



Rasoolan Bai and the Preservation of Purab Ang Thumri in Hindustani Classical Music



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Abstract

This research paper critically examines the life and legacy of Rasoolan Bai (1902–1974), a celebrated yet often overlooked figure in Hindustani semi-classical music, particularly known for her mastery of Purab Ang thumri. The study addresses the research problem of historiographical marginalization of women artists from the tawaif tradition, whose cultural contributions have been obscured by postcolonial moral and social biases. The primary objective is to assess Rasoolan Bai's influence on the evolution and dissemination of thumri and related forms such as dadra, kajri, and chaiti. The central hypothesis posits that Rasoolan Bai's innovations in vocal technique, her negotiation with institutional frameworks like All India Radio, and her ability to navigate sociocultural stigma significantly shaped the trajectory of semi-classical music in modern India. Using a qualitative methodology, this paper draws upon archival audio recordings, academic literature, documentaries, and oral histories. The discussion analyzes her unique performance style, socio-political challenges, and adaptive strategies. The findings affirm her critical role as a transmitter of musical tradition and as a resilient cultural icon. In conclusion, Rasoolan Bai's legacy offers vital insights into gendered music history and remains deeply relevant to contemporary discourse on cultural preservation and artistic agency.

Keywords: Rasoolan Bai; Thumri; Hindustani music; Tawaif tradition; Gender and music

Research Paper

Introduction

In the intricate world of Hindustani classical music, the Purab Ang Thumri stands apart as a form that privileges emotion, intimacy, and lyrical grace over the more abstract, intellectualized forms like khayal and dhrupad. Emerging from the cultural crucible of eastern Uttar Pradesh—notably Banaras and Lucknow—Purab Ang developed as a sophisticated expression of romantic and devotional themes, often performed by women in salons, mehfil, and kothas during the 18th and 19th centuries (Manuel 38). However, with the rise of colonial morality and postcolonial nation-building, the association of Thumri with courtesans led to its gradual erasure from the official canon of "respectable" classical music (Qureshi 139). In this context, Rasoolan Bai, a tawaif from Varanasi born in 1902, emerged as

a rare and powerful preserver of this marginalized yet aesthetically rich tradition. Her music, which carried the hallmarks of the Purab Ang style—expressive lyricism (bol-banav), intricate embellishments (murki, meend), and a slow unfolding of emotional nuance—has become a reference point for scholars and artists alike (Neuman 89). More than just a performer, Rasoolan Bai became a custodian of memory, resisting both societal exclusion and aesthetic dilution. Despite her immense talent, Rasoolan Bai navigated an era that increasingly silenced women performers outside the Brahminical fold. The institutionalization of music education and the emergence of new cultural gatekeepers in independent India left little space for artists who did not conform to middle-class ideals of morality and professionalism (Deshpande 112). Yet,

through her appearances on All India Radio, festival circuits, and archival recordings, she managed to sustain the essence of a dying style and pass it on to the next generation, including prominent artists like Girija Devi, who openly acknowledged her influence (Sanyal and Widdess 54). This study seeks to explore Rasoolan Bai's musical and cultural legacy, arguing that she not only preserved the technical features of Purab Ang Thumri but also embodied resistance to the systematic marginalization of female artistry. Her life and work offer a lens through which we can understand how tradition is maintained—not just through formal institutions—but through lived experience, oral transmission, and aesthetic conviction.

Research Problem

While Rasoolan Bai is increasingly recognized in performance circles and academic discussions as a key figure in Purab Ang Thumri, systematic research into her role as a preserver and transmitter of the style remains scarce. Most existing literature on Hindustani classical music tends to focus on gharana-based traditions or male performers, often overlooking the contributions of women from courtesan backgrounds, whose musical legacies were transmitted through oral lineages and non-institutionalized spaces (Qureshi 141). Furthermore, scholarly engagement with Thumri as a genre has historically positioned it as either a semi-classical form lacking the gravitas of khayal and dhrupad or as a sentimental artifact of feminine performance, rather than as a technically rich and culturally significant art form (Manuel 45). In this framework, Rasoolan Bai is often mentioned as a historical figure but rarely analyzed in depth as a musicologist, stylistic innovator, or cultural conservator. The existing gaps in scholarship raise critical questions: How did Rasoolan Bai's performances sustain the stylistic elements of Purab Ang in the absence of formal institutional support? In what ways did her gender, caste, and profession shape both the dissemination and reception of her music? And how has her legacy been preserved or appropriated in contemporary interpretations of Thumri? These unresolved questions reveal a larger issue within Indian musicology—namely, the need to interrogate the structural silences that exclude marginalized practitioners from music history. Addressing this research gap is not only essential for understanding Rasoolan Bai's individual contributions but also for constructing a more inclusive narrative of Hindustani classical music.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to critically examine the role of Rasoolan Bai in preserving and perpetuating the Purab Ang style of Thumri within the broader tradition of Hindustani classical music. The study intends to address the lacuna in scholarly discourse by focusing on the aesthetic, cultural, and socio-political dimensions of her contributions. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. **To analyze the musical features of Purab Ang Thumri**—including its melodic ornamentation, lyrical emphasis, and rhythmic flexibility—as practiced and performed by Rasoolan Bai.
2. **To investigate Rasoolan Bai's role as a cultural conservator**, focusing on how she preserved the oral traditions of Thumri despite institutional neglect and societal marginalization.
3. **To contextualize her performances within the socio-political environment** of 20th-century India, especially regarding the decline of the tawaif tradition and the rise of nationalist and reformist attitudes toward female performers.
4. **To assess the transmission of her legacy**, both through direct discipleship and mediated forms such as All India Radio broadcasts and commercial recordings.
5. **To contribute to a broader understanding of gender, caste, and class dynamics** in Hindustani classical music by using Rasoolan Bai's career as a case study.

Through these objectives, the study aims to reposition Rasoolan Bai not only as a performer but also as a critical agent in the survival of a cultural form, challenging dominant narratives that often marginalize artists from non-elite backgrounds.

Hypothesis

This study is grounded in the hypothesis that Rasoolan Bai played a pivotal and under recognized role in the preservation and transmission of the Purab Ang style of Thumri, not only through her performances but also through her implicit pedagogy and cultural resistance. It is further hypothesized that her music maintained core stylistic features of Purab Ang Thumri—such as bol-banav, murki, and meend—at a time when institutional and social forces were working to marginalize or sanitize courtesan art forms in post-independence India. Her identity as a tawaif and a woman from a marginalized background contributed to the neglect of her legacy



in academic and musicological literature, despite her influence on subsequent generations of musicians. Her contribution challenges the elitist historiography of Hindustani classical music, which has traditionally prioritized male, gharana-affiliated performers while excluding informal and matrilineal forms of knowledge transmission.

Relevance of the Study

This study holds significant relevance in the fields of musicology, cultural studies, gender studies, and heritage preservation, as it seeks to foreground a figure often relegated to the periphery of classical music scholarship. In exploring the life and work of Rasoolan Bai, the research addresses critical gaps in the historiography of Hindustani music—specifically, the marginalization of female performers from the courtesan tradition and the non-institutional transmission of musical knowledge. Firstly, by centering Rasoolan Bai's role in preserving Purab Ang Thumri, the study challenges the conventional narratives that privilege male-dominated, gharana-based lineages while neglecting the tawaif tradition, which has historically played a central role in nurturing semi-classical forms like Thumri, Dadra, and Kajri (Qureshi 138; Manuel 49). These traditions have not only contributed to the aesthetic richness of Hindustani music but have also functioned as critical sites of cultural resistance for women excluded from mainstream artistic institutions. Secondly, the research contributes to cultural preservation efforts by documenting and analyzing Rasoolan Bai's stylistic contributions at a time when intangible heritage forms are under threat from globalization, standardization, and the erosion of oral traditions. With growing scholarly and governmental interest in safeguarding India's intangible cultural heritage, this study serves as a vital intervention by offering a nuanced, contextually grounded account of how musical traditions survive beyond formal institutions (Sanyal and Widdess 56). Thirdly, the study opens up avenues for rethinking the politics of recognition and legitimacy in Indian classical music. It encourages a more inclusive approach that values embodied knowledge, informal transmission, and gendered modes of musical expression, thereby contributing to the decolonization of Indian musicology and arts historiography (Deshpande 119). In sum, the study is not only an act of academic inquiry but also a form of cultural reclamation—an effort to ensure that voices like Rasoolan Bai's are acknowledged, studied, and preserved as vital threads in the tapestry of Indian classical music.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining historical research, musicological analysis, cultural theory, and oral history to investigate Rasoolan Bai's role in preserving the Purab Ang style of Thumri. Given the limited availability of written records and the oral nature of musical transmission in India, the research relies heavily on archival material, recorded performances, and secondary literature.

1. Archival and Audio Analysis

Primary sources include archival recordings of Rasoolan Bai, especially those preserved by All India Radio (AIR) and various music archives. Selected Thumri compositions are analyzed for stylistic features, such as:

- Use of bol-banav (lyrical improvisation),
- Vocal ornamentations like murki, meend, and gamak,
- Modal and raga-based structures specific to Purab Ang.

This analysis is supported by close listening techniques and comparative study with contemporaneous artists such as Siddheshwari Devi and Begum Akhtar (Manuel 72).

2. Textual and Lyric Analysis

The study closely examines the lyrical content of Rasoolan Bai's repertoire to trace themes of female subjectivity, romantic longing, and cultural expression. Particular attention is paid to how the vernacular language (Bhojpuri, Awadhi) enhances the emotional impact and regional identity of the Thumri (Qureshi 145).

3. Interviews and Oral Histories

Where possible, interviews with scholars, musicians, and disciples (direct or indirect) of Rasoolan Bai have been conducted or consulted. These provide insights into her teaching style, influence, and perception among contemporary artists. Oral accounts are crucial in reconstructing a figure whose life is poorly documented in official histories (Neuman 93).

4. Literature Review and Cultural Contextualization

Secondary sources include academic books, journal articles, biographies, and essays that contextualize Rasoolan Bai's work within the broader cultural,



gendered, and postcolonial landscape of 20th-century India. Works by Daniel Neuman, Regula Qureshi, and Peter Manuel inform the theoretical and historical framing of this study.

5. Ethnomusicological Framework

The research uses an ethnomusicological approach to understand music as both a sound-based and socially embedded practice. This involves examining not only what Rasoolan Bai sang, but how, where, and why she performed in particular contexts—and how her identity shaped those performances (Sanyal and Widdess 58).

Discussion

The study of Rasoolan Bai's musical contributions reveals her as an indispensable link in the transmission of Purab Ang Thumri, a form that embodies both musical complexity and emotive storytelling. In a period marked by the decline of the tawaif tradition and the institutional sanitization of classical arts post-independence, Rasoolan Bai's performances resisted the erasure of courtesan-based knowledge systems and reasserted the centrality of female-led, oral pedagogies in Hindustani music (Qureshi 138; Dasgupta).

Musical Style and Aesthetic Choices

Rasoolan Bai's Thumri singing exemplified the *bol-banav* style—a slower, more interpretive and emotionally nuanced rendering of lyrics—which distinguishes the Purab Ang tradition from the more rhythmically driven Punjab Ang (Manuel 45). Her renditions, such as “Lagat karejwa ma chot, phool gendwa na maar”, highlight her mastery of *murki*, *meend*, and *andolan*, revealing a performer deeply attuned to the emotive subtleties of raga-based expression (Neuman 76; Harmoniummusicblog). Her use of regional languages like Awadhi and Bhojpuri further rooted her art in a specific cultural landscape, adding linguistic texture and narrative intimacy to her performances (Malhotra; *Feminism in India*). These features not only served an aesthetic function but also functioned as markers of regional and gendered identity—forms of expression often absent from institutionalized music curricula.

Socio-Cultural Challenges and Marginalization

Rasoolan Bai's position as a tawaif in post-independence India placed her at the intersection of multiple marginalities—gender, caste, and profession. With the nationalist project seeking to elevate Hindustani classical music to a “respectable” art by disassociating

it from its courtesan roots, artists like Rasoolan Bai were systematically excluded from formal platforms (Qureshi 141; Trivedi). Despite this, she found a public voice through All India Radio, which served as a lifeline for many women artists. AIR archives show that she was a regular performer well into the 1960s, a period when public performances by tawaifs had almost entirely disappeared from urban cultural spaces (ThePrint; UCLA Archive). Yet, even as she reached wider audiences, she remained materially impoverished and was denied the institutional honors accorded to male contemporaries (Das; Scroll.in).

Legacy and Transmission

Though Rasoolan Bai never taught in formal institutions, her stylistic influence is visible in the work of singers like Girija Devi, who trained in the same Banaras tradition and often acknowledged her debt to Bai (Neuman 98). Her recordings, especially those broadcast by AIR and later digitized by ethnomusicologists and archivists, now serve as vital pedagogical tools and have inspired a re-evaluation of Thumri's place in classical music (Sanyal and Widdess 56; UCLA Archive). Importantly, the recent revival of interest in her life—through documentaries like *The Other Song* (Dewan) and scholarly platforms like *Feminism in India*—indicates a shift in public and academic perception, one that seeks to recover erased histories and recenter women's contributions to Indian classical traditions.

Intersectionality and Resistance

The discussion reveals how Rasoolan Bai's musical practice was inherently political. Her art resisted both aesthetic simplification and social exclusion. She embodied intersectional resistance—a Dalit Muslim woman preserving a high art form associated with a now-marginalized performance lineage. By performing deeply expressive Thumris in a time of increasing formalization and homogenization, she asserted a cultural identity that was both subaltern and elite, both excluded and central to the tradition (Das Gupta; Rao).

Results

The findings of this study strongly support the initial hypothesis: Rasoolan Bai played a pivotal yet underrecognized role in the preservation and transmission of the Purab Ang style of Thumri, particularly during a period of institutional and cultural transition in 20th-century India. The results of the research are categorized below:



1. Preservation of Stylistic Integrity

Analysis of Rasoolan Bai's performances confirmed that she upheld the defining features of Purab Ang Thumri—such as bol-banav, slow-tempo improvisation, emotional subtlety, and lyrical intimacy. Her renditions reveal a consistent and deliberate use of regional dialects (Awadhi, Bhojpuri) and ornamentation (e.g., murki, meend, andolan), which were hallmarks of the genre as it was originally conceived and practiced (Manuel 45; Neuman 98). This stylistic fidelity positions her as a cultural conservator rather than a mere performer.

2. Impact of Gender and Caste on Reception

The research confirmed that Rasoolan Bai's contributions were marginalized due to her identity as a Muslim woman and tawaif in a society that increasingly valorized caste-Hindu, male, and gharana-trained musicians. Despite national recognition through AIR, she was excluded from formal teaching institutions, awards, and state patronage, unlike her male counterparts or female artists from higher social strata (Qureshi 139; Deshpande 112). This exclusion illustrates the intersectional biases in the historiography of Hindustani classical music.

3. Oral Transmission and Informal Pedagogy

Though not formally institutionalized, Rasoolan Bai transmitted her musical knowledge through informal and oral methods, influencing students and contemporaries such as Girija Devi. Interviews and documented conversations confirm that her interpretive depth and vocal technique significantly shaped the next generation of Purab Ang singers, even if her pedagogical work was not formally acknowledged in public institutions (Sanyal and Widdess 58; ThePrint).

4. Revival and Reassessment of Legacy

In recent years, there has been a growing reassessment of Rasoolan Bai's work through documentaries, feminist scholarship, and digital archiving projects. These efforts have revealed her as not just a performer, but as a repository of a vanishing tradition. The renewed interest highlights a shift toward more inclusive historical narratives that value contributions from marginalized communities (Dewan; Malhotra; Scroll.in).

5. Role of Media in Sustaining Tradition

Her presence on All India Radio played a critical role in preserving her voice for posterity and ensuring that Purab Ang Thumri survived the decline of live salon performance. AIR recordings now serve as valuable

pedagogical resources for students of Hindustani classical music (UCLA Archive; Rao).

Summary of Results

The research demonstrates that Rasoolan Bai not only preserved the aesthetic core of Purab Ang Thumri but also resisted cultural and institutional forces that sought to marginalize her tradition. Her work stands as a powerful example of how marginalized artists can serve as central figures in cultural preservation, even when they are denied formal recognition.

Conclusion

The life and music of Rasoolan Bai offer a compelling lens through which to understand the interplay of tradition, identity, and resistance in Hindustani classical music. This study has shown that, far from being a passive transmitter of an inherited style, Rasoolan Bai was a deliberate and innovative custodian of Purab Ang Thumri, navigating multiple layers of marginalization—gender, caste, class, and religious identity—to safeguard a fading aesthetic tradition. Her artistic choices, deeply rooted in the oral, performative culture of the tawaif tradition, preserved essential elements of Purab Ang—not only in terms of musical ornamentation and raga structure but also in the emotional and lyrical character of the genre. Despite being systematically excluded from formal music institutions and state honors, her influence on artists such as Girija Devi and her preserved recordings via All India Radio ensured that her voice continued to educate, inspire, and transmit a form nearly erased from the mainstream. Moreover, the study revealed that mainstream historiography of Hindustani music has often ignored figures like Rasoolan Bai due to biases in caste, gender, and professional respectability. Her exclusion from dominant narratives highlights the need for a more inclusive and decolonized approach to Indian musicology—one that recognizes the complexity of knowledge systems developed and transmitted outside formal structures. Today, as renewed scholarly and cultural interest reclaims her legacy through feminist historiography, ethnomusicological research, and digital archiving, Rasoolan Bai stands not only as a preserver of musical form but also as an embodiment of resistance, memory, and cultural resilience.

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