





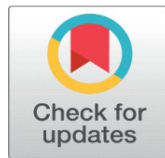
HEERAMANDI: A CRITICAL REVIEW ON THE ROLE OF THE COURTESANS IN INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE

Dr. Sudhir Kumar Patnaik ¹, Dr. Nikhil Kumar Gouda ², Rijitha R. ³

¹ Senior Assistant Professor, Department of Basic Science and Humanities, GMR Institute of Technology, (GMRIT)-Deemed to be University, Rajam, India

² Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Central University of Odisha, Koraput, India

³ Research Scholar, Department of Media and Communication, Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvavur, India



ABSTRACT

Media played an important role in disseminating the anti-colonial sentiments during India's freedom movement. Many cultural shows, dramas, and local festivals were used as a medium to spread secret messages and unite people against the British. Women, particularly the courtesans (tawaifs), contributed significantly through their unique social and artistic positions. Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar (2024) dramatizes these contributions, fusing fact with fiction to demonstrate how artistic expression functioned as a vehicle for rebellion. This paper explores the portrayal of courtesans as agents of alternative media and evaluates the balance between historical accuracy and cinematic romanticization.

Keywords: Alternative Media, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Heeramandi, Covert Communication, Social Network, Revolutionary Messages

Received 25 November 2025

Accepted 10 March 2026

Published 27 March 2026

Corresponding Author

Dr. Sudhir Kumar Patnaik,
sudhirkumar.p@gmr.it.edu.in

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i2s.2026.7094](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i2s.2026.7094)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



1. INTRODUCTION

Alternative media played a significant role in spreading the anti-English sentiment across India during Independence movement. Through newspapers, cultural performances, and covert communication channels, revolutionary ideas spread despite stringent British censorship. Thousands of people sacrificed their lives during India's struggle for Independence. Among them courtesans also had their own way of contribution. They supported the movement with their social networks exhibiting their artistry.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's series Heeramandi: [The Diamond Bazaar \(2024\)](#) blends facts with fiction and highlights the role of courtesans or the so called tawaifs in the backdrop of the red-light district of Lahore. These courtesans acted as secret communicators disseminating the anti-Colonial news and helping the freedom movement. Although the dramatization opens a fresh outlook, a critical view of the broader aspects related to the facts in the Heeramandi of Lahore in the 1920s.

2. ALTERNATIVE MEDIA CHANNELS AND RESISTANCE

During the independence struggle, the British imposed strict censorship, compelling revolutionaries to rely on alternative media such as pamphlets, cultural performances, and vernacular songs to disseminate their message [Hussain \(2017\)](#). Courtesans, with their vast social networks and influential patrons, became vital conduits for covert communication.

In Heeramandi, the character Hamid Mohsin Ali produces revolutionary pamphlets, defying colonial censorship [Chandra \(1997\)](#). This depiction emphasizes the ingenuity of alternative media channels in subverting British authority. However, the series could further explore the inherent risks faced by those involved in such endeavours.

3. COURTESANS AS CULTURAL AND MEDIA FIGURES

Historically, courtesans were more than entertainers; they were cultural icons and confidantes of the elite, occasionally engaging in political affairs [McCallum and Honig \(2004\)](#). For instance, a courtesan from Kanpur significantly contributed to the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny [Her Zindagi \(2020\)](#).

Heeramandi highlights courtesans' dual roles as artists and revolutionaries. Performances laden with symbolic messages served as covert communication tools, blending art with resistance [Chandra \(2020\)](#). The character Bibbojaan exemplifies this by smuggling weapons for freedom fighters, ultimately sacrificing her life for the cause. While this portrayal underscores their bravery, it simplifies the complex socio-political dynamics they navigated.

4. MEDIA IMPROVISATION AND SECRET NETWORKS

Courtesans in Heeramandi utilize innovative strategies to overcome British surveillance. For instance, the character Mallika's refusal to record songs on a phonograph highlights an acute awareness of media's dual-edged nature. Such improvisation underscores their resourcefulness in creating secret networks for exchanging critical information [Baruah \(2013\)](#).

The series sheds light on these clandestine practices but overlooks the broader limitations and societal constraints faced by courtesans. A more nuanced portrayal would enrich the narrative by acknowledging the intersectional challenges they encountered.

5. ROMANTICIZATION AND HISTORICAL ACCURACY

While Heeramandi brings marginalized voices to the forefront, it romanticizes courtesans' roles, portraying them as empowered figures who defied societal norms. This depiction risks oversimplifying their struggles and diminishing the systemic barriers they faced [Nanda \(2004\)](#).

Moreover, the series' focus on courtesans' clandestine messaging marginalizes other critical aspects of media practices during the independence movement. By presenting a more balanced perspective, the show could provide a holistic understanding of their contributions.

6. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

Unlike traditional historical dramas that spotlight prominent male revolutionaries, Heeramandi emphasizes marginalized voices and alternative media practices. This approach enriches our understanding of India's liberation struggle by highlighting the subtlety of resistance and the diversity of its participants [Walkowitz \(1980\)](#). However, a comparative analysis with other narratives could further contextualize its portrayal within broader historiographical discourses.

7. CONCLUSION

Heeramandi offers a compelling narrative that challenges conventional histories of India's independence. By spotlighting courtesans as cultural and media agents, the series redefines their roles and underscores the transformative power of media in revolutionary movements [Kaur \(2020\)](#).

The romanticized portrayal necessitates critical reflection on its historical accuracy and implications. As Heeramandi opens the platform to discuss the contributions of many in the freedom movement, particularly, the contribution of the courtesans that has been overlooked. It is important to highlight such narratives critically to gain a holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of India's freedom struggle.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Baruah, S. (2013). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chandra, B. (1997). *India's Struggle for Independence*. Penguin Books.
- Chandra, S. (2020). *The Cultural Politics of Performance: Courtesans in Colonial India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Guha, R. (2007). *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. HarperCollins.
- HerZindagi. (2020, May 5). 5 Unsung Courtesans Who Contributed to India's Independence.
- Hussain, M. (2017). The Press in the Indian Freedom Struggle: Role and Impact. *Journal of Media Studies*, 32(1), 45–58.
- Kaur, R. (2020). *Hidden in Plain Sight: Women Spies of the Indian Freedom Movement*. Routledge.
- McCallum, H., and Honig, E. (2004). *Courtesans in Renaissance Venice*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nanda, M. (2004). *Trafficking in Women and Children in India*. Orient Longman.
- Oldenburg, V. T. (1990). *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877*. Princeton University Press.
- Walkowitz, J. R. (1980). *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511583605>