Moving from the debates around obscenity, and high and low culture within print—which was accessible to a relatively small percentage of the population—let us look now at popular culture, oral narratives and the wider public and social spaces of women in this period. Here too the attempt to cleanse culture of perceived obscenities occupied centre stage. There were debates on theatre and the cinema, on women’s songs, and on women’s participation in Holi and fairs. Critics sought to restrict certain areas of leisure and recreation, especially of women and lower castes, and turn them into a ‘refined’, banal structure. With this reordering of entertainment, a traditional moral conservatism was reconstituted. At the same time, some of these attempts remained at the level of rhetoric and had a limited impact on the ground. This is reflected by the survival of many social practices, though in a substantially changed form.

Then there is the question of prostitutes in the urban areas of UP. Looking at their lives enables us to explore how cultural values were redefined in specific geographical locations. There were regular attempts to undermine and expel prostitutes from municipal limits, to ensure new norms of appropriate social conduct in respectable and civilised areas. Here too there were uneasy oscillations, and women tried to rework their own spaces.

I. Controls Over Entertainment

In her study on the leisure activities of the artisans of Banaras, Nita Kumar regrets confining herself to males. She says women were
entirely excluded from the world of public life and popular culture, and their sphere of entertainment was completely separate from that of men. Women had their social and cultural world, though this could occasionally commingle with that of men. Amusements, performances and festivals were closely woven into the fabric of daily life, and these also provided arenas of sociability across gender. Women in UP had limited scope for fun and leisure, but they did share in marriages, festivals and religious practices, these providing them a diversion from incessant routine. Obviously, much of this womanly sphere was not confined to an inner spiritual or private domain. It was part of neighbourhood life and social gatherings in villages, markets and towns, and could sometimes be a public spectacle.

S.W. Fallon’s extensive dictionary celebrated the separate private space of women while noting distinct features of zenani boli in the North Western Provinces. His narrative seems exaggerated and romanticised as he gives a wholly separate space to women’s voices; he also offers a particular view of language—that it grew in pure forms, isolated and within demarcated places. This does not seem altogether credible. It seems much more true to assert that there were overlapping and coexisting dialects: women’s language was not confined to the zenana, but escaped into social events and popular songs.

Moreover, women were pivotal to the rendition of imaginative narratives. In north India, as elsewhere, they dominated the world of singing joyous and sad songs, not always outside the hearing of men.


2 Thus for example, Holi saw the participation of women along with men. On other occasions, like fairs and pilgrimages, women could be seen participating alongside men.

3 In this chapter the focus is only on some cultural spheres. Women visiting pirs, pilgrimages and bathing ghats, travelling by trains, their sexual and other relationships, and their reading of novels have been dealt with in later chapters.


5 Sisir Kumar Das, A History of Indian Literature, Vol. III, 1800–1910: Western Impact, Indian Response (Delhi, 1991), p. 110. Das points out how a great corpus of all kinds of songs was created partly, if not entirely, by women, and it was they who mainly preserved and transmitted this corpus.