



*Little did author Vikram Sampath know that his research on the history of the Mysore royal family for his first book 'Splendours of Royal Mysore: the Untold Story of the Wodeyars' would unwittingly lead him to the subject of his next book. Nose buried in the royal splendor of the famed Mysore Maharajas, Vikram came across aged letters and correspondences from a certain tawaif, a Hindustani musician. After much study and dogged determination, he found that her name was Gauhar Jaan. And so came about his book, 'My Name is Gauhar Jaan'. The Bangalore-based author, who was in the city to launch his book, talks to What's Hot about the travails and travels of the singer, famed for being the first Indian and first woman to ever record on a gramophone.*

#### WHO IS GAU HAR JAAN?

Apart from the fact that she was the first Indian to record on the gramophone, Gauhar was one of India's biggest enigmas. Born to Armenian parents, she had an Indian grandmother and British grandfather. In 1873, after her parents went through a bitter divorce, mother and daughter shifted base from Azamgarh to Banaras. There, they joined the *tawaif* (a sect of performing women, known for their mastery over singing, dancing and writing poetry, who worked in the courts of royals). After a while, they shifted to Calcutta, which was the capital of India then, to perform at the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. There, under various maestros, Gauhar underwent intensive training to become a singer/dance/poet extraordinaire. She reached dizzying heights of fame in her prime. At that point, she led a hedonistic lifestyle — in fact, during a certain period, she paid a fine to the (then) government because she enjoyed driving around the city on her four-horse driven buggy and only Englishmen were allowed to do so at that time.

#### ABOUT THE BOOK:

The Mysore Palace archives are extremely well-maintained and I noticed several correspondences between the Maharajas and Gauhar. The letters built for me the image of a struggling diva who was holding on desperately to her golden years. After an extravagant lifestyle, she was at that point reduced to begging for extra salary from the government. When I dug deeper, I found that when recording technology came to India in 1902, Gauhar was the first one chosen to record. She recorded over 600 songs in over 20 languages, including Tamil, Telugu and even Persian!

#### RESEARCH:

It was very tough because in India, music doesn't have a strong recorded history. So, this book took me on several journeys to Kolkata, Banaras, Mysore, Mumbai. Two important documents helped me out immensely. The first one is a document from the Calcutta High Court, which is a parentage suit filed by Gauhar's step-brother. The second one was an embezzlement suit that she filed against her secretary-cum-lover Abbas, who fleeced her of all her money and valuables. The National Archives at Delhi and National Library at Calcutta were of immense help. I caught hold of the only available copy of Urdu poetry that Malka Jaan (Gauhar's mother) wrote, in London. I also managed to get my hands on the memoirs of the German, William Gaisberg, who came to record Gauhar.

#### WHAT NEXT?

I'm essentially a student of Carnatic music. It was ironic and quite by accident that I wrote my first on a Hindustani singer! But my dream is to marry two of my life's biggest passions — music and history. So, my next project is one that will trace the evolution of Carnatic music through different ages and places right from Thanjavur to Karnataka.

ANUSHA VINCENT