

When Women First Found Their Voice

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In early recording expeditions of The Gramophone Company—in 1902, 1904-05, and 1906-07—women’s recordings accounted for 80.95 per cent, 83.51 per cent, and 85.36 per cent respectively of the total recorded catalogue of Indian classical music.



Illustration for representation

At the turn of the 20th century, a silent gender revolution was brewing in India—one that has sadly gone largely unnoticed by historians, sociologists, and feminists. India had its first brush with recording technology imported from Europe and America, through multinational firms such as The Gramophone Company. European recording agents, with no knowledge of India’s languages or music, were sent in as ‘experts’ to gather as many commercially viable recordings of ‘natives.’ Singing in high-pitched voices for foreigners in the absence of microphones during the era of acoustic recording and limiting one’s presentation of an expansive art-form like Indian classical music to a mere three-minute capsule (which is all that an early shellac disc could hold) were creative challenges that unsettled most artists.

Yet, across India, while men largely stayed away, women stepped forward. Braving these challenges, they adapted their art to this new technology and its limitations, even negotiating commercial and copyright terms with European agents. Many of them came from tawaif and devadasi communities. In early recording expeditions of The Gramophone Company—in 1902, 1904-05, and 1906-07—women's recordings accounted for 80.95 per cent, 83.51 per cent, and 85.36 per cent respectively of the total recorded catalogue of Indian classical music.

While some information on the North Indian women pioneers, including the celebrated Gauhar Jaan, are well-known, the southern counterparts are largely forgotten. Among the earliest recorded superstars of South India was Salem Godavari, who lived in (then) Madras' devadasi stronghold—Thambuchetty Street. Negotiating with the French Pathé Company that secured Godavari initially for 16 titles for Rs 300, she got herself a whopping raise to Rs 900 at the end of just two days! Her Carnatic music recordings sold widely and like her fellow-women artistes, she made a fortune. But by the time of her death in 1911, she had willed her property away to the famed Pachaiyappa College, Society for Protection of Children, Annanda Samajam, Salem College, Vedic School attached to Salem Theosophical Society, and for temple cars and a rest house for pilgrims at a Shiva Temple in her hometown Salem. Would these institutions even know of Godavari or her munificence today, one wonders.

Another prolifically recorded artiste was Dhanakoti Ammal of Kanchipuram, who had family ties with the prima donna of Carnatic music Veenai Dhanammal. She had a wide repertoire of Tamil songs and knew several Ramayana kritis of Arunachala Kavirayar. It is said that at one of her concerts, an intemperate young zamindar once rudely addressed her by her first name, ordering her to sing a song from the Ramayana, causing angst to everyone including her. But she quickly composed herself and broke into song: 'Yaaru Da nee Korange?' (Who are you, O! Monkey!). While the repartee seemed apt for the rude man, this was actually a Ramayana song where Ravana questioned Hanuman on his first visit to Lanka. Her presence of mind and wit turned an insult into a joke, at the ill-mannered zamindar's expense. The erotic padams and javalis that women like Dhanakoti recorded are a treasure trove of a forgotten chapter of Carnatic music.

One of the more popular recorded artistes was Bangalore Nagarathamma (1878-1952), daughter of the devadasi Puttulakshmi in Mysore. Their patron's insult of the young girl made the mother vow to make Nagarathamma a star. By the time she was 15, she had been feted by the Mysore ruler Chamarajendra Wodeyar X. Her recordings in chaste Sanskrit and erotic Telugu padams were widely consumed. But in 1910, she courted a huge public scandal by publishing the 18th century erotic love-poem Radhika Santhvanamu (Appeasement of Radhika) of courtesan Muddupalani of Thanjavur. The bold storyline, the inherent woman's voice and articulation of female sexual needs, drew loud social and moral protests. Legal cases followed. She was called a prostitute and adulteress who had shamelessly put out intimate scenes for commercial gains. In spirited

rebuttals, Nagarathnamma explicitly attacked the double standard of male critics: why, she asked, should propriety and embarrassment apply to women but not men? Eventually the colonial government banned the book in 1911, copies were seized and pulped, and the prohibition remained until 1947. She refashioned herself after this episode. Later she willed away all her life's earnings to build a memorial for Saint Thyagaraja at his samadhi in Thiruvaiyaru. There too, she battled patriarchal attempts of takeover and sidelining her from even participating in the annual Pancharatnakriti rendition. As a memory of her single-minded devotion, her idol sits opposite the Saint's to this date.

Coimbatore Thayi (1872-1917) was such a superstar that the Gramophone Company held special sessions called 'Coimbatore Thayi Recording Sessions' and issued violet-labelled records indicating their best-seller status. But her records were to elicit a rare collaboration. French composer Maurice Delage heard her records in Paris, exclaiming that they 'sent chills up and down my spine!' He came to India looking for her and heard her live. Her singing fed into the Indian musical influences that produced his celebrated Western-music piece Ragamalika. Courtesy these women singers, Indian music was thus quietly catapulted from temples and royal courts to global mass-media.

These are merely four among scores of women who displayed remarkable enterprise and chutzpah at the dawn of recorded music in India. Ironically, the technology that captured their voices for posterity could not prevent their names from slipping out of our cultural memory. More than a century later, those fragile shellac discs still speak—and sing. Perhaps it is time we listened to the women behind them?

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