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by Syeda Armeen Nasim

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Music of South Asia



Fall 2020**MUS 101: Music of South Asia****Name:** Syeda Armeen Nasim**Student ID:** sn04063**Submitted to:** Yousuf Kerai

Rationale:

Choosing a final topic for one's paper is a great deal, for in a way it reflects upon as a culmination of your learning experience, for that particular course. 'Music of South Asia' however, was an entire journey in itself – and one that I would like to believe is ongoing. There is so much to more know, learn, and understand about when it comes to the history of South Asian Music, which is why I am extremely excited about the course next semester. However in choosing what to talk about as my 'final contribution' to this particular course, I operated in the typical fashion that I do generally about things I love to learn about. Here is an example: my entire love for and understanding towards Old Bollywood stemmed from my obsession with one figure and that would be *Hema Malini* – and it is the same for any little knowledge that I have about classical dance forms of subcontinent, specially *Bharatnatyam* which Hema Malini continues to perform, long after her career in Bollywood is over. Now, in case any SDP faculty or student comes across this, I would like to add how deeply disappointed I am by her politics – she is after all a BJP Parliamentarian, but I continue to recognize her for the force that she was once in the film industry and through her the journey I have had of indulging in the cinema of days gone by and by extension – dance and music.

Similarly, this semester, alongside this course, I was taking another course that is 'The World of Qurratulain Hyder' and coincidentally – during the time we were covering the module of *ghazal* and *thumri* in 'Music of South Asia', we were reading the novel '*Gardish e Rang e Chaman*' for this course. The said novel is called a 'semi documentary work' by the author herself, for it is loosely based around the life events of a mother daughter duo who were *tawaifs* in Calcutta. While the novel expands upon many other themes, it primarily captures the lives of these *tawaifs* or as the more colonial term would state the 'nautch girls'. It was thus this coincidence of covering these two things in different terms in two different courses simultaneously, that I discovered the figure that is 'Gauhar Jaan' (and not to mention, her mother: Bari Malka Jaan). Which brings me to my rather out of context reference to Hema Malini, the point being, like Hema Malini who served for me as an anchor to discovering cinema and dance – Gauhar Jaan (as well as Begum Akhtar, not to forget) became my anchor to venture into this musical niche, associated with the courtesans, the *tawaifs*, the *nautch girls* – whatever the term be, opened upon me a world of a different kind. And while I have read a lot about Begum Akhtar, and we have had the chance to discuss her in class as well, I believe this final project became the perfect chance to read more into the life of Gauhar Jaan.

While this paper is being written under extremely unusual and pressurizing times, where being alive feels like a fleeting uncertain moment that might cease any minute; it might not be what I initially dreamt of it to be, and the quality might suffer as well – but at least it is giving me an escape into another world. Like music which can be felt, literature too has some powerful qualities and by taking a closer look into the life of this powerful figure in Hindustani musical and cultural history, Gauhar Jaan, has allowed me to momentarily take a break from everything else.

*‘Lutf hai kaun si kahani mein
Aap beeti kahoon keh jag beeti?’*

‘Which story would you find more pleasing?

Should I narrate the tale of the world or the one of my life?’

Introduction:

For those who know, the couplet that I conveniently choose as a title for this paper, appears in Mirza Hadi Ruswa’s ever popular novel: ‘Umrao Jaan Ada’. Then there is little surprise that this can fit aptly upon Gauhar Jaan, in fact more so – for this woman lived a fascinating life and existed within fascinating times of great change and advances – an era which saw rapid changes within one’s lifetime. This paper can almost be read as a book review, for my entire research (I did read a lot of articles about Gauhar Jaan and the musical style of *thumri* – but they are limiting and reiterate the same basic premises) relies primarily upon an in depth work on the life, music, and times of Gauhar Jaan i.e. “My Name is Gauhar Jaan: The Life and Times of a Musician” by Vikram Sampath. Sampath’s book was a treat to read, and covers in depth ethnographic research and consolidates all available research about Gauhar Jaan. Utilizing the contents of this book therefore, I will try to talk about Gauhar Jaan in three ways: her biography – to understand who she was and how she rose to prominence the way she did, her music – which is basically our primary focus in this course, and the society during the time she lived – the during and aftermath of British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent and what it meant for women, specially these women, the rise and fall of the courtesans. I have still not concluded which term I prefer to use: *tawaif*, courtesan, or nautch girl – for all these terms are culturally loaded and have distinct connotations. Which is also why reading about and writing this paper is an important exercise, to understand the lives of those we have conveniently pushed towards the margins in the name of respectability. Therefore, there are endless reasons to write this paper for me personally, no matter if a lot of classmates thought of writing along similar themes – perhaps we should be talking more about it.

This is Vikram Sampath’s second book, preceded by his work on the history of Mysore (I get excited about this bit because my grandparents migrated from Mysore, another reason this subject caught my eye) – his first book is thus titled “Splendors of Royal Mysore: The Untold Story of the Wodeyars (Rupa & Co, 2008)”:

“Has been widely acclaimed across India. The book traces the 600 year long history of Mysore, its royal family and culture. It has been termed as one of the most definitive accounts on the Mysore royal family in recent times.”

And it was research for his first book which led him upon documentary evidence about Gauhar Jaan's stay in Mysore – which is where she eventually breathed her last and is her resting place. About this book, it is noted that:

“Sampath's second book "My Name is Gauhar Jaan!" - The Life and Times of a Musician (Rupa & Co, 2010) is the biography of Gauhar Jaan, India's first classical musician to record on the gramophone. The book has been hailed by several luminaries in India and abroad - ranging from Smt. Sonia Gandhi, Shri Shyam Benegal, and Smt. Rajashree Birla to renowned maestros like Pandit. Jasraj, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Smt Girija Devi, Pandit. Shivkumar Sharma, Smt Shubha Mudgal and others. The book also won the prestigious ARSC (Association of Recorded Sound Collections) International Award for Excellence in Historical Research, the first Indian book to have ever won this honor.”

Therefore it is a credible resource to work with and within the scope of this paper. Additionally, Vikram Sampath is trained in Carnatic Music and thus for this book, he expressed the challenges he had to face in familiarizing himself with Hindustani music as well as learning Urdu which he did in order to decipher Malka Jaan's *dewan* – i.e. Gauhar Jaan's mother's compiled works of Urdu poetry, mostly *ghazals*.

Main text:

It is rather simple to provide the details of the year and day Gauhar Jaan was born, however it remains important to our overall narrative to understand the social backdrop and therefore contextualize – the journey of a certain Eileen Angelina Yeoward to go on and become the famous Gauhar Jaan. We thus pick up the story of a certain woman named Rukmani, during the mid-19th century, the year 1855, who became the *Bibi* of a certain Englishman named Hardy Hemmings. She converted to Christianity and was officially baptized as Mrs. Elijah Hemmings. While the impermanence of such liaisons in those days were obvious, theirs was a harmonious household, their elder daughter, born in the year 1857 was named Adeline Victoria Hemmings. But as fate would have it, Hardy Hemmings met an untimely death, leaving his young household to fend for themselves. Since Rukmani was a native Bibi of an Englishman, she had nothing to her name, with Hemming's passing away, life turned upside down. Rukmani took up a job in a dry ice factory on meagre wages thereby running her household on limited means. The children were deprived of formal education, however, the elder daughter, Adeline Victoria, was naturally bright and had a flair for poetry – she used to compose verses early on. In time, an engineer of Armenian descent, a certain Mr. Robert William Yeoward was appointed as the manager of the dry ice factory where Rukmani worked. This 20 year old gentleman took a liking to Adeline Victoria who had inherited the good looks of her English father and thus Robert sought her hand in marriage. Adeline was 15 at the time. Their marriage was solemnized on September 10th, 1872 at the Holy Trinity Church of Allahabad. The family moved into Robert's mansion in Azamgarh, and theirs was a happy household – it was here in Azamgarh, on June 26th, 1873 that Robert and Adeline were blessed with a daughter who was baptized at the Allahabad Methodist Episcopal Church on June 3rd, 1875 as 'Eileen Angelina Yeoward'.

Soon however, Robert had to relocate from Azamgarh on grounds of a job offer, which left Victoria and their young daughter alone. Victoria in her husband's absence became increasingly lonely, and she sought refuge in poetry. She was encouraged to pursue her love for poetry by her neighbor, a certain man named Jogeshwar Bharati. This however started the rumor mills in the neighborhood

and sowed the seeds of jealousy in Robert's heart – who eventually accused Victoria of infidelity and filed the petition for divorce, Victoria did not challenge the case and the two officially separated in the year 1879. The family was back to a life of penury and Victoria tried her best to find ways to run the household – however it was not easy with a young daughter. She used to take singing lessons for the children of their neighborhood and it is here that a certain man Khurshid stepped in her life:

“It was at this critical juncture that a Muslim nobleman of the town named Khurshid came into their lives. Khurshid was a man of refined tastes and was fond of Urdu poetry and the lyrical Qawwalis. He also managed to play a little bit of the Esraj himself. He had seen Victoria in one of her music classes and had realized that she had no one to fall back on. Khurshid decided to step in and support the family in its worst moment of crisis.

But it was not some philanthropic urge that led Khurshid to take on the responsibility for Victoria and her family. Victoria's stunning looks had attracted him since the time he had seen her first. He demanded sexual favors from the young woman in return for his help. Victoria was at a crossroads in her life. Her decisions had to be instantaneous, even though they would be life-changing. Her daughter was critically ill, and the only man she loved dearly had spurned her. To stand on her chastity in anticipation of the return of her husband and decline the offer of sustenance seemed meaningless. Besides they desperately needed male support. So Victoria, having very little choice, knowingly and willingly, submitted to Khurshid's designs. Outwardly, Khurshid was the total antithesis of Robert, dark, insensitive and crass. However he took complete charge of the family immediately. The little girl was given proper and timely medical care and she survived. It was a small price that Victoria had paid!” (Sampath, p. 39)

But they became the talk of the town, so much so that they had to leave Azamgarh – thus in 1879, Khurshid moved the family to the nearest big city to escape the lewd comments of their neighbors. They moved to Banaras, the city of light –

“By the time Khurshid and his entourage came to Banaras, the town was a teeming center for religious, commercial and musical activity. One of the first steps that Victoria took upon reaching Banaras was to forsake all the identities related to her past. She did not want another Azamgarh kind of situation in Banaras and decided to not only change her name but also convert to the religion of her benefactor Khurshid. Accordingly Victoria and her daughter Angelina converted to Islam and assumed new names. Victoria now became Malka and her daughter was named ‘Gauhar’ which in Persian meant the most precious jewel. Gauhar was indeed the only bright spot in the troubled life of her mother. She was affectionately called ‘Gaura.’” (Sampath, p. 42-43)

Khurshid on his part, helped Malka to overcome her past troubles,

“Khurshid tried his best to get Malka out of her melancholy and allowed her the indulgences that gave her the maximum pleasure. He appointed Hussain Ahmed Asghar and Qadar Hussain to teach her classical Persian and hone her literary skills in the process. Hakim Banno Sahib ‘Hilal’ gave her lessons in Urdu. Zeenat Bibi, a famed dancer-singer of Banaras, was appointed to train Malka in classical music. She later learnt music under Kalloo Ustad and dance under Ali Baksh, a dancer from Lucknow who had migrated to Banaras looking for patronage after the British occupation of Oudh. The pursuit of music and literature served as a balm for Malka's troubled heart and she slowly emerged out of her tumultuous past in Azamgarh. Gradually Malka started becoming a well-known name in the locality and rich patrons began to seek her to listen to her poetry or her mellifluous singing.” (Sampath, p. 43)

At this point, it is important to understand what it meant to be a *Tawaif* and the complex sociopolitical and cultural layout of India under the British colonial rule.

What did it mean to be a Tawaif?

Etymology:

“A courtesan in the North Indian context was called tawaif or baiji. One school of thought opines that the word ‘Tawaif’ has its origins in a Sanskrit word that means circumambulation of the holy sanctum sanctorum of temples by a group of entertainers and performers. Another school of thought suggests that it is the plural form of the Arabic word ‘Taifa’ which means a group. Whatever the etymology of the word, it is certain that the tawaif held a position in society that was markedly different from that of the common prostitutes who were called ‘veshyas’ or ‘ganikas’. In ancient Indian scriptures, a sacrificial offering to the Gods was deemed incomplete unless accompanied by the ritualistic performance of professional women singers. This exalted status was given to these women only because they were the practitioners of an ancient and divine art.” (Sampath, p. 45)

With the decline of the Mughal empire post 1857, the seat of culture and learning as well as patronage shifted to the Kingdom of Oudh, ruled by the Nawabs, albeit as puppets of the British officials. The city of Lucknow ushered in a golden era for these tawaifs. They excelled in music, dance, poetry and prose and were of immaculate refinement. Much so that it was normal practice for the aristocrats to send their young sons to tawaifs to be trained in the art of letters and courtly etiquette or *Adab* as it was called in Oudh.

Etiquette and social order:

“The tawaif subscribed to a strict, if unwritten code of conduct. She was usually part of a household presided over by a chief courtesan or *chaudhrayan*. This house was called a *kotha*, which typically consisted of a main performing hall in the upper storey which was lined with mirrors. Invariably there was a caged parrot in the center of the performance room. The presence of mirrors all around the performing hall was symbolic. One was being watched all the time and was expected to behave with dignity and decorum. If there were no mirrors all around, it could be a brothel and not a *kotha* or a tawaif’s salon.

The tawaif community had thirteen major groups across the country and each was headed by its own *chaudhrayan*. These groups were based in Lahore, Karachi, Lucknow, Patna, Muzaffarpur, Chhapra, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Dhaka, Bhopal, Karnataka, Poona and Bombay.” (Sampath, p. 46)

There was an elaborate code of conduct for the performance, the familial structure of the *kotha* as well as the attendees of these *mehfils*. However that is not our point of interest here. There existed a rigid social hierarchy, can be visualized as a pyramid, in terms of classifying this community of professional women performers. The Tawaifs were at the top of this social hierarchy, and even in between them, the *Bai* was above the *Jaan* – the distinction being that the Bai would only sing while the Jaan would sing and dance. Another important distinction to understand is that,

“The community also had a rigid social hierarchy. One had to be born to a tawaif and claim a lineage to be accepted as a tawaif. Girls who were kidnapped were never inducted into the performing space of a tawaif. They were consigned to flesh trade. Thus a clear distinction between tawaifs and prostitutes was always made in society.” (Sampath, p. 47)

The tawaifs were well aware of their importance and took pride in their social status,

“The tawaifs or baijis took great pride in their lineage which they traced back to several generations. Some even claimed their descent from the heavenly courts of Indra and called themselves Urvashi or Gandharva. In fact the three main gotras or genealogical lines of the community were Gandharva, Kinnar and Rajmani—

the names themselves having their roots in ancient Sanskrit mythology. The tawaifs thus positioned themselves as purveyors of a divine art that had been re-contextualized in secular courts.” (Sampath, p.48)

The duality of emancipation & exploitation:

In times when there exists an entire body of literature on the strict system of *purdah* or the ongoing reformist struggle of allowing access to education for women – the *Tawaifs* constituted of a unique reality within the same patriarchal structure:

“The tawaif operated in society with a range of options open to her, none of which were available for a traditional woman from ‘respected families.’ Women from traditional families were never allowed to pursue the arts in the public domain. But for the tawaifs the fine arts was their monopoly and those who strove to reach the pinnacle of success in the field, did manage to get there as well. Those tawaifs who wished to settle down in life had the option of an open marriage as well. However those who wanted to lead independent lives were at liberty to do so too. Prostitutes were however denied this privilege. More often than not, the tawaifs who opted for the open-marriage route selected the wealthiest and most well established men in society. By virtue of their refined etiquette and good looks, most tawaifs were sought after anyway.

Women from respectable families were seldom given an education, let alone such options. It is interesting to note that only the names of tawaifs figure among the women tax-payers of the times, proving that they were the only female property owners of those days.” (Sampath, p. 49)

Thus, at a time when most women in India were illiterate, the tawaifs were accomplished in the finest of fine arts and were skilled poets, authors, musicians and dancers themselves. However, at the end of the day they operated in the same patriarchal framework, at the mercy of their patrons and all those who wielded power – often exploited at the hands of male authority figures, the locals and later on the English foreigners alike. Moreover, the fact that despite being epitomes of learning and the very center of culture – they were not deemed ‘respectable’. And as the sociopolitical order changed swiftly at the turn of the 20th century, we will see how rapidly the social status of these tawaifs changed. Therefore, it remained a dual edged sword, of being emancipated – liberated and independent in their individual existence and yet exploited by the larger structure under which they served.

To pick up on the story of Malka *Jaan* with her arrival in Banaras and being formally trained into music and dance. With the public attention and invitations to perform in Banaras, Malka soon gained prominence and a reputation and therefore rose to the stature of a known tawaif. An important thing to note at this point is mentioned by the author:

“It is pertinent to note that given the rigid social structure of the community, outsiders would not be easily accepted into the fold. But since Malka did eventually gain recognition and acceptance as a tawaif, one may infer that Rukmani may have belonged to a tawaif community herself. Like many tawaifs who married their rich benefactors, she had married Hardy Hemmings at Azamgarh. Besides, the fact that Rukmani, who was with the family during these major changes, hardly protested her daughter’s conversion or her taking to public performance bolsters the belief that she was possibly a tawaif herself. In the absence of supporting documentary evidence, however one can only conjecture about this.” (Sampath, p. 50)

However, with the suffix of *Jaan* added to Malka’s name, the obvious conclusion is that she officially became part of the closely guarded tawaif community. It is important to note that she was called *Bari Malka Jaan* to distinguish her from three other famous Malka Jaan-s of her time.

It was with time that Malka Jaan was rising to prominence and popularity and Gauhar was growing up, under similar influences. Gauhar had inherited her mother's talent for music and poetry, and Malka Jaan noticed her innate ability and started her training as a singer. After her initial training under her mother's wing, Malka Jaan wanted Gauhar to be put under the tutelage of the best available. Banaras as a city had no dearth of musicians,

"The city had no dearth of musicians, but Malka Jaan wanted the best person to train her daughter. She approached one of the stalwarts of classical music, Pandit Bechoo Mishra, who was a versatile artiste, and had mastered several genres of North Indian classical music like *khayal*, *thumri*, *tappa* and *tarana*. He played the sarangi as well. Bechoo Mishra belonged to a family of musicians. His father Pandit Buddho Mishra and younger brother Thakur Prasad were also musicians. When he heard young Gauhar's voice, he recognized the talent in her and readily agreed to teach her. He was a strict disciplinarian and ensured that Gauhar learnt her basics well. She was slowly being groomed into the art of performing. With a mother as popular as Malka Jaan, she did not need any other role models." (Sampath, p. 57)

With time, Gauhar accompanied her mother to her performances and the mother daughter duo immediately captured the audience's attention. Around them, things were changing, the last Nawab of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah was deposed and exiled to Calcutta. With the Nawab moving to Calcutta, the cultural center gradually shifted from Lucknow to the emergent center of Calcutta. Baldev, Malka Jaan's agent, advised her to relocate to Calcutta as it will change the fortunes of their family. Khurshid, the man who supported Malka Jaan so far in all her endeavors also encouraged this move, since his textile business was not doing too well and Calcutta would provide a fresh opportunity. Therefore in the year 1883, Malka Jaan along with young Gauhar, relocated once again, this time to Calcutta. Khurshid and Malka Jaan rented a place in the Chitpur locality of Calcutta, the fact that Malka Jaan was already a famous Bai of Banaras, it was easier for them to navigate Calcutta and soon invitations for concerts and performances started coming her way. Calcutta was on the crossroads of the old and new, a new emergent class of men educated in Western education formed the new literate class of society, commonly known as the *bhadralok* and like the old Zamindars they too wanted to exert influence and wield power and thus the patronage for music and arts continued to flourish.

As Malka Jaan's popularity continued to grow, she soon received an invite to perform from the court of Wajid Ali Shah. Malka Jaan and Gauhar both performed with intense emotion and captured the attention of the deposed Nawab. They were richly rewarded by the Nawab and Malka Jaan was appointed as court musician while Wajid Ali Shah blessed young Gauhar wishing her an illustrious music career. Another significant thing happened in the court that day. We will understand this part of Gauhar's life through the distinct *guru-shishya* or *ustad-shagird* tradition central to the preservation and key definition of Indian musical phenomenon.

Ganda bandhan – tying the musical knot

Present that day in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, was Bindadin Maharaj –

"Bindadin Maharaj, the son of the resident dancer of the Nawab's court. Bindadin (1836-1917) is regarded as one of the most important figures in the development of the *thumri* genre of Hindustani music as also the North Indian classical dance form of Kathak. He established a distinctive style that came to be known as the Lucknow Gharana. His father Durga Prasad and uncle Thakur Prasad had established themselves as dancers in Wajid Ali Shah's court. Bindadin and his brother Kalika Prasad brought about a renaissance in Kathak and

raised it to a high level of sophistication. Bindadin had started learning dance from his father and uncle from the age of nine. As a young boy of 12, he had challenged the percussion wizard and ace *pakhawaj* player, Pandit Kudau Singh, on matters of rhythm. The dispute was settled in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah who watched with astonishment the young lad's dexterity in both theoretical and practical aspects of the art. From then on there was no looking back for Bindadin Maharaj and he emerged as one of the most respected members of the Nawab's court." (Sampath, p. 62)

Malka Jaan's very purpose to locate to Calcutta was to gain recognition and expose young Gauhar to more experienced teachers, Bindadin noticed the talent of Gauhar and agreed to make her his disciple. An elaborate *ganda bandhan* ceremony marked Gauhar's entry into Bindadin's school.

"This was a customary ritual in the learning and teaching of music in North India. A teacher tied a sacred thread around the wrist of his or her student. The thread symbolized the commitment that both the teacher and the taught were making to the pursuit of the art. The student was given whole black gram (*kala channa*) and jaggery to munch after this ceremony. It was meant to convey to the pupil that proficiency in the art was not something that was easily achievable and like those dry black grams, a 'hard nut' to crack. But as a token of encouragement, the jaggery was offered signifying that the result of such rigorous *riyaz* or practice would be sweet success." (Sampath, p. 62)

Apart from being taught by Bindadin, Malka Jaan wanted Gauhar to have a well-rounded education and expand her repertoire,

"She sent Gauhar to take lessons in Bengali songs from the famous Bamacharan Bhattacharya, who was a court singer of the Maharaja of Panchakot and also a distinguished invitee at Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's court. Ramesh Chandra Das Babaji taught Gauhar the devotional Bengali Kirtans, an essential component of the Vaishnava tradition of Bengal propounded by the likes of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Srijanbai imparted to her the more esoteric and contemplative genre of Dhrupad-Dhamar. In those days a thorough grounding in Dhrupad, one of the oldest forms of Hindustani music, was considered essential for singers of the khayal and thumri as well. In addition to this, Malka Jaan appointed Mrs De Silva to teach Gauhar English and also hum a few English tunes. She herself taught her daughter Urdu and Persian and also guided her in the art of penning verses. Soon Gauhar was able to read, write and sing in several languages like Hindustani, Bengali, English, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu and could speak English and French as well." (Sampath, p. 63)

Gauhar thus continued to absorb and learn, and her ability to learn from a plethora of sources is what would soon set her apart – throughout her lifetime, Gauhar expanded upon her versatility by never shying away from learning not only from multiple *Ustaads* but also from her contemporaries. In times when music was a well-guarded secret between *gharanas* and lineages, Gauhar sought to learn from wherever she could and was equally generous in imparting her knowledge to others.

"At a time when most traditional musicians swore by the *gharana* system with its water-tight compartments that was so prevalent in Hindustani music, Gauhar and many other women musicians of her time, were emancipated enough in their thinking to realize that music could not be bound by such narrow, geographical and stylistical limitations and that a healthy interaction and intermixing of styles to create one's own individual style was important." (Sampath, p. 88)

While on the topic of musical education – I will break away from Gauhar's journey to elaborate upon a curious phenomenon which took place within the folds of this well guard and rigid system of *guru-shishya parampara*. It is elaborated in the book through an incident that took place in Gauhar's life in relation to Ustad Kale Khan of Patiala Gharana who visited Calcutta, and Gauhar who was always eager to learn asked him to be her teacher,

“Kale Khan agreed to take her on as his pupil and since he had few options for residence in Calcutta, readily consented to stay in a portion of her house. The teaching sessions began in right earnest. Gauhar was a meticulous student and very quickly assimilated all that he taught her. But sadly the teaching sessions and the proximity to Gauhar bred evil ideas in Kale Khan’s mind. According to Dilip Mukhopadhyay, one day he held her close and told her, ‘Tum mera dil bhar do aur main tumhe dil bhar ke gana sikhaoonga.’ (Satisfy me and I shall happily teach you all the music that I know.)” Gauhar was both enraged and outraged. This indecent proposal from the man she respected as her guru was an affront. She asked him to leave her house immediately and not show his face to her again.” (Sampath, p. 186)

It is further elaborated:

“The Kale Khan episode underscored a common and generally accepted phenomenon in the teaching and learning of Hindustani music those days. Many eminent women singers, including the legendary Begum Akhtar have spoken about the casual and repeated misdemeanors of the male ustaads with their female disciples. Expecting sexual favors from them or molesting them in return for knowledge rarely evoked anger, outrage or surprise. It was yet another indication of a debased system where music was equated with a variety of vices.” (ibid.)

Simultaneously existed another phenomenon:

“Closely allied with this was the tendency of the ustaads to be half-hearted in teaching their tawaif students. This point is borne out in Muhammad Ali Ruswa’s celebrated novel ‘Umrao Jaan.’ The famous tawaif of Lucknow, Khanum Jaan despite being so knowledgeable in music herself, had employed an ustad to train her girls because tawaifs could gain musical legitimacy only through association with gharanedar musicians. However, the resident ustad hardly made any attempt to correct the mistakes of his female students when they sang scales of ragas wrongly. It was Khanum’s intervention that forced the ustad to mumble the actual notation of the raga, but again in a half-hearted fashion.” (ibid.)

On teaching a *Tawaif*:

“Scholars like Kumar Mukherjee have elucidated **three kinds of musical training that these hereditary male musicians imparted: that given to their own male relatives, that given to the tawaifs and that given to the non-kin male students.** Obviously their own kin were top on their priority list in terms of the quality and dedication put into their training. They were taught the choicest compositions and special features that distinguished their particular gharana. After all it was ‘family property,’ and the next of kin had the first right over it as the future torch-bearers. While the ustaads might have maintained strict discipline and expected the same rigor from their tawaif students, they purposely kept their training incomplete. They were taught just as much as necessary to become skilled entertainers and there were no esoteric underpinnings, just cold pragmatism. Mukherjee speaks of a famous incident in this regard. **Munnibai, a tawaif, was a famous student of Ustad Abdul Karim Khan and was a highly talented artist. Her rendition of Ragas like Bilaskhani Todi would go on for a minimum of one to one and a half hours, with no repetitive sounding phrases and passages. Ustad Alladiya Khan heard one such concert of hers and was stunned. He immediately chided the guru saying, ‘What are you doing? Just teach her as much as is required. If she starts singing for one and a half hours, who will listen to us?’**” (Sampath, p. 187)

This is a crude reminder of how a tawaif, at the end of the day operated under these rigid frameworks which might not be in her favor after all. But it is important to note that there was reform in this complex world of teaching music as the years progressed. Bhatkhande is one key figure noted for his scholarship and influence in how the world of Indian music evolved.

It is noted that, gradually the mindsets of the ustaads of these gharanas changed. Doyens like Ustad Alladiya Khan and Ustad Abdul Karim Khan began to induct women from both ‘respected’ backgrounds and from the tawaif lineage as well, into their hallowed fold and groom them into

consummate artists. In fact, when one analyzes the list of women artists who ruled the roost in the last three quarters of the last century as gharanedar musicians, most of them came from the Jaipur and Kirana gharanas. (ibid.)

Therefore we see, that despite careful preservation through strict disciplinarian training, and guarded lineages the world of Hindustani classical music has evolved in its own ways – the changes are subtle but important and transformative which can be reflected in instances as simple as who is allowed to learn music and to what extent.

The journey of becoming Gauhar Jaan:

The book elaborates at length on Gauhar's life but here we will focus on the when Gauhar became Gauhar Jaan and on the two defining aspects of her famed existence; the genre of *Thumri* and the Gramophone. Once Gauhar's formal training was complete, there was an initiation ritual to formally introduce her as a tawaif. Once when Malka Jaan was invited for a concert at the Darbhanga court – she sent Gauhar alone instead of accompanying her. This proved to be a turning point in Gauhar's life. On the importance of the Darbhanga court:

“The principality of the Darbhanga Raj owed its origins to Mahesh Thakurji who was appointed by Emperor Akbar to be the tax collector of the Mithila region (today's Bihar state). Slowly the family consolidated itself at Darbhanga and became the largest zamindari in India. It was also touted as the best managed estate at the time of abolition of zamindari. Assuming the title of 'Maharaja', the zamindars lived regally and were great patrons of education, architecture, music and literature. By the 19th century, Darbhanga had emerged as an important seat of Hindustani classical music in the north. Their patronage to Dhrupad led to the creation of a separate Darbhanga Gharana, which was propagated by the Mallicks of Darbhanga. Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh Bahadur (1860-1898) was a well-known philanthropist and connoisseur and an accomplished player of the sitar himself. Performing in front of such a learned connoisseur and musician, was a matter of great prestige for Gauhar.” (Sampath, p. 69)

Albeit with due hesitation of performing alone for the first time, Gauhar's years of training bore fruit and she impressed Maharaja with her performance in the court and was therefore appointed court musician in the Darbhanga Raj the same day. Her success at the Darbhanga concert qualified her to add a suffix to her name and be called 'Gauhar Jaan' henceforth.

After her success at Darbhanga she was flooded with concert opportunities from various households of Calcutta and also outside. No self-respecting mehfil was considered complete without her presence. A popular saying of those days was '*Gauhar ke bina mehfil, jaise shauhar ke bina dulhan.*' (A concert without Gauhar is like a bride without her groom.) (Sampath p. 70)

Professionally, there was no looking back for Gauhar Jaan now – and having achieved these heights of fame, no one would have guessed, not even Gauhar Jaan herself, that with the turn of the century, a new invention will catapult her fame to newer heights and make her a household name.

Thumri and the case of 'light classical':

A brief history of Indian music:

- It is normally believed that until the advent of the Muslim invaders into Northern India in the 12th and 13th centuries, a common system of music prevailed across the country. The

music of Northern India was thereafter greatly influenced by Persian and Iranian music, while the South being unaffected by the invasions maintained its own system of music. This led to the bifurcation of Indian classical music into the two prevalent styles of Hindustani or North Indian Classical music and Carnatic or South Indian classical music.

- But the common foundation, the uniting feature of both these systems of music is the Raga system.
- Indian music has one of the most advanced and scientific systems of categorization of the melodic entities known as ragas and an equally sophisticated sense of rhythmic patterns or talas
- One of the oldest forms of Indian classical music is the Dhrupad. It was very popular in the North till about the 16th and 17th centuries. A highly stylized, structured and complex genre, dhrupad compositions predominantly eulogized Hindu gods and goddesses. However they were sung without any reservations by Muslim singers as well. Thus the dhrupad became a symbol of the unique Indian ethos of multi-culturalism.
- Between the 12th-13th centuries the dhrupad slowly began to lose its importance. Its place was taken by the Khayal, a genre not as rigidly bound by technicalities as the Dhrupad was. The word khayal comes from Urdu and means 'thought' or 'imagination'. The emphasis was on the imagination of the artist, who was free to expound a raga in a manner he or she wanted, but adhering to the basic rules and norms.

In this complex galaxy of genres of Indian music, the Thumri presents a bridge between the world of classical and folk traditions. Since Gauhar Jaan mastered the thumri and became almost synonymous with it, a closer look at this genre is warranted. (Sampath, p. 125)

Etymology and origins:

Though often dismissed as 'light,' the thumri has a hoary past as attested by several scholars. Musicologist Thakur Jaideva Singh traces the earliest form of thumri called '*Chalitham Nrithyasahitam*' to the Harivansh Purana (c.200 A.D.) This was sung along with the dance that Lord Krishna is believed to have learnt in the celestial court of Indra. Similar references have been made by eminent scholar and musician Dr. Rita Ganguly where she states that the thumri predates the dhrupad and the khayal, for both of which we have more or less certain dates.

The word thumri is said to be derived from the Hindustani word 'Thumakna' meaning an attractive gait. So literally it means a song that has an attractive, rather sensuous, gait in both melody and rhythm.

The lyrics of the thumris are largely written in Braj bhasha, a dialect of Hindi spoken in and around Mathura in U.P. This dialect was associated with the Krishna-bhakti movement that raged across the North in medieval times. However Khari Boli or the spoken Hindi of today and Urdu words also appear in the thumris. Besides, there are entire compositions in dialects of Hindi like Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Mirzapuri, Dingal etc. The language employed is soft and tender and allows the usage of colloquial words to make them sound 'elastic.' For instance, 'Paani' becomes 'Paniya' and 'Piya' becomes 'Piu' or 'Piyarawa.' The thumri draws heavily from the popular folk forms like the Hori, Raas and Charachari, as well as the dramas of Oudh and the surrounding areas. (ibid.)

Two types of Thumri:

There are two types of thumris namely: *bandish thumri* also known as *bol baant ki thumri* and *bol-banao thumri*. Both the kinds typically have a first part called *sthayi* (sometimes a middle portion or *madhya*) and is followed by single or multiple verses known as *antaras*.

Bandish Thumris:

- Most Bandish thumris were composed by the Urdu speaking Lucknow based poets and musicians and so the favored language was Khari Boli mixed with some Urdu. The word 'bandish' means composition and hence in these thumris the lyrics assume a greater importance.
- They have long texts with multiple *antaras*. Set mostly in medium or fast tempo, they stressed on *bol-baant* or a technique through which the text was aesthetically divided to enable *vistar* (elaboration), *taan* (fast melodic trills) and *layakari* (rhythmic manipulation) and these were largely Kathak centric compositions.
- The bandish thumris were the popular version of thumri as prevalent in the 19th century and many of these were written by gurus like Bindadin Maharaj. They are light, lively pieces and were generally written as dance accompaniment. Here the focus is seldom on leisurely musical improvisation but on fast *taans* or melodic trills and intelligent rhythmic manipulation of the lyrics in fast tempo.
- They were set in typical 'light' ragas like Kafi, Piloo, Ghara, Khamaj, Sindhura, Dhani, Manj Khamaj, Des, Tilang, Bihari, Jhinjhoti, Zilla etc.
- The taals employed in both varieties of thumri are Deepchandi, Addha, Ikwaai, Sitarkhani and those derived from folk music like Keherwa, Dadra, Khemta, and Charchar and so on.

Bol banao Thumri:

- As the very name suggests of 'making or creating a conversation', a musical conversation in this case, dwells on the effective and detailed exposition of the text and the melody through leisurely improvisations.
- The Avadhi and Bhojpuri dialects occur more in the *bol banao thumris* that originated from the cities of Banaras and Gaya.
- The lyrics are not as sophisticated as in the case of the bandish thumris. But it is precisely this rusticity of the lyric, the free rhythmic character and its open-endedness which helps create multiple patterns and gives the singer scope for improvisation.
- An example, through this single line verse '*Kaun Gali Gayo Shyam*' (Which road has Krishna taken?) the singer can demonstrate a variety of emotions by shifting the emphasis in the lyrics and varying the rhythmic patterns.

Musicologist Peter Manuel notes in his book 'Thumri in Historical and Stylistical Perspectives':

'A good thumri text is 'incomplete'; in that its expression of emotion is sufficiently broad, simple and general so that the singer can interpret it in innumerable ways. At the same time, each line is 'complete' and autonomous in that the emotional thought, however

simple, is expressed within that one line, and does not require two or more lines in order to be clear.’

Thumri evolved from the Krishna bhakti movement and is therefore written from a woman’s perspective and is often cited to the voice of the repressed feminine over the centuries even if many of them are composed by male writers. It is important to note that,

“The growth of the thumri is intimately linked with another sister-art, Kathak, the classical dance of North India that originated in the Indo- Gangetic belt. Kathak traced its roots from professional story-tellers called ‘kathakas’ or ‘kathakars’ who rendered popular episodes from the Hindu epics. By the 18th century it became a popular art form in Lucknow, almost contemporaneous to the popularity of the thumri in the same city. Like the thumri, kathak too drew heavily from folk art forms like the raas and charachari.” (Sampath, p. 128)

A lot of credit for the crystallization of these two art forms, namely thumri and kathak can be credited to the patronage of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah who himself composed thumris and performed kathak.

On khayal & thumri:

While it was the norm to dismiss the thumri as a ‘light classical’ another way of saying an unimportant genre of music, it is important to note that it evolved directly from the embedded classical styles and in turn influenced it:

“It was only by the latter part of the 18th century that the thumri perhaps began to be appreciated as a musical genre in its own right. It was influenced by the emergent genre of Khayal and in turn influenced that as well. The more classical 16-beat teental rhythmic cycle replaced the folk meters like kaharava. Khayal recitals were bifurcated into two major sections – a slow, composed one called the Bada khayal or the bigger khayal and a smaller, faster one called Chota khayal. It is commonly believed that the chota khayal was a direct offshoot of thumri, especially the Bandish Thumri. The less-polished and slower expositions of the thumri that derived itself from typical folk themes, ragas and rhythms was the bol banao thumris which, as mentioned before, were most suited for a leisurely and detailed rendition.” (Sampath, p. 129)

Contextualizing the prominence and popularity of Thumri:

Compared to the Mughal court of Delhi, the Oudh court with its seat in Lucknow saw an increased amity between Hindus and Muslims and the Nawabs of Oudh borrowed heavily from the provincial nature of their rule, adapting local culture, languages, and dialects. The region governed by the Nawabs of Oudh had a strong base of Hindu culture and therefore the Nawabs, the musicians, and dancers of the court adopted a cosmopolitan ethos. Another curious phenomenon was sowing its roots, which elevated the status of the thumri.

With the rise of British supremacy came the new concept of the absentee landlord, a new class of landowners of Oudh, known as the taluq dars, replaced the zamindars of the time. Taxes to be paid by each estate were now permanently prescribed and both owners and peasants were liable to eviction in case of defaults. These rich taluq dars had little taste for the sophisticated and complex dhrupad, and thumris started gaining immense popularity given their sensuous content.

And yet the evolution of the thumri is not devoid of gendered notions. With the advent of gramophone and recordings, which will be covered in the next section, thumri met a surprising fate:

“With the thumri slowly getting away from the kothas of the courtesans to the gramophone records and the public domain, it lost much of its seductive function and transformed into a pure, abstract form. The increasing number of male musicians who took to singing thumri also snatched away the original ‘nakhra’ and eroticism associated with the courtesan’s rendition of the same thumri.

The 1920s and after are considered the prime of the thumri era as the genre was supposedly ‘rescued’ from the lascivious tawaif by male musicians who appropriated it as yet another component of their classical repertoire. This also ensured a larger social acceptability and respect for the thumri and gave it an unprecedented degree of sophistication and expressiveness like the other classical genres. The bol banao thumri continued to remain the mainstay of all live performances.” (Sampath, p. 134)

A final note on thumri:

The idea of ‘rescuing’ thumri from the courtesan’s kotha, is an irony in itself – therefore I want to conclude this section on Thumri with my favorite lines from the book:

“Thus in this long and interesting journey of the thumri in the world of Indian classical music it is fascinating to note the space it occupies in the scheme of things in Indian music. Much like a woman in a patriarchal society, a thumri is the voice of the female in the world of traditional classical music, largely dominated by men. However it cannot be considered as a feminine form merely because it was sung and propagated by courtesans and its theme is essentially from a woman’s point of view. But a subtler investigation shows that its interrogative and subversive quality, its wonderful ability to co-exist in harmony with numerous ambiguities, multiple layers of meaning, usage of subtle humor in a way mirrors the myriad roles played by women in our traditional Indian society. Her role is ambiguous, undefined and lends itself to multiple definitions depending on the whim of the male patriarch. The woman creates a space for herself within the limitations that are placed on her by traditional society. Quite analogously thumris too, operate within similar limitations of a largely hereditary and orthodox classical idiom, but manage to extend beyond the set pattern.” (Sampath, p. 136)

Dr. Vidya Rao in her essay ‘Thumri as a Feminine Voice’ notes:

‘Thumri is the small space traditionally given to women in the world of classical/margi music. This is a fine cameo form which uses specific poetic themes, musical embellishments, ragas and talas. It is considered light and attractive but lacking the majesty and range of forms like khayal and dhrupad and is best heard or appreciated in small intimate mehfils...the endeavor of khayal is to guard its thresholds and gates, watch all points of danger, allow for no transgression of the purity of the raga. Thumri on the other hand—like the female body—is entirely open. The style of singing is based on this openness of the form. It is a small form with small scales, small light ragas, and small talas. But it leaves itself wide open and vulnerable. As a result it is able, constantly, to expand the space available to it in unique and unexpected ways...as female body, thumri is open, dangerous—yet fecund and regenerative.’

Gauhar Jaan’s rendezvous with the Gramophone:

Saturday, 8 November 1902, was a historic day. For on that day, the first ‘native’ recordings were made. And Gauhar Jaan’s voice was the first Indian voice to be imprinted upon the gramophone disc. Gaisberg, the man dealing with the gramophone company’s recording expedition in India noted about Gauhar Jaan’s appearance:

‘When she came to record, her suite of musicians and attendants appeared even more imposing than those who used to accompany Melba and Calve. As the proud heiress of immemorial folk-music traditions she bore herself with becoming dignity. She knew her own market value, as we found to our cost when we negotiated with her.’

Recording Indian music on gramophone came with huge limitations, specifically that of time. The first recording session's meeting between Gaisberg and Gauhar Jaan is therefore summed up as:

"Three minutes is all we have. Aah, a few seconds less than three minutes. Remember the announcement at the end which is for....' Gauhar stopped him politely and asked, 'Shall we start, Mr. Gaisberg?' It seemed as if this lady was born to record her voice on these discs, thought Gaisberg. He was amazed at the quiet confidence she demonstrated during a process which had daunted many an accomplished musician before her.

As the first strains of her high pitched, cultured and captivating voice were etched on the grooves of Gaisberg's shellac, Indian classical music took a giant leap forward. From the confines of the courtesans' salons and the rich man's soirees, it was catapulted right into the homes of the common people. In the process it underwent a major transformation in its content, structure and style of presentation."

Gauhar Jaan was a formidable force, who knew how to adapt with the changing times and it was with this prowess that she paved a new chapter in the history of Indian music, while raising herself to new heights of prominence and a 'celebrity' status. Gaisberg was convinced of her talent,

Gaisberg was convinced that Gauhar would become the country's first gramophone celebrity and a mainstay for the consolidation of the Company's fortunes in India. He knew that she was hugely talented and tried to get as much variety in her recordings as he could. One day he played the record of 'The Jewel Song' from Faust, sung by Suzanne Adams. Gauhar and her attendants were astonished by the rapidity of those bravura scales and trills. The high pitched song was sung almost in one breath. Gaisberg jokingly asked Gauhar, "Can you sing something like this?" She remained silent and did not answer his question even as she left for the day. When she came in the following morning, she told Gaisberg that she had accepted his challenge and would try something new. She sang a cheez or piece in Raga Sur Malhar. Gaisberg was electrified. He simply could not believe what he was hearing. It was a similar 'breathless song' sung in increasing tempo and with single breaths, packing more and more notes with each progression, in a raga that symbolized the monsoons and the accompanying thunder and lightning." (Sampath, p. 110)

These were the lyrics of the piece she sang:

Ghoor ghoor barasat meharava, bijuriya chamaki anek baar

Gun gaao more piharava, aap jage aur mohi jagaave

Bhar bhar surava, ghoor ghoor barasat meharava.

(The rains are pouring down the skies, the lightning flashing across them many a times

Sing along my beloved one, you keep yourself awake and don't let me sleep either

Are these torrents of rains or torrents of musical notes that are ushered in?)

Recording on the gramophone was a singer's worst nightmare, it was a challenge, and not many undertook it until Gauhar Jaan paved the way. It is also important to note that the male musicians were highly skeptical of this new device, which they believed would corrupt their music. It was Gauhar Jaan, a woman, and a courtesan, who singlehandedly changed the landscape of Indian music forever and it was her and those of fellow women musicians immense popularity and success, that the traditional male musicians then followed lead. Women were more sought after than male artists and they were willing performers for the company. In the 1906-07 tour, about thirty-five women classical singers were recorded by the Gramophone Company, of which about

thirty were first-timers. However there was a gradual tapering down of the numbers and eventually in the 1908-10 sessions there were only about eleven new singers.

About male musicians it is noted:

“Several interesting similarities in the attitude of the male musicians of those days come to light, both in the North and the South. They were wary of this new technology and very few of them dared to experiment and adapt to the winds of change. Numerous rumors were spread that recording one’s voice through this evil English instrument would result in a loss of voice; that it was against divine sanction, and so on. But it is truly a tribute to the grit, spirit and determination of the early women musicians like Gauhar Jaan and several others, who ignored these warnings, seized the opportunity that came their way, and made the most of it. They stormed into the hitherto largely male bastion of Indian music and conquered the hearts of the listeners through these early recordings. It was only when the commercial success of the women musicians started becoming apparent that the men folk sat up, took notice and meekly followed suit abandoning their superstitions. The records of these women singers started being listened to carefully by many male musicians to understand, evaluate and emulate the content and style.” (ibid.)

Therefore Gauhar Jaan was a trailblazer, she recorded over 600 discs, and her fame was widespread. She continued to reign as a famous courtesan during the 1920s, and it is her who upon meeting a young girl, eager to be taught by Gauhar Jaan, who refused on the grounds that she belonged to a respectable household, predicted – that with the right training this girl will go on to become the *Mallika e Ghazal* which was a prophecy to come true as this girl grew up to become Begum Akhtar, who also notes that it was after listening to Gauhar Jaan that I gave up the idea of acting in films and focused on training as a musician.

With the reigning anti-nautch campaign that gripped the 1920s and Gauhar Jaan’s personal life which remained tumultuous, she eventually had her wealth spent on a long public court case and her lavish lifestyle and extravagance caught up with her – reducing her almost to bankruptcy. She eventually sought refuge in the Kingdom of Mysore where she spent the last 1.5 years of her life appointed as a court musician with a monthly pay of rupees 500. She died lonely and unhappy, and was soon forgotten by the Indian music history – which is attributed to the changing attitudes of the society of that times, for many a tawaifs like Gauhar Jaan met similar fates. Yet her contribution toward the advancement of Indian music, cannot be overlooked and if we trace the journey – Gauhar Jaan’s name will spring up from the shadows of history.

Conclusion:

Reading this book was the perfect conclusion to this course. The reason I could read through this book cover to cover, decipher it and make a lot of sense of the text is credited to everything we have learnt in the course so far. I wouldn’t be able to read beyond the introduction of this book before August 2020, for the simple reason that all the terminologies and insights presented here would make little to no sense to me. Music of South Asia, as a course has opened an entire world upon me – it has equipped me, given me the required crutches, to an entire body of literature. Not to forget that it has trained my ears to be more appreciative of what I am listening to. Had it not been for this course, if I would have tried listening to the gramophone recordings of Gauhar Jaan, I would have absolutely despised it. But now, not only can I contextualize it, but also be appreciative of what I am witnessing. I can safely say, this has been one of those courses during my undergraduate journey that have added layered richness to my learning endeavors and opened newer worlds upon me. For which I am eternally grateful.

There remained much more to write, especially on the personal life of Gauhar Jaan as well as the anti-naught movement which sealed the fate of Gauhar Jaan and many like her. It goes well beyond the scope of this paper – however I am pleased that I got the chance to read this book which added greatly to my understanding.

References:

All references for the text are taken from the book:

- SAMPATH, V. (2012). *MY NAME IS GAUCHAR JAAN*. S.I.: RUPA & CO.