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THE IMPACT OF THE ARRIVAL OF SOUND
TECHNOLOGY ON HINDUSTANI VOCAL MUSIC
AND ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NORTH INDIAN
ART MUSIC

In Hindustani music the vocal element has always had a central role and this is reflected in the fact that all traditional styles, schools and genres developed on the vocal repertoire, and the voice has always been regarded as the instrument par excellence since its origins¹.

North Indian art music as we know it today has been refined in courts at least since the XV century in a context where sound technology would have not been necessary, as its main recipients were rulers and their restricted entourages, while the performer used to sit at a very close distance from the audience of connoisseurs, who in turn interacted actively with the artist through requests and manifest cheering and appreciation. The main instruments used were those aimed at enhancing the vocal movements, such as *sāraṅgī* and *vīṇā*, and drums, such as *pakhāwaj* and *tablā*, for vocal accompaniment.

The modal concept of *rāg* at the base of the Indian music system could only be refined in such a closed setting thanks to the mutual interaction between the artist and the listeners

¹ The Sanskrit word for music itself, *saṅgīta*, has the original meaning of "song with [dance and instrumental] accompaniment". Moreover, the great masters who shaped Hindustani music before the recording era were all exponents of the vocal tradition, see Van Der Meer, Wim, *Hindustani Music in the 20th Century*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague, 1980.

through impromptu live creations that could never be exactly the same twice in order to allow the tradition to go on without fossilising in a mere duplicate².

For this reason the arrival of sound technology had a huge impact on the nature and performing style of North Indian art music.

It all started when the Gramophone Company brought the newly born recording industry to India. The first expedition sent by the Company, then called GTL, was led by William Geisberg, a musician and early sound engineer from the USA, who had assisted Emile Berliner in creating his gramophone, inspired by Edison's recording inventions at the end of the XIX century. The expedition reached Calcutta by the end of October 1902 and had to select popular local artists to record for printing their performances on shellac discs to be sold in India.

Geisberg did not know anything about Indian music, so he relied on the agent previously sent by the Company, who introduced him to some musicians in Calcutta³.

At that time Calcutta was actually one of the best places for music, because in 1856 the last Nawab of Avadh, Wajid Ali Shah (1822-1887), was exiled just outside the city by the British, who had used the excuse of the ruler's love for arts to dismiss him on the accusation of neglecting politics. The Nawab was the greatest patron of the feminine semiclassical vocal genre called *thumrī*, to the point that some even erroneously consider him its inventor⁴, but he was also very fond of *kathak* dance, drama and poetry and was himself a dancer, musician and composer. Once settled in Calcutta he tried to recreate the artistic environment of his Lucknow court and thus all the most talented musicians had gathered there to perform for him⁵.

² Van Der Meer, Wim, *ibid.*, 192; Raja S., Deepak, *The Rāga-ness of Rāgas, Rāgas beyond the Grammar*, D. K. Printworld, New Delhi, 2016, 5-6, refers to this process as "continuity within change".

³ Sampath, Vikram, *My name is Gauhar Jaan! The life and times of a musician*, Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 76-78.

⁴ Du Perron, Lalita, *Hindi poetry in a musical genre – thumrī lyrics*, Routledge, London, 2007, p. 52.

⁵ Manuel, Peter, *Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1989, pp. 66-67.

When Geisberg got to see the first Indian musicians perform, he was not too well impressed, he actually found the music loud and unrefined, lacking harmony and unpleasantly based on the rhythmic element. Very different was his impression though, when he attended a performance of the then most renowned courtesan of Calcutta, Gauhar Jan (1873-1930). She was of Anglo-Indian origin, knew how to present herself to an international audience and the American gentleman found her vocal skills very pleasing. He also noticed how the local populace crowded the streets outside her performance hall and thought it would have been a profitable business for the GTL to print and sell her records, so he invited Gauhar Jan to their first recording sessions in India a few days later⁶.

Apart from Gauhar Jan, a couple of other courtesans were included in the first session, but only because they were part of the theatrical company invited on that occasion. She was actually the first Indian recording “diva” and even became the advertising image of the Company, as she would later pose for the cover of their catalogue. She recommended a few other musicians recorded in the first expeditions, like Moujuddin Khan (1889-1926), Peara Saheb (1870-1945) and Janki Bai (1880-1934).



Figure 1 - Singer Gauhar Jan at an early recording session in Calcutta

⁶ Sampath, Vikram, *My name is Gauhar Jaan!*, cit., 81-86; Lubinski, Christina, “The Global Business with Local Music: Western Gramophone Companies in India before World War I”, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 2012, pp. 69-72.



Figure 2 - Singer Gauhar Jan on the Gramophone Company catalogue (1907 ca.)



Figure 3 - Singer Jankibai at an early recording session in Calcutta

Most of the early recordings featured vocal music by courtesans and probably this choice had different reasons, firstly the difficult situation for professional women musicians at that time leading them to search for new sources of income and recognition. Another reason was the insecurity of great *gharānēdār* male singers, the maestros from music lineages, because their music could have been copied or the recording could stress possible mistakes, moreover the audience could not be selected, while the *gharānā* (traditional music lineage) system had been based on the selection of learners and audiences⁷.

Last, but not least, musicians did not certainly like to perform without a visible audience as in a traditional *baithak* (music gathering). This aspect will be in part restored with LPs since they would allow recordings of live performances and depict Hindustani music closer to its traditional context⁸.

The only women who could perform in India until then were courtesans. In some families "respectable" women could learn in order to teach children or to display such skills privately for their relatives, but were never allowed to perform publicly. If a courtesan was really skilled she could gain fame and money, but her name or contribution would never leave an acknowledged trace in history, she would remain outside the *gharānā* system⁹, and be considered as a mere entertainer. Usually these women were both dancers and singers, because their performances were primarily meant to attract and involve patrons and sponsors emotionally so as to make them a steady source of income. The most talented ones were carefully trained in all arts and well-mannered, thus they could become very respected, still their art was considered inferior to that of men singers and there was always some social prejudice against them, because of the smartness they had to practice for a living and because of the

⁷ Raja, Deepak, "The influence of amplification and recording technologies on Hindustani Music", Pt. V. N. Bhatkhande Memorial Lecture, Mumbai, 2016, <https://youtu.be/zMsFwD0duZs>.

⁸ In one of singer Moujuddin Khan's early recordings the spurs of an audience can be heard, see Chandvankar, Suresh, "Gramophone Celebrities", *The Journal of the Society of Indian Record Collectors*, vol. annual 2006, p. 4.

⁹ Even if they could be sometimes associated with a *gharānā*, they could not bring the tradition forward officially as gurus.

social freedom they were allowed¹⁰.

In the last decades of the XIX century, the puritan anti-nautch movement started. Courtesans were called nautch girls from the anglicised version of the Hindi word nāch (dance) and some British Christian groups demonstrated publicly against corruption and licentious lifestyles and more so after the spreading of the social disease. The British residents had been accepting the cultural customs of Indian courts for a long time, but suddenly were no longer allowed to be entertained by local courtesans. The anti-nautch movement had moral arguments, but as the facts of the last Nawab of Avadh had showed, targeting the courtly culture was first of all a precise political move for the benefit of the British Raj.

These protests were adopted by some local movements through the English educated middle class, that had been raised despising all representations of traditional Indian culture, therefore courtesans were banned from society and in the XX century professional women musicians had to reinvent their identity in order to fit in the new situation and to keep their art alive. This way they were soon able to turn the hostile middle class in their new sponsor in need to revive traditional arts and boost the sense of nationalism and identity after the Independence (1947)¹¹.

Those who continued pursuing the arts had to change their performing style in order to suit a new audience after the end of the courtly era as well as to avoid the connection with their original background. The arrival of the recording industry helped them in this endeavour together with the soon to come amplification, this is why courtesans were promptly open to the new media. The modern technology not only served them to broaden their audience, promotion and income, but let them leave their mark on music history through the announcements they had to make at the end of the first records stating their names. The discs were, in fact, initially printed in Germany and

¹⁰ Manuel, Peter, *Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives.*, cit., pp. 45-50.

¹¹ Sampath, Vikram, *My name is Gauhar Jaan!*, cit., pp. 183-190.

the singer had to mention his/her name to help the labelling process, thus the name of women singers, who were previously soon forgotten, were now fixed in everyone's mind and fame made it easier for them to be more in demand across the country¹².

In the first recording sessions the electronic technology wasn't yet available, so the singers had to practically shout as loud as possible in a big horn fixed on the wall, keeping their hands and head still. Thus the voices audible in those records sound far, high-pitched and full-throated. This was particularly true with Indian voices, not only for the rudimentary technology, but because of the lack of amplification¹³.

Indian performers of both genders mainly chose such devices as singing in full-throated and high-pitched voices¹⁴ in order to reach the audience as further as possible; this did not allow the performers to enhance the melodic element in detail, so they would generally emphasize more the rhythmic element¹⁵.

This explains the remarks made by Geisberg after hearing the first performances. He had also written: "Only one or two male singers were recommended to us and these had high-pitched effeminate voices. There was absolutely no admiration or demand for the manly baritone or bass, and in the Orient vocalists in these categories would starve to death."¹⁶

Gauhar Jan's biographer Vikram Sampath states that male singers probably sounded effeminate for their attempt at emulating courtesans' vocal techniques and gaining their same popularity. Indian musicologist Deepak Raja¹⁷ confirmed that the reason was, instead, their pre-acoustic vocal technique. After consulting a few sources I came to the conclusion that the first recorded male singers had actually an effeminate style as they

¹² Sampath, Vikram, *ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

¹³ Sampath, Vikram, *ibid.*, 85-86.

¹⁴ Van Der Meer, Wim, *Hindustani Music in the 20th Century*, cit., pp. 169-70.

¹⁵ Raja, Deepak, "The influence of amplification and recording technologies on Hindustani Music", cit.

¹⁶ Sampath, Vikram, *My name is Gauhar Jaan!*, cit., p. 84.

¹⁷ Personal communication.

were semiclassical specialists suggested by Gauhar Jan¹⁸ such as Moujuddin Khan and Pearsa Saheb. These two in particular had adopted women's *thumrī* singing. Pearsa Saheb was also a dancer known for his skills in *thumrī* performed seated with *kathak abhinaya* (dramatic gestures and expressions), just like in the courtesans' performing style, and it seems that his performances were very well paid and popular. Nevertheless all male singers in general used a high-pitched voice for acoustic reasons even if they did not sing in an effeminate style. The recording industry aimed at making a profit out of music, so they searched for the most popular and sought-after artists reflecting the tastes of the largest part of people who could afford to buy discs. As a result, music was spread outside the small niche of listeners from the courts and suddenly democratised to some extent. The fact that the first music popularised thanks to recordings was mostly by women courtesans had a great impact on the life and music of all women musicians from then on.

Initially, discs were 78rpm and lasted more or less 3 minutes. A normal live performance of a piece of music at the time would probably last from around 20 to 40 minutes¹⁹, so the artist had to condense it in less than 3 minutes, another possible reason why maestros would not accept to record. Singers like the *bājī*-s accepted the challenge and managed to cut down the duration while still maintaining the mood of compositions and *rāg*-s intact. Due to this limit, the recordings did not exactly represent the performing style of the time, but they served as a promoting medium especially for women singers. The preference for women singers for the first recordings was not specifically due to the fact that they mostly sang semiclassical light genres, because there are recordings of their

¹⁸ In Sampath, Vikram, *My name is Gauhar Jaan!*, cit., Geisberg's statement "they were recommended to us" is reported and in Chandvankar, Suresh, "Gramophone Celebrities", cit., p. 10, it is specified that Moujuddin Khan was recommended to GTL by Gauhar Jan, it is explained that Pearsa Saheb was one of the very few male singers recorded in the early sessions.

¹⁹ Raja, Deepak, "The influence of amplification and recording technologies on Hindustani Music", cit.

classical khyāl-s as well; but lighter genres such as *thumrī* and allied forms would certainly fit better in a shorter time frame and even singers who usually refused to perform them publicly recorded them on discs, as it was the case with Kesarbai Kerkar (1892-1977)²⁰. At first the choice was simply made by selecting the most popular singers who were also more keen on recording their voices, i.e. professional women singers.

Another remarkable change happened with the advent of amplification and electromagnetic recording technology around the mid '20s. This deeply influenced the vocal technique, dynamics, genres and styles of not only Hindustani singing, but of Hindustani music in general, and I believe the role of amplification has not been stressed enough by music scholars for its stylistic impact on Hindustani music and its genres. Firstly, the melodic element started gaining more attention as vocal harmonics and details were enhanced by microphones, thus enabling singers to turn to a more intellectual and refined approach to sound production without needing to sing in a high-pitched and far projected voice. This is a possible reason, according to Deepak Raja²¹, why more aggressive masculine and rhythm-oriented styles, both in *dhruvād* and *khyāl*, lost popularity, as in the case, for example, of *Darbhangā bānī* versus *Dagar bānī* in *dhruvād* or of *Agra gharānā* versus *Kīraṇā* and *Jaipur gharānā* in *khyāl*.

This last consideration led me to the conclusion that even the *thumrī* of the *pūrab āṅg* (Eastern style) could possibly find its renewed format thanks to the vocal techniques allowed by amplification and the incredible adapting skills of Hindustani women singers, in search of a new means of expression and artistic identity right at that historical time.

Ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel, in his book on *thumrī*, states that the advent of the recording industry did not influence much classical and semiclassical music evolution, as discs were not so spread, and thus did not popularise those genres as much as cassettes would do later with Hindi film songs, light *ghazal*-s

²⁰ Raja, Deepak, *ibid.*

²¹ Raja, Deepak, *ibid.*

and folk music. Moreover, art music remained a niche product in its refinement and never benefited much from selling records²².

Although on one hand I agree that the recording industry has acted more as a promotional means for classical artists in India, rather than as a source of income, I believe that, on the other hand, the amplification and electronic recording technologies have had a strong role in the stylistic revolution of not only classical genres, but namely on *thumrī*.

Manuel notices that the passage from the faster rhythmic *bandīs kī thumrī* (based on a composition) of the courts to the expressive slower middle class *bol banāo kī thumrī* (with word interpretation) happened just around the Twenties and how *khyāl* performing tempo was dramatically decreasing as well at that same time. This is why, rather than considering this tempo decrease in *thumrī* as a specific influence from *khyāl* and a general consequence of social changings as Manuel suggests, I would see both as a result of the new vocal technique allowed by amplification. *Bol banāo* passages were already present in fast *thumrī*-s as it was apparent from early recordings, but only in the late Twenties the technique became the main feature of this genre as the tempo slowed down²³.

Professional women singers of that time needed to adapt their repertoire and performing style to the middle class public audience, but they were now also allowed to finally affirm themselves as artists and express their own feelings, no longer only the feelings they were expected to express towards their patrons. This is how the dance part was removed, the lyrics were sanitised and the words started being explored thoroughly²⁴. Therefore what was now given the most attention was the melodic elaboration and interpretation, whilst the rhythmic variations found less scope thanks to the new sound technology.

²² Manuel, Peter, *Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives*, cit., p. 74.

²³ Manuel, Peter, *Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives*, cit., p. 83.

²⁴ Du Perron, Lalita, *Hindi poetry in a musical genre – thumrī lyrics*, cit., pp. 55-57.

This was the era of the great *bol banāo kī thumrī* female specialists such as Siddheshwari Devi (1908-1977), Begum Akhtar (1914-1974), Rasoolan bai (1902-1974), Vidyadhari bai, Badi Moti bai who all highly contributed to make *thumrī* the most refined semiclassical genre in Hindustani vocal music and certainly the third most important genre in Hindustani music after *khyāl* and *dhrupad*. It was definitely thanks to recordings that the names of these important artists who stylized the genre in its present format remained in music history. There were a few important *thumrī* male exponents as well then, but we would have probably heard much less the names of the female singers of the time and known less about their contribution to this genre if it weren't for their recordings²⁵.

Amplification also allowed women to finally compete with men on the field of vocal music even without a powerful voice. This is possibly one of the main reasons why Indian women singers chose not to pursue semiclassical genres as much as in the past. While on one hand semiclassical genres were for long more easily associated with the courtesans and still seen as more entertaining and feminine in nature, on the other hand, the changes brought in the performing style by courtesans also contributed to make singing a more suitable career for middle class women²⁶, although these latter felt much less the need to find their own voice, and more that of challenging their men colleagues.

Moreover, it is important to mention that the great *khyāl* exponents who took interest in performing female genres such as *thumrī* at that time, like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan (1902-1968) and Abdul Karim Khan (1872-1937), used it mainly as a shorter entertaining final piece for their classical concerts and thus definitely contributed to popularize the genre, but also to stigmatize it as a lighter form. This made less singers interested in pursuing *thumrī* seriously and once more the result was the marginalization of women's voice.

²⁵ Manuel, Peter, *Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives*, cit., p. 86.

²⁶ Pradhan, Aneesh, "Perspectives on Performance Practice: Hindustani Music in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Bombay (Mumbai)", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 27, 2004, pp. 343-4.

It is typical to very seldom see professional women singers from the courtly era allowing their daughters to become professional singers, because they did not want them to suffer the stigma of that identity. This is another reason why the old female repertoire is being lost.

Meanwhile, vocal music started losing its prominence through the process initiated by amplification, now that instruments could develop a solo repertoire²⁷ and began being requested for well-paid tours abroad, since instrumental music sounded “exotic” enough for the new market, but not as “ethnic” as vocal music. As a result, middle class women artists found more space in the classical vocal field, being less encouraged by families and society to travel abroad, which actually made them more keen on holding steady academic jobs and teaching privately or in institutions. Women are also generally considered more reliable educators, because they fall outside the category of possible harassers for young students²⁸. Although there isn’t still a definition for a woman guru in India, nowadays they have become important music teachers as much as men.

Basically, *thumrī* has been a great means to professional realization for North Indian female artists during a crucial historical time, and this allowed the singers who lived in between courtly society and Independence to bring it to its maximum magnificence then, but as soon as it served its scope, most women artists wanted to move away from the semiclassical genres and relegate them to easier and shorter conclusions in classical concerts. The few ones who can still bring the *thumrī* tradition forward in its own right are the artists who have been able to retain its expressive peculiarity and classical traits without expecting it to fossilise in its old format, as a great feature of *thumrī* has proved to be adaptability. It is the case of the great *thumrī* specialist Girija Devi (1929-2017),

²⁷ Raja, Deepak, “The influence of amplification and recording technologies on Hindustani Music”, cit.

²⁸ It is not uncommon to find some male gurus in India who consider it normal to expect sexual favours from female students, especially if they come from the traditional music families.

who had elaborated her personal performing style of this genre, through which she would literally depict the lyrics in a melodic representation.

Another field where courtesans reinvented their identity was the upcoming film industry. Initially, most of the music and dance repertoire in Hindi movies was delivered by them, this is why dance and vocal music retained their connection in that context, although the trick to adapt it to the middle class audience was to shape the female vocals in a very childish high pitch, also made possible by the amplification technology. This kind of vocals began in turn to influence even classical female singers in the last century, as they privileged virtuosic *tān-s* (fast scales) rather than melodic exploration and expression. Courtesans set the trend of the acting style in popular Indian cinema, but the more these movies became popular, the more their music lost a traditional connotation and any similarity with semiclassical music. Even the bourgeois actress/dancer could differentiate her role from that of the singer thanks to playback technology.

Generally speaking, amplification technology has created more distance between the performer and the audience, even encouraging the development of a star system, and this has deeply affected the nature of *rāg* music²⁹. In regards to this, *dhrupad* singer Uday Bhawalkar stated in a recent interview³⁰ that sound check and microphones usually interrupt the mood established in the green room, which is essential in performing a *rāg*. He has then added, anyway, that the interaction with the audience is not created by closeness with it, but by the artist's connection with the *rāg* itself, thus the process would only be a little different, but not made totally impossible.

For professional women singers at the beginning of the 20th century the distance from the audience created by new sound

²⁹ Raja, Deepak, "The influence of amplification and recording technologies on Hindustani Music", cit.

³⁰ Uday Bhawalkar: A brief Encounter, video interview for First Edition Arts, October 2017, https://www.facebook.com/firsteditionarts/videos/1168120663332973/?hc_ref=ARRx-t2jr1FNzZQ7WD45SR5qcFzD0HrIL4cYWBILQNiguuPjzHrAgXvOHQJ1X8UNNU.

technology was actually quite useful to help them shape a new identity for themselves. In fact, speed and improvisation techniques were not the only differences between fast and slow *thumrī*. In courts, it was meant for dance, thus the lyrics were rich in description of a scene, using a rhetorical literary language and serving as material for rhythmic manipulations. The compositions were a celebration of the skilled (male) composer and an erotic adulation of the recipient/patron. Ethnomusicologist Paul D. Greene describes the practice of some professional male performers in South India of faking the feelings of genuine female weepers in order to prevent women from expressing their actual voice³¹. This was also the case of *thumrī* in courts where male composers used to describe women's feelings and have them represented as stereotyped by courtesans to the amusement of the patron. In order to remove any connection with the courtly milieu, slow *thumrī* never comes with a composer's name³² and it shows a simpler folkish language allowing greater elaboration on the emotive content. This shifts the focus on the interpreter as she no longer needs to fake the feelings for a patron. Other specific features of *bol banāo kī thumrī* communication are the frequent use of the figure of a confidante who can listen to the heroine's pain, and the freedom to insert exclamations such as *oh!*, *e!*, *rī!*, *erī!*, *hāy!* etc. I argue that these do not particularly reflect the need to interact with the audience in a more distant context than the court, but rather the request for the singer's voice to be heard. *Bol banāo kī thumrī* lyrics are also based much more on the feeling of separation than those of fast *thumrī*³³ and the slow pace and expression of sorrow for a distant lover make this genre a perfect means of self-expression for these women in search of recognition. As over-stressed self-expression is considered unwanted in classical music and somehow socially beyond control, once again this feminine

³¹ Greene, Paul D., "Professional Weeping Music, Affect and Hierarchy in a South Indian Folk Performance Art", *Ethnomusicology OnLine* 5, 1999, https://www.umc.edu/eol/5/greene/Greene_0.htm.

³² Du Perron, Lalita, *Hindi poetry in a musical genre – thumrī lyrics*, cit., p. 76.

³³ Du Perron, Lalita, *ibid.*, p. 37.

voice has often been disguised as a devotional, rather than secular, representation.

After the disc era, cinema, radio and television followed. Of these, certainly radio had the most impact on Hindustani music allowing the broadcast of longer live performances, with the All India Radio offering a steady income to many musicians. After LPs, India saw a much later advent of musicassetes and CDs, but these ones mostly affected the pop and folk music scenes³⁴. What is actually making a certain difference nowadays for Indian art music is the Internet through social media and sharing platforms such as Youtube, Facebook, Instagram and the like. Until the arrival of the World Wide Web, Hindustani music was known abroad mainly thanks to touring artists, but nowadays anyone from anywhere can listen to, or even watch, a lengthy live performance. Moreover social media are intuitive means of self-promotion for artists who no longer have to depend on third parties for advertising.

We still have to see where this globalization of the market will lead Hindustani music to, but although many complain about the end of the recording market due to the Internet, I am hopeful that the global platform will open the niche of Hindustani music to a new audience and in a less limited format than that of a disc or CD. This is specifically a new chance for Indian women singers, as they tend to tour abroad much less, and have therefore been less known outside India until now.

³⁴ Manuel, Peter, *Thumri in historical and stylistic perspectives*, cit., p. 74; Manuel, Peter, "The cassette industry and popular music in North India", *Popular Music* vol. 10/2, 1991, pp. 190-91; Manuel, Peter, "The regional North Indian Popular Music Industry in 2014: from Cassette Culture to cyber culture", *Popular Music* 33, pp. 389-412.