



Voices in Raga: A Historical and Contemporary Study of Women's Role and Contribution in Indian Classical Music

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving roles and contributions of women in Indian classical music from historical roots to contemporary practice. Although Indian music traditions such as Hindustani and Carnatic have rich histories spanning millennia, women's participation and recognition have been uneven, shaped by cultural norms, gender discriminations, religious contexts, and institutional structures. Using a mixed-method qualitative approach grounded in historical analysis, selective literature review and interviews documented in secondary sources, the study maps women's musical journey across time and space identifying some torchbearers exploring how gendered expectations influenced training, performance opportunities, patronage, and public reception. Findings indicate enduring structural challenges, including limited access to formal institutions and gendered valuation of performance spaces, yet reveal resilient strategies women have employed to assert artistic authority. Implications stress the need for scholarship and pedagogy to foreground women's voices, and for institutional reforms to ensure equitable representation in academic and performance platforms. The conclusion highlights contributions, limitations of secondary data reliance, and prospects for future research at the intersection of gender, music, and culture.

Keywords: *Women, Indian classical music, Musicians, Gender, Performance, Contribution.*

Introduction

(Background) Indian classical music is structured around complex melodic frameworks, ragas, that serve as vehicles for expressive performance. Historically rooted in spiritual, royal, temple, courtly settings, classical music was disseminated through oral and guru-disciple traditions (guru-shishya parampara) that emphasized rigorous training and lineage. Although women have been associated with music in various roles—from temple performers to courtesans and concert soloists—their recognition within mainstream histories has been uneven (Neuman, 1990). Traditionally, gender norms limited women's access to formal training or institutional platforms, particularly in the public and courtly spheres.



1. Research Problem

Despite growing interest in gendered studies of performance arts, comprehensive research that charts women's historical participation and contributions in Indian classical music remains inadequate. Existing accounts often fragment women's narratives or without systematic analysis of gender dynamics.

2. Objectives

This study aims to:

- a) Trace the historical role of women in Indian classical music from advent till date.
- b) Address the challenges of these women musicians.
- c) Analyze contemporary contributions by women performers and educators.
- d) Suggest frameworks for inclusive scholarship and institutional practice.

3. Significance of the Study

Since this article seeks to explore Indian women musicians' Role, challenges historically encountered due to patriarchal restrictions, social prejudices, and institutional barriers, and the lasting contributions they have made in preserving, enriching, and innovating Indian classical music. By foregrounding women's voices, this research contributes to correcting historiographical omissions, enriches understanding of gendered cultural production, music education and performance spaces by Indian women musicians therefore offering a foundation for musicologists, gender scholars, policy advocates, and educators

4. Literature Review

a) Historical Perspectives: Sacred texts and inscriptions make reference to female musicians, showcasing their presence in this art form.

Patanjali, Katyayana, and some Rig Vedic verses, Ramayana Mahabharata it is mentioned that women enjoyed the freedom of learning and cultivating music, be it dance, playing instruments, or the rendition of ritualistic hymns. But most of the litterateurs have only taken notice of men artists in their scriptures. However, the contribution of some legendary women of the 14th century cannot be ignored. To name a few are the daughter of Tansen, Saraswati, an astonishing Veena player, and Saint Meerabai, the icon of the Bhakti cult who composed various splendid poetries devoted to Lord Krishna.

Despite adverse conditions, some women excelled in various fields, be it political, literary, or social. Razia Sultan, Noor Jahan, Rani Durgavati were some of them. Research on women in Indian music has often focused on specific roles, such as tawaifs (courtesans) of North India, (Neuman, 1990). In contrast, Carnatic music's institutional history shows early involvement of women artists like M.S. Subbulakshmi, whose fame in the 20th century reshaped public perceptions of women performers.

b) Contemporary Contexts: Modern studies have explored how women negotiate tradition and modernity, often in male-dominated academic and performance circuits. For example, women performers in Hindustani classical music have used media and global networks to expand audiences.

5. Research Gaps

Despite insightful case studies, there is limited synthesis of historical and contemporary dimensions of women's musical role and contribution across Indian classical traditions. Few studies systematically examine institutional participation – e.g., in teaching academies, broadcasting, and festival curation – through a gender lens. This study addresses this gap by integrating historical analysis with contemporary scholarship.

6. Methodology

a) Research Design: Given the historical and cultural focus, this research employs qualitative methods, synthesizing secondary sources to construct a cohesive narrative and analysis.

b) Data Sources: Historical texts and archival material: Music treatises, colonial records, biographies.

c) Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with female classical vocalists and instrumentalists from India.

d) Surveys: A structured online survey administered to women engaged in Indian classical music (students, teachers, performers).

e) Secondary sources: Journal articles, music reviews, and performance recordings.

7. Methods of Analysis

a) Historical Analysis: Role of women their active participation and contribution across India from vedic period till date.

b) Critical Discourse Analysis: Examining musicological and media discourses that shape cultural narratives about women performers.

c) Thematic Analysis: Identification of recurring themes related to challenges, constraints, performance contexts, and institutional participation.

8. Limitations

Primary fieldwork was beyond the scope of this study; reliance on published and archival materials may privilege narratives documented in English and institutional sources, potentially marginalizing vernacular and community-based voices.

9. Detailed Historical Analysis from Vedic age till date of the role of women musicians, challenges faced and their contributions in the development process of Indian classical music

A) Vedic Age (c. 1500 BCE – 500 BCE)/Also called: Vedic Period

Main features: Music in its earliest form originated as sacred chant, deeply embedded in ritualistic and spiritual practices. The Samaveda constitutes the foundational source of musical thoughts and performances and several women rishikas (female seers) made lasting contributions.

In the Vedic age the status of women musicians were relatively empowered but limited.

Challenges faced: Although women (e.g., Gargi, Maitreyi) were educated and participated in chanting, musical knowledge was mostly oral and priest-controlled. Performance of sacred music was restricted to ritual contexts. Public performance by women was rare and often discouraged.

Some notable Women Musicians of the Vedic Age (c. 1500 BCE-500 BCE) -

- i. **Lopamudra:** Lopamudra was a renowned female rishi credited with chanting of hymns in the Rigveda. Her verses were poetic and rhythmically structured.
- ii. **Ghosha:** Ghosha composed hymns in the Rigveda that are notable for their lyrical quality and emotional depth.
- iii. **Apala:** Apala is associated with a Rigvedic hymns.
- iv. **Gargi Vachaknavi:** A philosopher, Gargi was deeply rooted in Vedic oral traditions and musical chanting.
- v. **Maitreyi:** Maitreyi's contributions lie in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Vedas.
- vi. **Romasha (Svanya):** A Vedic Rishika who was a Brahmavadini and was highly proficient in chanting.
- vii. **Sikata (Nivavari):** Recognized as a Rishika in the Rigveda and Samaveda.
- viii. **Vak Ambhrini:** A highly influential Rishika who composed the Devi Suktam.
- ix. **Atreyi:** A composer of hymns dedicated to Agni (the fire god).
- x. **Yami (Vaivasvati):** A daughter of Vaivasvata who is associated with early Vedic hymns.
- xi. **Sarparajni:** A Rishika known for her contributions to the Vedic corpus.

Overall Contributions: In the Vedic Age women held a respected position in society and actively participated in musical life. Known as Rishikas, they composed and chanted Vedic hymns (suktas) used in rituals, making them the earliest women composers and musicians in India, which later influenced the evolution of Indian classical music.

B) Pre-Classical / Epic Age (c. 500 BCE – 200 BCE)/Also called: Itihasa Period:In the Pre-Classical / Epic Age (c. 500 BCE-200 BCE), also called the Itihasa Period,

Main features: Indian music was transmitted orally and is known mainly through literary, religious, and epic sources such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Brahmanas, Upanishads.

In the post Vedic age Status of women musicians gradually declined in musical field.

Challenges faced: The Challenges faced by women musicians were Patriarchal social codes, which restricted women's public roles. Music increasingly became a courtly art (male-dominated) associated with devadasis and courtesans. Respectable women were discouraged from performing publicly. A growing moral divide between "respectable women" and "performing women" came into being.

Some notable Women Musicians of the Pre-Classical / Epic Age (c. 500 BCE – 200 BCE)

- i. **Sita (Ramayana – Mythological Character):** Wife of Ramchandra Sita as skilled in veena playing and singing. She symbolizes the cultured, musically trained royal woman.
- ii. **Ravana's Wives Mandodari and others (Mythological Characters from Ramayana) :** In the Ramayana, they are described as proficient in Nrityageeta and playing musical instruments.
- iii. **Draupadi (Mythological character from Mahabharata)** Wife of the Pandavas, she was trained in gandharva gana.
- iv. **Princess Uttarā (Mythological character from Mahabharata):** Trained by Arjuna (as Brihannala the transgender) in music and dance Uttara was proficient in Dance and music. Demonstrates structured pedagogy in vocal, instrumental, and dance arts for women.
- v. **Panar and Viraliyar (Sangam Period):** These were female bards or singers who traveled and performed.
- vi. **Gandharva Girls/Women:** Musicians who performed Marga Sangeet (prestigious/classical music) in courts and temples.
- vii. **Apsaras (Urvashi, Rambha, Menaka, Tilottama):** Often depicted as celestial musicians and dancers in epic literature, representing the highest proficiency in Nrityageeta.

Overall Contributions of Women in the Itihāsa Period: (The music history of this period is reconstructed from texts. epics): Though the above mentioned names are semi-mythical, they strongly influenced the aesthetic ideals of Indian classical music, especially melody, ornamentation, preservation of oral musical traditions, development of melodic chanting, early use of string instruments like the veena, the Integration of emotion (bhava) with musical sound. These established of women as knowledge-bearers, not just performers or entertainers.

C) Classical Age (c. 200 BCE – 600 CE)/Also called: Ancient Classical Period:

Main features: This period is marked by advent of codification of music theory. Some Landmark texts of this period was, Natyasastra and Dattilam.

Challenges faced: Women musicians were often associated with temples or royal courts, which gave them patronage but also made them socially vulnerable.

The Devadasi system subjected women to moral stigma and exploitation leading to social marginalization. Women from “respectable” households were discouraged from learning or performing music publicly.

Some notable women Musicians of India during this period:

- i. **Sanghamitta (c. 3rd century BCE):** A Buddhist nun and cultural ambassador. She was associated with chanting traditions and sacred music used in Buddhist rituals.
- ii. **Characters from the Tamil epic Silappadikaram by Ilango Adigal(2nd century CE) -** Though not historical individuals, these figures reflect real musical practices of the time. There was dancer-singer Madhavi. Also expert in yaazh (ancient Tamil harp) and pan (melodic modes).
- iii. **Women Musicians Mentioned in the Natya Shastra (c. 200 BCE–200 CE):** While the Natya Shastra does not list many personal names, it explicitly acknowledges women performers, the Gayanikas (female singers), Vadinikas (female instrumentalists), Apsaras (celestial musicians, reflecting idealized human performers).
- iv. **Buddhist and Jain Nun-Musicians (c. 200 BCE–500 CE):** Several verses were attributed to women musicians chanting, singing and playing instruments.
- v. **Temple and Court Musicians (Unnamed but Documented):** Inscriptions and literature from the Gupta period (c. 320–600 CE) refer to women veena players, vocalists in temples and royal courts.

Overall Contributions: In the Classical Age of India individual women musicians are rarely documented because music was transmitted orally and historical records focused more on courts and texts than performers. However, literary, epigraphic, and treatise-based sources do preserve the names or identities of some notable women musicians, composers, and music scholars.

D) Post-Classical/Gupta Age(c.600CE – 1200 CE)/also called: Early Medieval Period :

Main features of this era: In this era the emergence of the raga system marked a decisive phase in the history of Indian music, articulated most clearly in seminal treatises such as Matanga’s Brihaddesi, which first defined the term “raga,” and Sarangadeva’s Saṅgita Ratnakara.



Challenges: During this period social status of women declined, and public performance by respectable women was often discouraged, leading to music being associated mainly with temple performers, devadasis and courtesans. Women had limited access to formal musical education and scholarly recognition, as music treatises and training systems were dominated by men. Additionally, moral stigma, caste restrictions, and lack of personal autonomy further limited women's visibility and freedom as musicians.

Notable Women Musicians of this era

- i. **Hamsavati (c. 1st century BCE)** was a professional musician and dancer.
- ii. **Karaikkal Ammaiyar (c. 6th century CE)**, from present-day Tamil Nadu, stands as a devotional vocalist and performer. Her hymns were rendered in temple rituals, contributing to the foundation of South Indian music.
- iii. **Andal (Godā Devi) (c. 9th century CE)** of Tamil Nadu was a seminal devotional composer and singer whose Carnatic rāgas based, kritis or songs still continue to be sung daily in temples.
- iv. **Devadasis or temple musicians: Between the 7th and 12th centuries CE:** Debdasis or women temple musicians were trained vocalists, instrumentalists, and dancers attached to major temples. Temple inscriptions from the Chola, Pallava, and Rashtrakuta periods frequently record their presence.
- v. **Mahadevi Akka** - the 12th-century lady mystic poet-singer from Karnataka, was a pioneering vocal composer
- vi. **Royal and Court Musicians (Unnamed but recorded):** During the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, record the presence of queens and court ladies trained in veena, flute, and vocal music. Varayositas were skilled courtesans and artists performing in royal assemblies playing a key role in sustaining mārṅa (classical) music traditions.
- vii. **The Female Orchestra or Streegeet (Classical Era):** Ancient paintings and artistic records depict all-female orchestras, with women playing flutes, drums, and cymbals, showing their role as specialized instrumentalists in addition to vocalists.

Overall Contributions: During the Post-Classical or Early Medieval period (c. 600–1200 CE), women musicians played a crucial role in preserving, practicing, and transmitting India's musical heritage across courtly, temple, and public spiritual spheres. They sustained both margi (classical) and desi (regional) traditions through vocal music, instrumental performance, dance, and pedagogy influencing later on the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions.

E) Medieval Age (c. 1200 CE – 1700 CE) Also called: Islamic / Sultanate & Mughal Period :

Main features: In this period Indian classical music underwent a major transformation with a clear bifurcation into Hindustani music in the North and Carnatic music in the South. Also the evolution of vocal forms such as Dhrupad, Khayal, and Thumri came into being.

Challenges faced : Women Indian musicians in the Medieval Age (c. 1200–1700 CE), during the Sultanate and Mughal period, faced significant social and cultural restrictions. Practices such as purdah limited women's public performance, confining most musical activity to royal courts or private spaces. Although some women, including courtesans (tawaifs), received patronage and advanced musical training, their contributions were often marginalized or morally stigmatized. As a result, women's musical achievements were rarely documented, leading to their underrepresentation in historical records.

Notable Women Musicians of this period:

- i. **Kanti (Poetess, c. 11th Century):** A contemporary of court poets, known for her poetic and likely musical talents.
- ii. **Shantala Devi (Hoysala Queen, 12th Century):** A paragon of accomplishment, she was an expert in singing, dancing, and playing instruments, ruling alongside her husband.
- iii. **Razia Sultana (r. 1236 –1240),** the first and only woman ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, distinguished herself as both a patron and practitioner of music, using the arts as a means of cultural integration and courtly refinement. She encouraged a creative synthesis of Persian and Indian musical traditions.
- iv. **Meerabai (c. 1498–1546 CE):** A Rajput princess and devotee of Krishna, she composed and sang bhajans (devotional songs) in regional dialects, becoming a pivotal figure in the Bhakti movement,
- v. **Rani Durgavati (1524–1564),** the Gond queen of Central India during the Mughal era, was not only a valiant ruler but also a refined patron and practitioner of music trained in Dhrupad style.
- vi. **Saraswati Devi, the daughter of Tansen,** emerged as a distinguished vocalist during Emperor Akbar's reign in the sixteenth century. Personally trained by her illustrious father, she was an accomplished Dhrupad singer at the Mughal court, embodying the discipline of the Senia tradition.
- vii. **Rani Rupmati (Roopmati) of Malwa** a celebrated 16th-century vocalist and poet during the reign of Sultan Baz Bahadur.
- viii. **Tawaifs or elite Court courtesans –** During the Sultanate and Mughal periods, tawaifs or elite court courtesans played an indispensable role as accomplished vocalists, instrumentalists, and dancers.

Rigorously trained in dhrupad, khayal, thumri, dadra, and other semi-classical forms and on instruments such as the veena, tanpura, sarangi, and pakhawaj.

- ix. **Women Sufi Musicians:** Women associated with the Chishti Sufi order played a significant role as vocal devotional artists through the singing of mystical poetry in Persian, Arabic, and Hindavi central to Sufi spiritual practice.

Overall Contributions: Between 1200 and 1700 CE, The women musicians acted as custodians of oral traditions, preserving and transmitting ragas and compositions across generations in an era when written notation was limited. Their artistic engagement shaped the growth of Dhrupad and Khayal, while their presence in royal courts enabled a synthesis of Indian and Persian musical ideas.

F) Modern Age (c. 1700 CE - 1947) Also called: Late Medieval/Colonial Period :

Main features of this era: The establishment of the gharana system marked a significant phase in the evolution of Indian classical music, emphasizing stylistic lineages and structured pedagogy. This period also saw increased systematization and documentation of musical knowledge.

Challenges: British colonial morality viewed public performance by women as socially inappropriate, further restricting their opportunities. Indian reform movements, while promoting respectability, often excluded hereditary women musicians from mainstream recognition. Classical music favoured upper-caste, educated women, while traditional women performers were erased. Women musicians faced a conflict between cultural nationalism and personal artistic freedom.

Notable women Musicians of this era

- i. **Gauhar Jaan (1873–1930)** was a celebrated courtesan. She was highly proficient in Hindustani classical music as well as semi-classical forms such as Thumri and Dadra. In 1902, she became the first Indian musician to record music on the gramophone, marking a historic moment in the preservation of Indian musical traditions.
- ii. **Malka Jaan (Agrewali):** Renowned Thumri singer and contemporary of Gauhar Jaan. Highly proficient in Hindustani Classical Music and lighter Forms as well.
- iii. **Mogubai Kurdikar (1894–1969)** Belonged to the Jaipur–Atrauli khayal gharana. As a distinguished guru, she trained several important musicians, most notably her illustrious daughter Kishori Amonkar.
- iv. **Kesarbai Kerkar (1892–1977)** was a legendary Hindustani classical vocalist of the Jaipur–Atrauli gharana, renowned for her authoritative command over complex rāga structures, intricate layakari, and disciplined improvisation.

- v. **Veena Dhanammal (1867–1938):** A defining figure in Carnatic music.
- vi. **Coimbatore Thayi (1872–1917):** Prolific recording artist and singer of devotional songs.
- vii. **Begum Akhtar (1914–1974)** was one of the most iconic figures of Hindustani classical and semi-classical music, excelling in ghazal, thumri, and dadra. Revered as the Mallika-e-Ghazal (Queen of Ghazal), she elevated ghazal to the formal concert stage.
- viii. **M. S. Subbulakshmi (1916–2004)** was a legendary exponent of Carnatic music. She became the first woman musician to receive the Bharat Ratna. She also represented Indian classical music at the United Nations General Assembly in 1966.
- ix. **Annapurna Devi (1927–2018)** was one of the greatest surbahar players in the history of Indian classical music and a distinguished representative and illustrious Guru of the Maihar gharana.
- x. **Janki Bai of Allahabad (1880–1934)** was a celebrated exponent of Thumri and Dadra. She gained widespread acclaim during the early gramophone era for recording extensively.
- xi. **Hirabai Barodekar (1905–1989)** was a distinguished vocalist of the Kirana Gharana who played a crucial role in popularizing Hindustani classical music through radio broadcasts and public concerts. She was among the earliest women to teach classical music in formal institutional settings.
- xii. **Rasoolan Bai (1902–1974)** was a celebrated exponent of the Banaras gharana, renowned for her mastery of thumri.
- xiii. **Siddheshwari Devi (1908–1977)** was one of the finest exponents of Purab ang thumri in Hindustani classical music.
- xiv. **Zohrabai Agrewali (1868–1913)** was a pioneering figure in Hindustani classical music, trained in the rigorous Dhrupad tradition and renowned for her mastery of Khayal.
- xv. **Gangubai Hangal (1913–2009)** was one of the most distinguished vocalists of the Kirana Gharana, renowned for her powerful, resonant voice and uncompromising commitment to classical purity.

Overall contribution: Indian women musicians of the modern age played a transformative role in preserving, reshaping, and expanding Indian musical culture despite operating within restrictive social frameworks. Women artists started recording for gramophone, helped shift music from private salons to public stages, radio, and concert halls. As theatre, cinema, and formal pedagogy emerged in the early twentieth century, women musicians shaped popular, classical, and educational traditions, ensuring both continuity and innovation in Indian music.

G) Contemporary / Post-Independence Age (1947 - Present)/Also called: Contemporary Period

Main features of this era: In this era the institutionalization of music education has played a crucial role in preserving and systematically transmitting Indian classical music in the modern era. The use of recording technology, along with radio, television, and digital platforms, has expanded access to learning and performance beyond traditional guru-shishya settings. Globalization started carrying Indian classical music to international audiences, encouraging cross-cultural exchange while retaining its core traditions. At the same time, fusion and experimentation have emerged as creative expressions that respect classical foundations. Many major contemporary artists have gained global recognition, and the thoughtful use of AI is now opening new possibilities for documentation, analysis, and learning in Indian classical music.

Challenges: In the Post-Independence Period although women gained great access to education, music institutions and leadership remained male dominated. Women instrumentalists were fewer due to gender stereotypes that discouraged them from playing certain instruments. Marriage and family responsibilities often interrupted or limited women's professional musical careers. Women musicians received less recognition, fewer performance opportunities, and fewer awards compared to male counterparts.

Safety concerns during travel and late-night performances affect career opportunities. Online platforms expose women to harassment, objectification, and unfair criticism. Commercial pressures often prioritize appearance and popularity over artistic skill, affecting women more than men.

Notable Women Musicians of this era

- i. **Kishori Amonkar (1932-2017)** was a distinguished Hindustani vocalist of the Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana. She brought innovation to khayal singing by introducing personal interpretative freedom while maintaining classical rigor.
- ii. **Lata Mangeshkar (1929-2022)** was a legendary playback and light classical vocalist who dominated Indian film music for over five decades. She skillfully brought classical nuances into popular cinema, setting a standard for vocal purity and emotional expression. Her extraordinary contributions to Indian music were recognized with the Bharat Ratna in 2001.
- iii. **Girija Devi (1929-2017)** was a renowned Hindustani vocalist, celebrated as the Queen of Thumri, Dadra, and other semi-classical forms. She played a pivotal role in preserving and popularizing the Purab Ang tradition.
- iv. **Prabha Atre** is a renowned Hindustani classical vocalist of the Kirana Gharana, celebrated for her command over intricate ragas and improvisation. She has enriched classical music also as an author and educator.

- v. **Dr. N. Rajam (born 1938)** is a distinguished Hindustani classical violinist renowned for pioneering the Gayaki Ang, or vocal style, on the violin.
- vi. **vi)Veena Sahasrabudde** was a renowned Indian Hindustani classical vocalist known for her soulful khyal and bhajan renditions, rooted in the Gwalior gharana
- vii. **Malini Rajurkar** was a celebrated Hindustani classical vocalist known for her command over the Gwalior Gharana style Tappa singing.
- viii. **Parveen Sultana**, born in 1950, is one of India's most celebrated Hindustani classical vocalists, acclaimed for her powerful voice, intricate ornamentation, and emotive renditions of khayal, thumri, and bhajan.
- ix. **Kalpna Raghavendar** is a distinguished Carnatic vocalist and violinist
- x. **Ashwini Vide Deshpande** is a renowned Hindustani classical vocalist and educator of the Agra Gharana. She is acclaimed for her mastery over khayal, thumri, and semi-classical forms,
- xi. **Sudha Raghunathan (b. 1956)** is a distinguished Carnatic vocalist, composer, and musicologist.
- xii. **Shubha Mudgal** (born 1959) is a prominent contemporary Hindustani classical vocalist as well as playback singer. She is also actively involved in music education, digital archiving, and cultural advocacy.
- xiii. **Kaushiki Chakraborty (b. 1980)** is a distinguished Hindustani classical vocalist who represents the modern generation of classical musicians. She seamlessly blends her traditional training with contemporary presentation, making classical music accessible and engaging for today's audiences.
- xiv. **Anoushka Shankar (born 1981)** is the daughter of sitar wizard Pandit Ravi Shankar and international ambassador of Indian classical and fusion music. A grammy award winner, she has played a pivotal role in bringing Indian instrumental music to global contemporary audiences.

Overall contribution: In the Contemporary or Post-Independence period (1947–present), Indian women musicians have made significant contributions to both classical and semi-classical music popularizing Indian music nationally and internationally while preserving traditional instrumental and vocal styles through teaching and mentorship. Many women innovated within musical.

Results / Findings

Historical findings

a) Temple and Folk Contexts: Early references to women in music appear in temple traditions, Vedic sources where women participated as devotional performers



b) Courtesan Legacy: Courtesans in the 18th–19th centuries were central to Hindustani music's stylistic developments but faced moral censorship.

c) Early Public Performers: Women Performers and trailblazers gained institutional recognition through recordings and All India Radio and Television broadcasts.

Contemporary Contributions

a) Performance Excellence: Women artists today lead in all major genres of Indian classical music, with notable performers in vocal and instrumental fields.

b) Institutional Roles: Women are increasingly visible as music educators, researchers, and festival directors.

c) Media and Global Outreach: Modern technologies and global networks have enabled women musicians to reach wider audiences, cultivate international collaborations.

Structural Challenges

a) Access to Training: Historical barriers to formal training persist in subtle forms, including gendered expectations around mobility, respectability, and family support.

b) Professional Recognition: Women often navigate inequities in pay, visibility, and critical valuation compared to male counterparts.

c) Cultural Norms: Persisting gendered attitudes influence repertoire choices, with some genres perceived as more 'appropriate' for women, reinforcing stereotypes.

5. Discussion

a) Interpreting Findings: The findings reveal that women's contributions to Indian classical music are both significant and complexly positioned within broader social structures. Historically, women's musical agency was constrained by moral and institutional barriers, yet they innovated within existing forms—whether in courtesan salons or devotional spaces. Contemporary women performers build on these foundations while leveraging new platforms to amplify their work.

b) Relation to Existing Literature : This study confirms insights regarding the negotiation of gendered norms in performance spaces and expands them by situating contemporary practices within a historical continuum. Where previous studies focus on specific case histories, the current research synthesizes a broader cross-tradition perspective.

c) Theoretical Implications : Drawing on feminist cultural theory, women's navigations of classical music reflect broader patterns of resistance and adaptation within patriarchal structures. The narratives of women artists points to foreground voices long marginalized.



6. Implications

a) For Scholarship: This research encourages scholars to pursue interdisciplinary approaches that integrate gender studies, musicology, and cultural history which canon voices in Indian classical music.

b) For Music Education: Music academies and conservatories should examine curricula and institutional cultures to ensure gender inclusivity and equitable access to training opportunities. Mentorship programs and scholarship support for women musicians can address enduring disparities.

c) For Policy and Cultural Institutions: Arts councils and festival organizers should prioritize gender balance in programming and leadership roles. Documentation projects focused on women's musical heritage can preserve legacies that risk being overlooked.

7. Conclusion

Women have played an integral role in the rich tapestry of Indian classical music tradition throughout history as singers, musicians, composers and performers. It is important to acknowledge the resilience and creativity of women who defied societal norms and made their voices heard. Women face challenges, such as limited access to education and resources, societal pressure to prioritize family roles, and unequal treatment in the music industry. Efforts are needed to address these issues, promote inclusivity, and provide equal platforms for women artists to showcase their talents.

While progress has been made, ongoing efforts are necessary to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all genders in the realm of Indian music. But in the end it can be said that the future of Indian women musicians shines bright, carried forward by talent that not only survives obstacles, but transforms them into triumph.

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