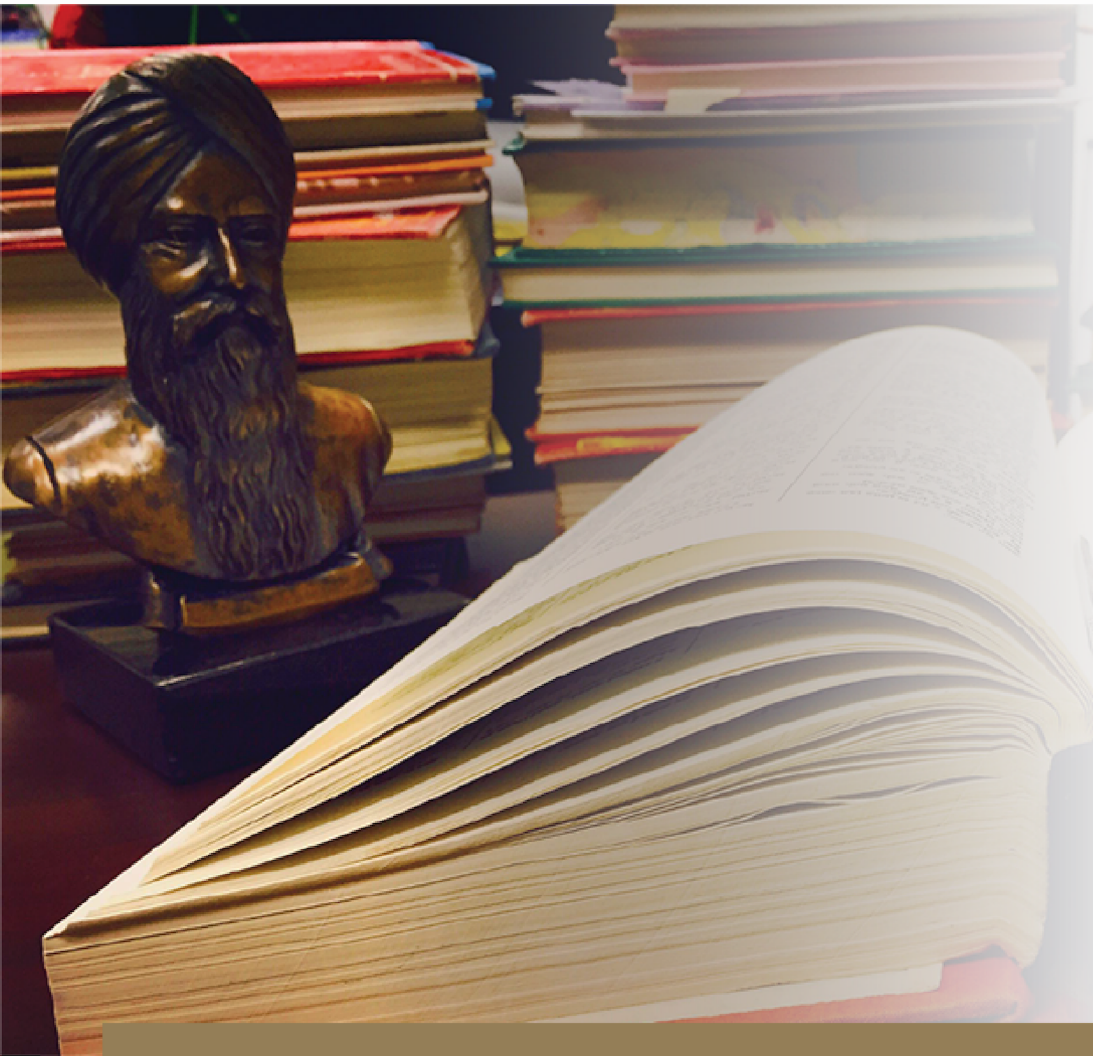


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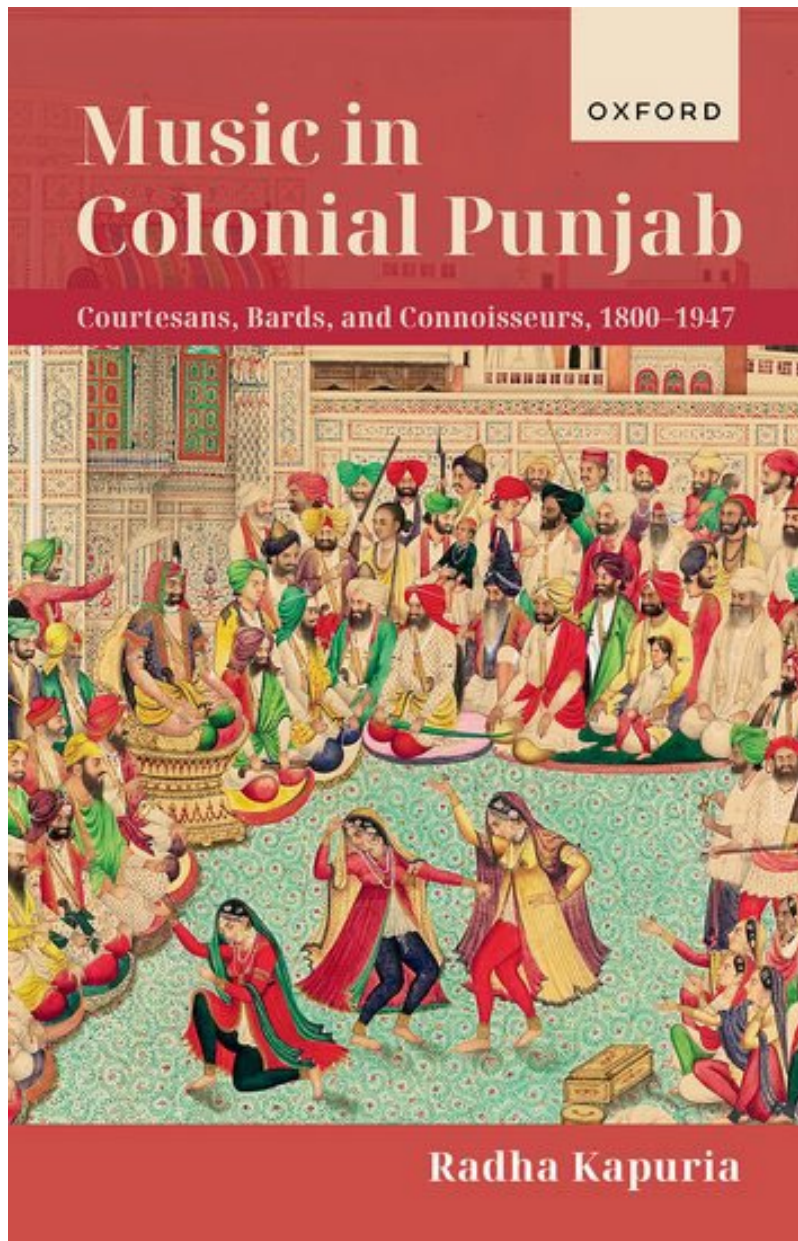
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Book review: Music in Colonial Punjab by Radha Kapuria

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Music in Colonial Punjab: Courtesans, Bards, and Connoisseurs, 1800-1947

Author: Dr Radha Kapuria

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Music in Colonial Punjab by Radha Kapuria is an empirical study of the development of various genres of music through practitioners and patrons in colonial Punjab from 1800 to 1947. The author focuses on a range of topics from the *mirasis* (bards) and courtesans to nautch girls of Punjab who were perceived through a range of emotions, from appreciation to disdain, among different people. Integrated into the book's narrative is evidence of music/song by Christian missionaries, along with emerging reform movements within the Hindu and Sikh communities in Punjab. Kapuria's engagement with the topic is enhanced with her use of approximately 50 rare images and visual ephemera that vividly illustrate these various dimensions of music in colonial Punjab. Altogether, Kapuria has gathered numerous stories, commentaries and anecdotes about the music and musicians in that period from a wide range of sources to compile a unique social history of music of the region. By so doing, Kapuria forces a conversation about the music of colonial Punjab that challenges today's stereotyped boisterous images of Punjabi music which overlooks the rich history of music in Punjab, a "tradition" that goes all the way back to the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Interestingly, Kapuria documents that Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a great connoisseur of music and dance who not only enjoyed the daily performances by the *raagis*, *rababis* or the *tawaifs* (courtesans) in his court, but also supported and endowed these artists. The Maharaja in fact gave the courtesans huge land grants and even married a couple of Muslim tawaifs, i.e. Bibi Moran and Gulbahar Begum. During this period, the courtesans were given special status and respect in the court as well as in Punjabi society. As is well known among scholars, the higher status of the singers and nautch girls eroded under British colonial rulers who viewed the tradition as illustrative of moral decay of the colonized, a perspective that in the early twentieth century was infused into the reform movements that were a collaboration between the colonizers and elite nationalists of the time.

However, of all the themes presented in *Music of Colonial Punjab*, there is one I assert is particularly noteworthy. Kapuria points to the elitism that informs the distinction between classical and folk music. The book reveals that the practitioners did not distinguish the two and neither did they distinguish religious and secular music. Instead, they maintained a fluidity between genres, lyrics and styles without compromising the rigor of their training. Many of the musicians in fact were trained in a variety of styles, including dhrupad and kirtan. Some even performed what dominant society labels as "folk" music. Their audiences, comprising of individuals across class and caste groups as well as from rural and urban spaces, too appreciated the variety. Annual music festivals, like the Harballabh Sangeet Sammelan that is still held in Jalandhar since 1875 mentioned by Kapuria, illustrate the point. As above mentioned, it is only in the early twentieth century when reform movements, blessed by the British colonizers, that one begins to see a rigid distinction emerge between "classical" and "folk" music.

Radha Kapuria's findings actually confirms my own discoveries in developing the documentary film *Khayal Darpan* as well as my experiential knowledge based on a trip to Pakistan in 2005. In my observation, despite the challenges confronted by the musicians after the Partition, some of the most successful stories of survival of this music were the ones where the practitioners experimented with the form and basic structure of ragas. For instance, when Punjabi folk singer Tufail Niazi, born in a village near Jalandhar in 1916 and trained by many *ustads* in Kapurthala and Batala, migrated to Pakistan, he developed his own

style using “classical” ragas in folk songs in a way that enthralled the audience. Niazi even mixed different ragas in the same composition, something the Indian puritans would abhor. Similarly, Pakistan’s famed ghazal singer Mehdi Hassan was born in the family of *kalawant* musicians in a village in Rajasthan, not far from India-Pakistan border, and was trained in classical music, including dhrupad. After migrating to Pakistan, he too developed a refined style of *ghazal* singing using ragas, once again beautifully mixing different notes in the same song.

Although this book largely focuses on these musicians who traversed between classical and folk/popular binaries – *mirasis*, *rababis* and courtesans – it does not draw much from a field study or even meeting with the said musicians of today on either side of the border. So, while the reader benefits tremendously from the rich historical sources used here, one is left clueless on the current status of these subaltern performers. It is probably a subject for a future study. Even though the book pans across a wide range of topics, it rather expectedly stops at around 1947 and understandably does not cover the impact of the Partition on Punjab’s musicians and their audiences, especially those who had to migrate to the other side due to their religious identity. The lack of, or a change in, the patronage to the music after 1947 is a subject that needs comprehensive research in both countries.

Nevertheless, *Music in Colonial Punjab* is a rich tapestry of musical accounts that deepens our understanding of a prominent region of South Asia - I only wished I was listening to all those melodies of Punjab while reading this book.

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