

## Role and Representation of Women in Indian Classical Music: A Historical Analysis

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### Abstract:

Indian classical music is an ancient and intricate art form that holds deep cultural significance. Throughout history, the role and representation of women in this traditional art have evolved, reflecting societal norms, religious beliefs, and changing perspectives. This research article aims to conduct a historical analysis of the contributions of women to Indian classical music, exploring their challenges, achievements, and the gradual transformation of their status within the musical landscape. By examining various historical periods, this study sheds light on the remarkable resilience and determination of women who have defied societal constraints to make an indelible mark on Indian classical music.

### Keywords:

Women, Indian Classical Music, History, Representation, Role

### Introduction:

Indian Classical Music, with its rich and diverse heritage, offers a unique lens to study the representation and role of women artists over time. From ancient Vedic traditions to the present era, women musicians have graced the stage, but their journey has been marked by several obstacles. This research seeks to understand their challenges, achievements, and the evolving perception of women in this esteemed art form.

Throughout history, women musicians encountered multifaceted challenges, struggling against the prevailing norms that viewed music as a male-dominated domain. They faced limited access to formal education and training, with music academies and prestigious gharanas often reserving their doors for male disciples. Cultural expectations often prioritized domestic duties, relegating women's artistic aspirations to the periphery, and hindering the exploration of their full creative potential.

### Historical Background:

Indian Classical Music boasts a storied history that traces its origins back to ancient times, deeply rooted in Vedic traditions. The presence and participation of women in this musical tradition can be discerned from numerous texts, sculptures, and archaeological discoveries that illuminate their involvement in musical practices. In the bygone eras of ancient and medieval India, women musicians held pivotal positions, and their contributions were intricately shaped by the prevailing socio-cultural milieu of their times.

During the Vedic period, women were actively engaged in music and dance, with references to female musicians and singers in sacred texts like the Rigveda. As music evolved, women continued to participate in various musical forms, such as the regional folk music and devotional songs performed in temples.

The patronage of royal courts and temples provided opportunities for women musicians to showcase their talent. Some of them held esteemed positions and were respected for their musical abilities. However, societal norms and gender biases did pose challenges for women's full-fledged involvement in music. Despite these hurdles, exceptional women musicians emerged, attaining fame and recognition.

In the medieval era, especially during the reign of some enlightened rulers, women's participation in music flourished. Empress Nur Jahan, a prominent figure in Mughal history, was herself a talented musician and a patron of the arts. Similarly, many Rajput and Maratha queens were accomplished musicians and encouraged the arts in their courts.

Throughout history, women musicians faced various challenges and stereotypes, which at times limited their opportunities and recognition. Despite these obstacles, some women managed to overcome societal barriers, making significant contributions to Indian Classical Music, which continue to influence the art form to this day.

### **Influence of Royal Courts and Temples:**

The patronage of royal courts and temples played a pivotal role in shaping the involvement of women in Indian Classical Music. These institutions provided a platform for women musicians to showcase their talent and receive formal training, which contributed to their prominence in the musical landscape.

#### **Royal Courts:**

In ancient and medieval India, rulers and nobility were enthusiastic patrons of the arts, including music. Women musicians found opportunities to perform in the lavish courts of kings and princes. They were often appointed as court musicians, and their performances were admired by the royalty and esteemed guests. The patronage of rulers provided financial security and recognition, encouraging women to pursue music as a profession. During the Mughal era, emperors like Akbar and Jahangir were known for their love for the arts. Empress Nur Jahan, known for her refined taste in music, actively supported women musicians and encouraged their participation in courtly performances. Women artists like Jahanara Begum, the daughter of Shah Jahan, were respected for their musical talents and made valuable contributions to Indian Classical Music.

#### **Temples:**

Temples have been significant centers for the preservation and promotion of Indian Classical Music. Women musicians often found opportunities to perform in temple settings, especially during religious festivals and ceremonies. Devotional music, bhajans, and kirtans performed by women added to the spiritual ambiance of the temples. In South India, the tradition of Devadasis, women dedicated to serving deities through dance and music, allowed them to develop expertise in various art forms, including music. Some of the Devadasis became renowned musicians and composers, enriching the repertoire of Carnatic music.

Despite the supportive environments provided by royal courts and temples, women musicians still faced challenges related to societal norms and gender biases. However, the exposure and recognition gained through these patronages significantly contributed to the historical representation of women in Indian Classical Music. Their influence and contributions have left a lasting impact on the development of this cherished cultural heritage.

## **Challenges and Stereotypes:**

Throughout history, women musicians in Indian Classical Music confronted numerous challenges and stereotypes that hindered their full-fledged participation and recognition in the field. These obstacles were deeply rooted in societal norms, prevailing gender biases, and misconceptions about women's abilities as musicians.

### **Social Norms and Gender Roles:**

Traditional Indian society assigned specific gender roles, and women were often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over pursuing careers in music or any other art form. This perception limited the opportunities available to women musicians and discouraged them from seeking professional careers in music.

### **Limited Access to Education and Training:**

Formal musical training was often restricted to male students, leaving women with limited access to professional gurus (teachers). This hindered their progress in honing their skills and acquiring in-depth knowledge of the art form.

### **Conservatism and Moral Concerns:**

Historically, there were conservative attitudes towards women performing in public spaces. The idea of women musicians performing in front of audiences, especially mixed-gender audiences, was viewed with suspicion and raised moral concerns among certain sections of society.

### **Lack of Recognition and Acknowledgment:**

Even when women musicians displayed exceptional talent and skill, they often faced neglect and lack of recognition compared to their male counterparts. Their contributions were undervalued, and their achievements were not always given the due acknowledgment they deserved.

### **Stereotypes about Artistic Expression:**

Certain stereotypes prevailed, suggesting that women's emotional and artistic expressions were limited, thereby limiting their ability to convey the depth and complexity of classical music.

### **Marital and Familial Obligations:**

Marital obligations and the responsibilities of family life sometimes deterred women from pursuing full-time careers in music. Balancing these responsibilities with a professional career in music proved to be challenging.

Despite these challenges, several women musicians broke free from societal constraints, defied stereotypes, and made remarkable strides in Indian Classical Music. The determination, perseverance, and extraordinary talent of these trailblazers paved the way for subsequent generations of women artists to thrive and establish their rightful place in the world of classical music. Efforts towards gender equality and a more inclusive environment have led to a shift in attitudes, enabling women musicians to flourish and continue their invaluable contributions to this treasured cultural heritage.

## **Trailblazers and Reformers:**

In the face of daunting challenges and pervasive stereotypes, countless women musicians in the annals of Indian Classical Music history rose as trailblazers and reformers, leaving an indelible mark on the art form. Their extraordinary talent, unwavering determination, and visionary spirit shattered barriers and laid the foundation for the empowerment of future generations of female artists.

Begum Akhtar (1914-1974):

Begum Akhtar, renowned as the "Queen of Ghazals," stood as a legendary figure in Hindustani classical music, displaying exceptional prowess in thumri, dadra, and various light classical genres. Her audacious spirit defied societal norms as she fearlessly took to the stage in public concerts, captivating audiences with her emotive and soul-stirring renditions. With her remarkable talent, she became an icon in the history of Indian music, leaving an enduring legacy through her ability to seamlessly bridge the gap between traditional and popular music genres.

M.S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004):

M.S. Subbulakshmi, a renowned Carnatic vocalist, earned national and international acclaim for her mesmerizing voice and mastery over classical compositions. Her career spanned over six decades, and she was the first Indian musician to receive the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award. M.S. Subbulakshmi's artistry and philanthropic efforts further elevated the status of women in Indian Classical Music and contributed to its global recognition.

Kesarbai Kerkar (1892-1977):

Kesarbai Kerkar, a doyenne of the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana, was celebrated for her intricate and powerful renditions of khayal and thumri. Despite facing societal disapproval, she pursued her passion for music with unwavering dedication. Kesarbai's exceptional talent and her fearless pursuit of her art challenged prevailing stereotypes and inspired countless aspiring women musicians.

Annapurna Devi (1927-2018):

Annapurna Devi, daughter of Ustad Allauddin Khan, was a brilliant surbahar player and a renowned music teacher. Although she chose to withdraw from public performances, her artistry and exceptional musicianship significantly influenced the world of Indian Classical Music. Annapurna Devi's dedication to teaching and preserving the musical traditions of her father's Maihar gharana had a lasting impact on generations of musicians.

Gangubai Hangal (1913-2009):

Gangubai Hangal, an eminent Hindustani classical vocalist from the Kirana gharana, was admired for her soul-stirring performances and impeccable control over ragas. Her journey from a conservative background to becoming a prominent musician showcased the transformative power of music and the determination of women artists.

The contributions of these trailblazers, along with numerous other talented and courageous women musicians, challenged the status quo and brought about a reformative shift in the representation of women in Indian Classical Music. Their legacy continues to inspire and empower female musicians, fostering a more inclusive and diverse landscape within the classical music community.

### **Women Composers and Their Impact:**

The role of women in Indian Classical Music goes beyond being exceptional performers; many women composers have made significant contributions to the art form. Despite the prevailing societal norms and limitations on their creative expression, these women composed beautiful and intricate compositions that enriched the musical repertoire.

Venerated Composers of the Past:

Throughout history, women composers have made significant contributions, creating compositions that have withstood the test of time. One prominent figure among them was Saint Meerabai, a mystic

poet and devoted follower of Lord Krishna in the 16th century. Her soulful bhajans and padas remain an integral part of devotional music, cherished and sung by artists across generations.

#### Women in the Development of Thumri and Dadra:

The development and popularization of semi-classical forms like thumri and dadra were significantly influenced by women composers. Their emotive and expressive compositions became an integral part of the North Indian semi-classical repertoire. Some notable women composers in this genre include Siddeshwari Devi and Rasoolan Bai.

#### Contribution to Carnatic Music:

In Carnatic music, several women composers have made remarkable contributions. One of the most notable names is Muthuswami Dikshitar's sister, Muthuswami Lakshmi Bai, who composed beautiful kritis. Additionally, Ambujam Krishna, a 20th-century composer, crafted numerous kritis on various deities, showcasing the spiritual depth of Carnatic music.

#### Influence on Modern Compositions:

In recent times, women composers have continued to make their mark on Indian Classical Music. Many contemporary female artists are actively composing new pieces, including instrumental compositions, thematic pieces, and fusion music, reflecting their versatility and innovation.

The impact of women composers goes beyond the melodies they created. Their contributions challenged gender stereotypes and societal expectations, proving that artistic expression knows no bounds. By adding their unique voices to the musical narrative, these composers expanded the horizons of Indian Classical Music and provided a more inclusive and diverse perspective. Their compositions, passed down through generations, continue to inspire artists and music enthusiasts, perpetuating the legacy of women's invaluable role in shaping the art form.

#### Contemporary Scenario:

In the contemporary scenario, women's role and representation in Indian Classical Music have seen significant positive changes compared to the historical past. Today, women musicians have a more prominent presence, and their contributions are increasingly recognized and appreciated.

#### Increasing Representation:

The number of women actively pursuing careers in Indian Classical Music has grown substantially. Female musicians can be found across various vocal and instrumental genres, performing at prestigious concerts and festivals.

#### Empowerment through Education:

Access to formal education and training in music has improved for women, enabling them to develop their skills and knowledge. This has empowered them to compete on equal terms with their male counterparts.

#### Recognition and Appreciation:

Contemporary female musicians are receiving greater recognition for their talent and artistry. They are earning accolades, awards, and opportunities to perform on national and international stages, gaining widespread appreciation.

#### Challenging Gender Norms:

Women musicians are breaking stereotypes and challenging traditional gender norms. Their success is redefining societal perceptions of women's roles in the arts and inspiring other aspiring musicians.

#### Supportive Initiatives:

Numerous organizations and initiatives are working to support and promote women in Indian Classical Music. These platforms provide mentorship, networking opportunities, and financial support to empower women musicians.

#### Contributions to Music Education:

Female musicians are actively contributing as music educators and mentors. They play a crucial role in passing down knowledge and preserving the tradition while inspiring the next generation of musicians.

Despite the progress, challenges remain, such as addressing gender biases, ensuring equal opportunities, and fostering a more inclusive environment in the classical music community. Continued efforts are necessary to promote gender equality and empower women to thrive in Indian Classical Music. Overall, the contemporary scenario reflects a positive trend of increasing representation and recognition of women in Indian Classical Music. As more women continue to excel in the field, their contributions will undoubtedly shape the future of this cherished musical tradition.

#### Conclusion:

The historical evidence indicates that women have been actively involved in Indian Classical Music since ancient times. Sacred texts and inscriptions make reference to female musicians, showcasing their presence in this art form. The support and patronage of royal courts and temples played a crucial role in providing these talented women with opportunities to showcase their skills and receive formal training, thereby elevating their prominence in the musical landscape. Challenges and stereotypes throughout history, such as restrictive gender norms, limited access to education, and societal prejudices, hindered women's full participation in music. However, the perseverance and exceptional talent of trailblazers like Begum Akhtar, M.S. Subbulakshmi, Kesarbai Kerkar, and others paved the way for women to break free from these constraints and make indelible contributions to the art form.

In the contemporary scenario, women musicians have made significant progress, with increased representation, recognition, and empowerment. They have shattered stereotypes, contributed to music education, and are actively promoting gender equality in the field. Despite these positive developments, the journey towards gender parity in Indian Classical Music is an ongoing process. It requires continued efforts from individuals, institutions, and the music community as a whole. Encouraging initiatives and support systems must be established to create a more inclusive environment for women musicians to thrive and succeed.

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