



TALES OF THE BI

Visual anthropologist Pallabi Chakravorty tells Priyanka Dasgupta that Kathak was part of the *baiji* history

Subrata Kr Mondal

What prompted you to do your Phd in visual anthropology in the US?

■ I completed my schooling from Patha Bhavan and my graduation in English from JU. I was attached to Children's Little Theatre and have trained for many years under *guru* Bandana Sen.

I've also been attached to Padatik and have taken lessons from Pt Vijay Shankar. Immediately after my graduation, I got married and shifted to the US. That was before the concept of a new India and liberalisation had hit the US shores. I was initially attached to the dance department of the University of Florida. What struck me there, was the fact that Indian dance has been attached to a stereotypical image.

What kind of image are you talking about?

■ People back then believed that if you pursued Indian dance, you had to be a spiritual person. They thought you must be doing *puja* everyday. Somewhere, people in the West conjured up signs of traditional

spoke about Indian dance.

But it would be hypocritical of me to say I indulged in all that. I saw a film by visual anthropologist Steve Lansing on Bali. That kept me thinking and in 2000, I did my Phd in visual anthropology from Temple University.

During your research on Kathak, what are the interesting bits of information you gathered on the *baijis*?

■ When I was doing my research, I realised that Kathak was part of the *baiji* history that has been denied. There are huge historical events connected to this phenomenon. In the 1890s, India witnessed a social reform movement. Around this time, an anti-nauch movement had also started.

But what prompted the downfall of the *baijis*?

■ Kathak was a popular form in the Mughal court. It was highly prestigious for *baijis* to pursue this dance form. *Tawaifs*, back then, were considered artistes and were seen as icons of nation. They were also



Pallabi Chakravorty



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baijis have freedom and are known to have multiple liaisons with other males, they are a different breed altogether. It was the Victorian influence that changed the British and Indian outlook towards them.

What was the final nail in the coffin in terms of giving *baijis* their due?

■ In the 19th century, the anti-naught movement started in Madras against the *devdasis*. The protest was against women who were artistes and served men as well. Soon, this had an impact on other cities too. The Brahma Samaj was instrumental in protesting against the *baiji* culture too. Back then, sexuality had a different connotation. Much like the geishas in Japan, the status of *baijis* remained slightly hazy for many. One must also remember that

baijis were never a homogeneous group. While some were purely artistes, others danced. Some others sang, danced and also served as sex workers. The titles given to them were often symbolic of the kind of work that they were doing. Those with the title *jaan* were strictly

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singers. The *bais* sang and danced. The *dominis* among the *baijis* were pretty low in the pecking order

So, how did the *baijis* get overlooked in terms of tracing Kathak's history?

■ Initially, Kathak had to do

with Islamic culture. The Hinduisation of Kathak happened during the Nationalist phase. By then, *baijis* had already become stigmatised. The revivalists decided that we have a golden tradition and hence, harked back to the *Natya Shastra* to trace the roots of Kathak. They removed it from the practice of the dance form, textualised it and said Kathak originated from the word *katha* and that *kathakas* were a Brahmin caste in north India. This narrative traces it back to the *Mahabharata*, giving it a patriarchal identity. When *gharanas* emerged, *baijis* receded to the background.

There are many theories about *baijis* also having lesbian tendencies...

■ I haven't done any research on that. There is a book by Veena Oldenburg on the courtesans of Lucknow. There are chances of that happening because somewhere, they share an empathy for each other.