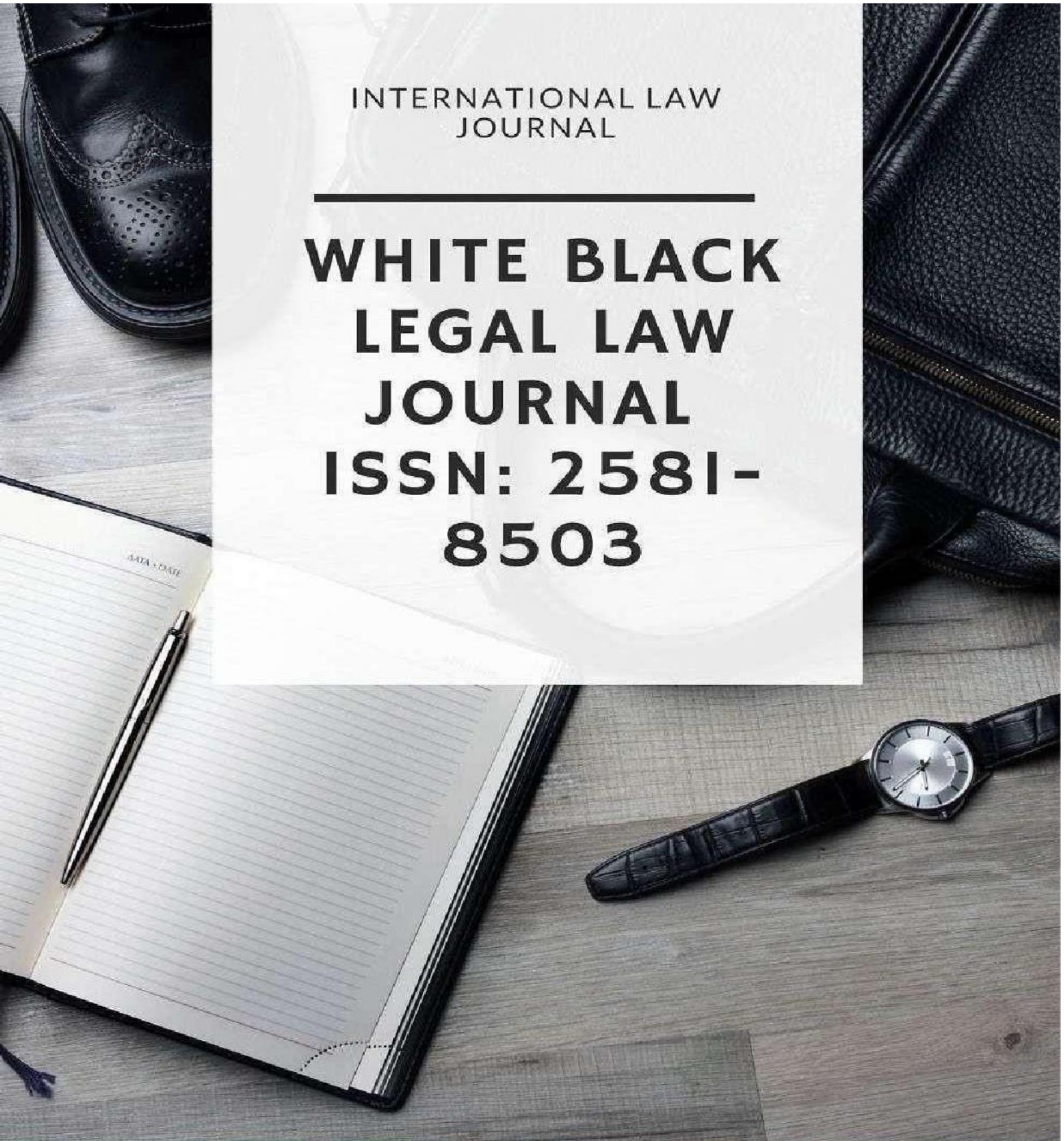




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THE DRAPED DESIRES: WITHOUT THE COLONIAL BLOUSE

AUTHORED BY – AKSHAT SHARMA

ABSTRACT

What is Kamasutra? – a guide to sex position? What does Hijra mean? – word to use as shame? What is your definition of beauty? – fairer the better? Can you imagine a woman wearing saree with NO blouse? – or it may harm your ‘values’ and ‘modesty’? Will you believe, If I say centuries before an emperor had desires for a young boy? What comes in your mind, when you hear the word Tawaif? What is natural and what is unnatural?

Well, these questions might have bothered many Indians living in post colonial era, if asked personally. Ironically Kamasutra which talks about ‘consent’ and ‘pleasure for both’ is considered as ‘vulgar’ or one which is ‘against Indian values’ apparently the same country which doesn’t give legal mandate to marital rape seems like very modern right? They label dance feminine and war masculine, yet Hinduism’s most graceful cosmic dancer is a man (Nataraja/Shiva) and its fiercest warrior is a woman (Durga/Kaali)

But the question is Post colonial India really modern? or it just looks modern? These are not just some rhetorical questions, this research paper will help you showcasing cultural, social and legal aspects to find the answers of these questions, and will help to introspect these questions-Are you really modern?

Key Words:

Colonialism, Modern Indian society, Women’s autonomy, Queer oppression, Indian Fashion and clothing, Patriarchy, Art

1. INTRODUCTION:

Law and literature, when you put them side by side, open up a pretty revealing window into the mess colonialism made of “justice” in India. If you really want to get inside the head of modern India—with all its strict patriarchal ideas, deeply embedded misogyny, and the routine erasure of queer voices—you first have to bust the myth that these so-called “Indian” traditions are, well, genuinely Indian. They’re not. What people today call “Indian values” are⁴

often just leftovers from Victorian England, holding on for dear life. The British Raj planted these morals right into Indian law, and they never really died off. Colonization wasn't only about grabbing land or money. It was a full-on assault on knowledge itself—a kind of “epistemic violence,” where the colonizers tore apart native worldviews and forced their own narrow, binary thinking on everyone.

1.1 Epistemic Law and Silencing the Subaltern:

Abigail Onowosemenmen Oaikhena (2024) explains that “epistemic law” is basically the colonizer ignoring whatever cultural sense the locals had, brushing centuries of traditions aside with the stroke of a pen. The British system didn't bother adapting to India's social reality; it just drowned it, wiped out a history of fluidity and pluralism. Gayatri Spivak talks about how this creates the “subaltern”—the colonized person who isn't just physically oppressed, but whose whole history and language are made unreadable, invisible, by foreign law.¹

Look around today at whose stories get told, what laws exist, and whose rights get recognized—it's echoes of this same colonial “dialectic.” Laws weren't just about order; they were instructional tools, meant to teach Indians how to be “civilized”—civilized according to a British yardstick, that is. In practice, this meant silencing women, erasing queer existence, and shoving art and fashion into neat boxes.

1.2 The Great Vanish: From Shikhandi to Section 377:

To get what colonialism really did, you've got to remember what came before. Pre-colonial India wasn't anything like today's rigid society. Ancient texts and art show a place where ideas about liberty and identity were way more flexible.

Take Shikhandi from the Mahabharata, a character whose gender identity shifts through divine intervention and personal choice. That's not some fringe story; it's right in one of the biggest epics. The Khajuraho temples are covered in carvings of people expressing sexuality freely, with all kinds of bodies and relationships—stuff that didn't seem out of place or shameful at all. These weren't “deviant” or “vulgar” acts tucked away—they were celebrated, visible, respected².

Then came Section 377. The British wrote this into law in 1860, cribbing from their own centuries-old regulations. Suddenly, what had always been natural here got branded

¹ ABIGAIL ONOWOSEMENMEN OAIKHENA, Paradise

² Devdutt Pattanaik, The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore 5–9, 84–87 (2014).

“unnatural.” The Criminal Tribes Act (1871) went after the Hijra community, labelling them criminals by birth. These folks had held special spiritual and administrative roles for ages, but to the British, they were “indecent.” That’s how institutional transphobia got started—hidden under talk about “public order.”

1.3 Patriarchy and Misogyny—By Design:

Colonial thinking was always deeply patriarchal. The British imported the idea of the “Gentleman” and his “Domesticated Woman.” Women in pre-colonial India faced plenty of injustice but could still wield power in certain spheres—economic, religious, literary. The colonizers chopped that down, forcing women’s agency into private, “safe” spaces. The new legal system was straight up misogynistic, enforcing Western property laws and family values that didn’t care about Indian realities.

The impact is obvious in literature. Deependra Sharma (2024) says early Indian English writers struggled under the “Colonial Gaze.” They had to prove they were “civilized,” which meant cleaning up their writing to fit Victorian codes. So gone were the raw, diverse voices of Bhakti and Sufi poetry, replaced by “respectable” prose meant for foreign approval³.

1.4 Identity, Fashion, Food—All Labelled:

Colonialism even managed to dictate what Indians wore and ate. Indian clothes like unstitched dhotis and sarees—the kind worn without blouses or petticoats—were labeled “primitive.” Jnanadanandini famously got turned away from a British club because her sari was draped the “wrong” way, so she adapted the sari style just to fit in. The British pushed “sartorial colonization”—if you wanted to be “modern,” you wore stitched suits.

British influence crept into kitchens too. Suddenly, eating with hands was “unhygienic,” and the dining table became a class marker. It wasn’t about convenience—it was about drawing a line. The more you mimicked British manners, the more “modern” you were supposed to be.

1.5 Thesis and Scope:

This paper tracks Indian literature from its pre-colonial fluidity, through colonial mimicry, right up to today’s fights for self-definition. It looks at how laws (from Section 377 to Navtej Singh Johar) shaped the Indian mindset. Even what people wear and eat is tangled up in this history. “Modern India,” at its core, is psychologically split. If it wants real progress, it’ll have

³ Deependra Sharma, *The Colonial Gaze and the Evolution of Early Indian English Literature* 88–92 (2024).

to rediscover older truths: Shikhandi as a hero, fluid fashion, justice as something homegrown, not imposed.

2. Historical Background and Pre-Colonial Fluidity:

To understand how colonialism disrupted Indian society, you need to look at life before the British arrived. Back then, people didn't stick to strict categories of gender and sexuality. There was a natural openness, with room for various identities. Spiritual beliefs included everyone, social rules adapted as needed, and jobs suited the person rather than forcing them into roles.

Take the Kamasutra, for example. Outside India, it's often seen as just an old sex guide, but that misses the point. Vatsayana focused more on intimacy and connection than just pleasure or physical acts. When Sir Richard Burton translated it for Victorian England, **cut out much of its emotional and spiritual meaning, reducing terms like “lingam” and “yoni” to mere body parts⁴.**

Now people realize the Kamasutra is about living well, not just sex. Burton transformed it into something exotic and scandalous to fit Western fantasies, ignoring its deeper wisdom. The British picked and chose what suited them, shaming Indian openness and promoting their own culture as superior.

The original text emphasized relationships—**respect, consent, and partnership**—long before “gender equality” was a thing. It offered advice on many life areas, from friendship to music. Sex was only one part of it but the British only focused on the titillating parts, pushing their rigid values and turning honest conversations about sexuality into taboo topics. These colonial-era attitudes still linger. Many call sex “Western” or dirty, schools often skip sex education, and families avoid talking about things like menstruation or intimacy. These stigmas haven't fully gone away.

2.1 Hijra Community and Queer expression:

Someone like Shikhandi in the Mahabharata reveals tension between inner conviction and social rules. Long ago, communities such as the Hijras held valued roles throughout India, particularly in rituals and royal gatherings. But colonial rule brought Victorian morals - suddenly love between people of the same gender became illegal. Words like "deviant" started clinging to individuals who had been revered, turning respect into stigma almost without

⁴ Vatsyayana, The Kamasutra lii-lvi (Wendy Doniger & Sudhir Kakar trans., 2002).

warning. Still, years since empires crumbled, unfair laws shadow Hijra existence, narrowing access to respect and support. **Carved quietly into temple walls at sites such as Khajuraho and Konark lie images of love beyond gender** - echoes distant from current hardship. Though voices rise today demanding justice, the effort carries weight deeper than reform - it stirs memory of visibility lost. Lives worn thin by erasure begin returning to narratives where they never should have been missing.

2.2 The Khwajasara's Legacy: The Sunehri Masjid (1747–1751):

The creation of the Sunehri Masjid, commissioned by a khwajasara, underscores the significant contributions of this community to India's historical and cultural landscape. Next to Jama Masjid, This isn't just some minor detail—it's the core of the story. Near the Red Fort, you'll find the there's a Sufi shrine marking the grave of a man killed for loving another man. Even Babur, the first Mughal emperor, let his guard down in his memoirs. **He wrote about his desire for a young man named Baburi—he didn't hide it, he owned it.**

People like this shaped India. They built its monuments, wrote its poetry, and advised queens. History didn't wipe them out—it just left their names out. Now, we're bringing those names back in. **Right by the Red Fort, the Sunehri Masjid stands tall, quietly defying old colonial lies. Nawab Bahadur Javed Khan, a khwajasara—a gender-diverse official—built it.** He wasn't just some background figure, either. He managed the imperial harem and served as a trusted advisor to Qudsia Begum and Ahmad Shah Bahadur. Records prove it. After the British showed up, they branded khwajasaras as "Criminal Tribes," but the truth is these folks once held enormous power. They helped shape Delhi's skyline. The mosque stands today, even if the Raj stripped away the builder's honor and status⁵.

The Martyr of Love: Dargah Sarmad Shaheed:

Just outside Jama Masjid is Sarmad Shaheed's shrine. Sarmad was a poet and mystic who couldn't be boxed in. He started out as a Jewish-Armenian merchant but gave it all up for the love of Abhai Chand, a Hindu boy. Their relationship was both spiritual and openly romantic. Sarmad wrote about it in his poetry.

He was beheaded in 1661, but locals still see him as a saint. His shrine is proof that, in pre-British India, what some call "deviancy" was often viewed as spiritual strength. The British changed all that, bringing their "Obscenity Laws" and trying to hide or sanitize this kind of

⁵ Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Caste and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850–1900*, 28–32, 214–16 (2019).

expression.

2.3 The Emperor's Heart: The Baburnama and Baburi

The Baburnama pulls no punches. Babur writes plainly about his longing for Baburi, a young boy in his camp. He didn't bury it in some private diary—he set it down in his memoirs. He wrote poetry for Baburi, weaving his feelings right into his royal identity, letting all the pain and love spill out⁶.

Put together, these stories show India's history is full of LGBTQ figures and sexual fluidity. Forget the idea that all this is “modern” or “Western.”

Colonial officials twisted these traditions. Through Victorian lenses, **they saw Indian sculptures as obscene and stripped them of meaning.** Stuff like the Kamasutra got reduced to “exotic curiosities,” with real history left out. But places like **Khajuraho and Konark** show India celebrated diversity long before British morality tried to stamp it out.

3. The Tailored Subject: How the British Raj Redesigned Indian Identity

3.1 The Imperial Makeover:

Colonialism didn't just take land—it messed with who people were. The British brought their own blueprint, where men had to be tough, breadwinners, and women had to be quiet, modest, stuck at home. They weren't comfortable with India's fluid gender roles, unisex clothing, or women who thought for themselves. Basically, the British Raj forced Indians into strict, Western-style gender norms, changing not just what people wore, but how they saw themselves.

3.2 The “Manhood” Trap: Masculinity as a Political Weapon:

The British wielded “Colonial Masculinity” to keep control. It wasn't just calling Indians weak—they sorted people to suit their empire.

The “Effeminate” Thinker: Bengali intellectuals, the ones pushing for change, were mocked as “soft” and “unmanly.” That way, the British could claim these men were “naturally” bad leaders.

The “Martial” Soldier: Meanwhile, groups like Sikhs and Gurkhas were called “martial races.” It wasn't about respect. It kept them in the military, not politics so, here's how it

⁶ Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, Babur-nama (Memoirs of Babur) 120–21 (Annette Susannah Beveridge trans., 1922).

worked: Be “manly,” fight wars. Be “smart,” you’re “womanly” and “unfit” to rule. The British set the trap⁷.

3.3 The Battle of the Sari: From Freedom to “Armor”:

Clothes in pre-colonial India were simple—dhotis, saris, loose and unstitched, worn by both men and women. Victorians saw skin and freaked out.

Take Jnanadanandini Debi, She tried to enter a British club in a traditional Bengali sari—no blouse, no petticoat. They kicked her out for “indecent.” Instead of backing out, she got creative. She mixed the Parsi drape with a European blouse and petticoat, creating the Brahmika Sari but there was a price. The “modern” sari let women step into public spaces, but it **buried India’s body-positive traditions**. Women packed themselves in layers just to earn respect—even in their own country⁸.

3.4 Losing the Public Voice: The "New" Domestic Woman:

Before the British arrived, Indian women did a lot more than cook. They were poets, scholars, healers, and midwives, part of every layer of society. Then the Raj rolled in, and everything changed—the kitchen became their main stage.

- The "Domesticated" Wife: Colonial schools weren’t trying to create women leaders. They were grooming **Indian women to be ideal wives** for Western-educated men, following a British model that shrank their roles.
- Replacing the Healer: Women midwives who passed down knowledge for generations suddenly found themselves out of work. British medical institutions, run almost exclusively by men, pushed them aside. Medicine was declared a **“man’s job,”** robbing Indian women of their authority over health (Menon, 2020).
- The "Bhadramahila": Even Indian nationalists played along. They dreamed up the “Respectable Lady”—educated, yes, but only within her home, baking “pure” Indian values into this image⁹.

3.5 The Aesthetic of the Colonizer: Labelling Beauty:

The British colonial influence significantly redefined perceptions of beauty and cultural

⁷ Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century 1–3, 18–19 (1995).

⁸ Malavika Karlekar, Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women 48–51 (1991). 10

⁹ Nivedita Menon, Essentially Undemocratic? The Limits of Liberalism in India, in The Oxford Handbook of Indian Constitution 110–12 (Sujit Choudhry et al. eds., 2020).

practices in India. The notion of beauty transitioned from the inclusive and celebratory ancient ideals, embracing varied shades, to a preference for lighter skin, which was seen as virtuous and sophisticated. This shift resulted in a cultural hierarchy where fair-skinned individuals were portrayed as superior, **undermining the value of darker complexions historically associated with divinity and power.**

In pre-colonial art, such as Ajanta murals, women depicted exuded strength and vitality. However, British ideals deemed these representations "too sexual" and imposed a fragile, thin aesthetic modeled after Victorian standards, stripping beauty of its original association with power and placing value on modesty. This aesthetic change was not just skin deep¹⁰; it **affected societal perceptions of status and desirability**, as fairness continues to be linked to caste and class in modern matrimonial markets.

Furthermore, British colonialism transformed eating habits from communal practices connected to the earth into regimented, class-distanced routines. The introduction of dining tables and utensils symbolized a division, with floor dining perceived as primitive. The colonizers not only altered Indian dietary customs but established time-regulated eating behaviors, prioritizing efficiency over traditional, natural rhythms of consumption.

Lastly, the delineation of food cleanliness according to British standards marginalized traditional diets associated with lower castes, reinforcing the caste hierarchy. Upper-caste cooking methods became the benchmark of sanitary food practices, while diverse, sustainable diets of lower castes were labeled unclean, contributing to ongoing social divisions surrounding food and identity¹¹.

4. The Fall of the Courtesan: From Cultural Custodian to "Legal Outcast":

Let's get real about how performing women in India—Tawaifs in the North, Devadasis in the South—went from cultural legends to legal outcasts. It wasn't some accident. The British came in and systematically destroyed what little independence women had.

4.1 The Kotha: Not Your Average Brothel:

Back in the 1700s and 1800s, the Kotha wasn't a shady den. It was basically the heart of art, music, and conversation—a place where elegance was king. Veena Talwar Oldenburg says

¹⁰ Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* 269–71 (1977).¹¹

¹¹ Utsa Ray, *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class* 74–77, 102–05 (2015).

these women had money and legal standing. They didn't have husbands hiding in the background; they ran things themselves.

They were teachers for the elite. Here's the irony: the British saw them as "corrupt," but Indian nobility sent their sons to learn manners, poetry, and how to talk like a grown-up from these women. The Kotha was a finishing school, just steeped in culture. and when it came to cash, these women weren't shy about it. **Tawaifs paid taxes, owned property, and handled their finances while women in England barely had any rights to their names.** No shrinking violets—they were visible and powerful¹².

Kathak and Thumri both born in these spaces. The Kotha wasn't just a party spot; it gave rise to **dance and music forms that blend spirituality and sensuality.** Forget trying to split them into "sacred" and "profane"—they defied those boxes¹³.

4.2 The "Nautch Girl" and Outsider Judgment:

Cue the arrival of the British. They didn't know what to make of these bold, independent women. They slapped the label "Nautch Girl" on performers, purposely lowering their status. Colonial writers loved calling them temptresses, ignoring their talent and focusing on imagined threats. And forget complexity. In Victorian eyes, if a woman was out in public, she was a "prostitute" by default. That wasn't just casual judgment—it was a way to justify legal harassment and push these women further out.

4.3 Contagious Diseases Act (1868): Law as a Weapon:

Things got ugly once colonial law got involved. After the 1857 rebellion, the British military obsessed over "sanitation," mainly worried about STDs spreading to their troops.

Under the Contagious Diseases Act, women in military towns had to sign up and endure invasive medical checks. Basically, the state started treating their bodies like property—stripping them of their dignity and rights. Refuse the checks? You risk losing everything: your home, your freedom, your reputation.

"Anti-Nautch" Movement: Turning on Their Own:

The new Indian middle class, shaped by British education, joined the anti-nautch crusade. Suddenly traditional dances were labeled "dirty" and "un-Indian." Laws followed, promising freedom but just bringing loss. Devadasis and Tawaifs went from being culture-bearers to red-

¹² Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877*, 131–43 (1984).

¹³ Pallabi Chakravorty, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* 42–45, 58–60 (2008).

light district residents—the same harm the British had claimed to be fixing¹⁴.

5. Colonial Law: The Queen's Straitjacket:

Old laws brought by British rulers still shape India's justice system today, especially the penal code that keeps strict control over sexual behavior and free speech. **Take Section 292 - banning anything called obscene, which ends up treating love symbols or folk art as shameful.** After independence, instead of change, the country passed another law targeting sex trade, seeing women involved only as helpless, never asking what they want. Work centered on intimacy remains outside recognized jobs, ignored by labor protections even now. Silence often begins where laws like Section 124A take hold, shaped by old ways of shutting down resistance under empire rule. Still today, traces linger - how people see expression, creativity, even movement - as if past controls whisper through present choices. Freedom bumps up against invisible walls, built long ago yet somehow standing firm. **Art bends slightly under unseen weight, voices pause without knowing why.** Many push back, though, slowly tugging at threads sewn into older forms of power.

Still present in laws today, colonial influence changed how Indian traditions are seen. Back then, strict male-dominated rules replaced India's older, more flexible ways of living. People and customs once honoring variety and sensual expression got pushed aside. Now, silence and control often take precedence over open recognition. Starting fresh on India's legal path means digging into roots long overlooked. One turn came when courts said gay sex is no crime - that was the Navtej Singh Johar moment. Then came a shift in how gender sees itself, thanks to the NALSA verdict calling third gender what it is: real. Another pivot arrived through Justice K.S. Puttaswamy's case, where privacy became a right, not a wish. Each step pulls law closer to people, away from old scripts¹⁵. Truth lives in how India chooses to see itself now. Not by copying foreign ways, yet drawing strength from what already exists within. Old names given during outside rule often twist meaning - those need questioning. To grow fully, the country has to retell its own stories. Freedom means shaping who you are without old chains holding back voice.

¹⁴ Amrit Srinivasan, Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance, 20 Econ. & Pol. Wkly. 1869, 1871–76 (1985).

¹⁵ Nat'l Legal Servs. Auth. v. Union of India, (2014) 5 SCC 438; K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, (2017) 10 SCC 1; Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India, (2018) 1 SCC 1.

6. Conclusion: Letting Go of the Victorian Blouse

If we want to decolonize for real, we have to recognize one thing: that heavy sense of shame—the “Victorian blouse,” whether it’s cloth or just an idea, it never belonged to us in the first place. Today, as our literature and laws change, India is working to get its voice back after centuries of being told that voice was somehow “indecent.”

Being Indian-style modern doesn't mean imitating the West or mindlessly adhering to the past. It's about **reclaiming our connection** to what was always ours: **the daring of the Tawaifs, the open spirit of the Kama Sutra, and the shape-shifting tales of the Mahabharata**. It's time to use our own pen—not to change who we are to fit someone else's model, but to remove the labels colonization imposed on us. **Then and only then will India's soul be able to stand with pride, loudly, and defensively on its own terms.**

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