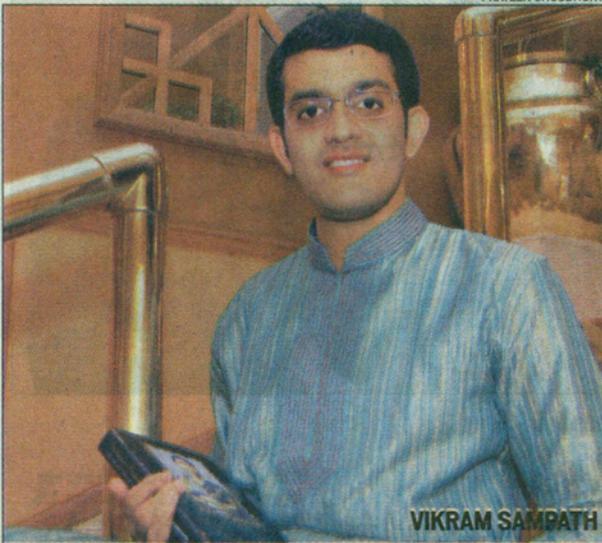


Romance of Gauhar

Vikram Sampath, a unique combination of Carnatic vocalist and computer professional, and now a certified author, describes it as an obsession. With a *tawaif* (courtesan), what's more. But then, she is no ordinary *tawaif*. She is Gauhar Jaan (1873-1930), one of the earliest female Hindustani classical vocalists (as opposed to a nautch girl or a glorified prostitute), who made this city her home, though she was originally from Azamgarh.

Sampath is the author of a new book on this remarkable woman, titled *My Name is Gauhar Jaan — The Life and Times of a Musician* (Rupa & Co, Rs 595, hardcover). In the city recently for the book's official launch, Sampath, also the author of *Splendours of Royal Mysore: The Untold Story of the Wodeyars*, says he stumbled upon Gauhar Jaan's name while researching for his first book.

"The resonance in her name struck me immediately," he says. So he decided to find out more. And the more he learnt, the more obsessed he became with the woman who became one of the most celebrated vocalists of India.



PRATEEK CHOUDHURY

In fact, she wasn't born Gauhar Jaan, but as Eileen Angelina Yeoward, an Armenian Christian who later converted to Islam. During her career, she recorded about 600 songs in over 20 languages including English, and wrote poetry in Hindi and Urdu. She lived like a fairytale princess, charming her numerous admirers with her voice as

well as her looks, but died in relative poverty in Mysore, broken-hearted and lonely.

All this and more are part of Sampath's book, but it isn't just about Gauhar. "I have tried to paint a social picture, too, of women who took up the challenge of recording in studios before the men, and whose achievements have been obliterated," he says.

Incidentally, along with

such peers as Shashimukhi and Phanibala, Gauhar was among the first artistes of the Gramophone Company in India. And Sampath's book describes how the Gramophone Company's agent Frederick Geisberg was delighted with her, and how her photograph reportedly appeared on matchboxes in Austria.

At the book launch, renowned vocalist Girija Devi spoke of how she belonged to the same *gharana* in Benaras as Gauhar, and described her as an inspiration.

"Gauhar's real achievement lies in the way she made Hindustani classical music accessible to the masses through her huge repertoire," says Sampath. "She brought the art out of *kothas* and liberated women singers from exploitative patrons."

And at the end of all her recorded songs (she even sang Rabindra sangeet with a classical twist), as was the custom in those days, she would announce herself with a saucy "My name is Gauhar Jaan!" in perfect English. The book celebrates that sense of mirth.