

Gramophone years with Gauhar Jaan

DYNAMIC DIVA
FORTY FIVE MINUTES

Vikram Sampath's latest book is about a Hindustani classical music diva, born into the abandoned *tawaif* tradition. She had a rockstar-like, turbulent career and was the first Indian voice to be frozen for posterity in 1902, during the infancy of recording technology in India, says Shana Maria Verghis

Kolkata may not have any memorials to one of its former daughters, Gauhar Jaan, who was of Indian and Armenian parentage, living and singing between 1873-1930. But the city's *Chor Bazaar* also proved to be a treasure trove for her biographer, Vikram Sampath. He managed to locate a scratchy 78 rpm recordings of hers there, as well as many old timers, who knew about her music and also the mansion that she had lived in. She would lose it over a case with her secretary-cum-husband, Abbas. One of many dramas in her eventful life.

There are supposedly 600 recordings by Gauhar, but only about 200 are available. Some in possession of a group called India Record Collectors. Sampath digitally mastered about 25. They accompany the book. He narrated how early voice recordings had musicians loudly announcing names. Hence the exclamation point in the title of his book, *My Name is Gauhar Jaan!* (Rupa&Co). And the quality of the equipment was such that they would "shout in a crooning falsetto, with undistinguishable words. Later the quality improved." He has included different stages of recordings in a CD.

Sampath has a day job with Hewlett-Packard, and is trained in Carnatic music. His earlier book, *Splendours of Royal Mysore: the untold story of the Wodeyars* first gave him a glimpse of Gauhar, who by accounts in his book, was a temperamental, passionate vocalist invited by the Maharajah to play at Mysore court, being entranced by her personality. Apart from her repertoire, Gauhar Jaan's legacy was risking convention and superstitions of the time and having *chut-poh* to be first to have her songs on gramophone. This opened the way for today's digital music. Her life also coincides with an anti-naught campaign, which was an extension of a somewhat self-righteous 'social parity movement' begun in Britain



Young Gauhar



Gauhar recording in the studio

in the 19th century, coming hard on Brit residents with *babis* or Indian mistresses, *tawaifs* and *devadasis* as immoral.

In the event, these women who for centuries were linked to aristocrats or temples, for whom they sang and danced, lost their social position and many died without former patronage. What is also tragic is Indian classical music was 'purged' of their influence and repackaged as more divine, leaving a gaping hole in cultural history with artists from these traditions denying associations with it. So Sampath's work is a welcome blank-filler, if one might use this crude phrase. He mentioned poor documentation made digging up material on Gauhar Jaan difficult. In fact, classical musicians who sing her songs, are often unaware to whom credit must go. But that is



got a Bharat Ratna that, books about him were written in Kannada," Sampath said. In Gauhar's case, he had anecdotes of her celebrity status, like her rides to Kolkata streets in a *buggy*, which for the times was a unique vehicle for anyone to possess. The parties that she held. Once she walked in with two bodyguards to watch over her diamond brooch. So gangsta! Comments on her beauty went like, "she was so fair you could see red juice of *ponn* she took, coursing through her veins as if she was a lizard!" chortled Sampath. He

was attracted by her un-classical musician-like, rockstar persona. "Recitals usually have a *diya* on stage. And there is seldom anything in a presentation to make one go, 'wow!' Apart from the music itself of course.

In the course of research, he learnt that after Thomas Alva Edison had had a breakthrough with his phonograph on December 22, 1877, a German based in Washington named Emile Berliner, was working on his version, with pianist Frederick William Gaisberg. He licensed this to a newly formed syndicate called the Gramophone Company (that launched the HMV label in 1916), and Gaisberg went around London making recordings in various languages, including



The author

welcomed this new form of technology, being received with a lot of misgivings." Gauhar's history is checked. Her mother, Malka Jaan, a singer like her, who left behind a book of her poetry, was born Victoria Heinning, daughter of an English sailor Hardy Heinnings and his mistress Rukmani. Victoria, supposedly a beauty, married an Armenian engineer who abandoned her and a daughter, Angelina

Sikh/Gurumuki, Arabic, Hindi and Urdu/Hindustani. So technically, the first experimental recording by Indian voices happened before Gauhar Jaan was recorded in 1902. And as Sampath, who avows to be a feminist, put it, "A woman, not a man,

(later Gauhar). Malka/Victoria became the 'keep' of a nobleman named Khurshid and moved to Benaras. There's an interesting paragraph where Sampath relates hierarchies in the *tawaif* system, separating them from common prostitutes, called the *veshyas* or *ganikas*. They were usually more well-versed in traditional skills like arts and languages than traditional family women. One of their roles being to teach aristocrat's sons court etiquette. Their *kotha* was as such, not a brothel, Sampath said. The bottomline involved exchange of sexual favours and money, but it was conducted more classically. "Tawaifs were top of a hierarchy allowing power to choose clients." The 'Bois' sang, *Janns* danced and sang. Others were lower-class *Mhrasans*, called *Karshans*, *Kashmans*, *Gandharvas*, *Dholis* or *Dominis*. This group had *lamis*, who were entertainers; *Khamgis* gave favours and entertainment.

Thakhis and *rondis* could not access arts, and sold their bodies. Gauhar, as a *tawaif* daughter had access to prestigious venues when her mother sang. But even her mother's clout did not protect her from preying eyes of a decrepit, raja in his 90, who raped her at the age of 13. Sampath mentioned "glazal singer Begum Aichtar was raped by a raja at a young age too. The child was brought up as her half-sister." Girls in such positions, were always walking a tightrope. Living in relative respectability and luxury still made them vulnerable to wolves.

Gauhar lived her music through several wealthy men, who supported her; and also won appreciation from compatriots and wealthy patrons on the basis of her talent, not just the 'casting couch' factor. She was one of the stars to perform for the English king and queen at the prestigious Delhi Durbar. But at different stages of her life, the label of 'prostitute' or someone who was immoral was a shadow. When she retired from music into isolation and depression, neighbours created a storm outside her house, saying they didn't want to be around a prostitute. On the other hand, the recording of her voice, which came with lots of publicity — her face was on Austrian matchboxes — would have given women in her position some leverage over clients. There were many others across India like her. Famous *tawaifs* and *devadasis*. Malka Jaan Agrewali, Zohrabai, Selum Godavari, Coimbatore Tilly whose stories aren't told. One effect of the Anti-Naught Act, Sampath explained, was on "padams and *javalis*, reflecting *tawif* music, that were earlier replete with innuendoes. Today they resemble *bhajans*. People like Pandit Bhatkande saw to it Hindustani classical would be taught in 'respectable' families. So immoral references in songs were erased. We lost *shringeris*, a vital component."