In Pre-colonial India”) she examines textual scholarship on the Kamasutra, Arthashastra, and other canonical sources. Amrit Srinivasan works on Devadasi culture in modern Tamil Nadu, which has a strong big-temple culture.
and thus of her family’s, good reputation.”\textsuperscript{48} This association of the public sphere as a masculine space, thus leads to a careful monitoring of women who do venture into the public space, and those “[w]omen who conduct business in the public sphere are suspect, a suspicion charged with the particular cruelty reserved for accusations of prostitution.”\textsuperscript{49}

Doris Srinivasan argues that in precolonial times the two spaces of public and private were still clearly separate, but women had a respectable position in both, as wives and mothers in private space and as courtesans in public space.\textsuperscript{50} A woman in each role, however, was forbidden from entering the other’s space, and the courtesans’ position never achieved the respectability enjoyed by women who were wives and mothers, and firmly entrenched within the private space. A woman's movements were carefully monitored as she was considered to be “naturally libidinous,”\textsuperscript{51} and needed to be guarded throughout her life, first by her parents, and then by her husband. D. Srinivasan refers to Manu’s \textit{Dharmashastra} which encouraged men to guard their wives so that they could maintain the sexual purity of their wife in order to preserve the purity of their offspring. The \textit{Dharmashastra} was not necessarily rigidly followed by the majority of the public. Wendy Doniger refers to Manu’s frequent “emergency escape clauses” and comments that if Manu himself acknowledged the need to to circumsvent such laws, and outlined procedures by which to do so, then “how seriously did other Hindus take it?”\textsuperscript{52} However, the \textit{Dharamshastra} is still an example of yet another text which reflected attitudes towards female conduct in this time

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 165.
period. Hence, the rigidity surrounding the restriction of the wife and other female family members to the private, domestic sphere.

However, if the wife was the “keeper of the (pure) lineage” then, the courtesan was the “keeper of culture.”\textsuperscript{53} D. Srinivasan’s work focuses on the ganika, the secular courtesan and the devadasi, the temple courtesan, both of whom, she argues, were held in high regard in earlier times. D. Srinivasan notes that courtesans “wield[ed] much power and prestige through the millennia”; with the Kamasutra and other literary works according her high regard.\textsuperscript{54} This may be due to the important role they played in the economic health of the court. The Arthashastra, dating from the 1\textsuperscript{st} or 2\textsuperscript{nd} Century, stated that ganikas, dasis and actresses were to be taught similar skills and all their earnings were to be given to the state, as it was the state which financed her education and lifestyle, as well as providing her with a monthly salary. Their work with culture is what separated courtesans (ganika) from sex workers (vesya); they (ganika) were “exceptionally civilized public women [with] artistic talents,”\textsuperscript{55} talents that included singing, playing musical instruments, dancing and even knowledge of topics such as chemistry, magic and architecture.

Most of these women were labelled as Shudras -a caste community which was usually connected to a lower class standing, due to their traditional jobs as labourers who worked with their hands. Despite their lower class standing, however, these courtesans catered to a high caste clientele, including kings and brahmins. Srinivasan also specifically refers to the Lucknow courtesans, or tawa’if, who were patronized and part of the powerful elite of Lucknow in precolonial times. They “enjoyed luxury, privileges, property and cultural engagement because of

\textsuperscript{53} D. Srinivasan, “Royalty’s Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives,” 165.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 162.
their liaisons with males in authority at Lucknow.”\textsuperscript{56} These were the women who provided entertainment in the public sphere, as dancers, singers and actresses.

D. Srinivasan states that precolonial texts deemed the devadasi just as important as the courtesan in terms of being a “keeper of, or contributors to, the artistic, cultural, and religious life of India.”\textsuperscript{57} In his work, based in modern day Tamil Nadu, A. Srinivasan agrees that, although today the term devadasi may evoke ideas of prostitution and ill repute, it was not always so. In earlier times, the devadasi was given great respect and honour and enjoyed privileges that few other women would receive. For example, she was taught to read and write and recognized as a trained professional and highly skilled artist.\textsuperscript{58} She was also often given the honour of performing rituals and ceremonies in the homes of elite members of the community.

True, a devadasi could not marry, as she was considered married to the local temple god; however, she faced no restrictions otherwise in terms of “economic activity, sex and childbearing.”\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, the dedication and puberty rituals of devadasis were public ceremonies (at least until 1910) which were meant to attract appropriate patrons (usually Brahmmins or the landed and commercial elite) and it was made clear that she was available for sexual relations.\textsuperscript{60} For the patron, himself, not only was it socially acceptable to maintain a devadasi, despite being married, it was also a symbol of prestige and “public success.”\textsuperscript{61} The wives of these patrons also

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} D. Srinivasan, “Royalty’s Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives,” 173.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 175.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Amrit Srinivasan. “Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance,” in Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader, ed. Nandi Bhatia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 248.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 235.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 236-237.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 239.
\end{itemize}
often stated that they preferred a devadasi over a second wife, since the devadasi would not enter the home in the way that a second wife would.\footnote{Ibid., 238.}

Why would the temple allow such relationships, overlooking the strict moral codes set for other women in the community, when it came to the devadasi? Some devadasi scholars suggest that the financial stability afforded to the institution by the devadasi’s work made their role socially acceptable, although this acceptance did not grant them the status and respectability allocated to wives and other women. The behaviour was advantageous to and suited the needs of the dominant patriarchal groups and individuals (privileged and elite men) and so it was termed acceptable. Temples recognized that the devadasi’s “art and physical charms”\footnote{Amrit Srinivasan, “Reform and Revival,” 239.} attracted individuals to the temples contributing to its economic and social status and so they were willing to confer special privileges upon these women. For example, the children of devadasis and their patrons enjoyed a “prime monopoly over temple service,”\footnote{Ibid., 240.} of course, by doing so, they also ensured a “permanent task-force committed to temple duties over all others.”\footnote{Ibid.} This special status supposedly made them superior to low-caste musicians and, consequently, in Tamil Nadu, at least, they (as well as the men in their communities) were able to accumulate an abundance of fortune.

In contrast to D. Srinivasan and A. Srinivasan’s somewhat naïve description of courtesans and devadasis in an exalted position of social honour and prestige, however, Davesh Soneji points to the ambiguous position of such performers.\footnote{Davesh Soneji, \textit{Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India}. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).} Although he acknowledges that these women possessed a larger degree of social agency in contrast to other women in India (such as their literate
status, matrilineal households and financial security), he refers to the records from courts such as Tanjore (in South India, Tamil Nadu) which “document the fact that courtesans were commodities regularly bought and sold through the intercession of the court. In other contexts, as the concubines, mistresses, or ‘second wives’ of South Indian elites, they were implicated in a larger world of servitude focused on the fulfillment of male desire.”67 Therefore, although they may have been accorded some level of respect, it did not come close to the social prestige enjoyed by the women firmly placed within the private space.

The Change: Women’s Exclusion from the Public Space

Whatever the degree of social honour these women enjoyed, or however ambiguous it was, it is generally agreed that the introduction of British social codes and morales in the colonial period, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, led to a complete loss of any prestige that the devadasis and courtesans may have formerly enjoyed. The British colonial rulers seem to have been influenced by the “Purity Crusade” of 1880s England which was making an ambitious attempt to bring a halt to sex work and condemn any sexual activity that occurred outside of marriage. The “Purity Crusade” stipulated that sexual relations should only be undergone for reproduction, an opinion we will see echoed by the Indian reformer, Swami Dayanand Saraswati. In addition, British society was not as familiar with the roles of the courtesans and devadasis, nor did they have the vocabulary to identify them; “prostitute” was the only definition available to them, and so another derogatory label was firmly affixed to these women. Consequently, the

67 Ibid., 3.
courtesans in the North and the devadasis in the South lost both employment and any form of social honour they may have enjoyed.\textsuperscript{68}

In 1856, the British annexed Lucknow and Tanjore (considered the cultural center of the South), bringing a stop to the royal patronage of courtesans. The Anti-Nautch\textsuperscript{69} Movement was launched in 1892, not only by the British, but also by local reformers who organized protests and marches to the homes of those who refused to boycott the devadasi. They also referred to the devadasis as prostitutes when petitioning the Viceroy of India and the Governor of Madras for legislative action and a ban on the dance. By 1911 a dispatch demanding action to be taken against devadasi performances was issued and 1947 saw formal legislation against temple dedication.\textsuperscript{70} This reform movement enjoyed great success in comparison to other reform movements such as those against dowry, widow remarriage and child marriage which met with great resistance because of “the threat posed to the landed, patrilineal interests of the elite.”\textsuperscript{71}

A. Srinivasan argues that professional and personal rivalry felt by certain male members of the devadasi community had as much to do with this loss of prestige as the arrival of the British did. The men in the devadasi community benefitted greatly from the abolishment of the devadasi tradition. Whereas women had to give up all rights and privileges associated with the temple and its service, men not only continued their performances in temples and individual homes, they also received patronage from local political parties.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, they were now permitted to inherit land, a right that until now, had been enjoyed only by the daughters of the devadasi.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} The term nautch (a corruption of nach or dance) referred to the more common dancing girls of Northern India, carrying with it connotations of ill repute.
\textsuperscript{70} A. Srinivasan, “Reform and Revival,” 250-1.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 253.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 252.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
A. Srinivasan’s insight into the discontent of male members of the devadasi community indicates that many individuals were upset by a female presence in the public space, even in cases when this presence was officially sanctioned. This was especially true if the female presence affected a male’s own social prestige or financial status. A. Srinivasan’s description of the two groups within the devadasi community, those responsible for the dance and those responsible for the music, shows us that public and private spheres were firmly separated within both groups. Married girls from the dance families were not allowed to train in the classical temple dance and dedicated devadasis were not allowed to cook or perform other domestic duties. All women in the music families were kept out of the public eye.

Female authority earlier reigned within the private sphere in many dancing families in South India, where the eldest woman, usually a former renowned dancer was the head of the household. The womenfolk were the “breadwinners” and decision makers regarding household spending or the arranging of marriages. The men in the families usually acquiesced to this authority as they saw it as financially advantageous. However, one cannot homogenize the experiences of all the dancing families. Some male teachers were able to exercise a certain amount of control in the public sphere. A. Srinivasan states that “[t]he dasis feared and respected their guru as teachers and artists and informal religious leaders of the community.” If he was financially able, then a man could move out and reside in his own household, whether he was a teacher, or skilled in another profession. Srinivasan also states that wealthier households of this type, headed by men, tended to prohibit their own women from adopting the profession. These types of households also became more common in colonial India, under British rule which included a law that stated men

74 The respect attributed to such women was evident from the fact that many families offered daily prayers to the photographs of many previous dancers.
75 A. Srinivasan, “Reform and Revival,” 244.
76 Ibid., 248
had to bear financial responsibility for their own children, so that many of the males in these matrilineal families began to demand their share of property and wealth from the households.

As Soneji has stated, some groups already disapproved of the devadasi tradition, even before the arrival of the British. This preexisting discontent helped to strengthen the anti-Nautch movement. First of all, although members of both the dancer and the musician groups “lived, married and worked together,” members of the musician group felt that “the natural attraction of women”77 gave the devadasis an unfair advantage, so that they enjoyed greater wealth and fame. They also claimed that the temples knowingly gave the devadasis and their dance prominence at festivals since it would attract more of an audience. In addition, A. Srinivasan states that “the privileged access of women artistes to rich patrons and their wealth underscored more sharply their absolute non-availability to their own men.”78 A final reason for discontent, on behalf of all male members of the community was the fact that daughters were favoured over sons in the matter of property and inheritance.79 A. Srinivasan asserts that it was “the power and influence the devadasis had as women and as artistes” which fueled the “leading role played by the men of the community in the subsequent reform campaign to abolish the female profession of temple-dancing.”80

"Folk" Performance, Underpinnings and Continuities

While Devadasis and courtesans provided entertainment for elite male audiences, other performance traditions, such as naqqal, bhand, and nautanki, provided entertainment for less elite audiences. The performers of this form of entertainment generally came from the lower castes and classes. Therefore, in the time period of the late 19th century, according to the views of people like

78 Ibid., 243.
79 Ibid., 245.
80 Ibid., 243.
Swami Dayananda Sarasvati, a female actress would have been “doubly threatening,” because not only was she entering a public space, but because she belonged to a lower caste. Even in these “lesser forms” of performance, women were restricted from the public sphere of the stage.

Sarasvati was a late 19th century reformists and founder of the Arya Samaj movement, (first established in 1875, and in Punjab in 1877). The ideology he promoted led to the restriction and “management” of women in Indian society. Although progressive in matters such as the advocacy of the education of women (at least until the age of sixteen), Dayananda’s use of the female body to “populat[e] an Aryan nation” proved otherwise restrictive. Dayananda revisited the ancient connection of the retention of semen with physical, intellectual and moral strength for a male and asserted that any form of sexual intercourse was to be solely for the purpose of conceiving children. Consequently, any women outside the institution of marriage were seen as threatening as they offered temptation by their very presence. Dayananda and other upper caste individuals were especially critical of low caste women as “voracious sexual beings.”

There was, therefore, the designation of two distinct spheres of theatre, distinguished by the caste/class backgrounds of both performers and audience. We can see how this typology of “elite” vs “folk” performance continues to the present. A newspaper article that examines the history of Punjabi theatre credits Richards with “creating serious theatre” in Punjab during a time when the stage was dominated by either commercialized Parsi theatre or Urdu theatre (which most

82 Ibid., 130-1.
83 Ibid., 139.
84 Ibid., 141.
other scholars would term to be Hindustani theatre). The writer, Sitara Asghar, echoes the perception of many, both scholars and the general public, who refer to Norah Richards’ theater as an elite theater. This “elite” theatre is viewed as such by many because they see it as modern and urban, whereas they erroneously equate folk theatre with pejorative understandings of it being “unskilled” and rural. Purveyors of such opinions seem to be ignorant of more accurate definitions of “the folk,” as postulated by Alan Dundes; a definition which identifies all individuals as members of folk groups. Dundes also states that folk traditions are ubiquitous, they occur in all settings, rural and urban and new forms of folklore are constantly being developed, so they are not only traditional, but also modern. The elite theatre was considered as such because it was being developed in the hands of cultural and social elites, and in elite settings. Such an equation is especially ironic, considering that many of the practitioners of this so-called “elite” theatre make use of many folk elements. For example, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, one of the co-participants in my research, incorporates the folk tradition of *naqqal*, in many of her works. However, it must be acknowledged that the presence of the *naqqal* in an organized production, on a stage, in front of an audience, decidedly separate from the performers, does not lend it to continuing as a “folk” tradition.

Folklorists generally define “folk” as informal, non-commercialized culture which spread through person to person contact. Other characteristics of this genre are that it persists through traditions of cultural practice and exhibits variation. Although it is not necessary that “folk traditions” and “folk theatre” be oral; the “folk” theatre of the Punjab has traditionally been an oral tradition. It is a tradition which is not formally learned, one in which scripts and plays are not written down, and which is generally the domain of peoples belonging to, what are considered,

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“lower castes”. The perception that Norah Richards’ modern and urban theatre is elite implies that it is of a higher quality than the traditional, informal folk performances of comics and musicians. This is dismissive of the theatrical contributions of earlier purveyors of folk theatre within the Punjab region, neglecting to recognize the value of folk theatrical traditions such as *bhands*, *naqaals* and *mirasis*.

Claire Pamment provides a clearer understanding of the difference between “elite” theatre as opposed to “folk” and/or “popular” theatre. Pamment shares that she first saw a *bhand* performance not in a traditional folk setting, but “in the contested illegitimacy of the popular urban Punjabi theatre.” Pamment commented that artists associated with “art theatre” (what she terms “parallel theater”) in Lahore usually criticize popular theatre, echoing the statements of the press which label the popular theatre as obscene and vulgar, comprised of “cheap thrills.”

Pamment shares a personal experience which shows us a common perception of “popular” theatre. In 2003, when Pamment was teaching theatre at a private university in Lahore, she took her students to a popular theatre performance. Hitherto, the students had only seen what Pamment terms to be “legitimate types of contemporary (upper) middle-class urban theatre.” They had viewed performances from parallel theatre, such as plays about women’s rights, as well as from Pakistan’s English theatre, including *Moulin Rouge* and *The Vagina Monologues*. This popular, “non-elite” theatre was different in many ways; it began rather late, at 11.00 p.m., and was attended predominantly by males from lower middle class backgrounds. It also consisted of “improvisational comedy” and “raunchy dancers” which are considered “lowlbrow by the elite and

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87 Claire Pamment, *Comic Performance in Pakistan*, 3
88 Ibid., 4.
89 Ibid.
the upwardly mobile." Pamment shares that this popular Punjabi theatre, which incorporates elements of folk theatre, “is considered anathema to legitimate theatre.”

The perception of this type of theatre is apparent when Pamment shares that she was inundated with phone calls from her students’ parents and other relatives. They called her repeatedly, both before and during the performance, asking “Are you sure it’s safe” or demanding, “She [my daughter/sister/niece] has to leave!” This example from Western Punjab (within modern Pakistan) is parallel to the popular “vulgar comedies” of East Punjab during the 1970s, which, as we will discuss in Chapter 2, were also considered by Indian critics to be a lowbrow theatre. This, however, was also a period in which theatre was used for reformist and activist purposes by theater artists such as Gursharan Singh, a theatrical director and Punjabi language playwright, about whom we will learn more later in this chapter. The practitioners of this type of theatre were allotted more respectability due to the “noble” nature of their work.

In Punjab, traditional theatre, often termed “folk,” consisted of two types: religious and secular. Religious theatre consisted of the staging of stories from hagiographical traditions, such as the Ram Leela (stories about the life of Rama, an incarnate of the Hindu god Vishnu, taken from the epic, the Ramayana) and the Krishna (Raas) Leela, (stories about the life of Krishna, another incarnate of the divine). These were usually held annually during religious festivals. Secular folk theatre in the Punjab, are those traditions which are only for entertainment, such as dancing, naqqal (mimicry), bhand (comedy) and kavishree (singers of ballads). The performers of these types of folk theatre were traditionally from lower castes. Uppal condescendingly states that the only

90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Kamlesh Uppal, Punjabi Natak Ate Rangmanch, 137.
employment available to the members of these landless classes was either menial/labour work or “the art of pleasing people or making them laugh.” The roles of any women characters would be performed by young boys.

Gibb Schreffler has described at length how, since medieval times, the occupation of the professional performer has been associated with the mirāsī, a term which Schreffler identifies as both an “occupational” and an “ethnic label.” Interestingly enough, he does not label this as a caste group, although Mirasis, are generally identified as a lower caste group. Mirasis are generally known as “hereditary professional musicians” who have acted as “personal bards and genealogists” and are understood to include a wide range of performers: musicians, singers, dramatists, comedians, impersonators, etc. Schreffler acknowledges that “the generic, lumping term ‘Mirasi’ has acquired some connotations of greater or milder contempt;” he notes that Mirasis:

usually come from low-status or marginal communities, and this includes a number of communities whose members have recently taken to performance even though they had no tradition previously. We can theorize that, in the case of individuals that do not come from the ‘main’ performer communities (above), they may elect to perform because their social position ‘permits’ it. In the least, they have ‘nothing to lose’ and only to gain, in that music performance … is a viable means of survival.

The very fact that he states that it is only people who have “nothing to lose” who would traditionally turn to performance as a profession, indicates the low standing that this group held

94 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 For more detailed information on bhands and naqqals, see Ibid., 17-18.
98 Ibid., 16.
99 Ibid., 28.
within the social hierarchy. Lowell Lybarger, another researcher on performers in Pakistani Punjab, also acknowledges that Mirasi is a “pejorative term”\(^{100}\) and refers to H. A. Rose’s, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, a study of caste in pre-1947 Punjab which details “the social role and rituals of the Mirasi” and showed them to be “low status service professionals.”\(^{101}\)

Within these groups, it was male members who performed in public. The females in the community, known as *mirāsan*, performed in domestic spaces, in the homes of their patrons, where they would sing on occasions such as the birth of a male child, or a wedding, and where they would also play the small drum and lead other women in singing and dancing. Another important function they executed was to lead women’s mourning songs on the occasion of a death.\(^{102}\) They were still firmly relegated to the private space; the public space was only for men.

However, Madhu Trivedi, in her study on the performing arts in medieval North India, states that the women of the *dhaadi* community in Punjab did venture into the public space. The *dhaadis* sang heroic ballads whilst playing the music instruments known as the *dhadda* (a small, wooden, hourglass-shaped drum) and the *kingara* (also known as *kingri*, a bowed, stringed instrument). The *dhaadi* women played on the *daf* (tambourine) and the *duhul* (a round, two-headed drum) and, according to Trivedi, although they used to play only at weddings and birthdays, they gradually began to perform for male audiences as well.\(^{103}\) Interestingly, though, she does not provide any evidence for this statement, despite heavily citing other facts throughout her work. She also cites an example of upper caste theatre artistes known as *Kirtaniyas*, who were members


\(^{101}\) Ibid., 36.


of the highest caste, the Brahmans. Trivedi cites Abul Fazl’s *A’in Vol III*, when describing the work of young Brahman boys who would perform the roles of women in productions based on the life of the Hindu god, Krishna.\(^{104}\) Despite such instances, however, the vast majority of performers were from the lower castes.

Kamlesh Uppal states that there is no real tradition of Punjabi theatre, arguing that even folk theater was not able to establish itself in Punjab. Uppal’s opinion is not surprising, considering her statement that Punjabi theatre has a relatively recent history and that there was no real tradition of Punjabi theatre until the early 20\(^{th}\) century. Uppal concludes that Punjab never had the type of folk performance traditions that were enjoyed in other areas of Northern and Southern India. She states that only a few historical and religious examples show us that the people of Punjab were exposed to some examples of folk theater from time to time, such as the *Ras Lila*\(^{105}\) of Uttar Pradesh, as some troupes would occasionally come to perform it in the Punjab.\(^{106}\)

Gunjeet Aurora and Atamjit Singh agree with this conclusion.\(^{107}\) Aurora and Uppal acknowledge the presence of folk performance traditions among lower castes such as *naqqal* and *bhand*;\(^{108}\) both also refer to the folk theatre traditions of *bhaga* and *khiyaa*\(^{109}\) of Haryana and Rajasthan,\(^{110}\) and the *tamasha*, *yakshagana* and *nautanki*\(^{111}\) traditions present across North India.\(^{112}\) However, although both agree that while Punjabis were most likely exposed to these

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\(^{104}\) Ibid., 90.
\(^{105}\) A folk theatre based on the legends of Lord Krishna.
\(^{106}\) Uppal, *Punjabi Natak Ate Rangmanch*, 137.
\(^{108}\) Naqal is a type of mimicry and *bhand* traditions incorporate storytelling, dance and minstrels.
\(^{109}\) Forms of dance drama.
\(^{110}\) Uppal, *Punjabi Natak Ate Rangmanch*, 137.
\(^{111}\) Also forms of dance drama.
\(^{112}\) Aurora, “Punjabi Theatre,” 271.
traditions, they minimize the influence of these traditions upon the development of modern Punjabi drama, and Aurora states that Punjab “lacked a performance culture in the tradition of theatre” despite its strong presence elsewhere in India. A. Singh states that Punjabi drama is essentially a mixture of characteristics of English and Sanskrit drama, with English having a greater impact than the indigenous Sanskrit traditions.

At the same time, many scholars, including Uppal, state that modern Punjabi theatre was influenced to a greater extent by travelling drama troupes, such as those by Parsi theatre. Of special significance was the fact that the roles of female characters were performed by women. However, this influence did not extend itself as far as to allow the participation of women on the Punjabi stage. Males still performed the female roles, using many types of sexually exciting and provocative acting techniques.

**Stigmatization and Shame**

As will be discussed, in Chapter Four, actresses are generally accepted on the stages of what is determined to be higher forms of theatre by the middle and upper classes; women performing in traditions associated with the lower class, still experience a deep stigmatization. We saw this in the example provided at the beginning of the chapter. Women are a generally respected presence on the Indian stage today, however, this respect is limited to what the upper echelons of

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113 They do, however, disagree on the sang/swang traditions of song and dance theatre. Uppal feels that this was restricted to the areas of Rajasthan and Haryana, whereas Aurora feels it had a strong tradition in the Punjab as well.

114 Aurora, “Punjabi Theatre,” 271.


society determine to be “higher forms of theatre.” Both Kathryn Hansen and Susan Seizer have explored this stigma. Fawzia Afzal-Khan also refers to this stigmatization in her work on Pakistani street theatre as does Claire Pamment in her exploration of women in Pakistan’s Popular Punjabi Theatre. Because many of these performance traditions are looked down upon by urban elites, female performers are still heavily stigmatized. Traditionally participating actresses come from lower castes and classes and suffer a loss to their social standing; the connection to lower class and caste status was also used as a reason upper class/caste women should not perform.

Kathryn Hansen explains that most female performers in the folk theatre of nautanki are said to be from lower castes (berin or natin) associated with singing and sex workers. However, she also mentions that it is not clear whether these women were born into these castes, or whether the labels were attached to them after they began performing. The association of this theatre form with “the possibilities of exhibitionism and voyeurism” for male audiences results in this public space being labelled “forbidden and dangerous.” In addition, the content of these plays may show women transgressing social boundaries and norms, as they often depict “bold aggressive

121 Hansen, *Grounds For Play*.
122 Ibid., 41, 311.
123 Ibid., 7.
women [who] dominate the stage, robbing attention from the hero.” The very tradition is named after one of these women, Princess Nautanki. In a society where women’s presence in the public space is still heavily regulated, not only do women enter the public in the space of theatre, they also engage in contact with strange men.

Though not as old as folk traditions like nautanki, the “Special Drama” that Seizer studies has a history dating back to the 1890s. These dramas are usually held in villages during religious festivals, lasting all night from about 10 pm to dawn. Each performer is hired specifically for each performance, so artists from different cities and towns, meet for the first time onstage during a performance. This necessitates a great deal of travel on the part of the artists. Seizer states that during the busy season (from March to July) performers may even appear in a different village each night - thus women involved spend almost half the year outside of the private domain, exposed to different environments and different men within them. It is a recipe ready for the production of a “stigmatized” woman. Also contributing to the stigmatization of the actress is the

124 Ibid., 27.
125 An example is the story of the Princess Nautanki, after whom, the tradition is named. In this tale, the Princess Nautanki is caught with a young man who has disguised himself to enter her bedroom. Her lover is sentenced to hang, however Nautanki dresses herself as a man and arrives at the execution with a sword and dagger, threatening her father with the sword. She also threatens to commit suicide unless he pardons Phul Singh. Eventually the king consents. Other well known love stories depicted on the Nautanki stage, include the popular Hir Ranja, and Laila Mujnu both of which also portray women in strong roles. In Hir Ranja (the first half of which bears a striking similarity to the narrative of Princess Nautanki), it is Hir who is the stronger character, showing skill and daring when planning her daily secret meetings with Ranja. In the story of Laila Mujnu, Laila is no demure young girl either, she openly declares her love for Mujnu and refuses to have anything to do with her husband in her forced marriage. Other stories, include, Saudagar vo Syahposh, and Lakha Banjara in which, again, the heroine defies societal conventions, by defying her family for love, and acting as the rescuer of her male beloved. However, they show further transgressions on behalf of the female, in that she follows in love with a man from a lower rank, which goes against the North Indian convention of males marrying females who belong to families of a lower rank. The final story, of Shirin Farhad is even more disturbing in terms of the transgression of social norms, as it relates the story of a married Queen who actively pursues a lowly born stonemcutter.
Hansen, *Grounds For Play*, 147-158.
126 Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, 21.
127 Ibid., 23.
content of these dramas. The majority of the performance is dramatic, however the initial two hours are comedic scenes between the character of the male buffoon and the female dancer, which incorporate lewd sexual banter and highly suggestive dances.

In the comedic opening scenes of Tamil Special Drama, a “clown” or “buffoon” type male character approaches and purposely bumps into a young girl who is dancing alone in the street. From Seizer’s description one can see that the female characters do not confirm to societal norms of “proper” female behavior. The actress is already defying conventional norms with her presence on the very public stage, but the character she is playing performs further social transgressions with her public dance. No “good girl” would be found alone on a public street, much less dancing on it, especially since there are very few types of dance that are permitted in the public. To make matters worse, not only is the girl touched by this strange man, she has to touch him herself in order to push him away whenever he comes too close and traps her in a space on the stage (which occurs frequently throughout the performance). The character often voices her concern regarding the physical contact, warning him not to touch her, especially since people are watching and no one will marry her if she is seen being touched by another man. Seizer states that “[h]er response lays bare an underlying norm that makes the duet such risqué business: a woman’s reputation is negatively affected when a man touches her in public; a stigmatized, public woman may never have a proper marriage.”128

Compounding this perception is what many members of society consider to be the vulgar content of many of these types of performances. The label of “easy virtue” is clearly present upon the body of the actress who wears flashy and revealing outfits, whilst the male costume is unremarkable. In addition, the female dancer’s movements are often suggestive and flirtatious,

128 Ibid., 220.
meant to arouse the male audience, which often responds with whistles and hoots.¹²⁹ In addition, the dialogue between the girl and the buffoon is replete with lewd and sexually suggestive banter. The culmination of the comedic scene involves the pair falling in love and deciding to marry, so that they also break the social taboo against love marriage.

Perhaps most disturbing, however, are the actors’ vocalized opinions of the “loose” characters of the actresses. Whether they sincerely believe this characterization or not, it is assuredly one that is promulgated on the Special Drama stage. Seizer states that these comedy scenes “are the locus for much of the stigma on actors, … play[ing] off common notions such as that actresses are prostitutes, for example, or that stage artists have neither culture nor morals.”¹³⁰ For example, in some performances, as the couple leaves the stage, the buffoon will turn around and address the audience, asking if anyone is “interested” (in the girl) and, if so, to meet him backstage, effectively “pimping out” his new-found “love”. In still other performances, it is the girl who sneaks away, excusing herself as she has seen her “uncle” (or “client”) who is beckoning her.

The reputation of the performers in such a tradition is such that the term “drama people” is often used as what Seizer terms a “stigmatized identity category.”¹³¹ “Drama people” are believed to lack murai, a sense of propriety and social order.¹³² However, this lack of murai is more readily attached to women than to men. Indeed, Seizer points out that most of the Tamil words for actress are also the same words used for “dancing-girl or prostitute.”¹³³ While Hansen points out “the selling of sexual favours is not essential to the definition of a stage actress as a prostitute, either in

¹²⁹ Ibid., 213.
¹³⁰ Ibid., 21.
¹³¹ Ibid., 31.
¹³² Ibid.
¹³³ Ibid., 4.
North India or in other societies, women's reputations are already damaged, whether or not they participate in the sex trade, as they have transgressed the norms for gender roles in the patriarchal society of their rural audiences. The norms in this society are “defined in spatial terms, with women occupying private inside spaces and men public outer ones,” with enclosure seen as essential in the preservation of a “woman’s chastity and, by extension, her menfolk’s honour.” Seizer witnessed this stigma firsthand, observing that “[e]veryone … held markedly negative opinions about these artists. Landlords refused to rent to them. People stared at them in the street; rowdy boys sometimes even hurled insults at them as they passed. And middle-class interlocutors quickly lost interest in me, too, when they understood how closely I moved with [them].”

It is rare for families to allow their daughters to enter this profession as it severely limits their marriage prospects. Even the families of male actors will typically not arrange their son’s marriage to actresses due to their poor reputation. Actresses are often disowned by their families and, if they do marry, they often become second wives to men who are already married. Seizer states that 95% of actresses in Tamil Special Drama become second wives, in effect “mistresses” to men who are often actors themselves.

Seizer states that every South Indian woman understands that “being an actress is a shameful occupation and social identity.” Many state, “It is too late for me, but my children should have a different life.” Then why do they choose such an occupation? Although the odd

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134 Hansen, Grounds for Play, 21.
135 Ibid., 21.
136 Ibid., 23.
137 Seizer, Stigmas of the Tamil Stage, 13.
138 Ibid., 313.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid., 312.
141 Ibid., 7.
actress may willingly join the stage because of its allure, the truth of the matter is that often there is very little choice involved, especially in the case of families who are considered to be “low status” in society. The stigma is such that women will only join such types of theatre out of *majboori* (helplessness or compulsion). The work provided by such “low forms” of theatre, may be the only work available to them, or the most financially attractive option. We may look to the wages paid to performers in the Tamil Special dramas, which are very attractive in comparison to other available jobs. For example, in 1993, a female cook or maid earned an average of Rs 75 a month, however, a special drama actress could earn upwards of Rs 300 in one night.\(^{142}\)

Such sentiments are found not only amongst Tamil Special Drama actresses. Fawzia Afzal-Khan shares similar sentiments expressed by lower class actresses who were active in Pakistan’s folk theatre of the 1950s. These women stated that their profession felt like a burden and led to feelings of guilt. They lamented they would have readily chosen another occupation had it been available to them.\(^{143}\) In contrast, upper class women who have rejected the “upper class” theatre in favour of reformist “street theatre,” (which includes Afzal-Khan herself) suffer no stigma. Afzal-Khan observes that “the experience of being an oppressed woman is felt very differently, both in degree and kind, according to the socio-economic class to which the woman belongs.”\(^{144}\)

\(^{142}\) It must be taken into consideration that the drama season only lasts half the year, (from February/March to July/August) and performers have to earn enough in this period to last them the rest of the year. In addition, the pay is often unreliable, as their wages depend upon how popular they are during that particular season. The amount of work also varies, a popular artist can work almost every night during the high season of April and May (earning amounts that are higher than even some middle-class standards), but she may only have work 3-4 times a week during other times of the season. Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, 29.

\(^{143}\) Afzal-Khan, *A Critical Stage*, 37.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 38.
Claire Pamment’s study of popular Punjabi language theatre in present day Pakistan examines a light-hearted format, consisting mainly of comedy and dance, incorporating burlesque type, sexually suggestive gestures and movements (we will discuss this in more detail later). The performers in this theatre very often come from “socially maligned backgrounds (mirasis, prostitutes, khusras, and dwarfs).”\(^{145}\) However, it is the female who bears the brunt of the stigma. It is not uncommon for the government to arrest women performers in this type of theatre on charges of vulgarity,\(^ {146}\) but once again, class comes into play. Upper class actresses in English language theatrical productions with sexual content, such as, *The Vagina Monologues* (2003), *Moulin Rouge* (2003, 2005), *Home is Where Your Clothes Are* (2007) et al, have never been arrested.\(^ {147}\) One may ponder whether these actresses were not arrested because they were “upper class” or because they were performing English-language theatre? Whatever the case may be, it must be admitted that a strong command of the English language is strongly associated with upper class status in Punjabi society.

**Strategies for Negotiating Shame**

Often actresses try to abide by dominant cultural norms, although they may have to alter them somewhat and “[expand] the category of good woman to include themselves.”\(^ {148}\) Since actresses are “public women,”\(^ {149}\) who transgress societal norms of confinement within the domestic sphere, they are stigmatized and burdened with negative reputations. They aim to remain within acceptable norms by using strategies to achieve respectability, including efforts to remain

\(^{145}\) Pamment, *A Split Discourse*, 118.
\(^{146}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{147}\) Ibid., 121.
\(^{148}\) Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, 304.
\(^{149}\) Ibid., 303.
out of the public sphere. Seizer explores different strategies used by some actresses in order to lessen these stigmas and “maintain normative codes of decorum for Tamil women.” These strategies are an attempt to distance themselves from the public side of their profession; so that the only time they are “in public” is when they are on stage.

For example, they will try not to perform too close to their homes\textsuperscript{151} so that they can keep their profession separate from their personal lives. However, male actors have no such worries and perform anywhere.\textsuperscript{152} Another example is the absence of women from the public space of bookings. Rather than “taking bookings” herself, an actress will hang her calendar in “booking shops,” which are “very male public spaces.”\textsuperscript{153} Only men, whether they are drama artists, agents or sponsors frequent these spaces. The shop owners or “booking agents” earn a fee every time an artist is booked for a drama; they are invested in each artist’s value and reputation and often ascertain an artist’s value by asking him to sing. However, they will never ask a woman to sing. Seizer shares the comments of one booking agent who states, “We can’t ask a woman to come here and sing. Can we ask a woman to come sing in a public place? If this was a house, we might ask her; here we can’t.”\textsuperscript{154} Therefore, even within this field of public performance, all participants still recognize and abide the propriety of a division between the public and the private spheres, limiting the movement of women in the public spheres to only the stage. Due to this, even an actress’ booking agent is aware of her talents and reputation only indirectly, by other men who have seen her onstage. It is these men who share information about her to the booking agent and

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{151} Seizer states that is usually within a ten kilometre radius.
\textsuperscript{152} Seizer, \textit{Stigmas of the Tamil Stage}, 303-304.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 305.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 310.
to other men in and around the shop, so it is men who control and determine an actress’ reputation, while she sits at home, without any control.

Since “publicness” is identified as “the core of the bad reputation of the stage actress,” actresses will also employ other strategies in order to minimize their presence in the public space and “accrue as little tainting publicness as possible.” During her travels she will travel by private vehicles as often as possible and, when waiting for public transportation is necessary, she may try to organize some type of private space in order to shelter herself from the public eye. In addition, when setting up “resting spaces” during performances, actresses often hang up saris in order to create little private areas, which also double as changing rooms. Seizer states that “[t]hrough the creation of such small, secluded spaces, actresses force their inclusion as potentially ‘good’ women into a calculus of moral virtues that otherwise categorically excludes them.”

Another strategy used by many Special Drama actresses in order to minimize their presence in the public sphere is to live as close as possible to the Special Drama business district in order to minimize their daily travel. In contrast, however, most male actors still live in their villages. They only stay in the city during the drama season, when they rent rooms in lodges that are notorious for being disreputable nightlife spots, so that if a woman is even seen in one (let alone actually staying there) she risks her reputation. Seizer identifies the time period when an actress walks back to her home from the bus stop, the morning after a performance, as a “particularly vulnerable moment” when an actress’ shame is almost tangible, as she walks quickly, without stopping or

155 Ibid., 316.
156 Ibid., 321.
157 Ibid., 319-323.
158 Ibid., 322.
159 Ibid., 328.
speaking to anyone. Despite all these attempts, actresses are still not successful in negotiating a space within “Tamil norms of gendered respectability.”¹⁶⁰

Pakistani actresses also use similar strategies in order to maintain a foothold in social respectability. Fawzia Afzal-Khan refers to strategies that some Pakistani actresses use in order to deal with the conflict between their societal and religious beliefs and their profession.¹⁶¹ Being in the presence, let alone performing in front of, ghair mard (men who are strangers) is taboo for many. Other women in their society would use the burqa (veil) in such instances. The actresses borrowed this idea when dealing with the contradiction between their societal teachings and their profession, determining that the makeup they wore on stage was their “false face” (nakalī chehrā) as opposed to their “true face” (aslī chehrā); in essence, performing the role of the veil.¹⁶² Another strategy is to become more religiously zealous, performing more daily prayers than are officially required.

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi have stated that the people of Southern India and liberal Indian religions, such as Jainism and Buddhism, often encouraged female employment.¹⁶³ In addition, areas such as South India and Bengal have also been more accepting of performance than North India. However, we have seen above that that female performers in both the North and the South had to deal with stigma and shame. In her study of female singers and musicians in India, C. S. Lakshmi observed that even in areas such as South India and Bengal, where performance was allocated more respect than in North India, women have faced more obstacles in pursuing the performative arts than men have. In addition, the fine arts were still seen as associated with

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 324.
¹⁶¹ Afzal-Khan, A Critical Stage.
¹⁶² Ibid., 37.
¹⁶³ Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 94.
immorality. In the late nineteenth century, the “respectable” classes of Bengal thought that music was suited “only for the lowly as a profession and as a demoralising entertainment for gentlemen.”

She quotes an 1887 newspaper article which stated, “Will our European readers believe us when we say that no son could hum a tune or sing a line in the presence of his father, without seriously insulting the latter, and if a woman is heard to sing, why, from that moment she loses her respectability entirely. Singing and immorality are, in the popular estimation, most closely united.”

In addition, although women began to participate in musical theatre in Bengal, from 1835, they were not considered “respectable,” due to the connection of many female leads to sex work. We have already discussed the connection of sex work to women in early theatre and Lakshmi also refers to Binodoni Dasi, who played the female lead in many musicals and also helped establish the “first actors’ cooperative” by “agreeing” to be mistress of its patron. Sadly, however, her colleagues did not see this action as “an act of sacrifice;” they reasoned that, “she was from an urban prostitute family, anyway.” Part of the agreement was also that the company would be named after her. However, when the company was finally set up, her colleagues reneged on this part of the agreement, instead naming it the Star Company, as they felt that it would not be appropriate to name it after a prostitute.

In the South, even women from performing families or socially progressive families, who took up music faced considerable opposition. Lakshmi writes of the experience of singer Naina Devi, whose parents did not want her to pursue music professionally, as they were concerned about

\[^{164}\text{C. S. Lakshmi, The Singer and the Song: Conversations with Women Musicians (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000), xxvii.}\]
\[^{165}\text{Ibid., xxvii-xxviii.}\]
\[^{166}\text{Ibid., xxviii.}\]
\[^{167}\text{Datta, 1991 quoted in Lakshmi, The Singer and the Song, xxviii.}\]
\[^{168}\text{Ibid.}\]
honour. Devi shared that her parents’ disapproval of her sister’s love marriage was one of the reasons for their strictness. They arranged her marriage at 16 to a family in Punjab who were not fond of music and where singing “was not the done thing,” in contrast to her own family from Calcutta where “everybody sang and [she] had appeared on the stage with [her] sister and brother-in-law, and had sung in amateur theatres, performances for charity.”169 (48). When she did finally begin to pursue music professionally, at the age of 32, many assumed that she was of a tawaif (courtesan) background.

The Beginnings of Modern Urban Theatre: Males Only

When theatre first developed in modern urban settings men were the only performers, enacting all roles, both male and female. The latter half of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century, saw a great deal of development in Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatre in Bombay. However, until the 1870s only men played all the female roles and even after, men and women performers competed for the parts. Female impersonators accrued a great fan following and young boys were especially popular in these roles giving birth to Parsi “boy companies” which became especially popular in certain regions. These companies employed young boys “with sweet voices, good looks, and physical graces”170 and carefully trained them. Young “college-going” men from the middle class, were especially recruited.171

Extreme discipline was expected of the young boys and men who became representatives of the “perfect woman” on stage. For example, impersonators were not permitted to cut their hair short, or to drink or eat spicy food, as this could “spoil the complexion and [the] voice, and make

[them] manly and ‘hot-tempered.’”\(^\text{172}\) Many of the impersonators were not allowed to be seen with other men, lest they risk their ‘reputation’; whilst travelling, they had to sit in separate compartments and they were to never invite men into their tents. Dance and music teachers taught these performers how to move, and carry themselves in a feminine manner, as well as how to adjust their voices.\(^\text{173}\) These young boys also reputedly attracted great fan followings among men.\(^\text{174}\) They were so idealized and successful in their emulation that women copied their dress sense, walking style and other characteristics. Well known female impersonators often came to be known by the names of the characters they played, Gujarati actor Jayshankar Sundari (1888-1967) and Marathi actor Bal Gandharva (1889-1975), were two such performers whose “stage movements, attire and speech became models for women offstage.”\(^\text{175}\) Indeed, Gandharva was so popular that women copied his style of sari draping and his image was used for advertising products such as cosmetics.\(^\text{176}\) These female impersonators thus came to represent the ideal Bhāratīyā nārī (Indian woman), which the middle-class woman was expected to emulate.\(^\text{177}\)

Female performers first began appearing on the Parsi stage in the 1870s, at the same time that the genre experienced an increasing emphasis on aesthetics and professionalization. Kathryn Hansen states this was as a result of the increased appearance of women in the public sphere. Although professional actresses were generally regarded as “immoral and unruly, a stigma on the


\(^{173}\) Ibid.

\(^{174}\) One such boy was Master Wasi of Lahore, popular from 1915 to 1935. When he was on stage, admirers in the all-male audience were reputed to whistle, blow kisses and even become so overcome as to rip their sleeves and faint. Pande, “Moving Beyond Themselves,” 1646.


\(^{176}\) Pande, “Moving Beyond Themselves,” 1647

women from respectable families (read, upper class) were considered a civilizing force, one that was recognized by the introduction of “women only” shows. Since women were appearing more frequently in public, more people were open to the idea of women on stage. However, the idea of Parsi women on stage was still unacceptable. The actresses had to be non-Parsis, from the realm of the “other,” consequently the actresses on the Parsi stage in the 1880s were mainly professional singers and dancers. These included former courtesan women from Hyderabad who had been left destitute by the discontinuation of the patronage system. Other actresses came from a background of prostitution. However, the main female roles were still performed by female impersonators; these new actresses filled the parts of minor characters and engaged the audience in solo songs and dances. This proved popular with audiences who often showed their pleasure with the solo dancers by showering them with money. But many were still critical and unhappy with the female presence on the stage; some men even left theatre companies which began to employ women and started their own companies.

The Parsi stage was not the only one which saw the introduction of women. The new roles available to women in the public were influencing many other Indian theatre traditions, which were opening their stages to women. In Bengal, they were introduced to the stage even earlier; in 1795, a female relation of Rabindranath Tagore performed a role on stage in a family production. However, all these individuals, with the exception of Tagore’s niece, were considered individuals “of easy virtue.” The fact that Tagore’s niece was not labelled a “wanton woman” is quite likely

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178 Hansen, Stages of Life, 15.
179 Ibid., 16.
180 Hansen, Grounds For Play, 83.
181 Kathryn Hansen Grounds For Play, Mrinal Pande, “Moving Beyond Themselves” and Neera Adarkar, “In Search of Women.”
due to her position as a member of a well-respected upper class family; whereas the other women did not enjoy this advantageous position within the social hierarchy. This is a pattern we will see repeated in other contexts, and with the women at the centre of this study.

A similar story is seen in Marathi theater, which also saw the introduction of women performers by 1865. Neera Adarkar identifies at least three companies from 1908 to 1925 in which women performed regularly, the Belgaonkar, the Starker and the Manohar. Both the Belgaonkar, an all women theatre company and the Starker Street Sangeet Natak Mandali, a mixed company of both male and female actors. were founded by sex workers.\textsuperscript{183} From 1914, Kamlabai Gokhale performed male and female roles in, and later managed, her husband’s company. A mixed theatre company was first mentioned in 1929, when a famous classical singer, Hirabai Badodekar, and her siblings, founded a “mixed company”. There is also mention of a local trader in Sawantwadi, who formed a theatre company made up of local sex workers.\textsuperscript{184} However, criticism of such all-female theatre companies was acute. Accounts of males performing female roles were nothing short of glorious, lauding the men’s ability to “fool society by posing as women”\textsuperscript{185} even when off the stage. However, female actresses playing male roles were criticized as looking “ugly and abnormal.”\textsuperscript{186}

Many critics in Marathi theatre consented to the idea of sex workers filling female roles, because, while they recognized the need to introduce actresses to the stage, they too, as in the Parsi theatre community, did not want upper class women “to lose their morality.”\textsuperscript{187} They also felt that sex workers were better suited to acting because they were able to enact many different types of

\textsuperscript{183} Neera Adarkar, “In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theater, 1843 to 1933,” in Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader, ed. Nandi Bhatia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 221.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 221-222.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{186} P.G. Kanekar, Mazya Kahi Natya Smriti, 1944 quoted in Adarkar, “In Search of Women,” 221.
\textsuperscript{187} Adarkar, “In Search of Women,” 228.
emotions, since their minds were “full of evil thoughts.” In addition, they saw this as a chance to “reform the prostitute” by offering them a “decent” profession, as long as they followed strict moral standards. By doing this, they hoped to protect the morality of the male audiences. Theatre companies therefore imposed harsh discipline and strict rules of conduct for actresses. The rules were so strict, in fact, that Pande gives the example of an actress who resigned because she could not cope with the harsh discipline.

However, such rules of discipline did little to help the overall reputation of the actress. The stage was still not considered an acceptable profession for women. In addition, the experiences of some actresses at the hands of some overzealous fans, further encouraged women to stay away from the stage. An example is the case of Latifa Begum, an actress on the Parsi stage. At the end of one performance she was abducted by an upper class young man. In yet another instance, a former fan and lover cut off an actress’s nose.

Following the initial group of sex workers, singers and dancers were the Anglo-Indian actresses who first entered the stage in the 1920s. Still reluctant to allow Indian woman on stage, many preferred the Anglo-Indians as they were considered “foreign” or “others” who did not need to abide the societal rules which were imposed upon Indian women. Mrinal Pande reports on the popularity of the Anglo-Indian actresses, citing the Madan Corinthian Company, which was a group of 12 Anglo-Indian girls and reporting that many theatre companies advertised these “gorī – gorī” (fair) ladies on their playbills in order to attract audiences. Two extremely popular Anglo

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188 Ibid.
189 Pande suggests that these rules were also a strategy of keeping tight control on the actresses, as theatre companies frequently stole stars from one another. Pande, “Moving Beyond Themselves,” 1648.
190 Hansen, Stages of Life, 15 and Pande, “Moving Beyond Themselves,” 1648.
Indian actresses mentioned by Pande were Patience Cooper and Mary Fenton, both of whom quit acting after marriage.\textsuperscript{191}

Criticism of females on stage was still frequent and acute in the early decades of the twentieth century, once again stemming from the perception of women as a dangerous sexual presence in the public sphere. Pande states that “all communities, including the otherwise progressive Parsis, believed that the presence of real flesh and blood women in theatre groups and on stage would corrode moral values and lead to extremes of debauchery.”\textsuperscript{192} Many felt that morals would be threatened if women and men interacted together in theatre; it was considered immoral to imagine a strange man as one’s husband.\textsuperscript{193} Adarkar refers to an example from a popular publication in 1903, of a historian, who shared an incredulous story about a man and woman who were to play Radha and Krishna (two lovers) on stage, but “evil thoughts … and lust”\textsuperscript{194} consumed their minds, so that they were unable to perform. Practical objections seemed even more ridiculous as some asked what companies would do during their actresses’ menstrual periods, since male actors would not touch them during their “impure” state.\textsuperscript{195}

A renewed desire for greater professionalism and artistic integrity in the beginning of the twentieth century led to a greater push for female actresses, especially within the Marathi theatrical community. Perhaps the presence of females on the stage made the deficiencies of the female impersonators more acute. Adarkar refers to the 1912 essay by Mathurabai Dravid, “Actors and

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{192} Pande, “Moving Beyond Themselves,” 1646.
\textsuperscript{193} It seems that such sentiments have not changed amongst some individuals even a century later when many stage and screen actresses, abandon careers after marriage. Debutante star of the 1990s blockbuster Bollywood film, \textit{Meine Pyar Kiya}, actress Bhagyashree was at the height of her popularity, but after marriage, stipulated that she would only work with her new husband as costar. Her career quickly fizzled out.
\textsuperscript{194} Neera Adarkar, “In Search of Women,” 226.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 228.
their Acting,” which criticized the acting skills and appearance of these men. She condemned the actors’ vulgar dressing style (for example, many wore extremely low-cut blouses, emphasizing their “breasts”) and their tendency to use seductive gestures, whether they were playing the part of elderly women or young girls.196 Women, on the other hand, were seen as “natural actresses” due to their “imitating qualities.”197 Proponents referred to girls’ tendency to play with dolls and imagine themselves as mothers and wives as proof of such qualities. The advent of cinema may have been another factor to justify the presence of actresses on the stage. Theatre companies experienced declining ticket sales from the mid-twenties to the mid-thirties due to this new competition, so the introduction of women to the stage was looked to as a possible solution to attracting audiences. However, due to their poor financial state at the time, theatre companies simply could not afford to pay women for their services in this context. Sex workers earned Rs1000/night while the theatre could only offer Rs150/month.198 Some of the more prosperous companies may have been able to afford them in earlier years, but declining business made this expense more unreachable.

Due to these artistic and business demands, for the first time, the Marathi theatre community made a strong effort to include educated and kulin (upper class) women as actresses.199 The broader increasing presence of women in the public sphere, in schools and colleges, and even the workplace, helped to support this effort. However, whatever the practical reasons for including higher caste/class women in theatre were, moral reasoning was engaged from the beginning. Proponents of having kulin women enter the stage argued that the inclusion of such educated and cultured women (as opposed to earlier actresses) would greatly reduce “the danger of any

196 Ibid., 225.
197 Ibid., 230.
198 Ibid., 230.
199 Ibid., 227.
degradation of moral values. This shows us how closely class and caste are tied to the respectability of women in performance traditions and occupations.

Arguments in favour of having kulin women on stage grew stronger in the late 1920s. By now, female impersonators, who had much to lose if actresses took over their roles and were amongst the most frequent and vocal opponents, had begun to age by 1925. New actors were reluctant to take on such work; partly due to the fact that impersonators were being ridiculed as effeminate for the very work that had once glorified them and propelled them to an iconic status. However, a problem emerged: there were not enough kulin women to fill the demand. Therefore, an effort was made to “expand the definition of kulin” so that it would not be restricted only to women of higher birth. It seems that caste and class determine whether or not a woman is considered a respectable presence in society. However, rather than label the class/caste that female performers came from as respectable; the women performers were, very cleverly, incorporated into the upper class. A modified version of the kulin was initiated, in which women would belong, not by birth, but by “moral behavior.” There were two expectations of such “new” kulin women, one was to be loyal to one man, and the second was to give birth to kulin children. Therefore, they were to follow the societal norms that had been prescribed to women of the private sphere (as wives) years earlier; and which were now enforced by the middle-class patriarchy.

**Caste and Respectability in the Colonial Context**

Veena Naregal argues that caste plays a prominent role in the acknowledgement of an individual’s contribution to theatre. Naregal looks at two performers in the Marathi lavani/tamasha

200 Ibid., 229.
201 Ibid., 230.
202 Ibid.
tradition, observing that Pathe Bapurao, (1866-1945), a “Brahman poet Performer … enjoys a pre-eminent iconic status;” however Annabhau Sathe (1921-1969), who belonged to the lower caste Matang, has been almost forgotten, even amongst artists within the tradition. Bapurao, born Sridhar Kulkarni, in a poor Brahman family, was a gifted student who composed verses and showed a musical talent at an early age. He began to compose for tamashas in nearby villages but his association with lower-caste individuals greatly angered his parents. Later, a patron agreed to sponsor further studies in Aundh, however the patron withdrew his support when it was discovered that Bapurao continued to associate with lower caste tamasha artists. Eventually Bapurao came to Bombay for the specific purpose of working in tamasha theatres. Here, he began to perform, and then, to live with, a woman dancer, Pavla (1870-1839) of the lower caste Mahar community. This snub of social norms caused great antagonism amongst their fellow artists, but the pair remained extremely popular with the audiences. Widely told stories suggest that Bapurao renounced his caste and became a Mahar. However, Naregal argues that his actions and writings suggest otherwise, as they showed disdain and contempt towards his lower-caste performers and are also indicative of a view of “low-caste women as an acquirable commodity” Therefore, his upper caste sensibilities remained strong.

In contrast, Annabhau worked in tamasha troupes from an early age until drought forced him and his family to come to Bombay in the early 1930s, where he first found work as a


\[204\] Ibid., 337.

\[205\] Ibid., 338.

\[206\] Naregal provides very little information about this woman other than that she was from Sangamner and was supposedly very beautiful and talented. This snub of social norms caused great antagonism amongst their fellow artists, but the pair remained extremely popular with the audiences.

\[207\] Naregal, "Lavani, Tamasha, Loknatya,” 342.
labourer. Still, Annabhau became an “early radical Dalit writer” and activist. Whereas Bapurao’s works spoke of beautiful women and the pleasures that the city of Bombay had to offer, Annabhau was more critical of the city and its upper classes, commenting on poverty, caste and the plight of the working class, as well as various political topics.

Although Annaubhau and Bapurao shared the same audiences of the Marathi speaking working class, Naregal speculates that due to Annabhau’s performances in “public meetings, election campaigns and workers’ rallies” he actually reached a larger audience. Despite this, it is still Bapurao who is more widely remembered. Annabhau was almost forgotten and received no recognition until the 1990s when the state’s recognition of Annabhau's work was more of a gesture “to appease the OBC [Other Backwards Classes] constituency in Maharashtra.”

Naregal suggests that hegemonic interests are such that “any considerations of marginality of their communities” has been disassociated from the popularity of the aforementioned, and other, performers. Producers and performers of lavani and tamasha often had to acquiesce to the cultural and political interests of their patrons, who inevitably, belonged to the dominant groups. This explains why the more conservative Bapurao and his memory were preferred to the activist undertakings of Annabhau. Bapurao was “actively valorized by cultural and political elites in Maharashtra in the 1940s and 1950s.” Other artists attempted to raise their caste status, in others' eyes: Hansen refers to the efforts of the performer Betab to have his subcaste, the Brahmaghats, recognized as Brahmnic. Another, Sundari, made attempts to characterize his caste - which

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208 Ibid., 335.
209 Ibid., 337.
210 Ibid., 342-346.
211 Ibid., 337.
212 Ibid.
213 Ibid., 351.
214 Ibid.
consisted of musicians and bards - as higher than other castes, due to their service in Jain temples and for royalty.215

Naregal’s work shows that caste plays a role in the recognition and remembrance of theatre artists in general, such that lower caste artists are less recognized and remembered. At the same time, it seems that male performers have been more able to shed the confines of their caste than female performers. Many of the earliest male performers in urban theatre traditions came from backgrounds of low caste performance families, nonetheless, they were still able to win accolades on the stage. However, gender remained a stronger barrier in the legitimization and remembrance of individuals who have contributed to theatre and other performance traditions. It is still largely the female artist who is forgotten.216 However, it is true, that within the category of women themselves, it is upper class women who were first accepted as “respectable” on stage and it is generally the work of these upper-class women which is remembered. If one were to peruse the documentation of women who have contributed to theatre in India, generally, or Punjab, specifically, it is women of the upper classes whose names are mentioned. In addition, it is only if their work occurs on stages which are deemed as “respectable” by middle and upper classes, that they achieve legitimacy and respectability. Although actresses belonging to lower castes or classes are rarely able to shake off the stigma of their appearance in the public space, women from upper classes seem to bring their respectability with them.

215 Hansen, Stages of Life, 39.
216 Within contemporary Punjabi theatre, for example, the work of Samuel John, is frequently mentioned and has received many an accolade. However, references to female theatre artists, who are also actively involved in production such as Anita Shabdeesh and Sangeeta Gupta, who belong to higher castes are rarely mentioned. Many other low caste male performers have reached iconic status in Punjabi performance traditions; such as the popular singers Kuldeep Manak and Amar Singh Chamkila. However, despite the fact that they both performed duets with women (Chamkila performed with his wife Amarjot), the work of these women only receives fleeting mention, at most.
The Actress in Cinema

We see parallel dynamics with women in Indian cinema. Neera Majumdar states that the 1920s, when there was a significant increase in the production of films as well as their popularity, and 1930s still saw a “social taboo on acting (for both men and women).”217 A *Times of India* report stated that most actresses were “still largely drawn from among ‘dancing girls’ and Jewesses [sic] or Anglo-Indians.”218 The content of the films at this time was also cause for objection by many members of society. The Punjab board of film censors remarked cinema had replaced nautch in terms of entertainment for men.219 The content of the cinema at this time “was a pastiche of Oriental fantasies, Parsi-Urdu theatre-style romance plots, and Hollywood stunt film scenarios, and highlighted the exotic charms of the heroine through her dancing.”220

In contrast, Usha Iyer examines the rise of the “upperclass, upper-caste Hindu woman in the film and in the dance cultures”221 in the 1930s and 1940s. Music and dance were an integral part of most theatre, and, later, film productions. Iyer examines how classical dance forms were revived and adapted by middle and upper-class Indians in the 1930s and 1940s; this adaption by the higher classes, leading to a “reclassification” of these dance forms as respectable, in contrast to the “kothi or mujra dance repertoire of the Muslim courtesan.”222

Iyer refers to the Bengali bourgeois, or educated elite, the *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila*223

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218 Ibid., 19.
221 Iyer, “Film Dance, Female Stardom,” 56.
222 Ibid., 82.
223 Ibid., 74.
and the efforts undertaken to include them in artistic endeavours including theatre and dance. In Bengal in the early 1920s, Rabindranath Tagore introduced dance at his university in Shantiniketan in an effort to change its status in India amongst “respectable society.”\textsuperscript{224} In addition, Tagore’s dance-dramas “were among the first ones to be choreographed and performed onstage with the participation of girls from ‘good’ families.”\textsuperscript{225} Such endeavours helped make dance and performance a suitable field for “proper” Indian women – but ones who were unmarried. In addition, while acting slowly became more respectable, acting as a profession was still considered taboo especially by the upper class, educated elite which many professionals wished to include in their productions. Slowly this taboo was lifted as more women from amongst the \textit{bhadramahila} ventured into films. One of these was Tagore’s own grandniece, Devika Rani, who starred in many of her husbands’ productions and came to be known as one of the first ladies of Indian cinema.

Iyer’s survey of the career of Sadhona Bose (1914-1973), the daughter of a prosperous Bengali family, also lends credence to the argument that the introduction of “respectable”, upper-class women helped to change peoples’ perceptions of whether or not professional acting was suitable for women. Bose and her sisters learned music and dance at prestigious institutions but it was clear that they were never to pursue these arts professionally. Care was also taken to ensure that the females of the household never associated with female performers, such as courtesans. For example, when the family held a mehfils at their home, which they did frequently, they only invited male singers.\textsuperscript{226} Bose was only permitted to perform in amateur shows for public charities before marriage. In 1927, Modhu Bose, Sadhona’s future husband, had founded the theatre group,

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 66.
“Calcutta Amateur” Players” (C.A.P). He remarked, “It was always my dream to create my own theatre group, where men and women from progressive, aristocratic, respectable families would perform.” Sadhona performed in one of his productions in 1930, marrying him the same year. She managed to sidestep the decree of “respectable, married” women not acting, by working only in her husband’s productions (plays and films) for the next twenty years. Otherwise the opinion regarding married women acting, that too, professionally, was still contentious. In her autobiography, Bose stated:

It is not like theatre was an acceptable or reputed thing in society, unlike now. ... As for bhadramahilas entering the theatre either professionally or as a hobby, it was strictly prohibited. ... Amidst much disrespect, at the cost of losing our reputation, hearing lot of negative things from orthodox households and a major section of the local print media, we had to stay fixed on our decision to be on stage.

Iyer states that the focus of this “new generation of privileged-class and -caste filmmakers and audiences sought to reform the cinema” and, thus, the focus was on “expurgating the theater and the cinema of their “low-bred” personnel, including the baijee actresses from the Muslim courtesan tradition.” People were also careful to alter content of many plays and films in order to accommodate these new “genteel” actresses and the new audiences. Efforts were made to erase any trace of impropriety. For example, in his 1928 play, Alibaba, Madhu Bose eliminated any erotic or bawdy elements.

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227 Madhu Bose consciously chose to insert the word “Amateur” into the name of his troupe, as many advised him that without the inclusion of this word, no parent would permit their daughter to act in the group. The taboo against “paid public performance” by women is also seen in Bose’s decision to label his plays as “private charity shows performed by amateur players.” (Iyer, “Film Dance, Female Stardom,” 75)


229 Bose, Aamar Jeeban, 19 quoted in Iyer, “Film Dance, Female Stardom,” 77.

230 Iyer, “Film Dance, Female Stardom,” 77.

231 Ibid., 76.
Iyer’s examination of a 1939 Bengali Magazine included Sadhona Bose and Devika Rani as two of “India’s four educated, aristocratic film stars.”\(^{232}\) Sadhona Bose is shown “in a demurely-wrapped sari and bindi”\(^{233}\) and both are shown reading a book. The magazine also refers to Bose as a “danseuse”, as compared to a mere “dancing girl.”\(^{234}\) In general, Bose’s plays and films were also identified as “neo-classical ballets and film ballets”, once again placing them firmly away from the idea of the “nautch.”\(^{235}\) Attention was also paid to her background as an upper-class Indian, as was to Devika Rani’s. Iyer asserts that “like Devika Rani, the foreign-educated grand-niece of Tagore, Bose’s claim to an aristocratic lineage easily lends her a respectability”\(^{236}\) that other actresses could never aspire to. These included foreign born actresses such as Mary Evans (Fearless Nadia) who came from a circus background and performed exotic “gypsy” and “Persian” dances in costumes which included sheer pants and bare midriffs. In contrast, Sadhona Bose’s use of “oriental dance motifs is marked as respectable on account of her being an upper-class Indian, promoted as a classical dance exponent, and dancing and acting in a gentrified theatre and film context.”\(^{237}\) It was also Devika Rani’s social status which helped to make many taboo items acceptable in middle class and upper class Indian society. On the occasion of her death, one of her obituaries stated:

Rani’s greatest achievement was that she sold cinema as an art form to the essentially puritanical upper-crust Indians. Before she became an actress, girls from Bombay's red light areas filled in as actresses because girls from decent homes didn't wear lipstick, let alone prance before a movie camera. So when Devika Rani, Rabindranath Tagore's great-niece and daughter of

\(^{232}\) Ibid., 82.  
\(^{233}\) Ibid.  
\(^{234}\) Ibid.  
\(^{235}\) Ibid., 84.  
\(^{236}\) Ibid.  
\(^{237}\) Ibid., 89-90.
India's first surgeon-general, chose to make a career in films, it brought a certain respectability to the medium.\textsuperscript{238}

Even indigenous actresses, such as Binodini Dasi\textsuperscript{239} could not aspire to this level of social respectability if they did not emerge from the upper or middle classes.

Binodini Dasi, the daughter of a sex worker, was a prolific stage actress from the ages of 11 to 23, portraying characters such as Sita, Draupadi and Radha. However, “[s]he was constantly hounded by the pain that she was not part of respectable society.”\textsuperscript{240} She lamented that her critics’ criticisms often had nothing to do with her acting: “[t]hey censured me saying that it was a sin for people of my sort to even act the part of such lofty characters.”\textsuperscript{241} Theatre director Amal Allana states that “I don’t think the basic mindset will change. If I went to a prostitute and brought her to play Nati Binodini on stage, people would not accept it even today …After all, we belong to the middle class and are still unable to digest the idea.”\textsuperscript{242}

Some may argue that Binodini Dasi’s lifestyle choices may also have had something to do with her ostracization from “respectable society”. She was the mistress of different patrons at the behest of her employer and also had a “live-in” relationship with a man. However, even the “respectable” actresses Bose and Rani led lives which did not abide by middle or upper class gender norms. For example, the married Devika Rani at one time ran away with her paramour, returning to her husband after the love affair failed. Bose, also lived separately from her husband for a time, after she made the decision to act in a production other than her husband’s and there

\begin{footnotes}
\item[239] Even the names of these actresses are quite telling in terms of signifying their social status. Rani (Devika Rani) means queen, whereas Dasi (Binodini Dasi) means slave/servant.
\item[241] Binodini Dasi, and Rimli Bhattacharya. My Story and My Life as an Actress. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 100.
\item[242] “Women on Stage Still Suffer.”
\end{footnotes}
were frequent rumors regarding frequent parties and paramours. However, although “[s]he contested middle-class codes of feminine propriety … her class background also facilitated her emergence as an icon of modern Indian womanhood.”

The Foundations of Modern Punjabi Theatre

As mentioned in the introduction, Nora Richards is often credited with the foundation of modern Punjabi theatre, however, its development is much more complex. Scholars also disagree on its early forms and influences. Uppal identifies the arrival of Parsi theatre in Punjab, at the end of the 19th century, as the catalyst for modern Punjabi theatre, arguing that it was due to these Parsi theatre companies that Punjab became acquainted with theatre. Playwright and critic Gurdial Singh Phul agrees, stating that these Parsi plays most assuredly influenced Punjabi drama. Parsi theatre troupes became quite well known in the Punjab and some larger cities such as Amritsar and Lahore became centres for Parsi drama companies, even building theatres to accommodate these productions.

Harcharan Singh, however, is one scholar who acknowledges the contribution of Punjab’s centuries old theatrical traditions to the development of its modern theater. H. Singh asserts that Punjab most assuredly had a tradition of folk theatre. He acknowledges the value and merit of this theatre, which incorporated song, naqal and dance, and was connected to ritual worship of gods such as Shiva and Krishna. H. Singh also refers to saal, a theatre tradition of the “untouchable” caste, Chamar, which had a connection to magic and incorporated sang and

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244 Uppal, Punjabi Natak Ate Rangmanch, 141.
246 Ibid., 41.
He recognizes that the Western-influenced Parsi theatre in turn influenced Punjabi theatre to a certain extent. However, he quotes Dr. Mohan Singh Divana, who minimizes the influence of the West, claiming that Punjabi drama has only adapted Western form and technique, whereas Punjab’s centuries old folk traditions had already established the “soul” of Punjabi drama and modern Punjabi theatre was able to develop as early as 1885.

In addition, although he acknowledges the contribution of Parsi theatre, H. Singh takes care to detail other contributions to the development of Punjabi theatre, referring to the cultural background and reform movements of the Punjab in the 1850s as an explanation for the creation of Punjabi theatre companies and development of Punjabi theatre. He cites organizations such as the Temperance Association, which used plays, such as Sharāb Kaur, written by Dr. Charan Singh, and performed in 1885, as a means to spread their antidrug message. In addition, despite opposition from earlier leaders, reform movements such as the Singh Sabha also used theatre to their advantage, hence the creation of Giani Dit Singh’s Supan Nāta and the work of Dr. Charan Singh’s son, Bhai Vir Singh’s Rājā Lakh Dāta Singh. Another contribution to the growth of theatre was the exodus of the rural populace towards urban centres, causing an increase in urban populations, leading to greater demands for entertainment. This reduction in village populations led to many members of the performing castes (Mirasis, Mirs etc) to obtain employment in Parsi theater groups. H. Singh also refers to J. C. Oman’s book, “Cult, Customs and Superstitions of India”, published in 1889, which provides a detailed introduction to Punjab’s dramatic arts and

247 Ibid.
248 Ibid., 155-156.
249 Parsis were not the only “foreign” or nonPunjabi influence; English professors of various colleges engaged their students in staging English plays, including Lahore’s Government College, established in 1880 and Punjab University established in 1883. Christian missionaries would also write and produce plays. H. Singh states that it was their influence which led Giani Dit Singh to write Supan Natak in 1886.
250 Ibid., 161.
theatre and expounds upon the abundant differences between London and Lahore’s theatrical traditions.251

Aurora also states that Punjabi theatre first emerged in the late nineteenth century with the translation of classic Indian and Western plays, including those of Kalidasa and Shakespeare. Next came original works in Punjabi drama when some writers wrote plays “based around folk legends or the puranic kathas.”252 The end of the 19th century saw completely original works in drama. In addition to the playwrights cited above, Aurora also refers to Gurbakhsh Singh, another prominent writer who wrote the play Manmohan Singh (1912) about the moral and social demise of a Sikh landlord. Dr. Mohan Singh was another writer who wrote four original plays in Punjabi. However, Aurora points out these plays were written more for an urban, middle class literary readership than for performance, with an aim to “propagate[e] and inculcate[e] certain religious and social values among the people of the time.”253 Although there is some evidence of limited performance of these plays, nothing points to a strong tradition of performance; stage performance was still dominated by Parsi theatre, the content of which was vastly different from the Punjabi plays.254 Therefore, it seems safe to assume that Aurora feels that the origins of modern Punjabi theatre did indeed begin at the time of Norah Roberts sponsored playwriting competitions.

Despite H. Singh’s claim that the beginnings of modern Punjabi drama can be dated to 1885, many still see the second decade of the twentieth century as the beginning of Punjabi theatre in its present form, dating it from the time of Norah Richards’s aforementioned sponsorship of Punjabi language playwriting activities at Dayal Singh College in Lahore and her establishment of the Saraswati Stage Society in which she encouraged students to write and stage original Punjabi plays.

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251 Ibid., 159.
252 Aurora, “Punjabi Theatre,” 272.
253 Ibid.
254 Ibid.
Although I. C. Nanda is often credited as the first Punjabi playwright, there were others who wrote plays in the early twentieth century, prior to Nanda’s success.

H. Singh feels that Pandit Sharda Ram Philauri deserves recognition for forging the way for Punjabi playwrights, fifty years prior to Nanda. He details Sharda Ram’s extensive use of dialogue in his prose, stating that the only difference between Sharda Ram’s prose and a play was that Sharda Ram did not write the names of the characters before the dialogue, as is typical in a play. H. Singh also refers to the translation of plays into Punjabi, and the aforementioned composition of original Punjabi plays in the last half of the nineteenth century. Along similar lines, Anne Murphy also mentions the theatrical elements in Bhai Vir Singh’s novel, Sundari, another work which focusses on the plight of women; Sundari is a young woman who is abducted by a Mughal official, and, after being saved by her Sikh brother, converts to Sikhism. Murphy refers to aspects of the novel which work as theatrical devices, such as Bhai Vir Singh’s tendency to “spea[k] directly to the reader” when setting the scene at various points in the novel.

In addition to translations of works into Punjabi, Atamjit Singh and Harcharan Singh cite a number of early original works, including, Supan Nātak, by Giani Ditta Singh (1886-87), Puran Nātak (1887-88), Sharāb Kaur by Charan Singh (1889), Chand Hari by Bava Budh Singh (1909), Rājā Lakh Dāta Singh by Bhai Vir Singh (1910), Suka Samundar by Niranjan Singh Taib (1911), Brij Mohan Nātak by Gurbaksh Singh Barrister (1912), Harish Chander Nātak by Bava Budh Singh (1913) and Mannmohan by Gurbaksh Singh. Furthermore, even Nanda was only the second winner of the playwrighting competition. It had been won a year earlier by another student,

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255 Uppal, Punjabi Natak Ate Rangmanch, 145.
however that student’s play was not staged. The first original Punjabi play to be staged however, was not Nanda’s but Charan Singh’s *Sharāb Kaur*, which was staged in 1895.\(^{260}\)

H. Singh further states that with the onset of colonial rule Punjabis experienced a sense of inferiority, which was further exacerbated by the fact that all of the main teachers, professors, reformers, actors and directors of Punjab’s colleges were either British or Bengali.\(^{261}\) He claims that Aga Hashar Kashmiri began his theatre companies in Lahore in 1910, as a response to these Punjabi feelings of inferiority. Master Rehmat followed with another company, shortly after. They employed boys from the low caste Mirasi community as well as other performers.\(^{262}\) However, higher classes criticized this theatre as inferior, and, as a result, these companies were unsuccessful in establishing themselves in Lahore permanently.\(^{263}\) Folk theatre was also taking on new subjects and methods, in an effort to compete with the popular Parsi theatre. All this occurred prior to Nanda’s arrival on the scene.

However, H. Singh joins A. Singh in emphasizing the importance of I. C. Nanda’s contribution to Panjabi drama because, in his opinion, Nanda’s plays were the first Punjabi plays to be worthy of the stage.\(^{264}\) Nanda’s plays freed Punjabi drama “from religious and mythological themes,”\(^{265}\) focusing on modern topics and reflecting upon the social and political situation of the


\(^{261}\) H. Singh claims that Bengalis were especially proficient in English and Bengali fine arts traditions were highly advanced, in comparison to the Punjab. He further claims that Bengalis regarded Punjabis as illiterate and uncouth with no cultural heritage to speak of; although this argument is largely unsubstantiated, as he provides no references for this claim.


\(^{263}\) H. Singh states that there was a major difference between these theatre companies and the emerging Punjabi playwrights in that the theater companies emerged as a response to feelings of Punjabi inadequacy in the field of fine arts, whereas playwrights wrote on topics of reform. In addition, the use of folk performers from *Mirasi* and other folk performance traditions, may have been another reason for members of the upper elite to be dismissive of this theatre, since most members of the upper elite regarded “folk traditions” as the realm of the lower classes and illiterate.


\(^{265}\) Atamjit Singh, “Panjabi Drama and Theater,” 393.
His plays were also specifically written to be staged, and not just read. In addition, although Nanda adopted Western techniques, he ensured that his work was still strongly Punjabi, through the use of folk songs, dances and marriage scenes and folklore.

Both critics also highlight Norah Richards’ contribution to Punjabi theatre in this regard, as she encouraged the depiction of Punjabi rural life and the use of simple Punjabi language, as well as simple productions. Her use of open-air stages also emphasized a connection to nature. This period saw an increase in the writing and production of original Punjabi plays more broadly. H. Singh states that by 1937, over 36 original Punjabi plays had been written and staged. Other playwrights echoed Nanda’s emphasis on realism and reform, including Harcharan Singh and Gurdial Singh Phul.

The plight of women was a favourite topic in Punjabi drama, as it was in other forms of Punjabi literature; however females were generally restricted to the tropes of victim or vamp. Parvinder Dhariwal speaks to this in her MA thesis, in which she examines the representation of heroines in modern Punjabi literature, including Bhai Vir Singh’s aforementioned Sundari. Dhariwal declares that the problem in Bhai Vir Singh’s portrayal of Sundari was that she had “to sacrifice her sexuality and [was] transformed into a goddess whose perfection [was] unattainable.” Just as how in the literary domain women were the subject of literature, but rarely authors, women were also still missing in theatrical production; they were neither on the stage nor behind it. All roles, be they acting, writing or directing, were still executed by men.

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267 Ibid., 163.
268 Ibid., 165.
The penchant for Punjabi playwrights to focus on the female as subject matter, but still restricting her from performance and production, is one that was earlier apparent in Hindi language theatre. Vasudha Dalmia’s examination of Hindi language theatre in India looks to works by early pioneers of Hindi language theatre, such as Bharatendu Harishchandra\(^{270}\) (1850-85) and Jayshankar Prasad (1886-1937). Dalmia claims that Harishchandra’s historical play, \textit{Nildevi} was written specifically for women; the “Arya woman, respected as mother, sister and companion.”\(^{271}\) The play is about a queen who takes revenge for her husband’s murder, by disguising herself as a dancing girl in order to stab the murderer. This powerful show of strength, however, is mitigated by the queen’s last words, in which she states her wish to be a sati on her husband’s funeral pyre.\(^{272}\) So, even such an ostensibly progressive play valorized women only in the stereotypical exemplar roles of mother, sister or wife.

Jayshankar Prasad (1886-1937) was another voice for women’s rights, albeit in Hindi literature. Prasad’s play \textit{Dhruvasvamini} (1933) about Chandragupta’s ascension to the throne after killing his brother and marrying his wife, focused on the wife - her happiness and her decision to remarry. \textit{Dhruvasvamini} clearly rejects sati and the authority of the Dharmashastras in this play.\(^{273}\) Later writers, such as Upendranath Ashk (1910-96) wrote about urban families during a time when more and more middle class women were entering the professional world. He too, created “strong women characters”, but the conclusions of the plays usually returned these women into the very

\(^{270}\) Bharatendu Harishchandra is credited with the creation of Hindi drama in the late 19th century. Despite belonging to the upper class, Harishchandra was not elitist and his family was relatively progressive for their time; his father also wrote plays and sent his daughters to school despite this being considered scandalous. Harishchandra also included women in his audience; he owned and edited a woman’s journal, \textit{Balabodhini} in addition to writing plays.


\(^{272}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{273}\) Ibid., 107.
“entrenched positions”²⁷⁴ they were originally fighting against. The one commonality connecting these writers is that although the female presence was there on paper in the form of characters, it was still, for the most part, absent from the stage.

**Legitimization of the Stage**

The dearth of women on the Punjabi stage may be understood as further evidence of the greater impact of indigenous influences on Punjabi theatre, than of Western influence. Although actresses were a common presence on stages in the west and even Parsi theater companies had introduced women on the stage, this public space would remain off limits to Punjabi women for almost three decades. The first time that a woman performed in a Punjabi play was in Lahore on December 18, 1941, when playwright Harcharan Singh’s wife Dharam Kaur performed a role in *Anjor.*²⁷⁵

![Dharam Kaur, the first woman to appear on stage in a Punjabi play, with her husband Harcharan Singh (1941)](http://drharcharansingh.com/gallery/)

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 122.
²⁷⁵ Uppal, *Punjabi Natak Ate Rangmanch,* 147.
²⁷⁶ http://drharcharansingh.com/gallery/
The emergence of a female on the Punjabi stage may be attributed to the fact that the stage, which had originally been dominated by performers from the lower castes, was now becoming legitimized as an elite form of entertainment for the upper classes as well. The legitimization had begun when students and teachers in colleges (such as Nanda and Roberts) had begun to take an interest in this art form. The 1940s also saw an increase in such cultural activities in urban settings. More plays were performed on the stages of newly established colleges, such as the Khalsa College for Women and Sikh National College in Lahore. The formation of the Little Theatre Group, in 1942, by playwright and director, Gurdial Singh Khosla, also included the membership of Khosla’s wife, who remained unnamed.277

Theatre was also an important aspect of the larger reformist and nation-building projects in the early decades of the twentieth century, and this in turn provided growing opportunities for women. The formation in 1942 of the Indian People Theatre’s Association (IPTA), which sought to bring theatre closer to the masses, also established theatre as a tool for reform and nation-building. As is noted in Chapter 4, IPTA also provided a new opportunity for women to participate in theatre. Sheila Bhatia, who emerged from this environment, is seen as an early pillar in her contribution to Punjabi theatre. She is also the first female in Punjabi theatre about whom any substantial information is available. Bhatia’s play, Hulle Hulare which detailed the struggles of the Congress against the British government, was performed multiple times in Lahore during the 1940s. However, the content of the play (especially the songs such as, “TheForeigners are Dogs”) riled the government to such an extent that they arrested the cast, which included young women from Preet Nagar, an artist’s colony founded by writer Gurbaksh Singh "Preet Lari." Bhatia, along

277 Uppal, Punjabi Natak Ate Rangmanch, 148.
with Snehalata Sandial and Puran Mehta, also formed a group which they named, “Women’s League,” staging plays for female audiences in the courtyards of their Lahore homes.\textsuperscript{278}

After independence, Partition caused many artists to relocate to Delhi, including the aforementioned Bhatia, who was to make a strong and lasting impression in Punjabi theatre, with her Punjabi “opera plays” under her newly formed Delhi Arts Theatre. Bhatia staged her first song (opera) play in 1950. This was also a period when more and more women were seen on the stage, and began to make an impact behind the stage as well.\textsuperscript{279} There was also a greater legitimization of Punjabi theatre through the development of institutions in Punjab, India, although Punjabi theatre in Pakistan did not receive the same support. The establishment of the National School of Drama in 1959 was vital in the sustenance of Punjabi drama at this time, especially as it helped Punjabi theatre connect with theatre in other areas of India. The importance of these institutions in supporting Punjabi theatre, and in making space for women in that domain, cannot be overemphasized. Included amongst its alumni are those who are the focus of this study: Neena Tiwana and her husband Harpal, who established their drama troupe, Punjab Kala Manch International, Patiala, in this decade; Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry; and Navnindra Behl (whose contributions we will examine in greater detail later). Giving further legitimacy to the genre was the establishment of the Departments of Indian drama and Asian Theater at Panjab University,

\textsuperscript{278} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{279} Kamlesh Uppal references a number of women active in theatre at this time. These included Mrs. Chumpa Mangat Rai, Achla Sachdev, and Kalpana Kartik who formed the Little Theatre Group and performed Nanda’s play, \textit{Lily’s Wedding} in June 1949. Another theatre group, named Ace Club, formed in 1950, also included at least three women (Mrs. R. C Soni, Mrs. Kanta Grover and Usha Sinclair), who also often wrote plays. Kapoor Singh Ghuman’s staged plays are also noted to be some which had female cast members. Although her name is not noted here, Ghuman’s daughter, Navnindra Behl (who is now a reputed actress and director) may have participated in some of these. Many more references of women writing and performing can be found throughout this time period, however the information is limited, as even the full names of some of these women have not survived in the historical record (149-152).
Chandigarh and Punjabi University, Patiala, under the guidance of Balwant Gargi and Surjit Singh Sethi respectively.

On a more popular level, Gursharan Singh and others, such as the Tiwanas, brought theater to the masses. Singh, popularly known as Bhaa ji, was first inspired to become involved in theatre after watching the production of an IPTA member in 1961. He soon decided to pursue theatre fulltime and eventually established the Amritsar School of Drama, later known as the Chandigarh School of Drama, in 1964. His company’s performances attracted a regular audience, and performances could span 3-4 evenings. These productions featured substantial casts, costumes and lighting, as well as the contribution of skilled and able directors.

Unfortunately, Punjabi drama in Pakistan did not fare as well in this decade. M. S. Amrit (1991) refers to the lack of government support for the Punjabi language as a reason for this. Fawzia Afzal-Khan states that, despite the upheaval of the Partition, Punjabi language folk (lok) theatre had thrived until the 1960s, when the advent of radio, film and cinema contributed to its demise.²⁸⁰ This theatre, however, did not attain the legitimacy of the approval of “upper classes” who dismissed this folk entertainment as aimed “at the rural masses with the excitement of … blaring music, bright lights, loud colours and garishly made-up women.”²⁸¹ Women were hired as performers but they were stigmatized because of the vulgar nature of some of the shows and costumes, and because the theatre companies usually travelled, touring the countryside and performing at festivals, requiring long periods of absence from the home. Some women achieved certain levels of respectability if they married the owners of some of these companies, however they were often exploited, as once they were married, their labour was unpaid. Afzal-Khan refers some exceptions, such as Balli Jatti as an “unusual example of a woman’s independence in this

²⁸⁰ Afzal-Khan, A Critical Stage, 36.
²⁸¹ Ibid.
arena." She owned her own theatre company for 16 years, although she initially didn’t want to be an actress but was forced into the profession by her husband when she eloped with him. Another woman, Iqbal Begum, co-managed a theatre company with her husband.

**Entertainment vs. Reform/Activism**

Punjabi theatre seemed to experience some setbacks during this period. In East Punjab (India), the Punjab Government Culture Department formed a drama repertory to produce quality plays in the Punjabi language. The repertory was successful in terms of script, technique, music and stagecraft; however, it was only able to produce a small number of plays before being shut down in 1976. This initiative may have been in response to the production of some popular, but sexually crude productions of the time.

The Prem Julundry Sapru House shows seemed to be the most popular of the popular sexually explicit adult comedies that emerged in this period and were extremely popular amongst middle class Punjabi audiences in Delhi. They were heavily criticized by some and threatened with censorship, but although their titles became less provocative, the content remained highly sexual. The performance of actresses in such roles may have caused a return to the stigmatization of the profession. Uppal states, for example, that in a play in Goindwal, in East Punjab in 1979, all female roles were again done by boys. Of course, these two cities are separated by a great distance, so this may not have been a direct factor in the absence of women in the Goindwal production. However, the stigmatization was not as strong as it had been in previous years, as

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282 Ibid.
285 Ibid., 163.
there was enough work being done in urban theatre by upper class women to legitimize the profession.

Theatre with a strong reformist message also contributed greatly to this legitimization. Gursharan Singh continued his work of bringing theatre to the masses in the 1960s and 1970s, however, he diverted his attention from “frills” such as lighting and sets, deciding that his passion lay more in the message than the production. He worked with his family, including wife Kailash Kaur, and two daughters, Dr. Navsharan Kaur and Dr. Areet Kaur, to raise awareness of social issues through theatre. He took his productions from village to village, in order to bring socially progressive ideas to the rural populace, an audience that would otherwise have never been exposed to theatre. These productions were executed with the most basic of sets, with no ticket charge. He also engaged in nukkar nāṭak, “street theatre” and in the 1980s one of his plays was even broadcast on television.

Singh's productions themselves were simple, the characters generally uncomplicated and the psychological conflict or development almost non-existent. His subject matter focussed on rural Punjab and the lives of workers, as well as social issues including the status of women. Indeed, it was due to his efforts that the state finally began to include mothers’ names in school certificates. He often attacked the government, confronting political issues such as terrorism and the Emergency. The performance of his plays criticizing the Emergency led to his imprisonment in the 1970s. He was also a vocal critic and opponent of the Khalistan movement. Singh’s position as the editor and publisher of two magazines, Samtā (Equality) and Sardal (Threshold) which published progressive literature as well as articles relating to the social, cultural and political situation of the time also strengthened his legitimacy, and thereby, the legitimacy of his theatre.
However, in Pakistan, “higher forms” of theatre were dominated by the Urdu and English speaking upper classes, and Punjabi language theatre remained denigrated as “primitive in contrast to the ‘civilized’ English–language theatre.” The 1990s saw producers of the popular Punjabi theatre cater to their predominantly male audience and employ more singers and dancers as actresses, including performers from the red light district. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the press and government agencies involved in a campaign to denigrate the female performers, accusing the “tinsel town babes … of staging ‘objectionable dances’” and arresting many of them. There is no mention of the arrest of any male performers. What would the male performers do while their female counterparts were arrested? They would dance with mannequins or with groups of men dressed as women, including khusras (eunuchs). Pamment states that “[c]learly, censorship is not against dance in general but the dancing female body of the lower classes performed in public.” This was made all the more apparent by the presence of women in the aforementioned English language theatres that were lauded by the upper classes and government spokespersons alike. Despite the presence of suggestively clad women and risqué dance numbers in these productions, they are given accolades. Pamment notes the contradiction: “While the female dancer of a Western prototype is legitimized by the upper class, the female Punjabi dancer is disowned, exposing the hypocrisy of celebrated liberal freedoms.”

However, not all Punjabi language actresses are thus stigmatized in Pakistani theatre. Street theatre by Ajoka and the efforts of Huma Safdar in her Punjabi language productions are highly lauded; their work connects with the reform and activist work that has contributed so much

287 Ibid., 116.
288 The Nation quoted in Pamment, “A Split Discourse,” 119
289 Pamment, “A Split Discourse,” 120.
290 Ibid., 121.
to Punjabi theatre's "respectability" in India as well. Ajoka is a non-profit theatre group based in Lahore, which focuses on social issues. It was cofounded by Madeeha Gauhar and her husband Shahid Nadeem in 1983. Gauhar is a director, actress and playwright whose University of London master's degree is indicative of a position of privilege. Huma Safdar, who worked for years with Punjab Lok Rehas, another theatre group committed to raising social consciousness, also belongs to an upper-class family. She now works as an art teacher at an English medium high school, where she stages Punjabi plays with her female high school students. Again, we see the presence of upper class women bringing the respectability of their class to their profession, as does the activist content of their plays.

Conclusion

Nargis is unapologetic for her presence in the public sphere. Her return from Canada (where she fled after her vicious attack) and the success of her stage shows prove that she is neither subservient nor subordinate. In addition, her tendency to use both feminine and masculine traits and movements during dances, as well as her occasional portrayal of loud, masculine female characters, are suggestive of strategies that free women from the "male gaze" of the patriarchy. Pamment states that "Nargis is a prime example of a popular female performer who reverses the gaze, both onto other patriarchal audience and onto the larger body politic that attempts to regulate her movements and deny her agency." 291

However, although Nargis continues to perform, the fact remains that many members of Pakistani society view her performances as vulgar and crude. If she were a member of the higher classes of society, performing English language productions to the Pakistani elite, would she face

291 Ibid., 123.
the same discrimination? We have established that this is not the case. Most female performers in elite Punjabi theatre today, whether in India or Pakistan, have entered the stage through a path opened to them via a college or university education. Those who are not able to afford the luxuries of an education, usually those belonging to lower classes, are rarely able to make the entry onto a “respected” stage. Their stage is limited to modified versions of folk entertainment, such as dancing at weddings and other celebrations; this is often dismissed as a lower form of entertainment. Despite the fact that elements of folk theatre were incorporated by many leading figures of Punjabi theatre (including Sheila Bhatia and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry); folk theatre alone is most often dismissed as a lower form of entertainment. It seems that women who venture into public performance traditions have their respectability predetermined by the caste or class that they are associated with. Therefore, it seems that the absence and presence of women from the stage has as much to do with social status as it does with gender.

The women whose lives are at the centre of this dissertation emerged in the decades after independence when theatre had begun to be regarded with more respect. Its establishment as a legitimate subject in postsecondary education contributed to this credibility and it was here that most of these women first experienced and became involved with it. (Behl being the sole exception as she had been involved from childhood since her father was one of the trailblazers in Punjabi theatre.) The reformist and nation-building impulses that fed the legitimacy of theatre as a cultural form supported the involvement of these women in the theatre.
In 1975, Rani Balbir Kaur (RBK) played a particularly bold role – that of Polly in Bertolt Brecht’s *Three Penny Opera*. The fact that RBK had to wear Western clothing, such as dresses, was considered scandalous enough, but even worse was the fact that the role required her co-star to frequently take her into his arms. This also happened to be the first play that her parents watched, with an additional guest, her maternal grandfather; the reaction was not positive. After the performance, her grandfather lambasted her parents for encouraging her by attending her performances and told them to forbid her from acting.

A few years earlier, in the early 1970s, RBK’s first role as an actress was that of a courtesan in a Sanskrit play. She recalled that she did not tell any of her family members about it due to fear of their reaction. RBK’s mother had been extremely resistant to the idea of her daughter even singing on stage at an all-women’s college – what would her reaction be to seeing RBK on stage enacting the part of a courtesan? Now to act on stage with “strange” (unrelated) men was an even greater step, one that had stained her honour; and thereby, the honour of her family.

![Figure 3.1 Rani Balbir Kaur in the play *Mirza Sahibaan*](https://scroll.in/reel/817403/in-the-mirza-sahiban-love-legend-spare-a-thought-for-sahibans-predicament)
I was born in 1976, on the other side of the world, to a Jatt Sikh Punjabi family, in Canada. However, the restrictions I faced when growing up were not that different from those faced by RBK. In September of 1981, I sat in my kindergarten class, firmly ignoring the little boy who persisted in talking to me. I remembered what my father had told me before my first day at school – that there were going to be little boys there, but I was not to talk to any. I wondered why the little boy was not following this rule and I also wondered why my teacher had seated a boy next to me?

This type of behaviour may seem out of place in a Canadian classroom, however, it was what my parents had grown up with in East Punjab. My father was born in 1948 in the village Jandiala, in the district of Jalandhar. For many years, I was told that my dādī (paternal grandmother) had passed away when my father was a little boy. But this was not true. My dādī, Karam Kaur, had given birth to my father, her seventh son and eighth child, just months after her husband had passed away in an accident. When her youngest son was still a baby, Karam Kaur made the difficult decision to marry her husband’s younger brother who had immigrated to Vancouver, BC, many years before. This was something that greatly shamed my father and his brothers – that their mother remarried when she already had a married daughter and grown sons. Due to this shame, my father and his siblings rarely, if ever, mentioned their mother. It was only when I was in the 6th grade that I questioned the story. Whilst looking through old family albums, I came across a black and white photograph of an older Punjabi woman. I asked my mother who it was and she told me that it was a picture of my father’s mother, my dādī. I noticed that the woman was wearing a long apron – something that was not typically worn in the Punjab. Upon closer inspection, I saw that underneath the apron, she wore a pair of pants and a shirt. Her head
was still covered, but it was a Western style scarf, rather than a long *chunni*. When I questioned my mother about my *dādī* clothing, I was told that, in the 1950s, Punjabi women in BC often wore Western clothes, as they did not have access to traditional Punjabi clothing. I incredulously asked, “*Dādī* was in Canada? But I thought she died in India when Daddy was just a couple of years old?” It was then that my mother told me my grandmother’s story.

![My maternal grandmother, Bagha Singh, in Canada, in the 1960s.](image)

My father’s family did not own much land, and was left in a financially precarious position when Bagga Singh, his father and my grandfather (*dādā*) passed away. My *dādī* was now left pregnant, with a family of six sons to feed (the eldest child, a daughter, was already married). The other sons were of marriageable age and would soon have children of their own. How were they all to be fed and cared for? My grandfather’s brother had migrated to BC in the 1940s, but briefly returned to Punjab after his brother’s death. He approached his brother’s widow with a marriage
proposal. My father’s siblings believed that this would mostly be a “paper marriage”; an attempt to provide her family with a future of financial security. The general understanding was that he would bring my dādi to Canada so that she could eventually sponsor her younger children to join her. However, Bagga Singh’s brother’s marriage proposal had been sincere; he had led a bachelor’s life for too long and was interested in starting his own family.

My father was just a toddler when his mother, Karam Kaur, left him in Punjab, in the care of his siblings, to join her new husband in Canada. Eventually, Karam Kaur became pregnant with her last child, a daughter. Two of Karam Kaur’s eldest sons had also migrated to Canada, and they were outraged by her pregnancy. The rest of the family back in Punjab also shared in the shame and did not even tell their youngest brother, my father, about the birth of another sibling. The result was that when, a few years later, he was asked how many sisters he had, at an immigration interview, he replied, “one”, as he was only aware of his eldest sister. Consequently, he failed the interview and did not immigrate to Canada until 1970, at the age of 23. In the interim, he lived a difficult life in Punjab, without anyone to raise him properly; he would recall that his eldest sister-in-law who showed him some care, eventually left for Canada too. The remaining sisters-in-laws did not show him any affection, and so he would sometimes go to stay with his sister in another village, and at, other times, with his mom’s sister in a different village.

My mother also grew up with a heavy presence of shame and honour. For example, none of her elder sisters were sent to school. However, the first son, was sent to school and educated so that he eventually became a teacher. My mother – the seventh daughter – was only sent to school when her younger brother was old enough to go. At that point, my mother, her two elder sisters and her younger brother were all enrolled in school together. Later, my mother wished to continue her studies beyond the fifth grade, but, this would have meant that she enroll in another school in
town. Her brother had decided that he did not wish to continue his schooling, so she no longer had a male chaperone. Her education ended there.

My father carefully monitored the movement of myself and my sisters, as well as our clothing, in order to ensure that they remained within what he determined to be “respectable” standards. He did not allow us to dance in public, or to attend friends’ birthday parties or sleepovers, and after the third grade, we were not allowed to wear shorts or dresses; make up or cutting our hair was out of the question. Within a few years, I understood that the “no talking with boys” rule was only particular to some Punjabi families, and that communicating and interacting with males was an unavoidable and important part of daily life. However, I knew that my father would never approve of friendships with boys. It would have been too great of an affront to our family honour. I was careful to regulate my behaviour at home and to adapt my behaviour according to the norms of my environment. I would speak to boys at school, but never in front of my father.

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Women are taught to regulate their behaviour according to societal norms from the very beginning of their lives; and the affects of shame and honour play a large role in this regulation. Silvan Tomkins and Elspeth Probyn assert that an individual is taught what constitutes appropriate behavior, from the time of infancy. An infant is taught what is good and what is not, through shame responses such as the shake of a head, a disapproving look, the utterance of a “no.” Tomkins identifies an individual’s “early experiences” as essential in the trajectory of shame because, according to Probyn these “early experiences ensure that we all have scripts which establish the “individual’s rule for predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling” primal affective

scenes. Tomkins suggests that such a script is formed from a “set of excruciating scenes” in which a child may be shamed and prevented from expressing “excitement, distress, anger, fear, disgust, and even shame” by adults who teach her what the normative is. It is also important to clarify that this script theory does not deal with such scenes as elements of a plot, “but rather with the individual’s rules for predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling” these aforementioned scenes.

Therefore, an individual learns to identify the normative from her childhood, and to recognize the importance of adhering to this norm, or risk being shamed and ostracized. Some may dare to challenge these norms; but these “affect aliens” are then othered in society. It is this fear of being rendered an alien within one’s group that prevents women from stepping outside the boundaries of the normative, and restricts the majority of Punjabi women from entering the public space — and, even more so, the world of Punjabi theatre.

Negative effects are seen when early experiences of individuals produce scripts for behavior which are restrictive and discourage deviation. An individual’s earlier experiences have been engrained too strongly in her scripts as the normative, and it is difficult for her to diverge from this behavior, signifying “the power of the normative.” As ardent as the desire to break away from the normative may be, shame will most often prevent a woman from doing so. Everywhere she turns, a Punjabi woman is told that her proper place, indeed, her only place, is within the home. Even if she were to venture into the public sphere, the reality of her

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298 Ibid., 107.
“displacement” is apparent, as it is preferred that she be accompanied by a male relative in order to ensure her safety and the preservation of her honour.

Females in Punjabi society have traditionally been associated with shame and honour (izzat), especially in terms of their purity. A daughter is often referred to as ghar di lāj (The honour of the home) and her virginity is also referred to as her izzat. Nonconformity to gender norms, which include restriction from public spaces and from interaction with unrelated males, can be seen as staining one’s honour. There can be no greater shame for a Punjabi individual than to lose one’s honour; for a Punjabi female this is her own personal honour, and for a Punjabi male, his honour is tied to the honour of his female relative(s).

We have seen the ways in which women's participation in theatre has been constrained by these dynamics in Chapter 2. This is a widespread phenomenon: I am reminded as I write this of my mother's first time in a movie theater, as a young girl of 14 or 15, in 1969, who thought that an actor’s on-screen death was real. She and her sisters had to sneak out of the house in order to watch the movie, as they did not dare tell their father. The only reason they had a chance to watch was because their brother, who had watched it earlier, had convinced their mother that they should watch it, as it was a religious movie with a good message. My mother tells me that a number of girls and women were secretly escorted by a couple of young men from their village, so that they could watch the movie, without their fathers finding out.

This chapter explores how women regulate their behavior in order to preserve their own and their families’ honour and so that it fits the roles dictated to them by society: confined to the domestic space as daughters, wives, mothers. I will examine the specific experiences of four pillars in the world of Punjabi theatre, Rani Balbir Kaur (RBK), Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, Neena Tiwana and Navindra Behl, to understand how conformity to societal gender norms, such as
restriction from public spaces and the fulfillment of traditional female roles (obedient daughter, wife and mother), affected their relationship with the ideas of shame and honour, and with performance. We delve deeply into how shame and honour operate to regulate women's lives, recognizing their particular applicability in the world of performance, as we have seen in the prior chapter.

**Happy Families as “Happy Objects”**

Shame and honour can have far reaching effects on individuals, especially females. Females in Punjabi society face an intense pressure to regulate their behavior so that it conforms to societal norms, even if it means sacrificing their goals or happiness. Affect theorist, Sara Ahmed terms this the “happiness duty.” 299 The happiness duty which children have towards their parents, is a type of debt. Ahmed states that “[t]he obligation of the child to be happy is a repaying of what the child owes, of what is due to the parents given what they have given up;” however, sometimes individuals “simply approximat[e] the signs of being happy – passing as happy – in order to keep things in the right place.” 300 Agreeing to marriage and protecting family honour are all “happiness duties” which South Asian females have to carry out. It is instilled in a woman, that the happiness of her family is paramount – whether it is pleasing her own parents, or pleasing her marital family. Her own happiness is secondary. Being married also brought with it expectations of the conventional duties responsibilities of the roles of wives as caretakers of their homes, as well as their husbands and children.

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300 Ibid.
Ahmed writes that the family unit is deemed a “happy object” and any individual who does not “reproduce its line [is] the cause of unhappiness.”\textsuperscript{301} This individual becomes an “other” and is what Ahmed identifies as an “affect alien.”\textsuperscript{302} This is problematic due to the very nature of happiness. Ahmed refers to John Locke and reminds us that happiness is idiosyncratic, as different things make different people happy. Whereas the complete family unit may be perceived as happy, there may be individuals within that unit who are not happy. It is the dominant group who always decides the normative; and as this group is usually comprised of males, it is frequently a male who will define what is happy and what should make others happy. Therefore women who are not “happy housewives”, and defy the normative by becoming “feminist killjoys,”\textsuperscript{303} will make a family unit unhappy. Because a woman does not wish to be a killjoy or an affect alien, who is ostracized by her family, she will most often abide by the normative in order to make others happy.

Ahmed introduces us to the idea of this “ideal other” in her work, stating that “shame is about appearance, about how the subject appears before and to others.”\textsuperscript{304} This “Other” is an ideal to which one aspires and the gaze of whom one most fears. The shamed individual sees herself “as if [she] were this other”\textsuperscript{305} and “exposes [to herself] that [she is] a failure through the gaze of an ideal other.”\textsuperscript{306}

The family, especially its head (patriarch) faces a loss of honour if any members of the family were to threaten or disrupt these norms and behaviors of the collective conscience. Judge states that families in Punjab “live in competition with other families by complying with normative

\textsuperscript{301} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{302} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., 106.
expectations.”

They are compelled to uphold honour, by abiding by societal norms and conventions, especially in regards to their women, because, otherwise, “What will people say?” The burden of the maintenance of honour is borne most heavily by the daughter, because, as Judge states, “[A] girl's rebellion poses a much bigger threat - her action brings shame on the family. Shame is a curse for the family because living without honour and respect and in humiliation is regarded as worse than death.... Shame is the consequence of loss of honour. Shame, dishonour and loss of face accompany the situation in which a daughter violates the normative order.”

A loss of honour and the subsequent shame is also greatly feared due to its permanence, which Judge akin to a “millstone around a family’s neck.”

A family is forced to relive its shame at the mere mention of a past shameful event, which is never forgotten by their kin (birādarī) and their social and ethnic community (sharīka).

People feel shame because they worry about the opinions of the people they care about. Adamson and Clark state that shame occurs because there is a “relationship between the self and the other in which the self cares about the other’s evaluation.” Individuals seek the “consolidating admiring gaze” of the “judging other,” at the same time that they fear it, as it may result in an exposure of things which they try to conceal. Most individuals are often concerned of others’ opinions of themselves and their families. Elspeth Probyn further develops Tomkins’

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308 Ibid.
309 Ibid., 49.
312 Ibid., 10.
idea that “interest and shame are intimately connected.” Probyn states that “[t]here is no shame in being a sham if you don’t care what others think or if you don’t care what you think. But if you do, shame threatens.”

Shame is also heavily contingent on interest, as it is only felt if the individual “is interested in the [opinion of the] other,” especially if the other is an ideal. In other words, an individual will only feel shame if he cares about what the other person – the person who is judging him/her - thinks. Inevitably, this ideal is someone who adheres to the script that has been constructed by societal norms. It is the judgment of this exemplar which is most feared. The shamed individual sees herself “as if [she] were this other” and defines herself as a “failure through the gaze of an ideal other.” The shamed individual often tries to conceal this failure and hide “behind a mask of competence,” which further stipulates that shame is also “about appearance, about how the subject appears before and to others.” This is why one of the most uttered and considered phrases within a Punjabi household is *Lok kī kahinge?* (what will people say?) The preservation of one’s honour in front of others is the utmost priority, and to lose that honour results in the deepest shame.

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314 Ibid., 72-73.
316 Ibid., 106.
317 Capps and Lewis as cited in Ahmed, 2004, p.106
**Restriction From Public Spaces and Regulation**

“I was not allowed to sit with, even with my brothers too much” (RBK). Restriction and exclusion from public spaces, as discussed in Chapter 2, directly impacted the involvement of women in Punjabi theatre. A dominant reason to restrict females from public spaces and performance was to limit their interaction with males; this was true to an extent, for the majority of the theatre personalities interviewed for this dissertation. As mentioned previously, RBK’s interaction with males was so limited by her mother that she was even not allowed to sit with her four elder brothers for extended periods of time. She recalls, “I was not allowed to go, you know, at my free will to my neighbour’s house. I was not allowed to crack jokes when the menfolk were sitting and to go, you know, very free with everybody. No. My mother would tell me, “Cover your head, cover your … Stand like this. Sit like this”. RBK stated that many women in Punjabi society are of the mindset that “good women” sit at home; they do not have jobs, they do not go out and meet people, nor do they allow girls to even leave the house. Often girls are told that they have to wait until they are married in order to do what they wish. This is quite contradictory to the earlier statement which states that no “good women” leave the house; therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that a girl’s mother-in-law will allow her to leave her marital house. RBK shares that her mother shared a similar sentiment, often stating “No, you cannot go to a party alone; you cannot go anywhere alone. You can go once you are married.” However, we shall see that this was not to be the case even after RBK was married, albeit separated from her husband.
RBK’s mother was also restrictive in terms of her participation in school. RBK’s first love was not theatre, but music. She was an outstanding singer but her mother did not allow her to sing in front of others, even at all girls' institutions. RBK recalls that although her mother allowed her to sing at home, or amongst friends, there was “no way, nobody could ever dream that I’ll be singing on stage.” Her mother clearly stated to anyone who tried to plead on RBK’s behalf, that this possibility could not be entertained, as they needed to marry their daughter into a good home and if people came to know she was a singer, they would not be able to procure a good match. Eventually, her mother did relent and allow RBK to participate in some school functions and festivals, however, she still made it clear that RBK was never to take up singing professionally. “It was like, if you do that, I’ll kill you” (RBK).

The restriction of women to domestic spaces is quite clear in the memory that Neena Tiwana shares of her husband, Harpal Tiwana’s appearance in a Bollywood film, *Mirza Sahibaan*. Many female relatives who had never entered a movie theater, went to watch the film. Neena
shares that one aunt became highly confused when she saw Harpal on screen and in the theater, she was so unfamiliar with the viewing of films.\textsuperscript{320} RBK recalls another incident when she was rehearsing a play late into the night. Her mother forced her father to take her to the university, so that they could see “what she was up to.” This was something that her mother did somewhat regularly over the years. Unfortunately, in this particular play, RBK was to fall at the feet of a man, and cry pitifully, “Please don’t do this, Sir. Please don’t do this”. RBK laughingly states that her parents did not like this at all and it was hard to convince them with the reasoning that “it’s just acting, it’s not reality”. She also recalls that each time they came to check, she would always be working, however, the impromptu visits continued.

“Why do you go and watch? Are you not embarrassed?” were the words uttered by RBK’s maternal grandfather when he saw her perform on stage in 1975. He told RBK’s parents that whilst teaching or directing was fine, acting on stage was unacceptable. A decade later, when the Tiwanas made their first movie, \textit{(Long Dā Lishkārā)\textsuperscript{321}, 1985-6}, a great deal of effort was required in convincing the parents of the lead actress, Harpreet Deol, to allow her to make the movie. Her parents relented when she promised that this was the only film that she would ever do. A few years later, another producer requested Harpal Tiwana to ask the same actress if she would work in his film. Harpal Tiwana, told the producer that since she was now married, the producer would have to approach her husband for his permission.\textsuperscript{322}

Behl shared that even her liberal thinking father was concerned with society’s perception of his daughter, sharing that although he did not say anything directly to her, she was aware of

\textsuperscript{321} This film was a landmark in Punjabi cinema, dealing with issues of caste and class and sexual violence.
\textsuperscript{322} Ibid.
indirect messages regarding how she was supposed to behave, where she should go, and even what she should wear. She reminds us that this was a period 35 years earlier, when society was even more conservative than it is now. She recalls an incident in which her father slapped her just because she had worn some earrings before going out and he didn’t like it. “He wanted me to be very simple and not noticeable. People shouldn’t notice me. And, these are interesting instances I remember but, of course, if I see it from their point of view, they were justified and, I didn’t consciously know about all these things at that time.”

Chowdhry shares that similar concerns were conveyed by her extended family, when all other girls of her age, including classmates, had been married. Relatives lamented that nobody would marry her – she who wore unconventional clothing, did theatre and did not fulfil the conventions of a typical Punjabi daughter or daughter-in-law. Chowdhry shared some of the comments made by her extended family to her parents and herself; “Who will marry her? She acts. Look at the way she dresses; she's such a bohemian.” Chowdhry then shared the disadvantages of her “image”; “You don't dress in the conventional way. You wear lungis and kurtas and you're a bit wild and you wear chunky earrings and you have thelas. And that time women were very proper. … you're supposed to become … a knitting … embroider kind of person”.

We can see here a range of people functioning as a regulator of female bodies and movements. Male kin, including fathers, brothers and husbands, frequently function as regulators of females in Punjabi families. Regulation is not restricted simply to the immediate family; Khan cites sociologist, Nira Yuval-Davis who states that kin groups often form the same function as families in terms of regulating the behavior and morality of the women in their communities. Mucina’s research also examines the role that sons play in the regulation of female members of

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Punjabi families within the Canadian diaspora, as well as the “role that community plays in regulating second-generation women as a whole.” She references Amita Handa’s (2003) work which suggests that young females desire both family and community approval of their behavior and that “community monitoring of young women is not only an investment in the collectiveness of the community but also intimately connected to the regulation of the women in each individual family.”

The imposition and maintenance of “certain rules and norms of behavior” is seen as essential for the continuity of forms of kinship within one’s birādarī (brotherhood), or one’s ethnic or social community, or sharīka, the kinship structure that exists around a family involving the kin of both husband and wife.

However, the regulation of women is not limited to male caretakers; women as well as men attempt to regulate women who are in positions subordinate to theirs, such as daughters and daughters-in-law. Brara has stated that “Punjabi women are well aware of the differences between women by age and kinship status as powerful mothers-in-law or as husband’s sisters” who wield authority over, “relatively powerless daughters-in-law / brothers’ wives,” especially in terms of ensuring that they fulfill their duties and obligations as obedient daughters-in-law, remain suitable wives and mothers. The role of mothers in the regulation of women’s bodies and movements is a major theme in Mucina’s work. Mucina states that mothers were also regulated throughout their lives and they pass down “lessons of ‘honour’ to their daughters out of the fear that if they do not

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325 Ibid.
maintain these practices, their daughters will be victim to violence from all the men they encounter. Women are also judged on the basis of their daughters' behaviours; if that behaviour is not regulated, shame comes upon the mother or other senior women in the family. In the cases of these women we have seen that it was most often women who were regulating the behavior and movements of other females; whether it be RBK’s mother, or Neena’s mother in law.

For Punjabi women, as we have seen in Chapter 2, presence in the public space (especially in the area of performance) connects them to shame and dishonour, which function overall to constrain women's lives and require the restriction of her movement. RBK may not have felt shame about her work, but she certainly felt a guilt related to what she regarded as her failings as a mother. She felt this shame because she had a vested interest in the opinion of her family, as well as the opinion of the larger Punjabi community. Maintenance of gender norms and purity are strongly connected to honour; for which reason the movement and bodies of Punjabi females were highly regulated. *Lok ki kehenge?* What will people say?

**Honour and Purity**

Behl states that parents consider a woman to be a “very delicate thing” to be handled with great care. Therefore, they put societal pressures on her in regards to all forms of social deportment and behaviour; relating to things like man woman relationships and taboos on romance before marriage. She stipulates that although her family never had a problem with her interaction with boys she does acknowledge the existence of certain “unsaid instructions.” For example, in college and university plays she was often paired with boys and she would travel with them to debates and declamations, however, she was careful of not dressing up too attractively when going out, so as

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328 Mucina, “Exploring the Role of ‘Honour,’” 440.
not to garner attention towards oneself. The “girl next door” was touted as the image that every girl should aspire to; a wholesome and unassuming female who did nothing to attract the attention of the boys around her.

Neena Tiwana shares that she was apprehensive about joining plays when one of her college professors first suggested it to her and her sister in 1957. The two sisters already participated in events such as poetry readings, debates and declamations, however, she was uneasy about joining plays due to the possibility of harassment from boys, as the rehearsals would occur in the boys’ college. Since she was rather good looking, boys already posed a problem for her; she shares that “Boys would be after me … they would follow me on their bikes. Then I would come [home] crying; one actually wrote in my book. He said, I’ll rip your book, [I’ll do this] I’ll do that. When I read that, I cried and my elder brother said, “Why are you crying? What is your fault in this?” This was the main reason for my hesitation, that boys would comment on me.”

A few years later, when she enrolled in Mahindra College for her MA in 1960 her dread of boys was still so great that, although she rode a bike from her rented home, she would stop at a professor’s house, leave the bike there and walk the rest of the way, as she was afraid she might fall while dismounting, giving boys a reason to tease her.

Roles and behaviour were still clearly delineated for females as opposed to males during the extracurricular activities at school and college. For example, Neena and her sister would be sent together, with a professor as a chaperone. In addition, the boys could do many different things to express themselves during competitions but girls were limited in their modes of expression. For instance, boys could begin with a folk song or couplet, such as “O Beloved, let me take a gulp of

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you. A simple look does not satisfy me.” However, Tiwana stated, girls “couldn’t do such things.”

Respectability and the notion of what others in the community thought was still very important to Tiwana’s family. For example, although Tiwana and her husband had decided to delay their marriage due to the unmarried status of her elder sister, as well as the difference in their household status, when Neena was accepted to the National School of Drama in Delhi, her parents insisted that she marry Harpal prior to joining the school. They accepted Neena’s participation in theatre despite what others might think about “subjecting” their daughters to what many Punjabis considered an assault on their honour. Tiwana admitted that she and other female artists often had to deal with whistles, catcalls and lewd comments from male members of the audience. For example, on occasion, some men would shout out, “Now send out the dancing girls!”

However, Tiwana’s parents’ willingness to allow their daughter to participate in these activities may have may have been because she always had a chaperone of sorts, her brother or sister. To

330 Ibid.
331 Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 30-31
332 Ironically, whereas Neena Tiwana was encouraged to join theatrical pursuits by her mother; her husband, Harpal Tiwana was the one who faced opposition from his family. Neena recalls that at one time, Harpal Tiwana won first prize for his acting in a play during college. His father was in the audience, seated next to Rashtrapati Award winner Gurdev Mohan Lal Bullo. However, rather than reacting with pride, he turned to Bullo and said “You’ve turned my son into a Mirasi”. From then on, whenever they met, he would always say “You are the one who ruined my son” (Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 20). Tiwana feels that this parental (and extended family’s) disapproval for men in theater was more due to the lack of financial stability that the profession of theatre entails. Parental thinking is that this is not a profession; it’s a hobby. Tiwana acknowledged her father-in-law’s concern, writing, “All parents worry about their childrens’ security. We were married – had two children, a son and daughter. Because of this Papa ji was always worried about how we would feed and provide for our children”. The senior Tiwana was angry not only because his son had chosen theatre as a profession but also because he had convinced his wife to quit a stable government job (on two different occasions) and join him. Tiwana acknowledges her father-in-law’s declaration that “earnings are very important;” especially since they would work morning to night but there would be nothing left (Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 88).
333 Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 152 &155.
have her relocate to a city inhabited by her fiancée, without any chaperone, however, was too great a risk to take with their honour.

Honour is linked to female chastity. It is the fear of the loss of chastity that encourages families to control female movement and bodies, and we have seen its implications for women in performance traditions, marking women as "loose" if they move outside of tightly controlled, usually domestic spaces. This is visible across South Asia, not just in Punjab. Manjunath Pendakur thus points to the importance of controlling female sensuality in South Asia, as there is a fear of another establishing rights over “their” women’s bodies. He points to how, in rural areas, especially, women are expected to show modesty by not looking at men directly in public, not talking to ‘strange’ men, and keeping their head and upper body covered. There is very little consideration of female autonomy, a fact which he reiterates by quoting the old adage from the *Manusmriti* (an ancient Dharmaśastra, or legal text), “A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood, a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when her husband is dead, under sons. She should not have independence.”

Although this text did not have direct bearing on most women's lives, it did express a theme that had general significance: that women who fail to abide by societal codes of conduct prove themselves to be “immoral.” Yim and Mahalingam have discussed how a defining feature of masculinity includes the ability to protect the honour of one’s family and women especially through the control of female chastity. The authors state that

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men have been tasked with the responsibility of controlling the sexual behavior of women, because it is women who embody the “purity” of one’s caste; and a man was judged upon his ability to protect the chastity of his family’s females\textsuperscript{338}.

The importance of chastity and honour is also evident when considering the traditional attire of Punjabi females. The aforementioned pamphlet printed by the Khalsa Tract Society in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, had emphasized that if a woman had to venture out of the home, then very little of her should be seen by the public. Her desired attire was delineated: “Below a suthan [long trousers] and over it an ordinary but nice skirt (ghagri), above a long shirt (kurta) topped by a face-covering, heavy cloth wrap.”\textsuperscript{339} In contemporary Punjab, too, female clothing has many similarities. Anjali Gera Roy describes a female’s clothing as consisting of a long shirt (kameez), baggy pants (salwar) and a long rectangular piece of cloth (chunni) used to cover a female’s upper body and head. Gera Roy speaks to the significance of the chunni when she discusses its use as a symbol of honour. She writes that “[u]nwritten rules about covering, gaze, touch, space and behaviour construct an elaborate code of veiling and unveiling to inscribe notions of purity and pollution and sharam [shame] in its twin meanings of modesty and humiliation.”\textsuperscript{340} Prepubescent girls would not need to wear a chunni, however, it was important to carry one and cover one’s upper body after puberty and married women would have to use it to cover both their heads and faces in front of their husband’s elder male relatives. Gera Roy elaborates that the “idiom of veiling and unveiling inscribes community honour and shame on the female body, which must be shielded against … the male stranger’s profane gaze and contact.”\textsuperscript{341} Navetj Purewal also points to this practice of

\textsuperscript{338} They refer to the work of Dube, 2001; Hudson & den Boer, 2004; Parish, 1996.
\textsuperscript{339} Quoted in Malhotra, Gender, Caste and Religious Identities, 129.
\textsuperscript{340} Anjali Gera Roy, Bhangra Moves: From Ludhiana to London and Beyond, 1\textsuperscript{st} ed. (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010) 33.
\textsuperscript{341} Ibid.
pubescent girls being required to wear a *chunni* as indicative of the “pressures to emphasize both humility [and] concealment of the female, sexualized body in men’s presence.”

Rita Menon and Kamla Bhasin’s examination of the abduction of women during Partition also speaks to the weight of shame and honour which is borne by women in Punjabi society. Purity and honour are so heavily attached to women in Punjabi society that many family patriarchs made the decision to kill their female family members (wives, daughters, mothers) rather than risk them being “defiled”. Many female abductees eventually began a new life with men of a different religious community (very often, it was with their abductors), marrying them or living common-law and raising children together. After Partition, when the governments of India and Pakistan made an agreement to “recover” and return any female abductees, most of the abductees did not wish to return – because they knew that their loss of honour meant that their families would not accept them. The extent to which this thinking was held by members of Indian society is evident when considering that Prime Minister Jawarhal Nehru was compelled to make a public appeal in newspapers in January 1948:

> I am told that there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women (who have been abducted) back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls and women require our tender loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help.”

It is scarcely surprising, then, for many to find it scandalous to see women on stage, not only unveiled but also interacting with unrelated men.

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344 Ibid., 7.
Figure 3.4 Nina Tiwana, in a Western dress, a usually “unapproved” article of clothing for women in Punjab at the time.\textsuperscript{345}

The concept of honour is also linked to a heavily skewed sex ratio in Northern India, including Punjab; sons are preferred over daughters and the connection of honour to females is amongst the myriad of reasons for this preference. Monica Das Gupta and Leela Visaria have examined the phenomena of son preference and female foeticide in India, observing that data collected in 1980 and 1988 determined that couples with no sons usually wanted more children, however the presence of one son would usually mitigate this desire.\textsuperscript{346} Das Gupta and Visaria also looked specifically at the region of Punjab, which they determined as exhibiting very strong son preference and a low desire for daughters.\textsuperscript{347} They observed that the evidence for female foeticide increased in the late 1980s and 1990s. In 1991, Punjab only had 875 females for every 1000, the lowest of all regions in India, and after ten years, in 2001 this ratio had only increased by one, to

\textsuperscript{345} https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/om-puri-the-unlikely-hero-who-defined-art-for-the-film-industry/story-YG784PqRUAy4i8KxY5Y0pN.html
\textsuperscript{347} Interestingly, they looked at educated women from the villages in the Khanna area, as opposed to uneducated women and saw that not only did they have fewer children, but that “the desire for daughters [fell] even more rapidly than that for sons” Ibid., 122-123.
By 2011, efforts made by governments\textsuperscript{348}, and social groups aided in increasing the ratio to 895, ranking Punjab 27th out of 35 states and union territories. However, the union territory of Chandigarh ranked 33\textsuperscript{rd} out of 35, with only 818 females for every 1000 males, although the child sex ratio was better, numbering at 880 females\textsuperscript{349}.

More importantly, Ramaswami Mahalingam and Madeline Wachman point to cultural norms and beliefs which value sons over daughters as the major reason behind female foeticide.\textsuperscript{350} They reject earlier structural perspectives as an explanation for the prevalence of female infanticide. The structural perspective, argued by many earlier feminists, posits that a main cause is the difference in society’s treatment of men vs women. However, as we noted in the aforementioned studied in the villages of Khanna, improvements in female literacy, whilst improving the status of females, actually also increases “an increased involvement in boys.”\textsuperscript{351} Mahalingam and Wachman suggest that the cultural practices perspective “considers more context-specific reasons that might contribute” to female infanticide and foeticide.\textsuperscript{352} They suggest

\textsuperscript{348} For example, the government of Punjab offered the incentive of free education for girls in June 2017, however, as of March 2019 this promise has still not materialized. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ludhiana/free-education-for-girls-in-punjab-awaiting-notifications-for-21-months/articleshow/68406830.cms
\textsuperscript{349} https://www.census2011.co.in/sexratio.php

Although Das Gupta and Visaria acknowledged that the data available at the time was inadequate, making it difficult to estimate exactly how much of this gap could be attributed to female foeticide, they did point to the spread of modern techniques for sex determination as an influencing factor (130). The authors pointed to the chorionic biopsy, an inexpensive test which was available through private clinics and had increased immensely in Northern India. It could be conducted on pregnancies of 8 weeks and was considered to be 90-95% accurate (Das Gupta and Valaria 130). Ramaswami Mahalingam and Madeline Wachman share that more recent technology such as in vitro fertilization and artificial insemination now allows sex-selection to occur even before conception although ultrasound imaging still remains the most common due to its relative affordability. They refer to M. Sharma’s 2008 research which noted that such technology has led to a gendercide so that 100 million girls are missing from the world’s population. “Female Foeticide and Infanticide: Implications for Reproduction Justice,” in Reproductive Justice: A Global Concern” ed. Joan C. Chrisler (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 253.

\textsuperscript{350} Yim and Mahalingam, “Culture, Masculinity, and Psychological Well-being.”
\textsuperscript{351} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid., 256.
that cultural and religious practices such as dowry and the need for a son to perform funeral rites in Hinduism and Sikhism may contribute to the preference of males and the lack of desire for female children. Another cultural reason is the tendency of women to be “viewed as a liability …because of the patriarchal notion that the purity of women holds the honor of the community”\textsuperscript{353} whereas sons are seen as necessary to help protect the community. Dewan and Khan state that females are “seen as a potential embarrassment because they are vulnerable to sexual harassment.”\textsuperscript{354} As Mira Shiva maintains many women in South Asia opted for female foeticide “not because they were heatless [sic] but because they were genuinely concerned about the fate of girls who are being increasingly subjected to eve-teasing, molestation and sexual harassment and after marriage, exposed to the risk of bride burning and dowry death.”\textsuperscript{355}

Mandeep Mucina’s research explores the far-reaching effects of shame. She examines the presence and influence of the concept of honour amongst families in the Punjabi Diaspora in Canada. Her work is a result of interviews conducted with Punjabi women who were second generation immigrant Canadians who “had survived displacement, excommunication or exile from their family or community after transgressing boundaries of ‘honour’ or izzat in their family or community.”\textsuperscript{356} Mucina acknowledges that although izzat can be loosely translated as honour it “is layered and complex in an individual’s everyday behavior and actions.”\textsuperscript{357} She further states that:

\textit{Izzat} is a social, cultural construct and, like any other construct, is subject to being taken up, interpreted and used as a tool of power and control, particularly in the context of the patriarchal, capitalist societies in which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 258.
\item \textsuperscript{355} Mira Shiva quoted in Dewan and Khan, "Socio-Cultural Determinants of Female Foeticide," 394.
\item \textsuperscript{356} Mucina, “Exploring the Role of ‘Honour,’” 427.
\item \textsuperscript{357} Ibid., 429.
\end{itemize}
we live. The regulation of women’s bodies is essentially patriarchal violence that takes various shapes and forms. *Izzat* and “honour” are used as tools of controlling and regulating women, however at the very core of *izzat* is the construction of shame and the interplay with guilt that allows it to be a very effective way of controlling women. Shame and guilt are connected to the public manner in which *izzat* is measured and maintained.\(^{358}\)

Mandeep Mucina acknowledges that honour (*izzat*) is also closely associated to female sexual purity. She states that a “woman’s body as the vessel of family is controlled due to the belief that her body is vulnerable to rape, to loss of virginity and to a tarnished reputation if she is perceived to be performing outside the boundaries of piety and a “good girl” image.”\(^{359}\)

Such beliefs and practices in Punjabi society continue to the present day. The norms stipulated in the past served to influence and mold the norms for each succeeding generation and therefore, continue to dictate the behaviour of Punjabi women today. When shame and honour have such a prominent position within Punjabi society then it is not usual that they also comprise a large part of the lives of individual Punjabi females – shame has been a scripted norm in their lives since their very birth.

**Honour and Gendered Norms**

Chowdhry recalls that at one point her parents instructed her to not divulge to any potential grooms and their parents that she was an actress. “Tell them you are an artist,” they suggested, in the hope that the ubiquitous term would cover many areas and alleviate any concerns. In her own words, Chowdhry states that “at that time … in most middle-class homes, theatre could be seen as a hobby. Or the arts could be seen as a hobby but to go around becoming an actor, was certainly

\(^{358}\) Ibid., 429-430.

\(^{359}\) Ibid., 436.
not the norm.” Due to this perception, Chowdhry originally kept any theatrical work a secret from her in-laws.

Chowdhry astutely observed that “[r]espectability is so much associated with surrendering to a life pattern which has been laid out. You’re a mother; you’re a daughter; you’re a girlfriend; you’re a wife. Outside that, if you want to assert your own individuality, it’s definitely something which is going to get you nothing but [trouble].” Behl expressed a parallel sentiment, stating that parents of actresses, in some ways, have to be more vigilant about their daughters’ conduct, as they are afraid that society already has an excuse for pointing a finger at her. She shares that once, when teaching at the university, she chose a play with a very bold subject matter. Her father was very uncomfortable with that play, not necessarily because she had chosen such a subject, but because he was worried about the audience and what people would say about her. Behl goes on to say that many times the parents or husband of an actress will say, “You do wrong/immoral things with them”. All those things, like a suspicious nature, narrowmindedness, discourage women to take up this particular field. She may go into music, or into dance sometimes – actually in Punjab they don’t even go into these. In Punjab, dancing and singing are considered quite taboo.” Such sentiments are why it has traditionally been difficult to find women willing to go into theatre.

Punjabi society still “cherishes traditional gender roles and power distributions;” women are associated with submission and the domestic space (household and childrearing) whereas men are seen as aggressive money makers. Such characterizations speak to the general idea of male

360 Behl personal interview
361 Ibid.
dominance and female subordination which is prevalent in Punjabi society. Prem Chowdhry’s discussion of militarized masculinities, also delineates that, in Punjab, “[u]nlike a man who was both a producer and a fighter, a woman was only seen and credited as a reproducer.” Prem Chowdhry stresses that a woman was “considered to be ‘owned’ by her guardian— always a male, be it her father/brother, her husband or her son.”

**The Threat and Promise of Education**

At the time that these women were growing up, normative gendered roles for women did not include the pursuit of an education or profession. RBK states that “no one in the family took my studies seriously. No one. No one was bothered …. They thought I should just learn earn to be able to read and write. Even in [the] 60s, you know, this was the attitude.” An astrologer’s reading of her horoscope deemed that RBK was to be kept home from school until the age of nine, to be educated by private tutors. After the age of nine, she did attend a government school and college, but her mother ensured that these were women only institutions. RBK’s mother prioritized her marriage over her education; the only reason RBK was not married after matriculation (tenth standard) was because her mother had not yet found a suitable match. This was not highly irregular for the time period, as RBK’s mother herself had only gone to school up to the eighth standard.

In contrast, although neither of Neena Tiwana’s parents were highly educated they, especially her mother, emphasized the importance of a good education for all her children, including her daughters. Tiwana’s father’s three widowed sisters all lived with their brother’s family. She feels that it was because of her aunts’ situation that her mother encouraged her

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364 Ibid.
daughters to pursue education. She felt that one never knew what life may bring, and because of this it was necessary that girls be educated and become independent. Her mother was so insistent on a good education that she never asked her daughters to do much housework, instead insisting that they “study, study, study”. Tiwana laughingly recalled that their mother also threatened that, if they happened to fail, she would marry them off immediately. Interestingly, Neena’s mother’s definition of a good education included participation in extracurricular events that involved public speaking, such as debates, declamations and theatre. Neena recalls:

[M]y mother always used to say that it’s necessary to go on stage, it’s absolutely necessary for girls to go on stage and it’s necessary for girls to move ahead. It’s necessary for girls to be independent so that in the future they never have to ask for a handout. These were her thoughts. She wasn’t greatly educated [herself, but she used to say], I’ll make my daughter a doctor.

When she joined Mahindra College and participated in outside plays, Neena began to work with professional playwrights and directors, including Kapoor Singh Ghuman (father of Navnindra Behl). Her sister and brother often joined her in these plays. Mahindra College was also where she met her future husband, Harpal Tiwana.

This was typical of larger trends in the Punjab; Anshu Malhotra has shown that the education of women proved problematic for many reformers in the early twentieth century, for although they wished to educate women, they did not wish to “promot[e] the extension of women’s sphere outside the home.” Even the rationale of educating a woman was to “suppress women’s unruly culture and create the ideal women of the family.” Many in northern India, including the

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365 Tiwana’s mother had performed kirtan on stage prior to marriage. Tiwana shares that it was only because her father saw her mother performing kirtan, that he agreed to marriage; prior to that, he had been insistent on remaining a bachelor.
366 Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 29.
367 Malhotra, Gender, Caste and Religious Identities, 145.
368 Ibid.
Punjab, still hold fast to the idea that a girl should be educated mainly to increase her marriage prospects. There is no need to educate her further as her husband would provide for her, and ideally, he was to be more educated than she. Imandeep Kaur Grewal’s dissertation which examined the education of girls in rural North India, observed that this was an important goal for many families, and for some parents, educating their daughter was only important insofar as helping their daughter to “become a more ‘desirable’ bride.”

Although traditionally female education was not as much of a priority as that of males, all of the women in this study pursued higher education, including post graduate degrees; in this way, they reflect the new drive towards education that gained force from the end of the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth. Tiwana, Behl and Chowdhry had families which encouraged the education of their daughters. However, Rani Balbir Kaur’s mother was not supportive of her daughter’s studies after tenth grade; she prioritized marriage over education. This was not an uncommon sentiment at the time. Neena Tiwana recalls Dharam Kaur, the wife of prominent playwright Harcharan Singh, with whom Neena and Harpal had worked in Delhi. She recalls that Dharam Kaur could not read or write but would somehow memorize her lines and had been successfully participating in Punjabi theatre from the time of Norah Richards.

The education of daughters was traditionally not as important as the education of sons in many Punjabi families up until recently. When the four women at the focus of this study were entering the field of theatre (60s and 70s), despite the emphasis on women's education in reform

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369 I am reminded of warnings to my mother, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, by acquaintances who told her that she should not educate her daughters too much lest she face trouble in finding husbands for them later. This was in addition to the warning that we should not read too many novels, lest they give us “wrong ideas.”


371 Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 52.
literature of the first half of the twentieth century, most women in Punjab grew up illiterate. It was more important that they be proficient in household arts and tasks. In contrast, a male needed to be educated in order to obtain a good job and provide for his family. S. Dewan & A. M. Khan cite a study which declares that the perception of boys as “income” and girls as “outgo,” are factors which influence the decision of some Punjabi families to not educate females. “Outgo” refers to the economic burden that a girl represents; parents not only have to pay a dowry for her marriage, but even if she were to be educated and secure a good job, she would not be bringing money into her natal home and “repaying” them.

Navtej Purewal and Manpreet Gill observe that total gross enrolment in higher education in India is 20.8% for males and 17.9% for females; however in Punjab, it is 23.6% for males and only 14.5% for females. They state that:

While the gender impacts of the Green Revolution’s capitalist agriculture on Punjab in the 1970s were recognized by Sharma (1980) as withdrawing women of land-owning families in particular from the public sphere as a sign of status, our exploration of women’s higher education in the contemporary context of Punjab shows that the regulation of women’s mobility as a sign of status and respectability has continued through the subsequent decades.

Purewal and Gill observe that it has been a commonplace occurrence for privileged families to restrict their daughters’ education beyond primary school “due to heightened regulation of girls’ mobility and codes of humility and honour which can be viewed as compromised by girls’ mobility

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374 Ibid.
In the public sphere.”375 In addition, Purewal notes that “understandings of female education have largely been centred around normative notions of gender which saw a conservative reading of female education as one of social control, rather than transformation, in both historical and contemporary times.376 However, Purewal and Gill observe that a change is occurring, as a daughter’s education can be used to improve the family’s position via social mobility (through arranged marriages) and global migration.377 Despite this, to have young women venture into the public domain through such higher education can still be “perceived as a risk-invoking act.”378

**Marriage and “Happy Housewives”**

Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry recalled that although her parents were generally proud of their daughter’s work, they viewed it as a hobby and were more concerned with her marital prospects. Chowdhry shared that her parents, although not typical379 Punjabi parents, were still very traditional and had been concerned with her marriage from the time she was 16 or 17. By the time she was 21 and still unmarried, they became “very distressed;” Chowdhry recalls awakening at night to get a glass of water and finding her mother wide awake and looking visibly upset. When Chowdhry would ask her mother why she appeared so sad, her mother would reply, "You're still not married." Chowdhry goes on to state that other relatives would also raise concerns about Chowdhry’s marriage, vocalizing their concerns that “nobody would marry her, no Gursikh [baptized Sikh] family would accept her because she’s in theatre; she wears lungis and she doesn't

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375 Ibid., 107.
377 Purewal and Gill, *Flying High or Lying Low?*, 103.
378 Ibid., 107.
379 In terms of being atypical, Chowdhry states that they were very “gentle and … non-authoritarian as Punjabis.”
dress up like the rest of the girls;” she, indeed, was no “girl next door,” thereby exacerbating her parents’ fears, and even her own.

Chowdhry reminds us that this was in 1976 or 1977, at a time period very different from now. She said there were few options available to a young woman at the time, especially one who had pursued theatre. She stipulated that this profession did not have a “road map” where you knew what would happen next; few opportunities existed in theatre, there was no television, no alternative cinema. A woman was also conditioned to acknowledge that the next step after her studies was to get married. Chowdhry stated that the concern over one’s marriage arose from a “combination of social pressure, parental pressure and your own panic. Because there’s no alternatives that existed in the environment in which we lived”.

In contrast, RBK never wished to marry; her desire was to pursue her studies and a career in singing. However, marriage was unavoidable as her mother had been insistent upon arranging her daughter’s marriage from the time that she had completed her matriculation (tenth standard). RBK faced immense pressure for marriage again when she completed her Bachelor’s Degree, but as her mother still had not found a suitable match, RBK was able to pursue and complete her MA degree. RBK shares that any time her mother brought up the subject of marriage, she would create as great an uproar as she dared. She would fight and cry; she would leave her hair uncombed for days; she would not eat. Eventually her mother “used the threat of her father being a heart patient” to force RBK’s consent. After rejecting a number of potential suitors, the family decided on a young man from a Bedi family in Delhi. RBK voiced her displeasure at the match, but the family solemnized the proposal despite her protests.

Eventually, RBK grew fond of her fiancée who could be charming and would write to her twice a day. However, the marriage was a very unhappy and traumatic one; her husband was
physically and mentally abusive from the first day of marriage. RBK wished to leave him after this first incident of abuse, however her mother did not allow her to do so since they were already married. After four years of mental and physical abuse, which also resulted in a miscarriage, RBK could not tolerate any more and left the marriage; she returned to her parents’ home with her two young daughters. She never divorced her husband, despite the fact that they lived separately for the rest of their lives. Nor was RBK encouraged to officially end the marriage and perhaps remarry. Perhaps her mother was afraid of the reputation her daughter would obtain as a scandalous divorcee. RBK shared that her brother once approached their mother with the idea of a marriage proposal from one of his friends. However, her mother was so angry that she threw a shoe at him. She could not believe that he had even entertained such a thought.

In Punjabi society, if one has a daughter then it is crucial that she be married. A daughter is even referred to as a “burden” or a “weight” on her parents’ shoulders which will not be lifted until the day she is married and leaves the house. She is also often referred to as amanat, (something held in trust, until its true owners come and take it away). A daughter is taught from childhood that she is someone else’s amanat (a treasured item temporarily cared for by a trusted
individual) and that her natal home is not truly hers; her real home is the house of her future husband. Even today, marriage decisions are to be dealt with all members of the family; however this does not mean that the intended bride does not have any say in the matter; female relatives approach the “brides-to-be” in order to know their wishes.\footnote{Sonalde Desai and Lester Andrist, “Gender Scripts and Age at Marriage in India,” \textit{Demography}, vol. 47, no. 3, (2010) 669. \textit{Project MUSE}, doi:10.1353/dem.0.0118.} Despite this, some young women do feel pressured to consent to a marriage that they are not particularly interested in. This was even more common in the past, and we saw it in the experience of RBK.

Upon moving to Bombay after marriage, Chowdhry had to negotiate a new environment, a new home and, a new family, which had a different set of rules and routines. As a student in Delhi, she had been a part of the “bohemian environment” of “the school, the theatre houses”. She states that it was “a kind of space which would be unimaginable even in 2017. Because it was so liberal, with this wonderful director, [B. V. Karanth] who created a kind of language of expression for us which didn't exist in any of the other spaces that we entered.”\footnote{Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, personal interview, 2017.} Chowdhry’s family background also consisted of a simple, middle-class, nuclear family. This background was in complete contrast to her husband’s home, which consisted of a large, economically well-off, joint family, including not only her husband’s parents, but also his grandparents, an unmarried sister, a widowed aunt and her children, and two other aunts, one who was unmarried and another who was divorced. In addition, her marital family’s way of life different greatly from her natal family. Chowdhry’s natal family were vegetarians, and even eggs did not enter the house, and her father never touched alcohol. In contrast, Chowdhry’s new family frequented the clubs and even women drank; she recalls that her mother-in-law used to enjoy a nightly glass of whiskey. However, in
other ways, they were very traditional. She recalls that her mother-in-law once wondered aloud, “Your parents look so respectable. How’d they let you into theatre?”

Chowdhry went on to explain that the aforementioned statement was not one born out of any “malefide intentions”, but out of curiosity. She states that there were “little signals that make you realize that there's a completely different kind of thinking [in the inlaw family] … They were not to blame. That's the way most families were at that time and I remember I was always telling lies to go for rehearsals, so I was really disturbed by what it had done to my inner life.” Whilst in Bombay, although her husband knew that she was participating in theatre, she did not inform the rest of her marital family. When she needed to, she would tell them that she was taking a class in school, or some other such lie, when she was going for rehearsals. Having said that, Chowdhry, reflected upon the experience and stated, “Maybe it’s my fault because I should have actually come clean. If you’re convinced, nobody touches you. It’s when you’re waffling that you create this uncertainty around everyone. It’s like you’re embarrassed by what you are doing. So basically, I think it was all my fault.” It is interesting that Chowdhry takes on the blame in this situation; it seems to be decidedly female behaviour. Chowdhry is critical of herself for her handling of the situation, but her decision to withhold this information was influenced by the atmosphere in her in-laws’ home. There was a sense of impropriety associated with the profession which hindered Chowdhry from divulging her participation in it; after all, it was never anything that she hid from her parents. The blame should, instead, be directed towards the initial intolerance that her husbands’ family felt towards performance.

Chowdhry had founded a theatre company in Bombay, named Majma with senior colleagues who are well known and respected figures in Indian cinema today. When her husband was transferred to Bhopal, she was quite resentful and did not wish to relocate. She knew, however,
that she had no choice because it was an issue of her husband’s employment. The move, in the end, provided an excellent opportunity for Chowdhry, because this is when she found employment and professional development in Bharat Bhavan in the position of Officework Special Duty. There was considerable prestige and legitimacy to her work at such an institution. She stated that, at the age of 28 or 29, she was “catapulted” to a position which “many did not achieve until the age of 50.” This prestige allowed her to tell her marital family about her work. However, Chowdhry still had to follow her husband in his career, relocating at various times to different cities, even at a time when her salary was actually higher than his. The initial move from Bombay to Bhopal had been bad enough, but Chowdhry was distraught when she was told that she had to leave Bhopal, a “space where [she] could do such incredible things with endless money and actors and space and a work environment, which for, I think no other word would describe it better than Utopia. It was so perfect”. She likened the move to Chandigarh as feeling as though she had drowned or been thrown into boiling water. “I was so devastated,” she declared.

When her husband was given the post in Chandigarh, it was a fait accompli; the idea of contesting the move did not even occur to her. Chowdhry was affected by what Sara Ahmed terms, “the conditionality of happiness”; the norm of putting another’s interests before one’s own. Chowdhry was programmed to put her husband’s interests and happiness before her own. Chowdhry states “I think some way it takes a long time to break those notions, even within yourself. Because your mind is also conditioned. You’re also programmed to believe that the man’s job is more significant than yours. It’s just so inbuilt in the whole dynamics of the relationship.” In addition, she speaks to the workload that is thrust upon a working woman, stating “you also buy the vegetables, you also stock the fridge, you also see that there's milk and lunch and eggs and bread, all was in the kitchen”. She speaks to the change occurring in gender roles
now commenting that though it’s “been a long struggle” she has finally made her husband understand that he also occasionally has to take on some of the household tasks, such us buying vegetables. However, just as important is to “break things within” herself because she had also been conditioned to think and function in a certain way – that certain duties were hers to perform. She states, “I’m a product of the same society which creates what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man. So, it’s not that I had freed myself from it totally”.

I also still struggle with this conflict – as do all mothers everywhere, not only in the Punjab, or South Asia. Whilst conducting these interviews I was constantly worried about my children, who, along with my husband, had accompanied me to India for 6 weeks. They were out of school, and I did not want them to spend the entire time in front of a television or using electronic devices. Although my husband was there, I knew that I took better care of the children; he would be alright with leaving them with extended family while he visited old friends. In contrast, I would rush home immediately after the completion of an interview, so that I could turn off the tv and ensure they had some exercise, such as a walk. Or I would make them write in their journals, or teach them the math that they were missing in school. I even delayed my research trip because of what I felt was my duty to my children, that I could not leave my children for such a long time. Nor could I take them with me because they would miss so much school. I ultimately decided to schedule my trip around their two-week long Spring Break, so that they only missed four weeks of school. They returned to Canada with their father three weeks before my return date, but, again, I was constantly worried about them (especially my elder son who also deals with mental health issues). I had good reason to be worried, as he did very poorly in terms of behaviour at school.

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382 Chowdhry also shared how her elder son takes on many household duties, such as buying groceries or taking over childcare from his “stay-at-home” wife once he arrives home from work, in order to give her a break.
whilst I was away; this resulted in an email from the vice principal and a visit with the principal and teacher when I returned. However, once the meeting occurred, the teacher remarked that he had been much better for the past week (since I had returned) and commented, “You must be his rock.” This comment again influenced me to resist any prolonged absences from him in the future.

For many of these women the role that was considered most important in their lives was that of wife and mother. I was not able to question Behl about this since she was only available for one interview; however the responsibility of the household and children was firmly assigned to Tiwana, RBK and Chowdhry. Their ability to adequately handle these responsibilities aside, the expectation was that they should be shouldering these duties. It was more important to care for one’s family, than to pursue a career. Sara Ahmed refers to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s idea of a good woman, as outlined in his 18th century novel, *Emile*, stating that “[f]or Rousseau the good woman has a duty to keep the family together, to preserve the integrity of its form. …. It is women’s duty to keep happiness in [the] house.”383 Ahmed examines this ideal when she discusses the image of the happy American housewife; it is inevitably a housewife’s duty to “generate happiness by the very act of embracing this image.”384 Rita Brar further expands upon this image when describing the happy South Asian housewife, who has the added characteristic of living with and looking after her husband’s extended family. She states that the “contrast between a natal home and the marital or father-in-law’s home was an irrepressible women’s concern.”385 She shares the vents of a recently married woman about “the constraints in her new home … Living with the husband’s collaterals [his family], was like the inner self crying while the outer self was

383 Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys,” 66
384 Ibid., 53.
smiling.”386 She commented on how daughters-in-law had to constantly “put on ... good behavior”387 and concern themselves with pleasing their in-laws’ family members.

Neena Tiwana felt heavily the expectations of a “happy housewife” and keeping the family unit happy by conforming to traditional daughter-in-law roles. She shared that she experienced much mental anguish at her in-laws’ home after marriage. She recalls that upon her return home after a long day or night of rehearsals, her mother in law would offer her own son water and lay out his dinner but ignore her daughter-in-law. Tiwana also remembers that she would be denied milk; her mother-in-law would set it all for yogurt, without leaving enough for Tiwana to drink. Through her life, Tiwana felt that her mother-in-law was unhappy with the fact that Tiwana did not bring any dowry when she married into the family. Tiwana’s mother had a strong anti-dowry stance; she did not think it right to amass debt in order to fulfill the idea of showing people how much she had sent her daughter off with. Tiwana stated that her mother felt, “We have educated our daughters so that they can stand on their own feet; they are going to earn their entire lives.”388 On the other hand, Tiwana felt that her mother-in-law may have held a different view, that Tiwana did not fill her expectations of a new daughter-in-law in any way: she neither brought dowry nor did she take over the responsibility for household tasks after marriage. Tiwana acknowledges that her mother-in-law must have been disappointed because a daughter-in-law was supposed to come into the house and take care of her husband’s parents; however, Tiwana was barely ever home, most often accompanying her husband on one project or the other. Tiwana reminisces that her mother-in-law did not show any love or joy when her new daughter-in-law entered the house, nor did she give the new bride any blessings or gifts in the form of money or jewelry.

386 Ibid.
387 Ibid.
After Tiwana obtained a position as a lecturer in the newly formed theatre department at Punjabi University, her mother-in-law was willing to care for her granddaughter during the day, but she would leave many tasks for her daughter-in-law to take care of. For example, diapers were not in common use at that time, and if the daughter happened to relieve herself and leave feces somewhere, the grandmother would clean the child, but cover the feces and leave it for Tiwana to take care of, once she came home from work. She discusses the tribulations of this period, recounting that she would go to the university in the morning, and leave immediately after teaching classes, in order to return home to care for her daughter, as well as help with her and her husband's own productions. Adding to the stress of this hectic schedule was the fact that the director of the department, Surjit Singh Sethi, was unhappy that she did not stay behind in order to act in his productions. This compounded the headache at home that came with her mother-in-law’s complaints. Due to the constant tension in the home, Tiwana preferred to be outside of the house, rehearsing or performing, even if it meant the discomfort of travelling, sometimes for months at a time.

Her in-laws were upset with both Tiwana and her husband, Harpal, which Neena understood to an extent, as they had two young children but were not earning any money; anything they earned (even the salary from the university during Tiwana’s short tenure) was always invested back into their productions. Still the tension and irritation were most often taken out on Tiwana by her mother-in-law. She stated that “whenever I entered the house it used to feel like the roof was falling down on me.” The constant fighting from both parents led to their decision to leave the family house with both children for some basic accommodations elsewhere.390

389 Ibid., 75.
390 Ibid., 89-90.
Neena Tiwana was supposed to be in a partnership with her husband; he had encouraged her to resign from her post as a translator in the Language Department at Patiala, asking how she expected to help him in their productions if she was working a nine to five job? However, hers was certainly the subordinate position in the partnership, as all the household and childcare tasks inevitably fell on her shoulders. Tiwana and the other females in the troupe were responsible for the domestic tasks; such as costumes, contacting the washerman for ironing, tea and food. When they were no longer living at her in-laws’ home, she would have to complete all housework and cooking in the morning before joining rehearsals. Earlier, Tiwana had been very active in translating plays for the company to perform, but she gave less and less contribution in this area as the years went on, as domestic responsibilities occupied the majority of her time left her little time to devote to any other activities. Tiwana’s husband did not take on any of the aforementioned responsibilities. Tiwana recalled that once, after returning from a visit to Canada, her children complained that their father had not even paid the electricity bill, resulting in a cut to their services.

Figure 3.6 Tiwana and her husband, Harpal, dressed in costumes designed by Tiwana.

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391 Ibid., 133.
392 Ibid., 94.
393 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2545972/mediaviewer/rm3054859008
I notice this division in male and female tasks during my own experience with my theatre company in Surrey, British Columbia. The duty of ordering snacks, lunch and dinner for the cast and crew always fell to me, and, once it was ordered, it was the females in the group who were inevitably saddled with setting up, serving and cleaning. Neither I nor my husband, the co-director, would tell them to do so - they would automatically begin helping by uncovering and organizing plates and cutlery, serving water, etc. I would attempt to get males involved in the set up and clean up, but my requests usually fell on deaf ears, except for an occasional male (usually one who was much younger than I). I would also request the females not to serve the males water and other food, to tell the males to get up and get it themselves; however, I came to be regarded as difficult and, even, rude.

Feminist theorist Adrienne Rich describes woman as a “luxury for man,” a luxury who has served as a model and muse, as well as a “comforter, nurse, cook, bearer of his seed, secretarial assistant and copyist of manuscripts;” however, no such luxury has been available to women. Gilbert and Gubar’s work explored how women were considered to be “lesser beings” if they did not fulfil household and childcare obligations; and those who tried to do both, inevitably failed. RBK agrees, stating “there is no mother in the world who has worked hard and she has professionally excelled and yet has always taken care of her children.” Here, RBK seems to echo Adrienne Rich’s sentiments when Rich stated, “I am aware of the women who are not with us here because they are washing the dishes and looking after the children. …. And I am thinking also of women …who are washing other people's dishes and caring for other people's children, not to mention women who went on the streets last night in order to feed their children.”

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395 Ibid.
396 Ibid., 20.
I am reminded of social gatherings amongst Punjabi writers, in which I have conversed with the wives of some Punjabi writers. One woman proudly boasted of her husband’s success, while describing their daily routines. She awakened at 5:00 am to bathe, pray and then fix tea and breakfast for her husband, whom she awoke at 6:00. After his breakfast, she “sent him off” to work whilst she took care of other household duties, including peeling and cutting fruit which she delivered to his desk at 10:00. She would then call him out of his office at 1:00, only after lunch was fully prepared and laid out on the table, which she had managed to do in between dishes, laundry and countless other tasks. Would a husband do the same for his wife? Perhaps he would, but, as Rich has stated, “myths and images of women have [a great influence] on all of us who are products of culture.”\(^{397}\) It is difficult to brush away centuries of images and ideals which have presented the “ideal other;” an ideal woman who is mainly a producer of children and supporter of man. The woman who does venture out of the domestic space, will more often than not, have to contend with feelings of guilt and inadequacy due to a perceived neglect of the household and her children. However, Rich reiterates that “women can no longer be primarily mothers and muses for men: we have our own work cut out for us.”\(^{398}\)

RBK’s mother also groomed her from the time she was a child. She shares that her mother was constantly checking her skills and taught her to be a good housewife; “I knew cooking. I knew embroidery. I knew how to take care of the house.” RBK lived with her husband for 3-4 years before her separation. During this time, she and her husband did not live with his family, as he had fought and become estranged from them. She, therefore, had little to say on the experience of conforming to the role of a daughter-in-law. In terms of her role as a wife, one can see that this was still a priority for her family, and even for herself, at the beginning of the marriage. Although

\(^{397}\) Ibid., 21.  
\(^{398}\) Ibid.
her husband exhibited abuse on their wedding night, verbally lambasting her because he felt her family had not given sufficient dowry, she did not even think about leaving him. She stated that she was naïve and foolish at that time and although she should have told him “Hell with you, I’m going;” instead she begged him not to send her back to her parents’ home. Physical abuse soon followed and RBK asked her mother to allow her to return home. Her mother, however, told her this was not possible, that “marriages were not broken like this.” Another time, RBK was beaten so badly by her husband that she had to be hospitalized, and her father had her flown out to Srinagar, where he was working at the time. Even then, her parents did not entertain the idea of ending the marriage. Instead, they had their son-in-law come to Srinagar and tried to improve her husband's behaviour by reasoning with him. RBK’s mother insisted that “everything would be alright after they had a child.” The situation did not improve; RBK suffered beatings during and after her pregnancies and a beating during her third pregnancy caused a miscarriage. Ultimately both her parents supported her decision to return home once they saw that the abuse did not end, and only became worse.\textsuperscript{399} However, although RBK’s role as a daughter-in-law was limited, and her active role as a wife was brief, her role as a mother was all-consuming.

\textbf{Motherhood}

After the dissolution of her marriage, RBK made a conscious decision to return to her studies in order to obtain a good job to secure her and her daughters’ future. Although she was welcomed home, she was aware that her father was in a “financial crisis” at the time. She enrolled

\textsuperscript{399} RBK’s memories of her sister-in-law (brother’s wife), Kusum, also speak to the duty that a daughter-in-law had in keeping her extended family happy. RBK recalled that Kusum was a great friend; she was very loving and generous with her. For example, she would encourage RBK to wear any clothes out of her closet whenever she wished. However, RBK admitted that when she decided to join theatre, Kusum began to keep a distance. RBK shares that this was most likely because she feared that her marital family may think that she was encouraging RBK in this unorthodox career choice.
in Punjab University’s Department of Indian Theatre, intending to complete a one-year diploma and secure some type of job in the university. However, she was encouraged by many department members to join the MA program due to her natural talent; she herself was also drawn to what she describes as the “therapeutic nature” of the art form. RBK is passionate about theatre and the opportunities it gave her, but she also laments, “There is guilt also, that God gave me opportunity at the wrong time. [Laughs]. Either I shouldn’t have been married or this shouldn’t have happened after marriage, it should have happened before marriage. But then you know you don’t write your fate …. To achieve something, you have to sacrifice another thing.” And for RBK, she feels that what she sacrificed was sufficient care and attention for her children.

RBK states that “men have much more, power with their lives – control over their lives - as compared to women. Women are restricted because of their liabilities, their responsibilities.” RBK does not necessarily agree that women are conditioned to think of motherhood as their primary goal; she feels that it is inherent to a woman’s nature. She states that women do not want to break away from their obligations as a mother, “By nature she cannot break away from her responsibilities. And the men do, men do. They don’t even think twice at times. I’ve seen men leaving their children, leaving their wives for their ambitions. So, women can’t do. Women can be very ambitious but, at the same time, woman does not break away.” Rita Brar’s reference to the vocabulary used to refer to women and men, speaks volumes to the connection between women and children. She states that an “infertile woman and infertile land are both alluded to as banjh (barren). A man who does not have children may be advised to change his “field” (khet) – here the “field” is treated as a synonym of a “womb.”

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400 Brara, “Punjabi Inscriptions of Kinship and Gender,” 238.
Navdeep Kaur, lecturer and Head of the Department of Indian Theatre at Punjab University recalls that she had her mother’s support in her chosen field but not the support of her father. Although Navdeep’s fiancée, now husband, always fully supported her career choice, she states that, to this day, her father still objects to her presence on stage. Her father supports her work as an academic in the field, but he is not happy if she is on stage, or even if she directs. His main protests now focus on who will take care of her daughter while she is away.  

Chowdhry did not fit in the mold of the “girl next door” in her youth nor did she fit into the mold of the typical mother once she had children. She recalls that “my kids were very embarrassed when they went to local schools because [I] didn’t fit into the template of the other parents, mothers. [I] dressed differently; [I] talked differently.” It was not only the perception in her childrens’ minds that disturbed Chowdhry, there was also the problem that others, such as teachers, “always thought that my kids weren’t doing well because I was doing theatre. So there were a lot of things that one was constantly dealing with, also battling with, trying to manage internally.” Chowdhry admits that motherhood has been a “balancing act” and the main reason she has her own studio in her home is because it was easier to look after the house and the children when they were younger.

Tiwana also faced a balancing act as soon as she entered the professional realm, travelling to Bombay with a show when her daughter, Luna, was just over a year old. She recalls that the baby would be backstage, looked after by whichever actor was free for the moment. She was often travelling in a bus, throughout her career, sometimes spending up to six months on the road. Tiwana also travelled whilst seven months pregnant with her son, in 1970, and then again with her young son and daughter, doing shows in 1971.  

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402 Tiwana, *Oh Jo Si*, 78.
young children, an exceptionally difficult journey as they missed a connecting flight and had to remain in Paris for a night, and found it quite difficult to communicate their need for food or even tea. They were going to Canada to visit her siblings and parents who had settled there, but also to take care of the sponsorship and arrangements for bringing their theatre troupe with another show. Then in 1975-6, they were again in a bus for some six months doing shows.

Was Tiwana ever meant to be a truly equal partner in the theater troupe? Or was she just supposed to assist her husband? Although he valued her input, their partnership did not seem to extend to household duties and parenthood; in these Tiwana most definitely took on the bulk of the work. The responsibility of the children was entirely Tiwana’s own; she recalls that at one time, when their son, Manpal, was sick with malaria, Harpal was completely unaware.403 Another time, a friend recommended to Harpal that he take a holiday with the children, perhaps to a hill station, like other families do. Tiwana laughingly replied to the friend, that there was no point. “You know him, even if we go somewhere like Shimla, he’ll take Rishi, Sohi, others and say ‘let’s finish up a script over there.’ He won’t take the kids out sightseeing or anything.”404 The few times that Tiwana was able to have, what she termed “a real holiday” with her children, as opposed to a “working trip” was when they went to Disneyland and Universal Studios with her family from Canada; Harpal did not accompany them. Rather, he often pressured her to return quickly from trips so that they could commence or resume work on another project. When arranging the details of their son's and daughter’s marriages (their marriages were planned within a week of each other) Harpal was not at home. He refused to participate in any of the decisions or preparations related to the wedding, as he was too preoccupied with his own work. However, this did not stop him from

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403 Ibid., 184.
404 Ibid., 215.
complaining once he was informed of the final arrangements; among other complaints, he was upset that the marriage ceremony was not taking place in the house.\textsuperscript{405}

As babies and toddlers, the Tiwanas’ children had frequently accompanied their parents during their travels. However, this stopped once the children began their schooling. They were looked after by their paternal grandparents, with whom they lived. Neena Tiwana stated that her mother-in-law had no problem in looking after the children, as she loved her grandchildren. The affection, Tiwana lamented, “just did not extend to me.” Unfortunately, RBK did not have the luxury of such childcare. Although RBK lived with her parents after separating from her husband, her mother refused to give RBK any support that would further her theatrical career. She told RBK, in no uncertain terms, that she would not care for the girls in RBK’s absence; “If you do theatre, then I am not going to take care of your children.” RBK goes on to state that there was no one else to help care for the children either; everyone (such as her brothers and their wives) had their own families to take care of. She recalls that she did once put them in a hostel (which is not uncommon amongst middle class Indian families). RBK had flown to Calcutta for a week in order to make a film but she states that the children only lasted 2-3 days. They cried so much that RBK’s parents brought them back; it was an incident which greatly upset RBK’s mother. Another time, she went to America by herself for a couple of months and returned to find that the children had been neglected, and so she could no longer bring herself to stay away from her children; “I couldn’t do that because I used to feel-- I’m a \textit{bitch}.\textsuperscript{406}  I’m leaving behind my children. Just for my own? I used to feel very dirty that I’m a, that I’m not a respectable woman. I’m not a woman of integrity if I’m doing that.”

\textsuperscript{405} Ibid., 263.
\textsuperscript{406} RBK paused briefly and then accentuated the word “bitch”.
RBK’s happiness rested largely on her daughters’ happiness. This resonates with Sara Ahmed’s discussion of the “conditionality of happiness.” Ahmed explains that an individual’s happiness is conditional, in that she will do something that makes another happy, even if it compromises her own happiness. Often a woman will constantly deny her own happiness in order to ensure the happiness of her family. Along such lines, RBK could not be happy if her children were not happy. Her elder daughter, Sonia, suffered from a personality disorder and bouts of paranoia, making it necessary for her to accompany RBK on all trips, whether it was during research work, for productions, or any errand. This also made it extremely difficult for RBK to enroll Sonia in a hostel, although she agrees that her younger daughter would have been fine in one. Still, she states that “I couldn’t make myself tear apart from them. To go away from them and do something.” She recalls that the one time she went to America, leaving Sonia behind, she was constantly thinking about her, “You wouldn’t believe, I was not able to have a moment’s peace. My mind, my everything was focused on her. What must she be doing? What will be happening with her? …. I was just a wreck. So, I have realized, above everything, first of all, I am a mother.” RBK was holding herself up to the standard of a perfect mother; the fictional “ideal other” to whom Ahmed often refers. Growing up in a society surrounded by images and folklore of women who sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their loved ones (i.e. Sita, Savitri), this image of women was the norm.

RBK stated that both of her children have remained prominent throughout her life and career. She divulged that she lost out on many opportunities because she was reluctant to leave her daughters behind. She appreciates that whilst working at the university they could accompany

408 Ibid., 57.
her at rehearsals, playing while she directed. However, for other projects, people thought twice before offering her an opportunity. She was identified as an individual who would be accompanied by a sick child, particularly, a child who had the potential to create problems. However, this type of glass ceiling is not present only for mothers of sick children, but all mothers. RBK stated that:

for women, children are always the first priority. …. [because her children are] part of her, they are part of her being and the very foundation for her life’s joys, life’s, gratifications. The most gratifying thing for a woman is to take care of her children and to make them happy, and to see them progress, and to see them well established … and fathers, even in the normal conditions, … they are more concerned about other things than their children. They are more dispassionate about children, while the mother is very passionate. And, they can balance their emotions …with the sense of detachment balance their lives. But …99% women when it comes to her children they are emotional fools. So, you cannot make them dispassionate or detached or, you know, be more intellectually judging the situation. So, women are…women are always attached to their children and they are always the first priority and that has been for me also.

Other lost opportunities included admission to the National School of Drama and an opportunity to study at NYU. After completing her MA from the Department of Indian Theatre in Punjab University, she received admission directly into the second year of the National School of Drama. However, because she had to care for her two young daughters, who were only three and four at the time, she was unable to pursue the opportunity. Instead, she chose to complete her PhD at Punjab University. There was also an offer to work in the postdoctoral program in NYU under Richard Schechner, but she had to forego the opportunity as well as a Fullbright Fellowship, because it was impossible to go with her two young daughters, who were only five and six at the time. As she states, where would she have lived with two young girls? And how would she have cared for them?
RBK ultimately secured a position as a lecturer in the Department, where she taught for the next thirty years. If she did have an opportunity to travel with a play, she always took her daughters with her – if not the younger, then most definitely, the elder. RBK also shared that she chose to back out of a film in 1980, because the production team held the readings in the evening. She offered her place as an alternative venue, expressing her concern that their studios in Mohali would be too far to go to in the evenings. The production team tried to be accommodating by stating that they would pick her up and drop her off, but it still did not work because “I had these daughters with me.” RBK had to struggle with both cultural and material challenges in her role as a mother; her financial position and lack of childcare and other support for professional work all contributed to the challenges she faced.

Chowdhry’s conditioning of what it means to be a woman and a mother was such that when she was offered a job at Bharat Bhavan, in Bhopal, she did not even entertain the idea, automatically replying that she was unable due to the fact that she was breastfeeding her one month old child. Chowdhry was fortunate that Karanth replied, “I’m a very benign boss. You bring your child to school.” She accepted the job and brought the child to work, where she had a separate room, a bassinette, and even a female helper; she was able to lock herself in the room and feed her child whenever he needed it. As her children grew, she always took them with her when she travelled for workshops, productions or anything else. She states:

There was no question of not taking them …. I went to London. I had shows in London. I got 28 shows at the Tricycle Theatre, which was my first big international exposure. Then I went to Avion, then I went to the Edinburgh Festival. Wherever I travelled, Japan, Singapore Arts Festival, in Singapore, Japan I’ve been a few times, I took the kids with me. They came along with me. So, I felt it was better for them to miss school. At least they would have a wonderful time seeing plays, being amongst artists, seeing a different country. And then I was getting a room, all I had to do was pay their ticket.
Chowdhry did not feel that her duties as a mother and wife impeded her work at all. In Chandigarh, when her children were young and in school, she had joined the Department of Indian Theatre, which only required her to be at her job for two hours. In addition, Chowdhry took care to point out, theatre in India is not like Broadway in New York City, where you might have a show opening every night for a few weeks. She would have one production a year for perhaps two months, and it would be a single show, that might play, on rare occasions in two different cities, at different times. This is not the same exhaustive schedule involved in popular North American productions; “So it’s not that you’re working 24/7 with your own company. It’s not possible.”

Even the two months during productions were easier for Chowdhry, because she had her own studio in her own home. In her words:

[M]y rehearsals used to start at 3, 3:30, 4. By this time the kids are back from school. We’ve had our lunch; they’ve changed their uniform. In the morning you send them to school …. Then they come home for lunch …. then the driver would go pick them up and bring them home. We’d wait for them to come. We’d have lunch, chitter chatter a bit. 4:00 rehearsals would start. They had their own life, their cricket, their tennis, their homework.

In addition, Chowdhry enjoyed a very family-like atmosphere with the members of her company. She shares that since the girls in her company were highly educated and intelligent, they often tutored her children in various subjects, including Math and Hindi. The children frequently did their homework in the studio, where they could interrupt the rehearsals to ask for help.\(^\text{410}\)

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\(^\text{410}\) Chowdhry recalled that, “[While] Ramanjit is doing a very intense scene from Phaedra, Angad would go up and say, “Dede, Dede see if my sum is alright.” She’d kind of, with all the emotions on her face …[nod her head] and he’d go back and do his next sum. You know? So it became very integrated. I didn’t see life as here and art as there.”
In contrast, RBK houses a great amount of guilt in regards to her children. She laments that she was not there for her daughters. RBK struggled to balance her role as a mother with her role as a performer. Even now, some 40 years later, she laments the lack of time she was able to give them. In 1974, when she joined the department as a lecturer, her daughters were only 5 and 6 years old and she cannot help but compare them to her little grandson, who was only seven years old, at the time of the interviews. “The elder one, Sonia, was a year younger even than he is now …. [and that time is a] very impressionable age, when they need their parents to be with them, teach them. Which I could not.” She feels that her daughters were neglected when growing up. She has this feeling despite the fact that she would awaken and dress her children and send them to school before teaching at the university. Then, after returning home she would look after the children again, take care of their uniforms, clothing and regularly check their notebooks. However, she seems to focus on all that she could not do. For example, she regrets the fact that she was unable to pick them up from school, or that she was unable to spend long periods of time
sitting with them, helping them study, because she was so consumed/occupied with other duties. She states “I couldn’t do it, because I couldn’t handle two things together.”

She recounts that her daughters would travel with her when she was doing her PhD, whether it was during productions or for trips concerning her research. Although her younger daughter, Komal, did stay back on occasion, her elder daughter accompanied her during the vast majority of her travels, even when she was older, including a prolonged trip to the United States when she played the title role in *Rani Jindhan*. They would also accompany her to rehearsals when she was directing a play, playing off to the side, whilst she was busy with her work. It is hard, however, for RBK to shake the idea that she somehow “wronged” her children by enrolling in the PhD program when they were so young. She states, “I was so engrossed in my work so I must have been neglecting the children.” At the same time, RBK acknowledged that she had little choice but to work. She states, “I do blame myself. There are no two opinions [about it] but … if I were not working, if I did not get job, they would have been even worse … Because they would be dependent on [the family] and all the time would have been begging for our day to day needs also. At least we were good. We had our own money, my salary. And we could go about the way we wanted to. We could shop, we could…”.

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411 Of course, many of us would disagree with this statement. Rather, she seemed to be adept at handling two things at a time, considering that she was a single parent.
RBK was the only one of these women who had to raise her children as a single parent. RBK’s single status assuredly further complicated matters of an already busy/non-regular schedule, and a greater degree of financial precarity. Although RBK’s joint family was helpful in many ways (including her mother, even though she had refused to act as a major caregiver of her daughters) she states that “nothing can substitute the attention of parents. The children need both the parents, mother and - all the more reason if they are working. If, mother is working, the father is working, then [one can strike a balance].” She shares the experience of other female single parents she has known, and how it has been difficult for them to manage a job, as well as care for their kids. However, their jobs would at least include a regular routine. With her own job at the university, she was often required to be present for longer periods of time, as there would be duties involved in various functions, seminars and festivals, in addition to rehearsals and shows for theatrical productions. These would require her to be away from her children for an entire day and sometimes even the night, which, she states, inevitably led to neglect of her children. At the same

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412 http://drharcharansingh.com/gallery/
time, however, she acknowledges that the children of working single women adapt and mature sooner than other children; unfortunately, this was not the case for her elder daughter, Sonia, who required extra care from her mother. RBK states that her younger daughter was quite mature and helpful. She would never say “I want to go with you … No. She would always say ‘You take care of yourself Mumma. You take care.’” However, she feels that even her younger daughter must have felt neglected. She felt that she was constantly apologizing to her daughter’s teachers if she was ever away travelling, “all the time you feel you are apologetic.”

I know that I also struggle with the guilt of not being present for my children. Perhaps all mothers feel this way, Punjabi and non-Punjabi. I especially empathize with RBK regarding her elder daughter Sonia and her mental health issues (she has been diagnosed as bipolar), as my son also suffers from mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. I face this guilt even though my son’s condition is not as severe as her daughter's, and I have the support of the school system, my husband and my extended family. These are all things that RBK did not have. Even then I often find myself taking a background role in theatre productions or declining and shying away from further commitments elsewhere because I feel I need to be with my children.

Shame

Sharing the experiences of her mother, Manjit Ghuman, Behl states that when her father, Kapoor Singh Ghuman (well known Punjabi writer and director) first asked her mom to start acting on stage, Behl’s uncle (her father’s elder brother) “was very much against [it].” Behl’s mother actually used to keep purdah from him; and during the first performance, knowing that her brother-in-law was sitting on a on a certain side in the audience, she sat with her left hand raised in front of her face, so as to keep her face shielded. Her husband admonished her, stating that she was not

413 Behl, personal interview, 2017.
to wear a veil of any type whilst on stage; he stated that she could keep veiled otherwise, but not on the stage, because on the stage she was an actress, not the other person who needed to be veiled.

Behl’s uncle was upset with his brother, stating that he was corrupting the systems of their homes and setting bad examples for the women of the house, and society, in general. Behl’s father, however, remained steadfast in his beliefs, and because he was also very loyal to his family and worked so hard for them (i.e. handing over his entire salary), eventually her uncle backed down. Behl’s maternal uncle also did not approve of his sister performing on stage, but since he was such a good friend of Ghuman’s, he also eventually agreed to it, stipulating, however, that it was only okay for her to do so within the family, with her husband. He forbade it otherwise.414

RBK recalls her mother frequenting the university when she was studying there and asking RBK’s teachers to expel her from the class. Later, when she received the job as a lecturer in the department, her mother went all the way to the vice-chancellor and implored him to not give her the job. RBK feels this has a great deal to do with the mindset of Indian society, which thinks that “if you are single, if you are not living with your husband and then you are in theatre, you are a performing artist, everybody thinks, ‘She’s available.’” You know, that is the mental attitude. Then, you have to put them, you know, in their place. It is up to you.” It was only when RBK’s father finally sat her mother down and explained to her the importance of trusting and supporting their daughter that she relented somewhat. RBK’s mother’s disapproval or outbursts did not stop completely, however, despite her mother’s staunch objections, RBK continued in her career and achieved great success, as did the other female pillars in this study. In the next chapter, I examine what it was that helped these women to find success in a field that was restricted from women for so long.

414 Ibid.
CH 4: CONQUERING SHAME & ACHIEVING SUCCESS

We saw in Chapter 2, that the performing arts have traditionally been considered to be the work of lower castes, such as Mirasis and Baazigars. We have also seen that the prohibition of the Punjabi female from ‘male’ public spaces, especially the stage, took a long time to be eliminated, and still has not been completely eradicated in some groups and families in Punjabi society. Amongst the female pioneers in Punjabi theatre (whom I interviewed), it was only Rani Balbir Kaur who encountered a sense of severe shame in regards to performance in public. The other three women remained relatively unscathed by the old Punjabi prejudice against performance in the public. Although others may have had negative perceptions of their activities on the stage, their immediate families were supportive of their work.

Why was it that these three women had such different experiences from those of RBK, and how did they avoid the generally accepted perception of performance with lower class and caste activity, and the domain of men? What was the commonality amongst these women and their families which allowed for this support? Was it Caste? Class? Or, was it something more specific? This chapter explores the conditions of possibility out of which these four women emerged, and the circumstances that enabled support for women in theatre. I will argue that a complex combination of these factors enabled these women to deviate from the gendered norms associated with performance, and -- for all four -- to become leaders in modern Punjabi theatre.

The idea of honour has affected, and still affects, female participation in theatre. RBK states that even today the enrollment of girls as compared to boys in the theatre department at Punjab University, Chandigarh, is very low; that every year the department faces problems in terms of female students. She states that even when some female students do come for an interview and are admitted, they often do not follow through, most probably (according to RBK) due to family
interference. Dr. Navdeep Kaur, the current head of the Department of Indian Theatre at Punjab University, shared that 2017 saw only 3 girls enrolled in the department, as opposed to 13 boys; and the year before, there were only 4 girls, compared to 17 boys. Similarly, when RBK completed her postgraduate degree in the 70s, there were only 4-5 females in her class, and even when she began teaching, the males heavily outnumbered the females. On average, there would be ten boys and only 3-4 females; amongst the applications the difference was even greater. A yearly average of applications would consist of 200 applications by males and only 20-30 by females. In addition, if the females passed the aptitude test or interview, they would not show up once classes started.\footnote{Rani Balbir Kaur, personal interview, 2017.}

Behl observed that gender norms were even more stringent during the 1950s and 60s; it was not acceptable for girls to act in plays. Due to this it was difficult to find female actors for Punjabi theatre, so that young boys had to perform female roles, until, ultimately, playwrights began to cast their own wives and children. Behl shares the name of some playwrights who first cast women, including I. C. Nanda, Gurbaksh Singh Preet Lari, Harcharan Singh and Kapoor Singh Ghuman. However, these individuals were usually limited to the females in their own families (their wives and daughters), or the families of fellow playwrights in order to cast their female roles. Some of the first Punjabi actresses were Gurbaksh Singh Preet Lari’s daughter, Dr. Harcharan Singh’s wife, Dharam Kaur, and Kapoor Singh Ghuman’s wife, Manjit Ghuman. However, the stigma attached to appearance on the stage was such that it was still difficult to find actresses for Punjabi theatre up to the 1970s and even 1980s. The Tiwanas continually faced problems when trying to cast actresses in their productions in the 1960s and 1970s. When they first shifted from Delhi to Patiala, they found it difficult to find even three female actresses. Sometimes the problem
was solved by approaching instructors and principals at local colleges; often it was solved by casting members of their own family. However, for some productions, such as *Diva Bale Sari Raat*, which required an extensive cast of girls for singing and dancing, Neena found it necessary to approach some distant relatives. For this particular play, these extended relatives did the first show, but the girls’ parents balked at the idea of a second show. They stated they had thought it was just one show and had not realized the play would be so popular; they refused to send them again.

Some directors of Indian theatre shared that although in the present day they do not find it difficult to find actresses, they do face difficulty in retaining them. One problem is that they (as well as actors) are more attracted to films; however, the other problem is the majority of the actresses quit the profession when they get married. In contrast, Chowdhry stated that she has never faced any such problem; she immediately went on to list several female members of her regular troupe; “Raman’s been married. Payal, another actor, has been married. Geet was already married. One, Pamela and Payal live in Delhi. Raman lives in Calcutta …. But when I call them, they all come …. She was here. We were practicing for the play we are taking to Bangalore. So she was here for four days.”

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416 Nirmal Rishi, who remains affiliated with the Tiwana theatre troupe to this day, was introduced to the Tiwanas during her college years. When they were working with the Punjabi Bhawan, Ludhiana, they still faced the problem of actresses. Rishi was a loyal cast member who would attend rehearsals after work as a lecturer in a local college, and she would find some students.

417 Her brothers and sisters were both active in the Tiwana’s Theatre group and continued to work in productions whenever the Tiwanas visited Canada. Her sister is a noted actress in the Lower Mainland, Balinder Johal. Eventually, even the brothers’ wives were involved in the productions, including Charanjit Cheema.

418 Tiwana, *Oh Jo Si*, 129.

Scripts and Shame

We have seen that honour and shame are two concepts that weigh heavily upon the minds of individuals in North Indian societies and it is a burden born by women. Norms in a society influence an individual’s personal experiences and constitute the rules that an individual is forced to follow when leading her life. Affect theorist Silvan Tomkins terms this set of experiences a “script.” And in North Indian society shame and honour constitute an influential, foundational part of this script.

We have already discussed Tomkins’ assertion that an individual’s “early experiences” will constitute ideas of what is shameful and what is not, and these are present in an individual’s life from their earliest days. Rules are taught to an individual from the time that they are an infant. Others’ responses to her reactions teach the infant, and eventually, the child, what does or does not constitute appropriate behaviour, thereby producing a script,420 a crucial element of Tomkins’ understanding of shame.

Tomkins suggests that such a script is formed from a “set of excruciating scenes in which a child is shamed out of expressing his excitement, distress, anger, fear, disgust, and even shame; through increasingly skilled compression, summarizing, naming and ordering.”421 He also clarifies that this script theory does not deal with such scenes as elements of a plot, “but rather with the individual’s rules for predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling” these aforementioned scenes.422 The production of an individual’s script involves two stages: the first stage involves the cognitive, and the “examination of all incoming information for its relevance to a particular affect, in this case, shame and contempt.”423 The second stage involves the

420 Tomkins, Exploring Affect, 140.
421 Tomkins, Exploring Affect, quoted in Sedgwick and Frank, Shame and Its Sisters, 21.
422 Tomkins, Exploring Affect, 180.
423 Ibid., 166.
development of “a set of strategies for coping with a variety of shame and contempt contingencies in an attempt to avoid shame if possible or to attenuate its impact if it cannot be avoided.”424

Tomkins states that an individual’s earliest experiences are essential in the trajectory of shame, because these are what establish their scripts, akin to what affect theorist Elspeth Probyn identifies as “early experiences.” Strongly tied to the idea of shame and appropriate behaviour is Tomkin’s idea of nuclear scripts and scenes. Tomkins regards these scenes as the ones which matter more than anything else, and [which] never stop seizing the individual. They are the good scenes we can never totally or permanently achieve or possess. If they occasionally seem to be totally achieved or possessed, such possession can never be permanent. If they reward us with deep positive affect, we are forever greedy for more. If the good scenes are good, they may never be good enough, and we are eager for them to be improved and perfected.425

Adamson and Clark also look at the idea of scripts as playing a great role in conformity. The authors state that every “individual builds up a personal storehouse, a data base … of imagery and scenes for which various scripts are constructed.”426 These scripts are didactic in that they instruct individuals about conforming to specific ideals. These scripts, of course, differ according to different societies, class groupings and family units, some may be more constrictive than others. In other words, children learn from an early age what is acceptable or nonacceptable behaviour, according to the reaction that their behaviour elicits from others around them.

Most of the scripts which are in place for a Punjabi woman today are constrictive because they have been created from constrictive experiences. She has seen girls reprimanded or shamed for talking to unrelated males, so this is termed unacceptable. She has seen others reprimanded, or

424 Ibid.
425 Ibid., 183-184.
426 Adamson and Clark, "Introduction: Shame, Affect, Writing,” 27.
been rebuked herself, for spending too much time outside, so she learns that the home is her ideal space. She has seen brothers watch television or play outside whilst she cared for younger siblings, so she has learned that the role of nurturer and caregiver is hers alone.

Scripts have changed for many Punjabi females over the years. However, many remain quite constricting and, as such, may provide fodder for conflict because exposure to new ideas through new experiences may challenge what individuals were normally taught by their scripts. An individual faces the demands of conforming “to the shaming other … [whilst also facing the] conflicting demand that one remain loyal to the reality of one’s self.” To illustrate this point we can take the example of a young girl. She loves and is greatly loved by her family who teach her that girls are not supposed to be loud and demonstrative in public and that they must never question tradition. However, once she begins school the girl may be taught that it is important to ask “why” and to question authority; that speaking up and questioning is not only permitted, but also essential. How is a young girl to come to terms with such contrasting teachings?

This “doubleness of experience” as termed by Helen Lewis particularly marks the experience of women and other devalued and disempowered groups in society. Most often, the self cares about “others” which is why she is concerned about rejection and loss of their love. This may be especially true for younger generations who encounter new ideas and rules of conduct as they are exposed to different societies through modernization, education and travel. In most cases, one continues to participate in potentially shameful activities because one enjoys them. This is why concealment is such an inextricable part of shame and why shame is so painful – because it “operates to pull the organism away from whatever might interest it or make it content,” and

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427 Ibid., 10.
thus it is ‘painful in direct proportion to the degree of positive affect it limits.’ Negative effects are seen when early experiences of individuals produce scripts for behavior which are restrictive and discourage deviation. Because scripts have an influence on the individual in determining what is the ideal (often also seen as the normative) they will also form the basis for self-evaluation, shaming the individual if she does not meet the ideal standard. Chowdhry spoke to this “doubleness of experience” when she stated:

You see I love that quote of Salman Rushdie, where he [refers to] the migrant’s double vision. Which means that you are living in a place which is not designed for you but you are carrying the memory of what you were designed for…. In a certain way, it’s very enriching. I think this contradiction is what enriches me. There is a life and a behavioral habit that I wear and exercise. But my inner world is sending different impulses to me. Like, if I go to a very conventional party with everyone – husbands well-positioned and wives basking in the glory of their husbands’ success and perfect homes and perfect table and perfect housewives and perfect children. It’s all there. I’m sitting with them, and maybe to their eyes, I also represent the same. But inside the lens by which I’m looking at their lives, really belong to me and belong to the experience that I’ve had which has made me understand contradictions, made me understand conflicts, made me understand this double vision. But I’m the object and the subject. Where I’m doing, and seeing myself doing. So, I feel I’m enriched in that process. Yes, we’re all leading, not double lives, but multiple lives. You know, so, that is a constant state by which we respond to the universe in which we live. Especially for a working person, if you have taken decisions which are outside that framework which was gifted to you by society, by your conditioning, by tradition.

\[430\] Nathanson quoted in Ibid., 14.
Scripts in the Lives of These Women of Theatre

Why were these women able to overcome societal constraints and participate in theatre despite its association with shame? The difference in the lives of these women was that their scripts contained theatre as a normative activity, not something to cause shame, at least not in their immediate family. For someone like Navnindra Behl, theatre was a natural part of her life as she was involved in it almost from the time of birth. During childhood, if she was not being featured in a play, then she was running around and playing in an area where the play was the backdrop. Neena Tiwana, too, grew up in a family in which her mother tried to normalize the presence of females in the public space. She not only encouraged, but rather, demanded, that her daughters participate in activities on the stage. Because of this strong relationship with performance from childhood, it had not been written into their script as a non-normative and thus shameful act. However, that is not to say that all these women were completely untouched by the concept of shame. RBK’s experiences speak sharply to this.

RBK was identified as a troublemaker by her mother for refusing to acquiesce to a marriage and later for refusing to abandon theatre. Neena Tiwana was seen as a troublemaker by her mother-in-law for refusing to conform to the norms of a Punjabi daughter-in-law. Chowdhry and Behl were also accused of stirring small pots of trouble at different occasions in their lives. Sarah Ahmed defines a troublemaker as “the one who violates the fragile conditions of peace” and a disobedient daughter and wife. If a woman breaks the norm then she is termed the aforementioned, “affect alien”. If she dares to even speak against the norm, then she is termed a “killjoy.” Ahmed discusses the “role” of feminist killjoys in society by examining society’s idea of what a woman “should” be and how she “should” act. The “ideal woman” should be, first, a dutiful daughter and,

next, what Ahmed terms, the “happy housewife”\textsuperscript{432} devoted to her husband and family. Those who attempt to challenge such ideals, or express desires which are contrary to such ideals, are identified as troublemakers and killjoys, who are destroying the “happy object” of the family. Therefore, shame can be extremely limiting because one is afraid of being labelled a killjoy or being shunned by one’s family as an “affect alien”.

Parental obedience is a crucial tenet for Punjabi daughters; sons may be able to exhibit rebellious behavior to a certain extent, however, any daughter who defies parental wishes is automatically seen as immoral. A renunciation of voice is also taught to Punjabi daughters, especially when they get married. They are frequently told to never say anything, never “talk back” to their in-laws no matter the difference in opinion. Feminists then, can never rid themselves of the label of troublemaker or killjoy, because of their efforts to provide attention to women’s needs and desires through their very willingness to “cause disturbance”\textsuperscript{433} by vocalizing their concerns. Ahmed refers to her own childhood when she claims that “[h]owever she speaks, the feminist is usually the one who is viewed as ‘causing the argument,’ who is disturbing the fragility of peace.”\textsuperscript{434}

In addition, a woman is responsible for her family, especially in maintaining its status as a “happy object”. This status is maintained only if the woman, in her role[s] as mother, wife and daughter follows the script that has been created for her by her specific family unit. The early experiences which created the scripts for her family members have, in turn, influenced the experiences which have created her own personal script and echoed the behavioural norms set forth by society.

\textsuperscript{432} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{433} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{434} Ibid., 65.
Caste and Class

Scripts are also informed by an individual’s caste and class. Shahnaz Khan states that caste and class have a function in terms of articulating whether a woman is behaving appropriately or not. It is usually docile, middle-class women who are considered moral in society, “while agentive, impoverished women are deemed immoral.” Lower-class women who often have to “work for a living” are considered “loose, sexual, [and] promiscuous [women], whose sexuality is running wild and needs to be controlled.” It is important to note, however, that many other women who pursue non-normative roles and non-normative careers are viewed in a similar fashion. In addition, lest we see the aforementioned work of the lower-class women as a kind of freedom, it is important to note that many of these women also express a desire to have access to the middle-class life which would allow them to remain within the confines of the domestic space, indicating that these normative ideals permeate through class barriers.

Liddle and Joshi also observe that “increased control over women” is an important factor in caste ritual purity, specifically, through their restriction to the domestic space and exclusion from the public, as well as control of men over female sexuality. They go on to state that this restriction on female movement and female sexuality was “enforced most severely by the higher castes, particularly the brahmins, but some of the lower castes also adopted them.” A lower

436 Ibid.
438 The other two factors were vegetarianism and teetotalism, which, have diminished in the degree to which they are ritually practised, but the control over female movement and sexuality has remained.
439 Liddle and Joshi, Daughters of Independence, 59.
440 For example, the Jatts of Punjab, who, although Shudras, gained power and prestige through their transformation from simple farmers to farmer landowners.
 caste that had improved its economic position could attempt to move up the hierarchy over a number of generations, but economic power alone was not always sufficient. The caste had also had to adopt the cultural attributes of ritual purity, which meant constraining women’s freedom.\textsuperscript{441}

In contrast, lower castes were not as stringent in their control over women. Liddle and Joshi quote Srinivas\textsuperscript{442} who states that “the institutions of the ‘low’ castes are more liberal in the spheres of marriage and sex than those of the Brahmins. Post-puberty marriages do occur among them, widows do not have to shave their heads, and divorce and widow marriage are both permitted.”\textsuperscript{443} At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that this “relative” freedom is still monitored by their relatives and society; and it is also something that many of these same women would relinquish if they had the financial security to do so.

Caste and class have a function in terms of articulating whether a woman is behaving appropriately or not. But what is the difference between caste and class? Caste is hereditary, a social organizational ranking that you are born into, at least theoretically, whereas class is more directly associated with economic standing. A person may belong to a high caste grouping, however may have a lower socioeconomic position than other members of the same caste; they “may differ in their economic power, political influence, education and life-styles.”\textsuperscript{444} In addition, although there have been historical instances of changes in caste status for individuals and groups, people are generally understood to be unable to change their caste, while they can change their class. Liddle and Joshi also observe that caste is “collectively based;”\textsuperscript{445} the collectively based caste stratification system means that all the groups are dependent on one another. Any one group

\textsuperscript{441} Liddle and Joshi, Daughters of Independence, 59.  
\textsuperscript{442} Srinivas, Caste in Modern India quoted in Liddle and Joshi, Daughters of Independence  
\textsuperscript{443} Liddle and Joshi, Daughters of Independence, 60.  
\textsuperscript{445} Liddle and Joshi, Daughters of Independence, 105.
cannot survive without the other groups; however, the higher groups have better living conditions and opportunities than lower groups. Indeed, these conditions and opportunities occur, at the expense of, lower groups. This is generally the case because these caste divisions were formulated to align with the economic status of the different occupations and their groups. Individuals cannot improve their position within the caste system because it is allocated to them according to their birth. Liddle and Joshi state that, “[s]ocial mobility within the caste system occurs not with individuals but with entire groups and an individual’s attempt to rise brings dishonor.” An example of this would be the specific case of the Jatt Sikh caste in the Punjab, which is ranked amongst the lowest caste (in the Shudra varna), however the group’s emergence as influential landowners has catapulted this caste into a position of cultural, political and socioeconomic prowess as one of the most powerful groups in the Punjab. In contrast, the class system is individually based because it is based on wage labour; and it allows for social mobility.

Paramjit Judge provides a discussion of the segregation of the male and female spaces in society by referring to Pierre Bourdieu’s Kabyle house, an ethnography of domestic space; Bourdieu examines the social and spatial worlds of a house, in which the outer space is designated for the male and the inner space is designated for the female. Judge states that such a division is also present in Punjabi society, amongst all religious traditions, including Hindu and Muslim, however the degree to which the division was carried out was dependent upon caste and class. Whereas this division was highly visible amongst the upper castes and classes, it was less visible or absent in lower caste and classes. For example, whilst upper caste women (such as Khatri/Aroras, Brahmins and Rajputs) would not leave the house, Jatt (Shudra) women would work in the fields. It was when Jatts became rich landowners during the early modern period and

446 Ibid.
began to rise in socio-economic importance within Punjabi society that Jatts began to emulate more characteristics of the “higher castes”; although Jatt women were not completely restricted to their homes, Jatts did develop stronger restrictions regarding the movement of their women.\textsuperscript{447}

If one examines the origins of the Indian middle class, then, one can see the convergence of class and caste privilege. Jodhka et. al “argue that even for the emergence of the new middle class and the top professions, caste plays an important role and informs the emerging capitalist class structure.”\textsuperscript{448} According to Jodhka et. al., the term “middle class” was used in colonial India, during the early nineteenth century, when the British rulers realized that they needed a “class of lower-level native bureaucracy that would assist them in their rule” by acting as intermediaries between British rulers and the local Indians.\textsuperscript{449} The British policy of ‘educating the natives’ consisted of them opening schools and colleges in cities such as Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The students who enrolled in these institutions were members of the local community which had “resources and high social standing.”\textsuperscript{450} The vast majority of the newly modern educated professionals came from the upper echelons of the caste system and made up the newly formed middle class, consisting of individuals employed in administrative jobs within the government and professionals such as lawyers, doctors and teachers.\textsuperscript{451}

Jodhka et. al. state that the popular belief is that the members of this new class espoused beliefs of equality and democracy and that the “Western-educated middle class of India continues to be a modernizing social category and an important agent of positive social change in the Indian

\textsuperscript{447} Ibid., 49.  
\textsuperscript{449} Jodhka et. al.116-7.  
\textsuperscript{450} Ibid., 117.  
\textsuperscript{451} The size of this “educated middle class” continued to grow during the second half of the nineteenth century. (Jodhka et. al.118) enjoying further growth after independence, and again, in the 1990s due to policies of economic liberalization.
society, where the hold of tradition continues to be a critical source of its backwardness.”

However, according to the authors, the new Indian middle class was not an entirely “modernizing agent;” in actuality, many members of the newly formed middle class “championed ‘tradition’” and “actively represented and constructed local-level “sectarian” identities” which the British then absorbed “into their policy frames [reinforcing] the preexisting structures of social relations.”

Another indicator of the upper class in India is English language proficiency. Subhadra Mitra Channa refers to Chatterjee’s (1993) concept of “the colonization of the mind.” A result of the British “formal learning system” was that the elite group of Indians which were churned out by this education system, became critical of their own culture and began to “equate European culture with class superiority and elitism.” Channa goes on to state that, even today, fluency and comfort in the English language, as well as westernization are seen as important markers of “sophistication without which no one can gain entry into high society.”

The Co-participants And Their Relationship With Caste and Class

Caste and class were difficult subjects to broach with the women in this study. When asked about the influence of one’s caste in terms of finding acceptance in pursuing a theatrical career, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry stated, “first of all, I find it very uncomfortable, lower, upper, middle, you know? It seems too classist to me. I don’t think there is a behavior you attribute to a class.” At first RBK denied the existence of these categories in the modern day. She stated that “these things have now dissolved, [and are] dissolving in the cities, in the educated class. But, in
villages maybe there is some kind of discrimination between the lower and the upper class.”

However, later she did firmly place herself amongst the “upper class” when recounting her experiences. RBK likened her position in a higher class of society, to a curse, stating:

I always felt that being a daughter, single daughter and belonging to an illustrious family in many ways was a curse. You know, they were very snobbish. … Most of the class fellows that I had – the girls were from lower middle class and for them it was a different story. I feel that they were making their career - They were not married, first of all, like me, you know. And many of the parents - I have realized, the lower middle class is more sensitive. They understand; they encourage their children. But the higher class become more snobbish and they become more conservative. And they don’t allow their daughters because they know they can be married off to well-off families and they can lead - Whereas the lower middle class, they are always looking for avenues for their children to have a better life and this is also one, you know, avenue, which could have given them better bread and butter, better life.

She recalled her classmates when she pursued her graduate degree in theatre: the families of most of the girls were not very rich, but a couple of classmates came from families even richer than her own. One was the daughter of the finance commissioner, and another was the wife of an IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer, who fully supported his wife’s endeavours. This bears testimony to the fact that one cannot homogenize an entire group, there will always be exceptions and different levels of adherence to class and caste norms. However, in RBK’s case, she shared that her family was very conservative and orthodox. They felt that she only needed enough schooling to be able to identify as a well-educated individual. A career in performance was not “in her script.” Teaching theatre was acceptable, but to take up acting as a profession “was unthinkable.”

RBK felt that while it was difficult to join theatre if one belonged to a higher class, in contrast, individuals from the labour classes take pride if one of their own enters such a profession. She stated that, “they don’t even mind if there is something wrong in the profession … because
those people’s primary concern is always to be uplifted from their financial conditions. …they don’t even mind if this girl goes to someone’s house and if there she is getting a chance to do some work, receives some work, and even if there is something wrong going on there they ignore it.”

The traditional mindset of the upper castes was definitely against performance but the individual families of the co-participants did not associate any shame to the career (except RBK’s mother). Therefore, it was not as great a hindrance, as for, example, the early female members of IPTA (the Indian People’s Theatre Association), the experiences of whom Lata Singh describes.

Similar to the families of the women of Punjabi theatre whose experiences we are examining in this dissertation, the families of many of the women of IPTA were considered to be ‘liberal” and progressive for the time period. For example, they sent their daughters to school and even permitted higher education at a time when this was still an anomaly. Sheela Bhatia shares that, when growing up, there was no difference between boys and girls in her home; stating that “food, clothes and education given was the same for boys and girls.”

Women like Dina Gandhi and Reba Roychoudhury were all encouraged to pursue an education. However, this education did not allow the women “a sense of real ‘freedom’” they still faced strict “restriction and control.” For example, Roychoudhury shared that other than school and college, women were not allowed outside, and they were not to involve themselves in song, dance, music or even watching cinema. After her marriage, Bhatia’s in-laws permitted her to continue her education in Lahore, but she was to be restricted to the college and hostel; she could not interact with others, despite the fact that Lahore was a meeting place for many literary people like Balraj Sahni, Khushwant Singh and Balwant Gargi.

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458 Ibid.
Dina Gandhi was quite active in her high school; in addition to cultural activities, she organized study circles, meetings, discussions and demonstrations. This led her father to setting a condition on her higher studies after matriculation. He let her attend college in Bombay, where she was to live with her sister, Shanta Gandhi. However, he set conditions to ensure that she would not become disobedient like her sister. He stipulated that she was not to “take part in whatever Shanta did, in any cultural activities, in any ‘nachna gana’ [dance and song] at college; that she would study seriously and not take part in the annual function of the college.”\(^{459}\) Gandhi agreed to these conditions, but found a loophole by participating in activities outside the college, which included getting involved in IPTA. She also became a student activist and a leftist activist. Gandhi’s political activities led to her expulsion from two different colleges and also caused her father to fear that she would jeopardize his job. At this point, he repudiated any responsibility towards her and she moved to Lahore to stay with her sister. Rekha Roy was also severely criticized by both her own family and her husband’s family for her involvement with IPTA. This criticism was apparent in a letter penned by her mother-in-law, in which she wrote that Roy’s decision to learn dance, and that too, alongside men, was a “big stigma and ‘kalank’ [stain] for the family.”\(^{460}\) The end of the letter included the harsh statement, “if you were stone, then I would have swept you in the river so that I do not have to see this.”\(^{461}\)

The IPTA cultural troupe was viewed with great suspicion by the society of the time. The members of the troupe included both married and unmarried men and women who lived together in a commune. They would rehearse for six months of the year and travel and perform together for the other six months. It was considered very scandalous for unmarried individuals, especially

\(^{459}\) Ibid., 65.
\(^{460}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{461}\) Ibid.
women, to live and interact in such close proximity, contradicting traditional views of public and private space. Lata Singh shares that even Gandhi’s paper, Harijan criticized the group’s lifestyle as immoral. The troupe members faced criticism in both overt and hidden ways. For example, when they would stay at a home during their travels, the women of the household were instructed not to interact with the troupe members.462

The socioeconomic benefits of their class status assuredly helped the aforementioned female artists, as well as the female Punjabi artists in this study on their roads to success; they were able to meet and network with high ranking and influential people who could introduce them to different opportunities. They also had access to higher and better standards of education. Nor did they have to worry about finances to the same extent that other artists may have; hence they were able to fully devote themselves to their work.

Therefore, although caste and class could have functioned as inhibitors in some ways, as performance traditions and female presence in the public were generally considered dishonourable by the higher castes, the relatively higher class status of the women involved in this study also contributed to the success of these female performers. As members of upper caste communities and the upper or upper middle socioeconomic classes in Punjabi society, the co-participants were able to access resources and opportunities that were not as readily available to others. They were able to use their caste and class status to embody a different relationship to performance from those from lower class/ caste groups.

Another way in which these women were able to mobilize their social capital is through their relative ease with the English language that not all members of the social stratas of Indian society can lay claim to. All of the female collaborators we have been introduced to spoke English

462 Ibid.
very well. Indeed, all except Tiwana spoke the language almost as easily as Punjabi. RBK and Behl both flawlessly switched back and forth from Punjabi and English throughout their interview(s); and Chowdhry admits that she herself spoke English as her primary language for most of her life and had to work on her Punjabi skills later in life.

A further example is the large size of the homes that these women lived in. Although they were not palatial mansions by any means, the size of the residences was sufficient enough to allow for rehearsal spaces for their theatre troupes. This luxury of space meant that they did not need to worry about paying for a rehearsal space, and, in earlier years, they did not need to worry about leaving their children or other domestic duties to go off to rehearsal at a different location. In addition, both RBK and NMS lived in areas of Chandigarh that boasted high property values.

![Figure 4.1 The sitting area outside the entry of NMS’s house](image)

463 Since I did not meet Behl at her home, and because our interview was so rushed, I was unable to confirm whether she had a meeting space in her home. At the time she had relocated to Mumbai and was living in a small apartment with her husband.
Tiwana had the luxury of a privileged caste and class status, belonging to the highly powerful group of the Jatt Sikhs of East Punjab and marrying into a well-off and influential Jatt family (her father-in-law was a high ranking police official). When speaking of her natal family, Tiwana continually reiterated that they were not very well off, but this may have been only in comparison to her husband’s family, who owned a great deal of land. She shares that financial hardships made her family encourage Tiwana and her brother to attend college in Patiala, so that they could save on expenses by sharing living quarters with their elder sister who was now working in Nabha. However, she goes on to state that the three siblings rented a house and hired a servant. Therefore, although they may have had less land than some other Jatt families, they still came from a position of privilege as all their children were able to pursue higher education, and even afford a servant during their studies.

Tiwana herself shared that she was married into a family of notable financial means. After marriage, when the young couple moved to Delhi, and rented a set of rooms, Tiwana’s father-in-law helped them out by providing some basic furniture, as well as a monthly delivery of flour and
ghee. They always knew they could count on financial aid from home, if needed. Even when they made the decision to leave the family home with their children, in 1973, they had the understanding that ties were not cut off from their family and returned to live at home after Tiwana’s father-in-law passed away. The extent of their land ownership is also evident considering that they were able to sell various plots of land at different times in their life.

A further example that speaks to the class privilege of some of these women is an incident that Tiwana recounted regarding a woman, Gejo, who lived in a residence built on her in-laws’ property. Tiwana’s father-in-law had given Gejo’s father permission to live on the land as long as he was alive. Both men had passed away and the daughter was asked to move as the Tiwanas wished to build a rehearsal hall on the property. However, when asked to move, the lady asked where she should go. Tiwana’s main point in this story was that they wished for the lady to be gone but her husband, Harpal, did not deal with the matter when he should have – ignoring it for a few years as he was busy building a new house amongst other projects. She wrote:

Once I even suggested to him that we can scare this woman a little in order to get her to leave our land, which I knew that Harpal would absolutely not do, or we could even have given her some money for vacating the land, because we had just sold our land in those days. We could have given her Rs 100,000 or 150,000. I told Harpal to start with Rs100,000 and say, ‘Take this money and get a place somewhere else’

Six months later, they discovered that the woman had sold 1000 gaj\(^{464}\) of the land to a purchaser from the town of Nabha for Rs 100,000. The Tiwanas eventually came to an agreement with the purchasers, but they had to pay 80,000 for half the sold land (500 gaj), whilst the purchasers kept the other half. Although the Tiwanas had legal right to the land, I was a little surprised at the casualness with which Neena Tiwana wrote about this episode, painting Gejo in a negative light.

\(^{464}\) 1 gaj = 3 feet = 9 square feet)
From Gejo’s point of view, she may have honestly thought that the land had been given to her father by Harpal’s father. She had a valid concern, after her father’s death, regarding where she would go.

Another occasion when Tiwana’s caste consciousness raised its head was when she described a situation that occurred during the days of the militancy movement; her husband was out of town and some young acting students had been staying in the rehearsal hall which was still being built. When the young students expressed concerns about being potential targets for terrorists seeking shelter and food, Tiwana relates that she told them, “We Jatts also have guns … [We] can also run a tractor over [them];”\(^{465}\) showing her affinity with caste identity as well as her awareness of the power that the caste held in Punjab.

Although RBK states that belonging to an upper caste and class causes impediments for women wishing to pursue careers in performance, in many other ways, class provides advantages. Being professionals and members of the upper middle class meant that they were part of networks and social circles that could give them access to greater opportunities. The “privileged title” (Chowdhry) of being a graduate of the NSD opened countless doors for individuals such as the Tiwanas and Neelam Man Singh Chaudhry. Chowdhry explained that she formed her theatre company when she met the Joint Secretary of Culture somewhere socially whilst in Chandigarh and he suggested to her that she form her own company so that the Ministry of Culture could give them a grant.\(^{466}\)

These women were also able to break through the stigma of performance because they “carried their class with them” and because they were not participating in performance traditions.

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\(^{466}\) She was successful in procuring the grant, which led to the formation of her theatre group, *The Company*. 
associated with the lower castes. Their theatre was not one of the streets, or the type that was typically associated with traditional performance castes, such as *Mirasis* and *Bhands*. Theirs was what many in society would term to be a “legitimate” theatre influenced by European theatre traditions. It seems that it is only when folk traditions are sometimes integrated into elite theatre that they are “acceptable” in that context. Renowned singer, Naina Devi, who hailed from an upper caste background, shared an experience when a famous gharana singer had been invited to sing at a *mehfil* that Devi was also attending. The lady repeatedly entreated Devi to sing first; and she finally acquiesced and sang very well. The gharana singer’s reaction was to begin crying and angrily walk away, saying, “I won’t sing.” Devi shared that for the singer “that old complex came up unconsciously … respectability is something they want. Musical competence is there first, but they are dying to be accepted as respectable women.” Devi carried her respectability, in the form of her caste and class, with her, even when she joined this profession.

**Patriarchal Support and Success**

It is also because caste and class are heavily patriarchal structures that the support of male patriarchs in one’s family was of vital importance to the success of these women. None of the women’s male relatives tried to restrict their participation in performance, rather, they supported it. For RBK, it was her father. For Chowdhury both parents and then her husband had no problem with her artistic ventures. Tiwana enjoyed the support and encouragement of parents, yes, but it was her fiancée, and then husband, who pushed her into the world of theatre. And Behl enjoyed the support of both her father and her partner, and eventually husband, Lalit Behl.

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Due to parental support, especially their fathers’, these women were able to launch and carry on with theatrical careers is because of. Even if one parent strongly opposed their daughter’s choice of career, (such as RBK’s mother), if the patriarch of the family was in favour of the choice, then there was no question that the individual could continue.

We saw the male family members of the women involved in IPTA, fathers, grandfathers, brothers and husbands, playing crucial roles in the advancement of their education, as well as the formation of their careers. Subhadra Mitra Channa also emphasizes the role of the father as being crucial in female education468 and highlights Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto as being groomed by their fathers. She shares the story of her own maternal grandfather who ignored the protests of his family and decided to educate his daughters, even sending the author’s mother to England and encouraging her to pursue a career, rather than bowing to pressures to marry her off. Therefore, although many fathers may have educated their daughters in order to procure for her a suitable groom, this was not always the case. C. S. Lakshmi also frequently referred to the role of fathers in the lives of prominent female singers and musicians. For example, the prominent flautists, the Sikkim sisters, were taught by their father, in spite of severe disapproval by family members.469 The sisters shared that, before marriage, some relatives expressed concerns regarding the girls’ future, to which their father replied, “I have given birth to her, you can’t be more interested in her welfare than I am. I can take care of it.”470 Another singer, Dhonduta Kulkarni, shared that her father encouraged and even promised her teacher that he would not get her married for 5 years if he became her guru.471

470 Ibid., 72.
471 Ibid., 103.
The role of the father in supporting their daughters’ careers is also crucial in the success of women in Punjabi theatre. For example, we have already been familiarized with RBK’s mother’s opinion of her daughter’s decision to pursue theatre, however, RBK’s father’s support helped her carry on in her choice of career. RBK recalls that her father told her mother, “Our character is in our hands, not in anyone else’s hands, nor in any profession. If she’s a doctor, and she receives a call in the middle of the night, she’ll have to go, won’t she? … So it’s up to you how you deal with your life and I have full faith in my daughter.” Although her brothers, and even her beloved sister-in-law, Kusum, may have secretly supported her pursuits, she feels that they were too afraid to speak up for her or to encourage her, for fear of being blamed (by her mother and others) for leading her astray. Due to this, the only family member who gave her “unconditional support” and who used to take great pride in her achievements, was her father. The strong character of RBK’s dadi may have been a reason as to why RBK’s father was relatively liberal in his attitude to RBK’s decision to pursue theatre. RBK’s dada had been posted in the south of India, and it was there that her dadi had learned to speak English, to swim and even to ride horses. She further shares that her dadi was very dignified and “very dominating.” RBK recalled that her grandmother revealed her dignity in “[t]he way she would dress up [and] the way she would conduct herself”. She also laughingly shared that her dadi “always dominated my dada ji. And there are many stories about her, that she was married at a very young age and would refuse to go to muklava. And when my grandfather would come to get her, she would make fun of him.”

Behl was surrounded by theatre from infancy; her first appearance on stage occurred when she was only two years old, in a play written and directed by her father, the playwright, Kapoor

\[472\] *Muklava* is the term used when a young, married girl would go to her in-law’s home for the first time. Traditionally, girls were married at a young age, but stayed at their parents’ home until they reached puberty and maturity. At that time, her husband, whom she had not seen since the day of the wedding, would come to take her back to his home.
Singh Ghuman. She recalls that “there were always some or the other play going on and rehearsals were going on at home” and she herself would gather the neighbourhood children to perform plays, as well as write and direct plays in her senior secondary school. She feels strongly that it is because of her home environment and the encouragement and opportunities she received that she was able to achieve success in her profession. She acknowledges, however, that, at the time, her father had difficulty finding other women to work in his plays, because “people used to say that this is the job of Bhands and Mirasis, of naqaliyan. That it is not a respectable occupation to be taken up, particularly to be taken up by women.”

Both RBK and Chowdhry also spoke of the support provided by other men in their life, mentors in the world of theatre. RBK spoke highly of her teacher, Balwant Gargi, and of his encouragement and guidance as well as his role in exposing his students, including RBK, to the world beyond theatre, including painting, literature and cinema. Chowdhry pointed to Ebrahim Elkazi and B. V. Karanth as major players in her career.

Another major factor of success was the support of one’s husband; both Tiwana and Behl married individuals who were also performers; and although Chowdhry was married to a non-theatre person, he was also someone who did not deter her from her choice in her career. He “kept her secret” during the early days of her career473, in Bombay, when she was not comfortable divulging her theatrical pursuits to her in-laws, and news articles have described him as being a constant presence,474 welcoming theatre goers at the entrance of the venue of one of his wife’s productions. In addition, occasionally she would take her husband along on some work trips as somebody to look after the children, as well as things such as passports and freight.

473 When questioned as to why he never spoke up about it to his parents. She replied “I don't think that kind of space existed for that kind of dialogue.”
Tiwana’s husband encouraged and pushed her into the world of theatre, stating that he needed a “partner” for his dream of spreading theatre throughout the Punjab. The relationship between Tiwana and her husband was very close. She encouraged him to join NSD and he insisted that she join too. In addition, at a time, when it was not unusual for husbands to work and live separately from their wives and children, he chose his wife over the job. In the late 1960s, Tiwana’s husband was sent to Jammu-Kashmir, having secured a job with the Delhi Central Song and Drama Division. However, he gave it up after a few months because Tiwana had remained behind in Patiala with their infant daughter. For him, their relationship was of paramount importance. In the early days of their careers, she was with him at all times, in all tasks, whether it was going door to door selling tickets, working on scripts, or leading rehearsals. Later, he encouraged her to resign from her job at the university since her colleagues were causing her mental duress. He rarely began a production without her assistance, often calling her back from a vacation or a visit with family in London or Canada, prematurely, because he felt he needed her assistance in order to proceed with the work.

475 Tiwana’s capabilities/talents were often overshadowed by her husband’s. Although she underplays her own talents and highlights her husbands’, there is no doubt that Tiwana’s abilities in and contribution to theatre were also significant. It was she who first encouraged Harpal to join the National School of Drama, and, when she joined him there, a year later, in 1962, she had ranked first out of 70 applicants and was one of ten to received Rs210 monthly stipend from the federal government. Once there, she also helped to carry Harpal academically, (Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 34), ensuring he completed assignments, confessing that she was more prepared for the academic rigour, due to her previous MA studies in Punjabi.

Early in their professional career, in Delhi, Tiwana was unhappy with the performance of one of their actresses, as she felt that the actress’ urban style, did not fit the role in either appearance or dialogue delivery. She convinced a friend, an untrained housewife, to train for the part under Tiwana’s guidance (Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 59-60). Harpal was hesitant to let an untrained actress replace their original one and only allowed Tiwana’s trainee to perform when the original actress abandoned the production. However, the new actress did so well that Harpal had to acquiesce to Nina’s skill in spotting talent and ability. After that, whenever Harpal needed to make decisions about the cast, he would always consult with her (Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 64).

476 Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 68.
Although Tiwana often downplays her own contributions in favour of her husband, at other times she admits to her own skills, and it is apparent from many of the anecdotes she shares in her husband’s autobiography that she was the more organized of the pair. She confesses that when she was not involved in script or casting decisions, then, inevitably, both would be weak. In addition, he was weak in financial decisions and lacking in organization. There is no doubt that Tiwana’s husband valued Tiwana’s contributions and often asked her opinion on matters, however, he was always the final authority in their theatre group. Perhaps she was not as much a partner as she was a primary assistant. One thing, that I did not have a chance to further investigate in detail, was the fact that much of the success of Tiwana’s theatrical group would not have occurred without Tiwana, however most of the accolades were usually reserved for her husband. I wonder how many other troupes have similar unseen and unheralded female contribution in the backgrounds?

Acceptance and Success

Amongst the co-participants, it was only RBK who encountered severe shame responses from family members in regards to her public performances. The other three women remained relatively unscathed by the old Punjabi prejudice against performance in the public. Although others, such as extended family or in-laws, may have had negative perceptions of their activities

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477 Ibid., 305.
478 She often lamented his lack of fiscal sense, including his missed opportunities for sponsorship or poor business decisions. For example, when they did a show in the university auditorium, at Calgary, Alberta, he decided to book two shows (11:00 and 6:30) on the same day. Tiwana states that she and others advised him to wait a week before the second show but he declined saying it would be difficult to get the university audience again, and perhaps he wanted to save money by doing two shows in one day. However, the decision proved an erroneous one and they barely covered the costs of the show (Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 253). She often speaks of this stubborn nature. Later in their careers, she wished to sell a film they had made to any purchaser, however Harpal insisted upon releasing it himself. She states, “Once again, he did not listen to anyone else; further explaining, “First, he was a Jatt, Second he was a Man and Third he was Accomplished; why would he listen to anyone? ((Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 214-216)
on the stage, their immediate families were generally supportive of their work. In addition, even those individuals who were vocally critical of these females eventually accepted their work, and, even became proud of it. However, their scripts still exhibited gendered characteristics, which we saw in their acceptance of putting their husbands’ career first, or in acting as the primary caregiver to their children.

Liddle and Joshi refer to the role that social mobility plays in acquiring acceptance; they state that “honour can be gained from the woman’s rebellion instead of lost. However, the honour can only be gained from occupations high in the class hierarchy…. And the respect so hard won by the woman does not remain solely with her. The honour returns to the families who earlier had bitterly accused her of bringing them shame.”

Although theatre was not traditionally considered high in the occupational hierarchy, the “elite” theatre that these women participated in, which was recognized by governments and media, helped them to win acceptance and admiration. Tiwana states that over time her father in law became proud of the work his son and daughter-in-law did, especially when he saw newspaper reviews praising them. However, she states that since her mother-in-law was “illiterate” and never interested in anything beyond water buffaloes, land, and other indicators of wealth, it took longer for her to accept it. Eventually the accolades from the government and other institutions did win her approval.

Chowdhry also shared how, in later years, her mother-in-law would occasionally help her to paint sets for a play and she would even keep some cuttings from international newspapers about Chowdhry’s work in her bedroom drawer, although she never divulged this to Chowdhry directly. And RBK’s mother, the most vocal about her displeasure with her daughter’s work on the stage, would watch her daughters’ rehearsals in

479 Liddle and Joshi, Daughters of Independence, 106.
480 Tiwana, Oh Jo Si, 89-90.
her later years. RBK shared these memories, stating that her mother would pull up a chair on the rooftop, or anywhere else where the troupe was rehearsing, and sit, off to one side, watching silently. She would never make a comment, but she once shared with her daughter, “I never knew it is such a tough job. You have to put in so much hard work. I never knew that. And you are doing a good job.” She was also often heard praising her daughter amongst her relatives, stating, “She works so hard. She received an award."

How and why did these female pioneers in Punjabi theatre have different experiences than earlier actresses? What assisted these women during their journeys to not only enter the world of theatre, but also to achieve great milestones in their chosen professions? How did they persevere, conquer shame and achieve success?

Although honour was an important concept in their lives, shame was not as stringently attached to public performance as it had been in the past, at least not amongst the members of the co-participants’ immediate families. Their scripts did not associate public performance with “shameful experiences.” It was only RBK who had shame written firmly into her script – she had been carefully shielded from any exposure to men and restricted to the private space for the majority of her youth and the first few years of her adult life. She had to rebel against her script in order to continue her presence in the public space of the stage.

Aside from their own talents and perseverance, another commonality they shared was a supportive male relative. For RBK, it was her father. For Chowdhry, both parents supported her and her husband had no problem with her artistic ventures. Tiwana enjoyed the support and encouragement of parents, yes, but it was her fiancée, and then husband, who pushed her into the world of theatre. And Behl enjoyed the support of both her father and her husband.
Caste and class helped shape their scripts, their rules for behaviour. All the women were situated within upper middle class and higher caste communities. In the history chapter of this dissertation I discussed how the caste and class attached to the female performers were two constructs that helped to add legitimacy to the realm of theatre. Within this chapter, we again saw caste associations play a part in ascribing to the eliteness and legitimacy of different types of theatre. The co-participants in this study did have to deal with what Swati Arora terms “social and psychological restrictions [which are] imposed on urban middle-class women, who are expected to perform their femininity in ways that conform to the patriarchal discourse of respectability and safety.” However, as restrictive as class and caste rules surrounding women might be, it is undeniable that caste and class privileges also contributed to their success, due to the advantage it gave them in terms of education and other opportunities, such networking and relative financial security.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Elsie Clews Parsons has emphasized the ways in which women have been limited by “taboos, constraints and exclusionary practices, often centering on women’s bodies, their sexuality, and their reproductive roles as mothers.” In a similar fashion, I, too, have examined how Punjabi women are limited by taboos attached to shame and honour and how this taboo has restricted the presence of female participation in the world of Punjabi theatre. However, rather than focusing solely on what causes the exclusion of women from this domain, I focussed on women who did achieve success within the field and examine their relationships with shame and honour.

In my dissertation, I have argued that a primary reason for the absence of women from Punjabi theatre is the connection of shame with non-normative female roles, but that this experience of shame and the possibility of subverting it are constrained by class and caste distinctions. However, this association of shame and dishonor with women and the public, performing space can be negotiated successfully if its legitimacy is integrated into individual scripts. This legitimacy is facilitated by both caste and class privileges, including access to education and comfort and facility in the English language. The women in this study grew up in families and interacted in circles where their “behavioural scripts” did not have the same limitations regarding their interactions with shame and honour; and class and caste. In addition, patriarchal supports also contributed in a way that encouraged their participation in theatre.

I share many similarities with the co-participants in this study. I too am a Punjabi female belonging to the Jatt Sikh community which enjoys a relatively high status within Punjabi society. Similar to RBK, I also grew up in a family that connected the performative arts to the work of the lower castes and menial persons. In addition, my father, despite his tremendous love for his daughters, was especially vigilant about monitoring their bodies, as well as their movement in public spaces. My father regulated the bodies of myself and my sisters, and even my mother, in terms of what clothes we were and were not allowed to wear, as well as the application of makeup and even of hairstyles. We were not permitted, for example, to wear our hair down, except on special occasions, much less to cut it. I was not permitted to wear dresses after the third grade, because, traditionally, Punjabi females were not supposed to show their legs. Our movements in public spaces were regulated primarily to restrict our interactions with males.

The main difference between these women and myself was environment. Three of the women, Tiwana, Behl and Chowdhry had home environments quite different from mine – these women were not privy to any stigma that may have been incurred due to an affiliation with the stage. Only RBK’s home environment was similar to mine, where performance on the stage was stigmatized and my father was quite vigilant in preventing any interaction between his daughters and boys or men. Just as RBK was prevented from interacting with her brothers “too much”; my father limited the interactions my sisters and I had with groups of boy cousins. However, although the home environments of RBK and myself were similar (except for the fact that my parents never prioritized our marriage over our education), the time period in which we grew up and the surrounding communities were both quite different. My home environment had developed a “script” which was restrictive in terms of a female’s appearance and interactions with others in the society, but my experiences at school and with surrounding media were presenting a different
viewpoint, and, thus, developing a different “script.” I lived my life adapting my behaviour according to different scripts in different environments – and in fear of the collision of these scripts.

My two separate “behavioural scripts” first collided in sixth grade. I was friendly with all the students in my classroom at school, including the boys from whom I had kept my distance for the first couple of years in school. My philosophy was, “What my dad didn’t know, wouldn’t hurt him.” Since none of my classmates lived on my street, I did not foresee any problems. Then, one day, as I sat inside watching tv, my younger sister came up the front stairs, yelling that someone was at the door to see me. I assumed that it was my friend Nicole, who occasionally came over to play with me in my front yard. I walked towards the stairs, just as my father ascended them … and froze. It was not my friend, Nicole, a girl; it was my classmate Michael – a boy. He had stopped by my house to say hello while he took his dog for a walk on the lovely Spring day.

The day was no longer lovely for me. I stood frozen in shock. Visions of my father yelling, and perhaps carrying out one of his often threatened but rarely executed threats of a slap ran through my mind. Michael’s nonchalant, “Hi, Ranbir” unfroze my legs and carried me down the stairs. I still had not said a word, not even a “Hi.”

“I was taking my dog for a walk and decided to come by.”

I slowly nodded my head.

“I thought you might like to see my dog too.” He said smiling.

I still had not yet uttered a word.

“Because, uh, you know, since you have a dog too,” he continued, awkwardly.

“Yeah,” was my monosyllabic answer.

“Ok, well, see you tomorrow, I guess.” Michael finally noticed my discomfort and ended his visit, turning away from the door.
“Bye!” I replied, the first and only enthusiastic word that I had uttered. I quickly shut the door, even before Michael had fully turned around. I then looked at the stairs, took a deep breath and slowly walked up, preparing myself for the fury that was certain to be unleashed from my father’s tongue, and, probably his hand. Although my parents often threatened their children with a slap for misbehaviour or insolence, as many Punjabi parents did, I had rarely ever been slapped. I could not remember the last time and I was terrified. Once at the top of the stairs, I took a step into the hallway and was in full view of my father seated in his armchair. However, I dared not to look at him.

“That boy is in your class?” My father asked?

I nodded, still not daring to look at him.

“That was his dog?”

“Yes” I replied, still not daring to look at him.

Then … silence.

I finally looked at my father and saw that he had resumed watching tv. I stood frozen for a few moments, wondering what had just happened. Then I walked away, into the kitchen, thanking God for sparing me from my imagined terrors. I wondered why I was not punished for breaking such a vital rule. The only logic I could think of was that, my dad, a dog-lover, must have thought Michael must be an “ok” boy since he had a dog.

This was the first time that I begin to notice a change in my father’s behaviour, and an adaptation in his didactic scripts. My mother was the first to bend her views on what is and what is not acceptable for girls, and, by the time I entered university, my father also became much more liberal in his attitudes. The result was a new independence in terms of making decisions about my movements and my body, although these decisions were always carefully measured by how my
parents would feel about it. Concerns for shame and honour always lingered, even if one thought that one had overcome them.

The difference for these women of theatre was that their surroundings, members of the immediate family, extended family and society at large, were not always so accepting of nonnormative female behaviour. Although performance was written as acceptable into the scripts of most of these women from childhood they were still constrained by elements of respectability and shame in a broader context. Most were affected by pressures to conform to traditional gendered roles at some point in their lives. We saw this most heavily with the experiences of RBK, particularly in relation to her mother. Neena Tiwana felt it quite heavily from her mother-in-law, as did Chowdhry to a certain extent. Although Chowdhry’s own parents were pleased with her artistic endeavours, they did acknowledge society’s general disapproval by asking their daughter, at one time, to hide her profession from potential suitors. Even Behl found herself adapting her behaviour and style of dress at times, as we saw when she shared the experience of her father slapping her for being “forward” enough to wear some earrings. This was just the immediate family – the opinions of the larger community were also there to be grappled with.

Overall, however, we saw that these women were lauded for their contributions to theatre, due to their work in “elite” theatre. The praise and acceptance they received from society at large also constructed alternative scripts for these women to live by. This affirmation resulted in a “legitimacy” of their work. This “legitimacy” also follows, no doubt, from their affirmed status as respectable women from among the upper class and castes. Despite this, some members of the profession have shared that they still occasionally face taunts or negative comments from people who feel this is an “unsuitable” profession. With tears in her eyes, theatre artist Anita Shabdeesh once shared a thoughtless remark made by a relative about Shabdeesh’s childless status. The
woman remarked that Shabdeesh had chosen her career (theatre) over the option of having children; in reality, Shabdeesh is unable to conceive. We have women being judged for not having children, and, when they do have children, they are judged again, for choosing to work over children. In contrast, men do not face similar criticisms, if any. However, women who choose to digress from normative scripts still face criticism.

This dissertation will not accomplish much in alleviating the stigmas that are still sometimes attached to women who choose to follow their passions in performance. That is something that these women have been able to accomplish to a large extent through their accomplished careers. For my part, I hope that I have been able to contribute something to the scant literature that exists on the contributions of women to Punjabi theatre. I am glad that I have had the opportunity to record the life stories of these accomplished women.

Although few females participated in early forms of Punjabi theatre, the co-participants of this study were trailblazers in the field. They were amongst the first to perform on stage, as well as to direct and produce theatrical productions. They are to be noted not only for the quality and breadth of their work, but also for their perseverance in a field that was stippled with stigma.

An examination of the history of performance in South Asia showed us, not only the restriction of females to the domestic space, but also a restriction from performance. In addition, we saw that communities associated with performance traditions, were generally viewed by society, as being members of “lower” classes. These reasons, amongst others, are why it took so many years for a woman to finally appear on stage in Punjabi drama.

We have also seen that, to a large extent, it was only when individuals from “upper” classes, and/or castes began to participate in theatre, that theatre finally began to be viewed as somewhat “acceptable.” We saw that, those performers associated with classes deemed “lower”, did not enjoy
the same respect and were often even forgotten as compared to those associated with the upper classes, be they men or women.

However, it is women, by far, who have had to face the most challenges during their journeys in Punjabi theatre. Gendered norms in Punjabi society have traditionally taught females that they do not belong in public spaces. The concept of honour is still strongly connected to the females of a household, especially the unmarried daughters. And because honour is so strongly tied to chastity, it is usually a female’s movements and attire that are more closely scrutinized than a male’s. For these reasons, women are usually encouraged to pursue lives which concentrate on the domestic space, as wives and mothers, with lives and bodies carefully regulated by the men in their families – a world that is vastly different from the public space of the stage.

An explanation for the success of Rani Balbir Kaur, Neena Tiwana, Navnindra Behl and Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry in a field dominated by men, is the fact that they were raised with “scripts” which did not attach shame to performance. The encouragement and support of male relatives in this highly patriarchal society were also factors in their triumph, such as in the case of Rani Balbir Kaur’s father. However, it must be acknowledged that caste and class privilege played a role in legitimizing their work in the eyes of traditional Punjabi society. It is, however, the talent and travail of these women, which are the definitive reasons for their success.
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Doniger, Wendy. "Why Should a Priest Tell You Whom to Marry? A Deconstruction of the


—. “The Body as a Metaphor for the Nation: Caste, Masculinity and Femininity


Shabdeesh, Anita, interview by author, Surrey, B.C. October 7, 2015.


**Punjabi Language Sources**


Appendix 2

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*It will be helpful if you collect any photographs and/or artifacts prior to the interview so that I can scan and/or photograph them.

The following questions are just to help you trigger some memories. My own questions will be minimal; I will only speak in order to prompt you if you are having trouble remembering anything.

**BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD (Approximately Age 0-16)**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Where and when were you born? What do you remember about that place?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Who were the members of your family? Any siblings? What did your father do? Mother? Other relatives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Who were your playmates? With whom did you spend most of your time? What did your siblings do?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What did you enjoy doing? What were your favourite activities? Did you enjoy reading? Did you read any Punjabi literature? English? Hindi?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>When did you start school? What school did you attend? What were your favourite activities in school? What is your favourite memory of school? Least favourite?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Which secondary school did you attend? Where? What were your favourite activities in secondary school? What is your favourite memory of secondary school? Least favourite?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Were any members of your family involved in theatre? Did you ever attend any plays? In which language? With whom did you attend? Did you ever play act at home?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>What is your favourite memory of your childhood? Your home? Your family? Your least favourite?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Can you share some details about your day to day life? What were weekdays like? Weekends? What did your family do together?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Are there any major historical events from this time period that you remember?</td>
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**YOUTH (College, Marriage, Beginnings in Theatre)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Was higher education for girls encouraged in your family? Did your mother/aunts/sisters attend college? When? What did they study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>When did you attend college? Which college did you attend and where? Was it a local college or did you move away? How did you feel about the experience? (Excited? Apprehensive?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What did you study at school? Whose choice was this? Yours? Your family’s?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What was your favourite subject? Least favourite? Why? Favourite instructor? Least favourite? Why?</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Who were your friends? With whom did you spend most of your time? What are your favourite memories with these friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Were you involved in any extracurricular activities? Did you participate in any plays? What were your family/extended family’s feelings towards this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Did you travel during college time? (especially for theatre?) What were your family/extended family’s feelings towards this? Where did you travel to? What are your favourite memories of these travels?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Were you involved in any theatrical productions whilst at college? What was your first one? What was your role? What was your favourite production? Why? Whom did you work with? Were there any last friendships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>When and where did you meet your husband? When did you marry? What does/did he do? What were his feelings towards your career? Was he supportive? Your in-laws?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Are there any major historical events from this time period that you remember?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**CAREER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>When did you first decide that you wished to pursue theatre as a profession? Why did you choose this path over others? What was your father’s reaction to this decision? Your mother’s? Extended family’s? Friends? Husband’s? In-laws?</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>What was your first professional role in theatre? When did you first write/direct/produce a production? What was your experience? Were others receptive to your new role?</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>When did you first form your drama troupe? What drove this decision?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Of all your plays, which is your play? Why? Least favourite? Why? Favourite memories of each? What play have you always wanted to work on but not yet had the chance? Why is this play so important to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Whom have you been most inspired by? In Punjabi theatre? In other theatre?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Which is your preference: acting, writing or directing? Why? Which is your preference: theatre or film? Why?</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Can you describe a typical day in your life? A typical week?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>How often do you travel? How many months in a year? How many times in a month?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What do your children do? What are their feelings towards your career in theatre?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Have you seen any changes in society’s perception of “theatre people”? Are they more accepting? Of both men and women? In what ways?</td>
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