

From Mother To Daughter

—Women In Classical Music

INDIAN classical music, like all art forms, has had a long history. In the Indian tradition the artiste, the musician, has, for centuries, been a specialist, trained and skilled in the craft. The traditions have primarily been oral traditions handed down from parents to child, from *ustad* to *shagird* in an unbroken line, despite the political vicissitudes of history. If today music is recorded, written down, and taught in universities it is against this background of a centuries-old oral tradition whose roots lie in *Vedic* hymns, folk entertainment, household songs, and the integrated life of village communities.

One stream of our classical musical tradition has focused on elaboration of *raga*; building it up to “show” its structure and its own inherent meaning. Another stream equally abstract yet endearing in its use of certain other qualities closer to the lives and experiences of both performer and audiences—has used *raga* and poetry as its medium, through which to create *rasa* through their perfection in the depiction of *bhava*. The styles are not recent innovations. Thakur Jaidev Singh has identified such styles of music, Chalikyā or Chalitam, as mentioned in texts as early as the Yaduvansha Puran.

A Long Tradition

It is this second stream that is of interest to us here, being the stream that, by and large, has been associated with the voices of women singers and that we have come to know by the name of *thumri*, *dadra*. This is not to say that women singers were not versed in other styles, or that men were excluded from the performance of these expressive

styles. It is a fact that though much of what some of the great *ustads* of this century sang is not popularly remembered, their *thumris* are never forgotten—the names of Ustad Maujudeen Khan, Ustad Abdul Kareem Khan, Ustad Faiyaz Khan, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan are remembered as great *khayal* artistes, but above all, it is their *thumris*—‘*More Karamva Pe*’, ‘*Jamuna Ke Teer*’, ‘*Na manoongi*’, ‘*Aye na balam*’ that are almost synonymous with their names.

However, it is a fact that generally women have specialised in and excelled in this sphere of music making.

Contrary to current popular belief, *thumri* is not something to be tossed off lightly—a dash of sentimental sweet nothing—at the end of a serious programme of classical *khayal*. *Thumri-dadra* singing has its own strict traditions of training and technique.

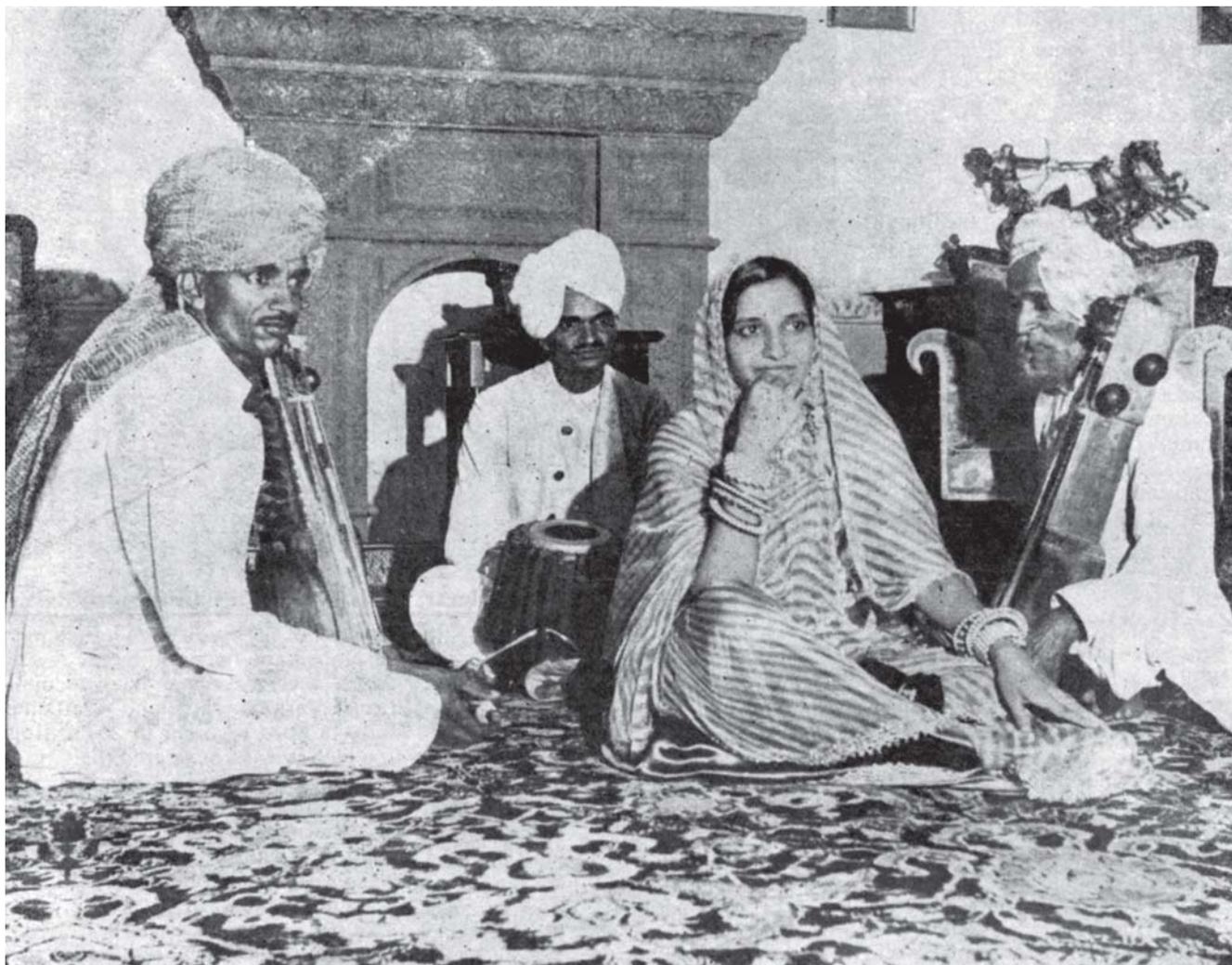
The *thumri* singer’s training consisted of a thorough understanding of all the art forms dance, painting, poetry; it was against this background of interlinked art traditions that *thumri* was nurtured, taught and performed. Some of the versatility of the performers can be grasped when it is pointed out that traditionally women began the evening’s concert with a *khayal*, then moved on to the many varieties and styles of *thumri*, *dadra*, *tappa*, *ghazal*, incorporating facial expressions and hand gestures, and full dance sequences in the course of the performance.

The ambience of the *mehfil* or gathering of a small group of intelligent listeners was ideal for such a performance where the slightest change

of mood, or depiction of *bhava* could be conveyed and understood. In fact, this art of total communication was considered women’s forte, and *khandani gavaiyas* also, in acknowledgement of this, considered it a part of their musical training to study with them. There is hardly any *gavaiya* of repute today or earlier who does not owe a musical debt to the great women artistes. The same is true of any *tabaliya* or *sarangiya* of repute—these musicians too have accompanied women singers’ performances and enriched their knowledge through generations of contact with the work of women artistes.

It is significant, if unfortunate, that very few will openly acknowledge this—owing perhaps to the changed sociocultural climate—endangering the tradition and repertoire of women singers, and denying them their true place in musical history and society. It is the near obliteration of the understanding of this tradition, and the danger of the tradition itself vanishing, that have prompted the undertaking of studies to document the repertoire of women singers, and their lives and work. It is necessary to point out again to a forgetful society the contribution of these women artistes.

From the days of “the death of music” following Aurangzeb’s *firman*, to the colonial Raj when music was steadily eroded from daily life, it was women singers who kept alive not only the artistic traditions, but also the artistes and their families, thus ensuring the continuity of these forms. For brief periods in between, it appeared that there was a revival of music, but closer



A professional singing woman, with sarangiya and tabaliya

examination shows that this was mainly patronage of women singers and dancers.

A Vast Range

Throughout history, there are recorded references to women performing artistes. In earlier times, their place as creators and sustainers of certain styles was recognised. Today, while some have managed to receive some publicity and acclaim, the majority are unknown even to many music lovers.

It is generally accepted that women's styles, *thumri* and *tappa*, for instance, are classicised versions of folk music and traditional music associated with rites of passage. It is less frequently acknowledged that women singers and

their styles and repertoire have in turn influenced the "classical" repertoires; that much of today's *khayal gayaki* has been influenced by these "light" repertoires, and that various *baaj* styles of *tabla* playing have developed around the needs of their particular style of vocal music or dance. It is noteworthy too that many *bandishes* noted as *druv khayals* by *Bhatkande* are in fact, originally *thumris*.

Certainly, the link between music and dance is quite evident. Music and dance as traditionally performed by women have also led to the creation of various styles and genres of instrumental and vocal music. Another point to remember is that though today's concert going

audience rarely hears women accompanists, traditionally some performances were accompanied by women playing on the *dholak*, *nal* and also *tabla* and *sarangi*. This was for performances within the *zenana* and generally during celebrations of life cycle events.

Another fact, not so well known, is the variety and range of the repertoire of women singers. Most of us are familiar with *thumri* and *dadra*, but the repertoire does not end there.

There is a vast range of styles—some associated with seasonal festivities like *Chaiti*, *Hori*, *Kajri*, *Sawan*, *Jhoola*, some with life cycle ceremonies, *sehra-banara*, *doli vadai*, *god-bharai*, *sohar*, at

mundan and *upanayan* ceremonies, and *shradh*; some depicting the entire canvas of the year like *barahmasa*; others associated with religious festivals—*soz*, *marsia*, *salaam*, traditional *bhajans* and *kirtan*, *mata jagran*; other styles associated with traditional theatre and peculiar to the region in which they were developed—*nautanki*, *lavani*—and of course *thumri*, *tappa*, *dadra*, *ghazal*, *khamisa*—with which audiences are more familiar. Even familiarity with the styles does not mean an understanding of their versatility. We tend today to think of *thumri* as a pleasant ending to an evening's concert of "serious" music. But women singers have carried the day on the versatility of *thumri* alone.

Devaluation And Decline

This repertoire of women singers is in danger of being lost to us forever. Why and how did the devaluation of women's musical work take place?

An immediate reason that springs to mind is the near collapse of the old system of patronage. Various scholars point out how relationships between musicians and patrons in the rural areas was linked with the *jajmani* system. This system of patronage continued to some extent even in provincial and urban centres which allowed for the growth of a high degree of musical sophistication and specialisation. That system of patronage has collapsed, and the new systems like the mass media, are not always able to recreate the personalised links and platforms of earlier days. Through the links of mutual duty and responsibility between *jajman* and *artiste*, generations of musicians were protected and ensured a means of livelihood.

Again, throughout history, there is evidence that performing artistes, among them women, were thought to enhance the prestige of the state. The state took pride in them and in their accomplishments, and frequently rulers would send groups of artistes to each other's states as a gesture of friendship. Standards created by the Delhi court were promptly adopted by the smaller states, as a sign of their status.



Three great singers—Siddheshwari Devi, Bari Moti Bai, Rasulan Bai

The blame for the changing social perceptions of music, its place in society, and the work of women singers has been laid at various doors. One opinion is that the decline in women's status generally and in the status of women musicians along with them, can be traced to medieval times and the advent of a series of invasions: there is the added fact mentioned that the invaders were Muslim. We do not accept this position. For one thing, there is the paradox that it was precisely this historical circumstance that led to the enrichment of all Indian art traditions and to the flowering of Indian music.

We would turn instead to another set of scholars who see the decline beginning with the advent of colonial rule. The British, both through insensitivity to the nuances of the culture and social institutions of the people they were ruling, and through various consciously introduced policies designed to govern their colony and to maintain their power position, created drastic changes in the people's ways of living, entertainment, eating and drinking.

Their policies also deeply affected both societal perceptions of relationships existing within Indian

society, and the people's own perceptions of their work and lives. Thus Oldenburg, writing about artisans, mentions how, after the annexation of Avadh, nearly 50 percent of the traditional handicrafts developed and nurtured by the Avadh court received no official recognition. Various crafts and craftsmen were lumped together in 26 headings to which it was considered their trade had the most affinity.* She feels that one result of this lumping together was that the nuances in the self perception of the workers as specialists was totally obliterated. Bookbinders and shoemakers, for instance, were grouped together, perhaps, only because they both worked in leather. The artisan's own pride in and emphasis on his special skill and training was ignored.

In the case of women singers, with the exodus of their erstwhile patrons from Lucknow, they had to perform for the entertainment of British soldiers (who had neither *tehzi* nor *tamiz*) or for the provincial *taluqdars*, who, though more sensitive, had not the musical understanding of their earlier patrons.

* Veena T Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow 1856-77*. Princeton, 1984.

Not All Nautch Girls

British colonial policy created a situation where all women singers were incorrectly, put into one category of “nautch girls” to be equated with “prostitute.” Several different groups can be identified. These groups maintain separate identities and do not intermarry. They also perform different functions. Groups can be enumerated as follows among Hindus: Kathak, Kinner, Gandharva, Ramjana; among Muslims: Dhari, Mirasi and Bhatt. Other groups of women mentioned by Mushtari Bai are Kanchan, Sawant, Ranjani, Bariki.

Each of these groups maintains a distinct identity and has a different history. Thus, according to Kishen Maharaj, the Kathak, Kinner and Gandharva are brahmins but not the Ramjana. Further, he says that among these first three groups, traditionally, women did not perform. At one point, Gandharva women began to perform which led to a decline in the status of this group. He further says that Gandharvas can trace their ancestry to the heavenly Gandharvas, the musicians of the gods, and to Narad Muni himself. Among the Muslim groups, Dharis are the group of Khan Sahib Log, while Mirasis, he says, are descended from women singers. Thus, they were the teachers. Women of the Dhari community were never performing artistes. Bhats, he says, are a Muslim group, but traditionally have Hindu names. He says this is due to their Hindu ancestry or links with castes like Bhats or Bhatias. For the last 20 or 25 years, Bhats have begun to use Muslim names which, Kishan Maharaj feels, could be due to the need for security during the increasing communal riots in view of the fact that they live in predominantly Muslim localities.

From speaking to Mahadev Mishra, it appears that women of the Ramjana, Mirasi and Bhat communities are not performing singers. He says the Ramjana community’s origins are unknown and explains this in terms of their name—“Ramjane” (god knows).

Tawaif As Teacher

Rameshwar Chaudhry spoke at length about the social organisation of the Deredar community, of which he is a member, and whose women have been performing artistes, keeping alive the genres and repertoires we are concerned with here.

He stressed the auspicious nature of the *tawaif* who is not only considered a creator and protector of culture but also a teacher of the younger generation of the patron group. These young men were sent to *tawaifs* to learn the arts and social graces as a necessary part of their



A traditional mujra

education. However, nowadays, he says, the *tawaifs* treated more as a vehicle for the satisfaction of the elite group.

The social organisation of the Deredar community is highly structured, with a Chaudhry or Chaudhrain acting as spokesperson for the group. Earlier, all of India, apart from south India, was under one single Chaudhrain. Rameshwar Chaudhry said that in his grandmother’s time, around the 1880s perhaps, this was Nanua Bachua. She was herself a student of the great Guru Bindadin.

Stressing the status and position of the Deredar group, he gave the following examples. The *tawaif* had earlier a high

economic position. She and her children received lands, property, costly gifts and money from the patron. He told an interesting story about Gohar Jan. When Gohar Jan was in Calcutta, it became the fashion for the wives of the rulers and of the nobility to drive out in richly appointed horse carriages. Seeing this, Gohar Jan also decided to do the same, and her carriage in fact was the most luxurious of all. On the discovery that a “commoner” was driving through this thoroughfare in this fashion, she; was intercepted and fined Rs 1,000. Gohar Jan immediately pulled out a bag full of gold

coins, told the official that he could pay the fine and keep the remaining amount for himself, and drove on.

According to Rameshwar Chaudhry, the *tawaifs* position as the: mistress of her patron was recognised and accepted by society and no aspersions were cast on her. Though, her contacts with the patron’s legal wife were generally minimal, her children frequently kept contact with their father, who also looked after their economic well being. Rameshwar Chaudhry repeatedly stressed however that this did not mean that the children of *tawaifs* received social recognition: they were not included among children born of his legal

marriage and their social status was lower. Though they were gifted lands and properties by their father, they had no inheritance rights in his property. Nor were they allowed to take their father's name or be included in his lineage. However, among Muslims, marriages were performed and recognised as valid and the children of such marriages were accepted socially.

It was, however, a matter of great social pride to belong to this group. Rameshwar Chaudhry mentioned one case where a Berni woman was very keen to be included as a member of this group. The group would not accept her despite her amazing ability as a vocalist because she was a Berni and as such, belonged to a community of prostitutes. Finally the Chaudhrain of Kanpur accepted her but this in turn led to the Chaudhrain's ostracism by the community.

Rameshwar Chaudhry also stressed that the fact that women singers lived and performed in a specific part of the city should not be construed to suggest, as is now the case, that this was a disreputable area.

Such prejudice stems from the colonial period and was not prevalent earlier. He says this spatial arrangement should be seen in terms of the fact that each area of the city was occupied by members of a specific occupational group, and there was no stigma attached to the area where singers lived and worked.

New Prejudices

Since 1947 we have an independent government of our own, but these women singers continue to face problems and prejudices.

Mass media, for instance, are not easily available to these women for performance. In fact, one of the first moves of the ministry of information and broadcasting after 1947 was to ban the performances of professional singing women. Even after the ban was lifted, famous singers like Anwari Bai and Kesar Bai Kerkar refused, as a symbol of protest, to perform for AIR. Nor has high tech equipment and mass media always been suitable for these styles. The

microphone, for instance, has affected these styles of singing to their detriment.

Music is now an accepted part of school and university curricula which demand that *thwnfi* also be taught. But what is heard, taught and performed as *thumri* or *ghazal* today, bears little resemblance to that sung by women of a generation ago.

Nor is it easy for a student to specialise in *thumri*. No important music conference devotes any programme exclusively to *thumri*. Even AIR *Sangeet Sammelan* has only one item of *thumri-dadra* as against six *khayal* programmes. Further, an auditioned A grade *Khayaliya* is automatically considered able to sing *thumri* but not vice-versa, despite the fact that it is not possible to sing *thumri* without a thorough understanding of *raga*. University departments of music rarely have *thumri* singers on the faculty nor is it common for the various music societies to organise *thumri* demonstrations.

For one reason or another, professional musician families are being edged out of the new avenues of training and performance like scholarship schemes and music festivals. Few even know how or where to apply for scholarships, and when they do, are often refused.

In other fields, the women suffer great harassment.** Their bitter complaint is that their source of work and earning through classical performance is being denied to them. Mass media are inaccessible. The *mehfil*, for want of educated patrons, is almost extinct. Their patrons today, by and large, want film songs and disco type music and have neither understanding of nor interest in classical styles. As a result of this, few performers are able to perform classical

** Rita Ganguli's interview with Sharada Sahai, torch-bearer of the Ram Sahai *gharava*, who said he was refused a scholarship on the grounds that he came from a family of musicians and so had no need to avail of training from any other sources.

Information in this section is from Rita Ganguly's interviews with several professional singing women.

music as they would like to.

Police harassment of the performers and their audience is also a factor they have to contend with, discouraging many from patronising their performances. They are forced to wind up performances by 9 p.m. while, ironically, in adjoining streets, prostitutes ply their trade with no restriction on time.

With the increasing inroads into their areas of work and earnings, what are their options? Education, frequently considered the answer to all problems, is, in fact if not in theory, denied them. As one woman said, schools insist that the father's name be given as guardian and wish to deal only with the father—placing the women in a particularly difficult position. Even if they get admission for their children, they are harassed and teased by their class fellows and teachers, and young girls face the eternal problem of sexual harassment. Apropos this last, one woman said, she herself had, in her youth, never been subjected to such degrading behaviour though she had been a professional performer throughout her life.

Everywhere there is neglect of, even prejudice against, these women who have contributed so greatly to classical music.

Second Thoughts On A Life Once Lived

*We learned
to love
by giving
They laughed
and loved
by taking
The circle still remains
from wedding band
to grave
And love is only
a hole in the bed...
Tell me, I ache to know
Why
we struggle and fight
and cling
to the circle so ?*

—Lopa Banerjee