

Jennifer Howes

Chapter 13

The Story Tellers of Mysore: Regime Change and the Musarrati Performance Artists of Tipu Sultan's Court

1 Introduction

What happens when performance artists who hold positions of prestige within a royal court are cut away from their source of patronage following an annexation or invasion? This question is increasingly being asked by historians who study the impact of British imperialism on the traditions of female courtiers who served within South Asian kingdoms. Such studies examine the different ways that women from courtly communities adapted to their new circumstances.¹ Sometimes they were forced to seek employment from Europeans and other times their traditions were criticised by Christian missionaries for being immoral, leading to the colonial misconception that these professional singers, dancers and musicians were little more than prostitutes.²

Perhaps the first documented community of female performance artists to undergo this shift from high-status courtiers to the dependents of Europeans were the 75 women, described as 'Gain or Mussuruttis for their accomplishments in playing singing etc',³ from the court of Tipu Sultan of Mysore. They were placed under East India Company house arrest in May 1799 and remained in British custody until their deaths. Before May 1799, they lived and served within the inner court of Tipu Sultan of Mysore at Srirangapatna. The word 'Gain' means 'singer', while the title 'Mussurutti' probably comes from the Urdu word 'musarrat', meaning joy or delight.⁴ This paper is an attempt to piece together what happened to these performers, the story tellers of Tipu Sultan's court, when this shift in power occurred.

1 For example, see the work of Lata Singh, "Courtesans and the 1857 Revolt: Role of Azeezun in Kanpur," *Indian Historical Review* 34, no. 2 (2007): 58–78; Angma Dey Jhala, *Courtly Indian Women in Late Imperial India* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008); Priya Atwal, *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* (London: Hurst, 2000), and Radha Kapuria, *Music in Colonial Punjab: Courtesans Bards and Connoisseurs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

2 Tiziana Leucci article in this volume.

3 British Library, IOR/HJ/461: 146. Reproduced as figure 1 in Jennifer Howes, "Tipu Sultan's Female Entourage under East India Company Rule," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 4 (2021): 855–74.

4 For the rest of this paper, aside from quoted passages, I will refer to this group of women as Musarratis.

In the late eighteenth century, the Musarrati performance artists were part of a community of about 600 women who lived inside Tipu Sultan's palace at Srirangapatna. Along with the other women of Tipu's court, they fulfilled important roles within a complex royal culture. After the Fall of Srirangapatna in May 1799, when British and East India Company troops besieged the capital of Mysore Kingdom, the courtly infrastructure that supported these women was abruptly replaced by a European bureaucracy that had no understanding of their performance traditions. The East India Company viewed the women of Tipu's court as an administrative expense, and arranged accommodation, food and clothing for their care, whilst claiming to have liberated them from the clutches of a cruel, controlling tyrant. By claiming to be the benevolent liberators of the women, the East India Company failed to acknowledge the Musarratis' court role as entertainers and story tellers.

When the Sultanate kingdom of Mysore was conquered in 1799, it had only existed for four decades. Haidar Ali Khan, the father of Tipu Sultan, was originally a military commander in the army of Krishnaraja Wodeyar II, the Hindu king of Mysore. In 1762 he deposed the Wodeyar king and founded the Mysore Sultanate. After Haidar Ali's death in December 1782, Tipu Sultan succeeded his father to Mysore's throne. Both Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan were seen as a threat to Britain's overseas empire because they worked closely with the French and employed mercenaries from France in their armies. On 4 May 1799, at the close of the Fourth Mysore War, the British stormed the capital at Srirangapatna and Tipu Sultan died in the assault. His death was immediately followed by a spree of looting and pillage at the hands of British and the East India Company soldiers. The descendants of Krishnaraja Wodeyar II, the ruler that Haidar Ali deposed in the early 1760s, were identified and the British crowned Krishnaraja Wodeyar III, a five-year-old boy, as Mysore's new king on 30 June 1799.⁵ The Wodeyar family's recovery of Mysore's throne came at a huge cost. One of the numerous financial conditions that the East India Company imposed on the Wodeyars was to fund the maintenance of Tipu Sultan's imprisoned family.⁶ Patronage of Tipu's family, including the female singers and dancers of Tipu's court, was reduced to a bureaucratic exercise, funded by the Wodeyar Mysore State, and administered by the East India Company.

To understand the changing circumstances of the Musarrati women, this paper begins by examining what we know about their roles within the Mysore Sultanate's inner court in the late eighteenth century, when it appears that they, along with their slaves and attendants, made up nearly half of the palace's female inhabitants. After

⁵ James Salmond, *A Review of the Origin, Progress and Result of the Decisive War with the Late Tipu Sultan in Mysore* (London: Luke Hansard, 1800): Appendix D, no. 2, enclosure 15 (unpaginated).

⁶ Account of the remaining members of the families of Tipu Sultan and Hyder Ali removed from Mysore to Vellore, July 1800–May 1802, British Library, IOR/F/4/113/2126, 4, 24A-24M; James Salmond, *A Review of the Origin, Progress and Result of the Decisive War with the Late Tipu Sultan in Mysore* (London: Luke Hansard, 1800): Appendix D, no. 2, enclosure 1.

looking at their roles alongside those of the other female courtiers inside Tipu's palace, I will then look at their lives in the early years of the nineteenth century, when the East India Company exiled them from Mysore Kingdom. They were moved over three hundred kilometres east of Srirangapatna, to Vellore Fort, in the Company controlled territory of Madras Presidency. Finally, I will look at two intriguing albums of Company paintings from Vellore that document the continuation of the Musarratis' performance traditions in the 1820s and 1830s. It was never a priority for the East India Company to document the roles and actions of these women, but there is sufficient information inside colonial sources to demonstrate that the Musarratis, the story telling performance artists of Tipu Sultan's inner court, kept their traditions alive by giving performances to the thousands of Mysorean citizens who followed them to Vellore. These exiles from Tipu's Mysore were a receptive audience that gave the Musarratis a sense of purpose and encouraged them to continue practicing their traditions whilst living under the East India Company's disinterested control.

2 The Women under Sultanate Rule

The Musarrati women of Tipu Sultan's inner court came from a diverse range of places and cultural traditions. Little is known about them before 1799, and even today, scholarly accounts of women under Mysore Sultanate rule are dominated by British colonial prejudices that were reinforced in the nineteenth century. For example, in the published testimony of James Scurry, an East India Company soldier who was captured by Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan in 1780, he described how he, and other European prisoners, were forced to marry 'a number of young girls, who had been driven from their relations out of the Carnatic'.⁷ His account of his imprisonment was not published until 1824, but Scurry's descriptions of the dispossessed female citizens of Mysore and their forced marriages to foreigners galvanised the received British view that Tipu and his father were the ruthless victimisers of women. By promoting this attitude, the British partially justified their actions at Srirangapatna in May 1799 by claiming that the soldiers who looted Tipu's capital were actually liberators of Mysore's female citizens.

The earliest known account of the Musarrati women was written by a French man, probably in the late 1770s. Maistre De la Tour served as Haidar Ali Khan's Commander and Chief of Artillery. In his account of the court's activities, he described the entertainments he witnessed inside the palace at Srirangapatna.⁸ His book, *The History*

⁷ James Scurry, *The Captivity, Sufferings and Escape of James Scurry, who was Detained a Prisoner during Ten Years in the Dominions of Hyder Ali and Tippoo Saib* (London: Henry Fisher, 1831): 118.

⁸ Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the*

of Ayder Ali Khan, was published in Paris in 1783 and translated into English in 1784. He described the women who took part in these court performances, which were typically given to male audiences during ‘a set supper’.⁹ He also gives brief descriptions of the plots of these performances and of the costuming of these all-female actors, singers, and dancers.

De la Tour claimed that the women were the finest performers in India on account of Haidar Ali ‘procuring, among this class of women, those who are most remarkable for their beauty and talents.’¹⁰ The costumes worn by the women were made of light, gold-embroidered cloth and they wore jewellery that literally covered them from head to toe,

[. . .] they are covered with jewels: their head, their neck, their ears, their breasts, their arms, fingers, legs, and toes, have their jewels; and even their nose is ornamented with a small diamond [. . .].¹¹

The most beautiful of these women were the dancers, who de la Tour praised as being talented enough to perform ‘on the theatre of the Opera at Paris.’¹² The story lines of the performances conjure up grand evenings of music, dance and theatrics that centred around titillating plots, authored by the Musarratis, about women deceiving men. They always had ‘a number of set pieces ready in rehearsal to be played at a moment’s notice’.¹³ The plot lines were typically ‘pieces of intrigue [. . . featuring] women who league to deceive a jealous husband, or young girls that conspire to

Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784).

⁹ Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, with Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 43.

¹⁰ Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 40.

¹¹ Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 41.

¹² Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 42.

¹³ Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 43.

deceive their mother'.¹⁴ The songs that accompanied the performances, when given in a single voice, were 'almost always the complaint of a lover', whilst those sung by a group were more joyful.¹⁵

The first British document to describe all the women of Tipu Sultan's palace at Srirangapatna, dated 1800, gives a totally different perspective of the Musarrati women. It was compiled in the months immediately following Tipu Sultan's death, at a time of upheaval, when Mysore's courtly traditions had been thrown into disarray. The author of the 1800 report was a young Orientalist scholar named Thomas Marriott who was appointed by the East India Company to manage the women's affairs. He was selected because he had studied some of the languages spoken inside the palace.¹⁶ To facilitate his work, the women of Tipu's court 'adopted' him as a brother so they could communicate with him without impropriety.¹⁷ Marriott's 1800 report gives a detailed breakdown of the different kinds of women inside Srirangapatna Palace and became the basis for the Company's early policies on how to deal with them. He counted 601 women as residing permanently inside the palace and listed them as either members of Tipu Sultan's private entourage, or as belonging to the entourage of his deceased father, Haidar Ali. There were 51 'Women called Gain or Mussurrutties' in Tipu Sultan's entourage and a further 23 from Haidar Ali's.¹⁸ Those from Tipu's entourage were waited upon by 124 'attendants and slaves', while the 23 women from the Haidar Mahal had 40. Collectively, the 75 Musarrati women in the palace had 164 attendants and slaves, meaning that of the palace's 601 female inhabitants, 238 worked as, or were in service to, this important group of singers, actresses and dancers.¹⁹ The 1800 report describes the high status, 'unmarried' Musarratis as the second most important group of women inside the palace. The only women to hold higher status than them were the high-born wives of Tipu

14 Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 41.

15 Maistre De la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 42.

16 Marriott, Thomas. Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461: 169–78.

17 George Annesley Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt*, vol. 1 (London: F.C. and J Rivington, 1811): 401.

18 Marriott, Thomas. Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461: 176–77. Reproduced in Jennifer Howes, "Tipu Sultan's Female Entourage under East India Company Rule," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 4 (2021): 861–62 as figures 1 and 2.

19 Marriott, Thomas. Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461: 169–78, 176–77.

Sultan and Haidar Ali who were married to the kings according to Islamic law.²⁰ Right up until 1821, the Musarratis were ranked in colonial reports as second in importance only to the widows of Tipu Sultan and Haidar Ali.²¹

Supporting hundreds of women inside the palace was a key part of Tipu Sultan's statecraft. The 1800 report describes the women of the palace as coming from a broad range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, with most of them originally coming from Mysorean Hindu families. The next largest group of women were 'the purchased slaves from Constantinople, Georgia, etc.', followed by 'Moor-women from Arcot, Tanjour, Hyderabad, Gurrumconda etc'.²² The resulting assemblage of female courtiers represented 'different parts of the world' and brought to Tipu Sultan's innermost court 'the singular knowledge of the manners of the harem of Persia, of Delhi, and of many other Mussulmaun kingdoms.'²³ The performance traditions practiced by the women were not described in Thomas Marriott's report, but one can assume that, based on the varied regions and cultures that these female courtiers came from, they were not trained in a single, conservative tradition. The Musarrati performance artists most likely represented numerous traditions that were all valued at Srirangapatna, and which made their set pieces, as described by Maistre de la Tour, more exciting, varied and potentially recognizable to the multicultural guests that they entertained.

Descriptions of how the women ended up as courtiers at Srirangapatna are documented in Thomas Marriott's 1800 report. Some were purchased as slaves, while others were 'supplied' from families that 'the Sultaun had either put to death or held in Confinement to obtain their wealth'.²⁴ There were also women in Tipu's court who 'were seduced or rather purchased by his money and promises of promotion to their needy parents or brothers.'²⁵ It is certainly fair to say that the women in Tipu's court did not independently choose to be there. However, the Musarrati women held high status positions within his court at Srirangapatna. Through their different backgrounds, the women of Tipu's court represented a microcosm for life beyond the palace's walls, reflecting the languages and cultures that the kingdom was connected to.

20 Marriott, Thomas, Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461: 176–77.

21 Augustus Andrews, Muster Roll of the Ladies Residing in the Hyder Mahal and in Tippos Mahal Compiled by Augustus Andrews, Paymaster of Stipends at Vellore, 1821, British Library, IOR/F/4/881/23029: 71 and 78.

22 Marriott, Thomas. Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461: 169–70.

23 George Annesley Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt*, vol. 1 (London: F.C. and J Rivington, 1811): 401.

24 Marriott, Thomas. Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461: 169.

25 Marriott, Thomas. Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461:170.

Thomas Marriott's 1800 report also raised the importance of food and drink to the inner court. His listing of the female courtiers included those who were responsible for the preparation of different sorts of food to the palace's inhabitants and guests. Everything from the preparation of bread and rice to the careful curation of sweets was attended to by women who specialised in distinct culinary areas. Female cooks and chefs had been an important part of courtly life in Deccan Sultanate kingdoms since the sixteenth century. When the East India Company laid siege to Srirangapatna, and Tipu Sultan's private library was looted, an illustrated manuscript on this very topic was sent to London. The *Ni'matnama* of Sultan Ghiyath Shahi of Mandu (r.1469–1500), translated into English as 'The Sultan's Book of Delights', was probably acquired by Tipu Sultan's father, Haidar Ali, nearly three centuries after it was composed.²⁶ Frequently described as a cookbook, the *Ni'matnama* is a court manual that is full of miniature paintings of the Sultan of Mandu observing the preparation of delicacies by his female courtiers. Their varied complexions and styles of dress show that the women of Mandu's inner court came from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The courtly ideals described in the *Ni'matnama* were copied at the Mysore Sultanate, which also styled its inner court at Srirangapatna through the presence of women from different cultural groups. The human presence of these hundreds of female courtiers from many communities, both within Tipu's kingdom and beyond its borders, were an important feature of his identity. His knowledge of other cultures was also enriched and expressed by the contents of his private library. New research on the estimated 2000 manuscripts that the British looted from the library at Srirangapatna show that Tipu and his father assembled these collections from the libraries of other powerful men.²⁷ Just like the women of his court, Tipu's manuscripts were taken from conquered territories or were given to him to gain favour. What is important here is, just like the women who served inside Tipu Sultan's inner court, the manuscripts represented the customs and cultures that he assimilated into his kingdom.

The Musarrati women were not the only performance artists inside Tipu Sultan's inner court. A further 48 individuals, also mentioned in Thomas Marriott's report of 1800, were classified as 'Khan Khawas' performers. He described them as the 'second class' of unmarried women, whose role was to 'attend the Sultan on his visits to the

26 *Ni'matnama* of Sultan Ghiath Shahi. Mandu, c. 1500, British Library, IO Islamic Ms.149. For a translation and full facsimile of the *Ni'matnama*, see Norah Titley, *The Ni'matnama Manuscript of the Sultans of Mandu: The Sultan's Book of Delights*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005). Ursula Sims-Williams has suggested that the Mysore Sultanate acquired it from the royal library of Bijapur, see "Nasir Shah's Book of Delights," British Library Asia and Africa Studies (Blog), 21.11.2016, <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2016/11/nasir-shahs-book-of-delights.html> [accessed 11.03.2022].

27 Ursula Sims-Williams, "Collections within Collections: An Analysis of Tipu Sultan's Library," *Iran* 59 (2021): 287–307.

Mahal'.²⁸ Their 'second class' ranking is reflected by them having fewer servants and attendants than the 'first class' Musarrati women. The 48 Khan Khawas women had 43 servants and slaves between them, so just under one each, while the Musarratis had at least two servants each. The Khan Khawas performers provided entertainment expressly for the sultan inside of his palace and were most likely regarded as his sexual property. Their confinement indicates that they did not write and perform for larger audiences, also suggesting that for a woman to hold status at court she required a more public role.

Bearing one of Tipu Sultan's children, particularly a son, could also increase a woman's status at court. This is what happened to Roshani Beigum, a Musarrati who was the mother of Tipu Sultan's eldest son, Fateh Haidar. She was originally from the fortress-town of Adoni, and became part of the inner court at Srirangapatna, along with her sister, when Tipu Sultan was still a prince.²⁹ Although many of the women of Tipu Sultan's inner court bore him children, it is misleading to believe that the women of the harem were his sexual playthings. Nearly half of the women in the palace were not from Tipu's entourage, but rather, were his father's courtiers, who he was duty bound to take care of. Amongst them were the mothers of Tipu Sultan's half-siblings, and the nursemaids who cared for them as children. Tipu Sultan supported these women after Haidar Ali's death to maintain his family's honour.

3 The Transition to East India Company Rule

In May 1799 the women residing inside Srirangapatna's Palace were placed under house arrest and the Musarrati performers, along with the other women of the palace, began a relationship of dependency with the East India Company. In Britain, the violent military actions of the East India Company's and the King's armies during the Siege of Srirangapatna were questioned. The Fourth Mysore War had been a costly battle that affected the East India Company's profitability, and its shareholders in London complained about losing money on their investments. To validate the extortionate price of this military action, the Company portrayed itself as the enlightened liberator of Mysore, who rescued its citizens from the grip of a ruthless tyrant.

It is impossible to know what really happened to the women of Tipu Sultan's inner court in the chaos that ensued in 1799. After the Fall of Srirangapatna, British

²⁸ 29 of the Khan Khawas women were from the Tipu Mahal and 19 were from the Haidar Mahal. Marriott, Thomas. Report to Josiah Webbe Regarding the Female Inhabitants of Tipu Sultan's Palace at Srirangapatnam, 2 July 1800, British Library, IOR/H/461: 176–77.

²⁹ Jennifer Howes, "Roshani Begum, Dancer Turned Rebel from Tipu Sultan's Court," British Library, Untold Lives (Blog), 27.04.2021, <https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2021/04/roshani-begum-dancer-turned-rebel-from-tipu-sultans-court.html> [accessed 11.03.2022].

soldiers were encouraged by their commander, Major-General David Baird, to overrun the capital in what has been described as ‘a four-day orgy of looting, pillage and rape’.³⁰ Colonial sources acknowledge that David Baird’s troops went out of control,³¹ but because military accounts of the Siege of Srirangapatna were recorded from a Western perspective, nothing is said about whether British soldiers mistreated the women inside Tipu’s palace. An eyewitness account authored by Ensign George Rowley tells us that the owners of houses and zananas ‘of the principal officers of the Sul-taun [who] were killed or wounded in the assault [. . .] were plundered; and jewels to an incredible value were obtained by some individuals of the army.’³² The only account to mention the women of Tipu’s palace in the aftermath of the Siege is a letter dated 10 May 1799, six days after Tipu Sultan’s death, written by Major Gabriel Doveton. He reports from a location over a hundred miles away that the ‘Palace and Women’s Apartments, my people say, were not blown up and the Sul-taun’s family [and] Women of the Haram, [. . .] were protected from injury.’³³ The Governor General at Kolkata, Richard Wellesley, removed David Baird from command of British troops at Srirangapatna and appointed his younger brother, Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington, to take over. It would have been a tremendous insult to Baird to be superseded by a junior officer, and an injustice that this young man would take the credit for the work of dismantling Tipu’s kingdom.³⁴ One of Arthur Wellesley’s first acts as Srirangapatna’s commander was to place a five-year-old child, a descendant of the dispossessed Wodeyar family that was overthrown in 1762, onto the throne of Mysore Kingdom. The coronation of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III was part of the British agenda to quash Tipu Sultan’s court at Mysore. Arthur Wellesley also arranged, between 1799 and 1802, for Tipu Sultan’s sons, followed by the women of the palace, to be exiled from Mysore Kingdom. They were sent to Vellore, and were imprisoned inside its fortress, in Madras Presidency. The sons of Tipu Sultan were moved first, and the hundreds of women of Srirangapatna’s inner court followed them in 1802. Immediately before the women’s overland transport to Vellore commenced in May of that year, Arthur Wellesley issued these instructions to the commander of the soldiers who oversaw the operation.

30 Hermione Almeida and George Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2005): 159.

31 Richard Wellesley, Letter to Henry Dundas, Fort St George, 7 June 1799, British Library, Mss Eur D623/24: 20–22.

32 George Rowley, “Journal of the Second Siege of Seringapatam Kept and Written by the Late Ensign G. Rowley of the Madras Engineers, Who Was Present during the Whole Siege,” in *Reports, Correspondence and Original Papers on Various Professional Subjects Connected with the Duties of the Corps of Engineers, Madras Presidency, Arranged by Capt J.T. Smith*, vol. 4, ed. John Thomas Smith and J.H. Bell (Madras: The Scottish Press, 1856): 130.

33 Gabriel Doveton, Letter to Henry Wellesley, Rayakottai, 10 May 1799, British Library, Mss Eur D623/21.

34 Martin R. Howard, *Wellington and the British Army’s Indian Campaigns* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2020): 63.

You will be so kind as to take care to prevent all interference with the women by the officers and soldiers under your command.

Your knowledge of the customs and prejudices of the Country must point out to you how very unwilling they are to be looked at: an attempt to see them can never succeed, & will only serve to gratify a vain curiosity if it should, and I therefore hope that it will be prevented if possible.³⁵

Whilst it is impossible to know whether any of the women of Tipu Sultan's inner court were violated by soldiers in 1799, we do know that many of the soldiers who supervised the transport of the women in 1802 were also present during the Siege of Srirangapatna. One wonders if Arthur Wellesley had doubts about the women's safety at the hands of these same men.

In late June 1802 the female courtiers' relocation to Vellore was complete. John Goldingham, the same East India Company engineer who designed Government House Madras, was placed in charge of building two sets of apartments for the women inside Vellore Fort. One set was for the women of Tipu Sultan's entourage, and the other was for Haidar Ali's entourage. The creation of these two separate sets of apartments mirrored the arrangement of the women's accommodation inside the palace at Srirangapatna.³⁶ To this day, the apartments that Goldingham built at Vellore are still known as the Tipu Mahal and Haidar Mahal, with the Tipu Mahal today serving as living quarters for the Tamil Nadu State Police. The British regarded Goldingham's mahals as an improvement over the women's previous accommodation at Srirangapatna and believed that it would improve their quality of life.³⁷ As for the sons of Tipu Sultan, they were placed inside pre-existing buildings inside Vellore Fort. Along with their private retinues, they lived there until August 1806, when in response to the Vellore Mutiny of July 1806, they were transferred to Kolkata. The same complex of buildings that Tipu's sons lived in from 1799 to 1806 was where the Sri Lankan king of Kandy, Sri Vikrama Kannaswamy and his entourage were interned, following their exile to Vellore Fort by the East India Company in 1816. Other political prisoners that were placed in Vellore Fort in the early nineteenth century included the family of Kattaboman Nayak of Panjalamkuricchi.³⁸

³⁵ Letter from Arthur Wellesley dated 30 April 1802 to the commanding officer. Arthur Wellesley, Private letters and copy correspondence of Col Arthur Wellesley relating to Tipu Sultan's establishment at Srirangapatnam and the move to Vellore, 1800 to 1802, Wellington Archives Southampton, 1/115, last letter in file 2 (not paginated).

³⁶ Letter from A. Anderson to Arthur Wellesley describing the condition of buildings inside the fort at Srirangapatnam. Arthur Wellesley, Private letters and copy correspondence of Col Arthur Wellesley relating to Tipu Sultan's establishment at Srirangapatnam and the move to Vellore, 1800 to 1802, 5 May 1802, Wellington Archive, University of Southampton. 1/116, file 1 of 3.

³⁷ Letter from Henrietta Clive to Edward Clive, 16 March 1800, in Nancy Shields, *Birds of Passage* (London: Eland, 2009): 115.

³⁸ List of all persons confined by the East India Company in Vellore Fort, 1823, British Library, IOR/F/4/886/23065.

When Tipu Sultan's sons and female courtiers were exiled to Vellore Fort at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they were followed there by thousands of Mysorean citizens. Recent studies have estimated that about 6,000 Mysoreans followed Tipu Sultan's entourage to Vellore in the early nineteenth century.³⁹ A report written in August 1806 counted 1,812 'servants and adherents' of Tipu Sultan as permanently residing in the pettah of Vellore, the market area of the city that was located beside the Fort's only entrance.⁴⁰ The Mysoreans living in the pettah area were those who were most closely connected with the exiled entourage inside the fort. For example, at least four of the pettah's residents were the daughters of Tipu Sultan who wanted to live near their mothers and brothers. These daughters, Ullmeer Ulnissa Begum, Fatima Begum, Budi Ulnissa Begum and Noor Ulnissa Begum, would have been permitted regular contact with their mothers inside the fort.⁴¹ Mysoreans of lower status would have lived in other areas of Vellore or in the town's outskirts. These thousands of exiled Mysoreans were the audience that the Musarrati women performed to at Vellore. One role of the Musarratis was to represent the royal household's womenfolk at important festivals and lifecycle events, particularly marriages. Because the East India Company had no interest in their courtly skills of song, dance and story telling, the women had a perfect cover for causing subversion within Vellore's Mysorean community whilst living under the control of their new imperialist masters. As the story tellers of Tipu's exiled court, the Musarratis performed their intriguing shows to Vellore's thousands of Mysorean citizens. The East India Company's indifference towards their traditions meant that they were free to script plays and write songs relating to their topical new circumstances.

Immediately before the 1802 move from Srirangapatna to Vellore, Thomas Marriott thought that he had reduced the number of women to be transported by almost half, from 601 to 345.⁴² However, when the move began in May 1802, he reported that their numbers had unexpectedly increased, with over 200 new women being secretly introduced to the mahals.⁴³ A flurry of letters ensued between Thomas Marriott at Srirangapatna and Thomas Dallas, the commander at Vellore Fort, who was waiting to receive the women inside Goldingham's newly constructed mahals. Dallas saw the

39 Jane Hathaway, *Rebellion, Repression, Reinvention: Mutiny in Comparative Perspective* (London: Praeger, 2001): 96.

40 Col Robert R. Gillespie, Report on Vellore after the Mutiny, August 1806, British Library, IOR/H/509: 163–79.

41 Thomas Marriott, Report on Tipu Sultan's Daughters at Vellore, Friday 8 Aug 1806, British Library, IOR/H/508: 280–84.

42 Thomas Marriott to Arthur Wellesley, 27 March 1802, p.1. Wellington Archive, Southampton University, 1/112, file 3.

43 Thomas Marriott to Thomas Dallas, 9 May 1802. Wellington Archive, Southampton University, 1/116, file 1 of 3.

introduction of the new women as ‘an improper and unnecessary expence’,⁴⁴ but Marriott parried that, ‘I could never have got them from Seringapatam, but by force, had I not allowed their new slaves to accompany them [. . .] The only way I see of getting rid of them [the newly introduced women], except by force, is to dismiss them from the Mahal whenever their mistresses die.’⁴⁵ In the end, the female courtiers got their way and the newly introduced women were received at Vellore. When the transport was completed in June 1802, there were 583 women living inside the newly constructed mahals of Vellore Fort.⁴⁶ Whilst their introduction was seen by Dallas as a scheme that took advantage of ‘the Company, who’s bounty has been so liberally extended to every branch of the Families’,⁴⁷ Marriott impressed upon his superiors that in their previous lives at Srirangapatna, ‘Tippoo allowed all the first class or Musruties two slaves each during his life – but [. . .] many vacancies occurred & the only terms on which the Women would give up their old slaves, were that they should be replaced by new ones’.⁴⁸

By 1806, the number of inhabitants of the Tipu and Haidar Mahals of Vellore Fort had increased even further. There were now 790 individuals inside the mahals of Vellore Fort, including 47 children that the women had ‘adopted’.⁴⁹ There is little information about individual women from Tipu’s court in colonial records. However, there is occasional mention of Roshani Beigum, the mother Fateh Haidar, Tipu Sultan’s eldest son. In a report dated 1804 it says that after the 1802 move to Vellore, she adopted a girl named Goolzeib ‘as her pupil and looks upon [her] as her daughter.’⁵⁰ The girl would have been one of the 47 children that were introduced into the mahals after the 1802 transport. Such adoptions were a common practice amongst professional singers and dancers in South Asia,⁵¹ suggesting that the women were trying to conduct themselves in the manner that they had lived in Tipu Sultan’s court.

44 Thomas Dallas to Thomas Marriott, 7 May 1802, p.1. Wellington Archive, Southampton University, 1/116, file 1 of 3.

45 Thomas Marriott to Thomas Dallas, 9 May 1802, p.2. Wellington Archive, Southampton University, 1/116, file 1 of 3.

46 Account of expenses from the 1802 move: Account of the remaining members of the families of Tipu Sultan and Hyder Ali removed from Mysore to Vellore, July 1800–May 1802, British Library, IOR/F/4/113, 2126: 105.

47 Thomas Dallas to Thomas Marriott, 7 May 1802, p.1. Wellington Archive, Southampton University, 1/116, file 1 of 3.

48 Thomas Marriott to Thomas Dallas, 9 May 1802 Wellington Archive, Southampton University, 1/116, file 1 of 3: 2.

49 There were 14 boys and 33 girls. Thomas Marriott, List of the women and children living in the *mahals* of Vellore Fort. 28 August 1806. British Library, IOR/H/508: 180–81.

50 Thomas Marriott, Report on the Four Eldest Sons of Tipu Sultan at Vellore, April 1804, British Library, IOR/H/508: 347.

51 Janaki Nair, *Mysore Modern: Rethinking the Region under Princely Rule* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): 205.

As the story tellers of Tipu Sultan's inner court, the Musarratis would have provided Vellore's exiled Mysorean community with entertainment that recalled their previous lives at Srirangapatna. Analyses of the court proceedings at Vellore in the weeks immediately before and after the Mutiny of July 1806 tell us that the women of Tipu's court were actively participating in a busy wedding season in the months preceding the Mutiny, when four of Tipu Sultan's daughters were married inside the fort.⁵² The celebrations for each of these weddings would have lasted for several days and featured performances of music and dance to large crowds inside the fort. In other words, the Musarrati women of Tipu Sultan's exiled court held a prominent public platform that they could use to foment dissent amongst the exiled Mysorean community. They were trained to script and perform storylines of intrigue and deception so it was predictable that they would prompt their audiences to antagonise the East India Company's sepoy soldiers.

The Vellore Mutiny of July 1806 was the most violent uprising within the East India Company's army to predate the Indian Rebellion of 1857. One of the most frequently cited causes of the Vellore Mutiny was a dispute over the sepoy soldiers' uniforms.⁵³ This reason, which was identified in the early nineteenth century, still dominates discussions on the Vellore Mutiny's causes right up to the current day, as can be seen by an exhibition on the Vellore Mutiny that was held inside the Fort Museum, featuring a display of sepoy uniforms.⁵⁴ Closer examination of the original 'Court of Enquiry' into causes of the 1806 mutiny indicates that the dispute over uniforms was merely the most visible layer of a broad spectrum of taunts directed at the sepoys.⁵⁵ One court entry describes 'the numerous moorpeople inhabitants of the Pettah [. . . who] began to poison the minds of the troops by observing that such dress was very bad and improper',⁵⁶ while another says that '[t]he thousands of adherents of Tippoo's House assembled, and uncontrolled in the populous Pettah at Vellore, will ever furnish powers to disseminate the most destructive tales.'⁵⁷ Other court testimonies say that the sepoys were antagonised by 'Tippoo's people and the village people [who told them that they] would not continue them in their cast, or give them rice or water or let them have their daughters in marriage' if they wore their East India

52 Thomas Marriott, Report on Tipu Sultan's daughters at Vellore, Friday 8 August 1806, British Library, IOR/H/508: 280–84.

53 William Cavendish Bentinck, *Memorial Addressed to the Honourable Court of Directors by Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, Containing an Account of the Mutiny at Vellore, with the Causes and Consequences of that Event, February 1809* (London: John Booth, 1810): 71.

54 Photo by S.S. Kumar, taken in 2006, reproduced by Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed, "Behind the Mutinies," *Frontline Magazine*, Feb 17 2017, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/books/behind-the-mutinies/article9511453.ece> [accessed 11.03.2022].

55 Testimonials of the 'Court of Enquiry' at Vellore, July–August 1806, British Library, IOR/H/507 and 508.

56 Account of Shaik Ahomed Sepoy, 21 July 1806, British Library, IOR/H/508: 382–83.

57 Report by J.F. Cradock, July 25 1806, British Library, IOR/H/507: 412.

Company uniforms.⁵⁸ The Mysoreans at Vellore most likely criticised the sepoys' uniforms because they were proof of their subjugation to the East India Company, which was Tipu Sultan's enemy. The sepoys' uniforms marked them as outsiders who were willfully excluded from any sort of family life at Vellore because of their traitorous employment. Mocking their uniforms was merely part of a broader public lambasting.⁵⁹

Although the Musarratis were skilled at telling stories of intrigue and trickery, none of them were interrogated about whether their performances contributed to the Vellore Mutiny. They were never questioned about the content of their performances in the months, weeks and days immediately before July 1806. The court records after the mutiny identified the exiled citizens of Tipu's Mysore, particularly those who lived in Vellore's pettah area, who would have attended the wedding celebrations in the fort, as collectively spreading the derisive tales about the sepoy soldiers. It is reasonable to assume that the Musarratis scripted the sepoys as characters of derision in the numerous wedding performances they gave inside Vellore Fort.

4 After the 1806 Mutiny

None of Tipu Sultan's family members inside the fort were held accountable for the 1806 Vellore Mutiny. The sons of Tipu were exiled to Kolkata in August of that year, but a Supreme Court ruling at Calcutta in 1807 'exculpated [the sons of Tipu Sultan] [. . .] from exciting the Mutiny'.⁶⁰ The decision to exile them to Calcutta was justified,

[. . .] so that they may during the rest of their lives dwell quietly and in Peace – which they could not have done so well at Vellore, from its proximity to Mysoor; where every one inclined to disturb the Peace would have taken their names.⁶¹

The Company blamed Vellore's Mysorean residents for prompting the sepoys to mutiny. The Musarratis' role as story tellers who could feed this antagonism was never addressed. Although they were not implicated in 1806 mutiny's events, exiling Tipu's sons from Vellore to Calcutta was a colossal punishment. All hope of resurrecting

58 Testimony of Shaick Hamed Sepoy, Weds 30 July, 1806, British Library, IOR/H/508: 216.

59 For more on the women's role in provoking the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 see Jennifer Howes, "Tipu Sultan's Female Entourage under East India Company Rule," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 4 (2021): 855–74.

60 Letter from Thomas Marriott to his parents. Quoted in a letter from his mother, Elizabeth to Warren Hastings, 13 April 1807 (Randolph Marriott and Elisabeth Marriott, Copies of letters to and from Warren Hastings, 1762–1808, British Library, Mss Eur C133/2: 90).

61 Letter from Thomas Marriott to his parents, quoted in a letter from his mother, Elizabeth, to Warren Hastings, 13 April 1807 (Randolph Marriott and Elisabeth Marriott, Copies of letters to and from Warren Hastings, 1762–1808, British Library, Mss Eur C133/2, f. British Library, Mss Eur C133/2: 90–91).

Tipu's legacy through his sons and heirs was quashed. The women remained at Vellore for the rest of their lives, never to see their sons and their families again.

In 1821, a detailed report was compiled at Vellore that listed the women who permanently resided inside the fort. Created with the help of the eunuchs who still lived with the women, the 1821 report classified them, using ledger style tables, so that the East India Company could clarify the cost of their allowances, known as rhatibs. The tables ranked them according to their status within the Tipu or Haidar Mahals of Vellore Fort and describe a payment system resembling the pay bands of East India Company soldiers or civil servants. It gives the names of the women and is titled with the British military term, 'muster roll'.⁶² Of the 431 surviving women on the 1821 list, 52 were categorised as Musarratis. To the East India Company, this title was now a perfunctory, administrative categorisation that determined their level of maintenance, and not a name for skilled performance artists from Tipu Sultan's court (Plate 13.1).

One would think that the passing of time, the Company's bureaucratic treatment of the women, and the devastating exile of their sons to Calcutta might have crushed the spirits of the imprisoned Musarratis. However, in two albums of Company Paintings from Vellore, one created in the late 1820s and another in the mid 1830s, there are pictures of these women taking part in festivals and celebrations. They could no longer refresh their numbers by introducing new pupils, but the girls that they adopted between 1802 and 1806 were now young women who were trained in the performance traditions of Tipu Sultan's court.

The first of these two albums, dating from the late 1820s, is today in the British Library's collections in London.⁶³ The second album, painted in the mid 1830s by an artist named Yellappa, is currently in a private collection.⁶⁴ Neither of the two albums are dated, but their contents make it possible to determine when they were made. The 32 drawings inside the British Library Album are on watermarked paper bearing the dates 1823 and 1826, and the kinds of people shown in the album were representative of Vellore Fort's administration before the early 1830s.⁶⁵ For this reason, the British Library Album most likely dates to the late 1820s. The 34 paintings inside the Yellappa Album

⁶² Augustus Andrews, *Muster Roll of the Ladies Residing in the Hyder Mahal and in Tippos Mahal, Compiled by Augustus Andrews, Paymaster of Stipends at Vellore*, 1821, British Library, IOR/F/4/881/23029: 71–78.

⁶³ British Library, Add.Or.39–70.

⁶⁴ The privately owned Vellore Album by Yellappa was last sold at Sothebys London on 24 April 2013 (sale L13220, lot 106). See Lucien Harris, "Bespoke: Painting to Order in 1830s Calcutta and Vellore," in *Forgotten Masters: Indian Painting for the East India Company*, ed. William Dalrymple (London: Bloomsbury/Philip Wilson, 2020): 118–37. Yellappa's portrait, at folio XXXIV of the album, is reproduced on the book's back cover.

⁶⁵ British Library, Add.Or.67 and 68, depicts the clerks and orderlies who worked for the paymaster of Stipends at Vellore Fort, a role that was abolished in 1834. See Papers on the abolition of the office of Paymaster at Vellore, and reports of the Committee to investigate the expenses of that office, Jul 1835–Jan 1835, British Library, IOR/F/4/1485/58544: 29.

No.	Name	Number of Rattee each received
228	Anemah	1
	<i>Cunuch</i>	
	Mahomed Mather	6
	Sowade	1
	Affand	1
229	Cooyar	1
		226

*Muster Roll of the Ladies residing in Tippos Mahal
 Mahal available to the best information these
 can all be obtained*

No.	Name	Number of Rattee each received
	<i>Resides in 1. Clap</i>	
	Padshah Begum	received 26 p. dman
	Mouzer Begum	3
	<i>Musuratties in 2. Clap</i>	
	Cooyar Nipa	2
	Mansoor Nipa	2
	Lodhoo Nipa	1
	Sahawal Khanum	10
	Sara Begum	2
	Maharaja Begum	3
	Mouzer Nipa	1
	11. Kheer Nipa	2
	Wanghoo Nipa	2
	Mogam Begum	1
	Makham Begum	1
	Makham Nipa	1

No.	Name	Number of Rattee each received
13	Moolposton Nipa	1
	Moolay Begum	1
	Mohar Nipa	1
	Goldscha	1
	Saracymah	1
20	Makbuddin Ban	1
	Rahmat Bie	1
	Mouzer Begum	1
	Mouzer Nipa	1
	Buter Small	1
23	Jamoon Nipa	1
	Budal Nipa	1
	Makham Nipa	1
	Makham Nipa	1
	<i>Resides in 2. Clap</i>	
	Mouzer Nipa	2
30	Sahawal	1
	Mohar Nipa	1
	Rupa Nipa	2
	Rahmat Bie	1
	Rahmat Bie	1
35	Sil Nipa	1
	Makbuddin Ban	1
	Mouzer	1
	Mouzer Khanum	1
	Mouzer Nipa	1
40	Sarah Begum	1
	Sarah Begum	1
	Sarah Begum	1
	Sarah Begum	1

Plate 13.1: First page of the *Muster Roll of the Ladies Residing in the Hyder Mahal and in Tippos Mahal* Compiled by Augustus Andrews, Paymaster of Stipends at Vellore, 1821. British Library, IOR/F/4/881/23029. The ‘Musuratties or 2nd Class’ women are listed below the two surviving wives of Tipu Sultan.

date to the mid 1830s because one picture shows ‘The Son of the late Ex-King of Kandy and his two Uncles’.⁶⁶ The King of Kandy died under house arrest at Vellore in 1832, leaving an infant son as his successor. The tiny child in the painting could be no more than four years old so the paintings inside this album must have been made in the mid 1830s.

Most of the paintings inside the two Vellore albums are of men representing different trades and occupations, standing alongside their wives, holding the tools of their different trades. Other paintings show people who worked or lived inside Vellore Fort such as sepoy and the secretarial staff of the Fort Adjutant.⁶⁷ Some of the paintings inside the

⁶⁶ Yellappa Album, folio XXXV. Reproduced as figure 29 in Lucien Harris, ‘Bespoke: Painting to Order in 1830s Calcutta and Vellore,’ in *Forgotten Masters: Indian Painting for the East India Company*, ed. William Dalrymple (London: Bloomsbury/Philip Wilson, 2020).

⁶⁷ Folio XXXI of the Yellappa Album shows sepoy. Add.Or.67 of the British Library Album shows the Fort Adjutant’s secretarial staff.

British Library Album are duplicated in the 1830s Yellappa Album.⁶⁸ Amongst these duplicated paintings is one of the Musarrati women. The one in the British Library Album is labelled 'Kunchinee or Dancing Girls', while the identical picture in the Yellappa Album is titled 'Mussulman Dancing Girls'.⁶⁹ Both pictures show three young women on the left, dressed in richly embroidered, floor-length red and blue gowns with matching, silver-edged dupattas across their shoulders and heads. They wear large amounts of gold jewellery. On the right side of the picture there is an older woman, wearing simpler clothing and no jewellery, holding a handkerchief in a story telling gesture. She is most likely their teacher or 'directress'.⁷⁰ Between her and the three younger women are five young men wearing simple white attire and turbans, playing musical instruments. The three youthful women could be the children that were adopted before 1806, who by then were young adults trained in the performance traditions of Tipu Sultan's exiled court (Plates 13.2, 13.3).



Plate 13.2: 'Kunchinee or Dancing Girls', Vellore, late 1820s.

⁶⁸ The following folios are repeated in the two albums. BL Add.Or.41 is Yellappa No.VIII; BL Add.Or.44 is Yellappa Nos.XI and XII; BL Add.Or.45 is Yellappa No.VII; BL Add.Or.47 is Yellappa No.IX; BL Add.Or.54 is Yellappa No.III; BL Add.Or.60 is Yellappa No.XXVII; BL Add.Or.62 is Yellappa No.XXVIII; BL Add.Or.63 is Yellappa No.XVIII.

⁶⁹ British Library Album, Add.Or.62; Yellappa Album, No.XXVIII.

⁷⁰ This is the term used by Maistre de la Tour, *The History of Ayder Ali Khan, Nabob Bahder: Or, New Memoirs concerning the East Indies, With Historical Notes, by M.M.D.L.T. General of Ten Thousand Men in the Army of the Mogul Empire, and formerly Commander in Chief of the Artillery of Ayder Ali, and of a Body of European Troops in the Service of that Nabob*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1784): 40.



Plate 13.3: Holi procession at Vellore, late 1820s.

The same young women reappear in the British Library Album in a picture of a Holi procession. The 'Kanchani'/Musarrati women, their dupattas protectively draped across their shoulders, hold their bodies with one hand raised forward, in the pose of story tellers. Standing near to them are musicians, their skin and outfits covered in paint. The festival of Holi originates from a story about Krishna, but for the women of Tipu Sultan's



Plate 13.4: Detail of the Holi procession showing the Musarratis.

court, who now served a community rather than a king, there was not a sectarian issue with them taking part in a festival that many today regard as ‘Hindu’ (Plate 13.4).

In the Yellappa Album there is another picture of the Musarratis performing in a procession.⁷¹ Titled ‘Procession of a Mussulman Marriage’, there are ten women, dressed in the same style as in the other pictures, at the centre of a night-time procession, surrounded by fireworks and torches. The buildings in the background indicate that the procession was taking place inside Vellore Fort. Four of the Musarrati women are at the very centre of the picture, singing to the crowd while standing inside large red baskets that are held up high in the manner of palanquins. Two more clusters of Musarrati women appear in the crowd, on either side of the red baskets. These two clusters of women are standing at street level and are encircled by attentive audiences (Plate 13.5).



Plate 13.5: Muslim wedding procession inside Vellore Fort showing ten Musarrati women performing.

The Yellappa Album differs from the British Library Album because it assigns sectarian labels to its subjects. While the British Library Album from the late 1820s only contains a picture of dancers labelled as ‘Kanchanis’ and shows them in another picture as taking part in Holi celebrations, the Yellappa Album from the 1830s identifies the same women, in an identical picture, as Muslims. The Yellappa Album has another picture of a different group of women that are identified as ‘Hindoo

⁷¹ Yellappa Album, No.XX. Another version of this picture, reproduced here as Plate 13.5, is in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.39/30-1987).

Dancing Girls'.⁷² They are dressed in saris with large pleats at the front of the skirt and they wear short sleeved blouses that expose the torso. It is the sort of attire associated with Devadasis or with the dress of classical Bhāratnāṭyam dancers today. Other pictures inside of the Yellappa Album show these Hindu dancers taking part in identifiably Hindu processions.⁷³ The paintings inside the Yellappa Album from the 1830s, and the captioning of these images, identifies two separate performance traditions at Vellore along sectarian lines, indicating that one group of female performers were Muslim and the others were Hindu. The earlier British Library Album from the late 1820s does not contain drawings of Hindu dancers and shows Muslim performers taking part in a Holi procession. Perhaps the patron of the 1830s album instructed Yellappa to differentiate between Hindu and Muslim performances at Vellore. It could also be that the distinctly Hindu community of female dancers at Vellore in Yellappa's drawings were from the entourage of the exiled King of Kandy, who was a Hindu. It is certainly notable that there are no pictures of dancing girls who are labelled as Hindu, nor are there pictures of the King of Kandy and his entourage, in the British Library Album.

The interior of Vellore Fort provides the backdrop for the crowd scenes in the Yellappa Album, regardless of whether the performers were categorised as Hindu or Muslim. The women of Tipu's court were not permitted to go beyond the walls of the fort, so the location of the Musarrati women's performances, inside the fort, must have made it into the conventional location for all such large events in the nineteenth century. The fort was a place of incarceration where the East India Company imprisoned royal households, making it the home of Vellore's highest status residents. This location became the main stage for royal performances within Vellore, featuring the lavish music and dance programmes of these exiled courts.

The women of Tipu Sultan's imprisoned court gradually died off. Every time the East India Company discovered that a woman had died inside the mahals of Vellore Fort, their allowances were cut back to reflect their reduced numbers.⁷⁴ In a tremendous show of resistance, the women tried to stop their allowances from being reduced by hiding the deaths of at least 25 individuals inside the mahals. These unrecorded deaths were discovered by the East India Company in 1834 and were posthumously recorded as entries in a ledger. For each deceased woman listed on the table, under the column where her date of demise was meant to be recorded, an identical entry was given, saying, 'died many years ago but the date cannot be ascertained'.⁷⁵ The women's

72 Yellappa Album, No. XXIII. Another version of this picture is in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.39/25-1987).

73 Yellappa Album, No. II, shows a 'Procession of Sivah'. Another version of this picture is in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.39/28-1987).

74 East India Company General Correspondence, Despatches from East India House London to Madras, British Library, IOR, E/4/897: 125–16.

75 Papers on the abolition of the office of Paymaster at Vellore, and reports of the Committee to investigate the expenses of that office, Jul 1835–Jan 1835, British Library, IOR/F/4/1485/58544: 102–6.

refusal to be treated as mere numbers on a spreadsheet was a permanent source of frustration for the East India Company, and this exasperation comes through in the passive aggressive way that the dates of their deaths were entered in this table.

5 Conclusion

After Tipu Sultan's death on 4 May 1799, the women of his palace abruptly went from being part of a pre-colonial court to being detained indefinitely by a colonial trading company. Forced to adapt to rules imposed by men with no understanding of the Mysore Sultanate's courtly traditions, these hundreds of women were moved to Vellore Fort, where they remained under house arrest for the rest of their lives. As professional performers and story tellers, the Musarratis had the training and confidence to become the spokeswomen of Tipu Sultan's inner court. They remonstrated their concerns to the outsiders who now controlled their lives, a role that even the highest-ranking women of the exiled court, the legal wives of Tipu Sultan and Haidar Ali, were incapable of doing.⁷⁶

The East India Company's arrangements for the women were limited to the provision and measurement of food, shelter and clothing. The funding for this was extracted from the new Wodeyar Kingdom of Mysore, and was implemented by East India Company employees, with the Fort Adjutant at Vellore overseeing their internment after their arrival in May-June 1802. In the early years of their captivity, perhaps through the intercession of Thomas Marriott, the young scholar who advised on their care, the women were able to introduce new servants, slaves and students to the mahals of Vellore Fort. In early 1806, just before the Vellore Mutiny, the women's allowances were cut, and their care under the East India Company veered away from how they were expecting to be treated.⁷⁷

The first recorded evidence of the Musarratis' protestations against their new colonial masters was in 1802, when the women forced through the introduction of over 200 newcomers into their entourages. Other incidents of protest continued over the following decades, such as the hiding of at least 25 deaths within the mahals to stop their allowances from being cut. When the bodies of the dead women were finally discovered in 1834, the East India Company regarded this act as a grotesque deception at the hands of women, who 'are often extremely petulant and troublesome [. . .] I have warned them that the probable consequence of such behaviour will be the en-

⁷⁶ For one example of such remonstrations, see A Andrews to Chief Secretary at Fort St George, Nov 1820. British Library, IOR/F/4/881/23029: 41–42.

⁷⁷ Jennifer Howes, "Tipu Sultan's Female Entourage under East India Company Rule," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 4 (2021): 866–67.

tire stoppage of these extra Rahtibs'.⁷⁸ The women, particularly the Musarratis, attempted to improve their lives under house arrest by deploying unusual tactics that took their European captors by surprise. The Company's response was to view them as 'petulant and troublesome',⁷⁹ and to accelerate their treatment as a perfunctory, administrative expense.

The East India Company struggled to control these 'outrageous' women, but to Vellore's exiled Mysorean citizens, the Musarratis were a source of information and entertainment. For these thousands of exiles, who held the Sultanate kingdom of Mysore in living memory, the women continued, through their court traditions, to hold power and influence. With their story telling abilities, the Musarratis were perfectly positioned to defame the Company's sepoy soldiers, and to plot the return of the Mysore Sultanate, which would hand power to their sons. The Vellore Mutiny was a historical flashpoint when the Mysoreans at Vellore unsuccessfully attempted to reinstate Tipu Sultan's dynasty, and it is unlikely to be a coincidence that it occurred after numerous performances by the Musarratis were held inside the fort.

The British at Vellore had little interest in the Musarratis, and no curiosity about how their traditions might have facilitated an ideological link between the deceased king and the exiled citizens of Mysore. Even though Tipu was dead, his capital looted and his subjects exiled, the Musarratis practiced traditions suffused with the ideologies of the court that they were trained to be part of. Because the East India Company's apparent control over these women lacked any engagement with their courtly roles, the women were, literally, free to act as the undetected mouthpiece of a subversive court culture for several decades.

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⁷⁸ Letter from G.M. Stewart at Vellore to the Chief Secretary of Govt, Fort St George, 11 Nov 1834, British Library, IOR/F/4/1485/58544: 97.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

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