

## Unearthing a forgotten life

December, 1911, Delhi: Emperor George V is crowned the absolute monarch of

British India and simultaneously its capital formally shifts from Kolkata to Delhi. The special event is marked by the performance of two special artistes, one of whom sings 'Yeh jalsa taajposhi ka mubarak ho mubarak ho!' (congratulations for this coronation), to huge applause from the gathered royalty from all over India. The two singers are specially presented to the Emperor, who gifts them with a hundred guineas. One of the them was Janki Bai. And the other, well, she was the first singer from India to have a gramophone record, on which, after every song, she used to flamboyantly announce her name: "My name is Gauhar Jaan!"

April, 2010, Delhi: Vikram Sampath, a young finance management professional in Bangalore, proudly watches as Vice-President of India, Hamid Ansari, unveils the result of his painstaking research: *My Name is Gauhar Jaan — The Life and Times of a Musician* (Rupa & Co).

Nearly a 100 years separate the two events, but this much time was enough to obliterate from public memory one of the most versatile classical singers of those times, who was known as much for her talent and beauty as her flamboyant lifestyle during the course of her lifetime that spanned between 1873 and 1930. Sampath has done something remarkable by unearthing a treasure trove of information about Gauhar Jaan who died in Mysore, where she had taken shelter in her last days as a guest of the king of Mysore. Nobody even knows where she was buried.

Jaan was an exceptional beauty but it was her talent that made her memorable for people of that era. Added to that was the way she led her life — records say that she did not wear the same jewellery set twice, and would travel through Kolkata streets on a horse buggy when Indians were forbidden from doing so by the British.

She was born as Eileen Angelina Yeoward to an Anglo-Indian mother and Armenian Christian father. Her maternal grandfather was a British soldier and grandmother a Hindu. And when her mother married a

Muslim gentleman from Azamgarh after her marriage fell apart, she converted to Islam and took the name Badi Malka Jaan, and the young Eileen became Gauhar Jaan.

Young Gauhar learnt the basics of music in Varanasi, where they were settled initially. Later, when Malka Jaan shifted to Kolkata, Gauhar honed her musical skills in the culturally vibrant city. They

became favourites at the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the Lucknow nawab who had shifted to the city. It was here, in 1902, that Gauhar was chosen as the first Indian artiste to have a gramophone record by Frederick William Gaisberg, the Gramophone Company's first India agent.

Sampath has brought alive the forgotten life of Gauhar Jaan in his meticulously-researched book. But it wasn't an easy task to find details about the singer who had 600 records in 20 languages, which had her sing Thumris, Dadras and Ghazals apart from songs in Arabic, Persian, Tamil, Telugu and even French.

Sampath, around 30, first got interested in Jaan when he read a document with Gauhar Jaan's name during his research for his earlier book on the Mysore royal family. "She was the first artiste to have a record in India. What drove her to settle down in Mysore on a measly pension in her later life, that propelled me to find out more about her," says Sampath. "The process was quite difficult but fascinating because she was someone who was a celebrity of her times but is almost unknown now. There was a lot of gossip about her, like the time she threw a party to 2,000 people when her cat had a litter of five kittens."

Sampath, a trained Carnatic vocalist, had to go through a learning process during the research as he had no idea about the nuances of Hindustani classical music which Gauhar Jaan practiced. "It was a great journey into her life that saw the heights of success and the depths of misery," he says. His only regret is that he was not able to find her grave. "There is no account of her grave. I got records of her hospital bills, even the death certificate copy, but no details of her burial," he says with a tinge of regret. "She certainly deserved much more, which is why I wanted to bring back her authentic memory."

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