

## Women empowerment by music



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### Abstract

*In the modern era, the women are participating in every sphere of advancement of human civilization like science, technology, adventure sports etc., including the propagation of music and attainment of independence by excelling in the art of music. The main purpose of research on this essay is aimed at determining the contribution of the women in the arena of music and make an exposure of their steady struggle to establish themselves as professionals in this subtle area which very often utilizes its appeal not only to soothe the depressed sentiments but also to inspire to accept the challenge the odds against life. The hypothesis is based upon exposing the historical evolution as to how the stigma attached to the women singers as an abominable creature has got obliterated in the modern society and placed the women as dignified and assertive artists enjoying honor and social prestige. The research method adopted is focussed to analyze the progress of the initial movement on emancipation of women launched in the nineteenth century in India and abroad and how the women singers marched ahead shattering the male domination in the field of music maintaining their dignified position in the society. In conclusion, it may be said that the present progeny of artists is not going to be thwarted by any hostile movement launched by the fanatics who bear an irrational feeling on the ability of the women and try to enslave them under the burden of domestic chores.*

**Key words:** Empowerment, Emancipation, Hostile, Dignity

### Research Paper

#### 1. Introduction

At the onset, it is necessary to understand the background of the issue under consideration, i.e., the need for empowerment of the women in every sphere of life with the support of all the tools to attain economic independence so as to ensure the assertions of women in their domestic as well as public life. The concept of empowerment and emancipation of women originated from the fact that the women undergo great discriminations in their social positions compared to the menfolk who are in the perennial habit of brandishing a sabre over their head through ages to keep them under subjugation that has led to the creation of an “unequal power relations between the genders”. Thus women’s empowerment has become practically synonymous with “the process<sup>[1]</sup> of increasing women’s access to control over the strategic life choices that affect them and access to the opportunities that allow them fully to realize their

capacities.” And all these are intended to redeem the women from being exploited sexually and the bondage of economic dependence on the male members of the society. Thus women’s empowerment indicates vesting them with the equal opportunities in the economic, political and sociocultural systems so that they can liberate themselves from the unjust sexual stratification leading to their inferior status in the society and also promote their quality of life.

Kbeer<sup>[2]</sup> in her research on empowerment of women, has viewed the term empowerment as an “ability to make choice”, signifying that disempowerment spontaneously rules out one’s independent will to choose according to her free will, which makes it evident that the women in a subjugate state under the dominant patriarchal society do not enjoy any freedom to have choices, “such as choice of livelihood, where to live, whether to marry, who to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, freedom

of movement and choice of friends, which are critical for people to live the lives they want.” This historical fact which has so long been accepted as the only order of rule over the women in the society started experiencing jolts in the mid nineteenth century in parts of the Occident followed by simultaneous blow against zealotry and barbaric attitude of treating women as a commercial object and a receptacle of sexual pleasure in the Orient too, particularly in India under the iconic leadership of Rammohun Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar.

## 2. Historical background of the feministic movement

The initiation of the feministic movement,<sup>[3]</sup> can be traced to the medieval age (leaving aside the reference to ancient Greece on the movement led by Saphoo – d. c. 570), through the campaign of Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), Christine de Pisan (d. 1434) although the nucleation of the movement got its pace accelerate by the unrelenting voices of protest raised by Olympes de Gouge (d. 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (d. 1787) and Jane Austen (d.1897 who are regarded as the pioneers in the modern women’s movement for their demand for the “dignity, intelligence, and basic human potential of the female sex”. However, the movement could not gather momentum until the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century although the Indian women witnessed the first blow against the sacrosanct authority of the Hindu society through the abolition of the Sati rite in the early nineteenth century (1831-33) under the valiant leadership of Raja Rammohun Roy followed by the introduction of Widow Marriage by Pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar in 1856. Vidyasagar who realized that empowerment of the women would not be achieved by a mere attempt of smashing the social prejudice against the exploitation of the widowed women by arranging marriage, but by such tool as spreading of education among women. He believed that in order to make the poor lot to exert their own choice, to make them independent economically, the ignorance of illiteracy had to be done away with at the first instance and he dedicated much of his active life to set up schools for girls in different corners of Bengal.

In the Occident the first wave of feminism<sup>[4-5]</sup> that continued during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was bent upon opening up opportunities for women with a primary focus on acquiring the rights of suffrage of women, As

Rampton describes it, “The wave formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 when three hundred men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (d.1902) drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration outlining the new movement's ideology and political strategies”. In the initial stage the movement confronted criticism because of the un-lady like behaviour such as public speaking, demonstrating and having stints in jail thrust upon them for participation in the feminist campaign, because as in all the society, the belief in the Victorian American society claimed that they challenged the “cult of domesticity”, whereas some also claimed that “women were morally superior to men, and so their presence in the civic sphere would improve public behaviour and the political process.” However the movement drifted to a more powerful and steady and mature state when in 1960s and 1990s it launched its anti-war and civil rights movements along with ever expanding self-consciousness amongst the minority groups in different corners of the globe including the movement by the mothers of Argentina who launched a campaign against the dictatorial regime to do away with the dirty war<sup>[6]</sup> carried out by the government causing the disappearance of their sons without even allowing them to face a fair judicial trial. The second wave was also characterized by its severe campaign against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City as the agitating women believed that such shows were intended with the malicious design to reduce the women to an object of beauty and sex model and thereby reducing their intellectual capability with the ulterior motive of furthering the subjugation of women and to confine the latter to the narrow domestic wall and converting them to inferior beings who should remain satisfied with low paying and lower ranking jobs inasmuch as the profiles of these emerging beauty queens were used to boost the sales of such commodities as “bras, girdles, high-heels, makeup and false eyelashes”.<sup>[7]</sup> The “Third wave of movement<sup>[8-9]</sup>, on feminism started its dissemination since the early 90s of the twentieth century in which issues on various social discrimination such as racism, subaltern issues concerning with the imposition of western culture on the third world countries along with economic and physical repression such as domestic violence, rape, child abuse, female feticide, and discriminations in pay between male and female workers even in sophisticated areas like informatics. Conforming to the analysis of Burkett,<sup>[10]</sup> the third

wave became more revolting and “was much more inclusive of women and girls of colour than the first or second waves had been. In reaction and opposition to stereotypical images of women as passive, weak, virginal, and faithful, or alternatively as domineering, demanding, slutty, and emasculating, the third wave redefined women and girls as assertive, powerful, and in control of their own sexuality.”

As discussed earlier, the first phase of the struggle for the empowerment initiated by Rammohun and Vidyasagar shook the core of the orthodox society and got its speed accelerated in the early twentieth century, the second phase of the women's emancipation in India gathered its momentum<sup>[11]</sup> with the sweeping nationalistic agitation that drew a large number of women to participate actively and exert the power of the women to betray their courage and conviction against the imperialistic forces marching hand in hand with their male counterparts. This rising surge of women empowerment sprouted the seed and nurtured the growth of the future prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi who proved herself to be one of the assertive political leader in the whole of the world. The history of Indian freedom struggle also remembers with great reverence of Matangani Hazra for the sacrifice of her life while participating in the anti-British agitation. Although the third wave of the march of Indian women got a jolt due to the partitioning of India in 1947 accompanied by the problem of huge exodus of people from the erstwhile East Pakistan and Western Pakistan simultaneously, the Indian women started keeping pace with the industrialization and the rejuvenated educational policy, granting the rights of franchise, gradual opening up avenue for access of women to all the fields of male bastion have resulted in the emergence of women of colossal stature like, Kalpana Chawla,<sup>[12]</sup> the talented space scientist, the Everest summiteer like Bachendri Pal,<sup>[13]</sup> Arunima Sinha, Santosh Jadav without any dearth of competent and eminent experts in every field of activities of modern society.

### 3. Emergence of Women across the realm of music.

In the brief background of the emerging force of women across the world, it has already been highlighted in a nutshell that advancement of women has made its stride forward through the wide extension of the opportunities of training and education covering all aspects of male hegemony, But it is also encouraging

to note that the women have dug out a permanent and everlasting niche in the domain of the music throughout the world. It is now regarded that music is also one of the arena that has been boosting the human spirit with ebullience and mirth to venture into the horizon of challenging unexplored fields, to mitigate the physical and mental trauma and attain transcendence to a higher platform of intellectual level apart from its routine chore of the entertainment of human beings. In this challenging area, the women by virtue of perseverance and tenacious efforts are now shining as luminaries in the galaxy of the eminent songsters.

In the history of the early women contributors to the music it is observed that even if there existed many highly efficient and innovative performers, they were frowned upon with disdain by the standard bearers of the orthodox society under the prejudiced notion of treating them as women of immoral characters. The lady of the so called nobler part of the society were kept out of the ambit of habitat of the music. But with the ongoing process of the emancipation of the women, this prejudice is now totally shattered and the women have now penetrated deeply and emerged as symbols of emancipation of women in every society of the entire world where they no longer have to face the sneers and ridicules.

The status of the women singers and 'nautch girls' is amply evident from the study of Erica Wald,<sup>[14]</sup> an extract from which reads as under:

One of the first groups of women that administrators and observers placed into the redefined and expanded category of 'prostitute' was the courtesans. In court capitals such as Lucknow, courtesans lived and entertained in salons renowned for being centres of music and culture. The courtesan was valued not just for her beauty, but, perhaps more importantly, for her skills in such arts as music and dancing... The courtesans upheld cultural and artistic traditions while also providing sexual services to a very select and carefully-chosen clientele. Shreya Ila Anasuya<sup>[15]</sup> is of the same opinion in her revelation of the status of the court dancers and singers:

Courtesan culture and communities! non-heteronormative sexuality has always been used to talk about them only in terms of possible sex work, or sexual relationships with patrons – never as tremendously influential and important artists in the arenas of music, dance, poetry, etiquette, theatre,

film. And yet, courtesans have been at the forefront of all of these fields — their contributions have enriched the performing and literary arts immensely — and have rarely been acknowledged, whether it is the performance of thumri or ghazal in what is known as 'light' Hindustani classical music or the appropriation of sadirattam performed by devadasis, by upper-caste elites who created Bharatanatyam.

But these women artists carrying the stigma of agents of immoral activity became the forerunners in developing the modern show business from the tiny enclosures of the "Jalsagar" with restricted entry to the so called elite class of the society to the open public forum by virtue of their genius of overwhelming dexterity in delivering the Indian classical tunes set to the appealing lyrics depicting love and romance, devotion and pity rendered through their melodious inimitable voice. Zinnia Ray Chaudhuri<sup>[16]</sup> in her authoritative research has established "How courtesans paved the way for women in Indian showbiz" citing the example of Gauhar Jan, a legendary singer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Raychaudhuri<sup>[17]</sup> puts it, "known as the first diva" among courtesans, her experimental approach to music and her adaptability had made her a force. And when India entered the gramophone era, it was no surprise that she was the first person to embrace the technology" and adds further to emphasize the assertion of this great songstress in the dissemination of classical Indian music quoting the popular saying that "A musical gathering without Gauhar Jaan is like a bride without a wedding."

It can be conferred without any iota of doubt that<sup>[18]</sup>:

"Jalsa traces the journey of the Indian music industry from the first recording machine, the phonograph, to the world of cinema. It was a journey built on the contribution of women who adapted their singing styles while upholding the integrity of their art form ... The world of cinema was a dynamic, heterogeneous space, in which Jaddan Bai (another female artist endowed with the gift of musical genius) began negotiating her identity both as a woman and a former tawaif.... Jaddan Bai led the way for women who wanted to find space in the male-dominated world of cinema and its newfound sensibilities."

Thus it is evident that the women belonging to the so called immoral section of the society became the illumined stars of the musical firmament in the Indian scenario that remain dogmatized with false prejudices of male superiority as a tradition succeeding from generation to generation.

One of the glaring example of empowerment of women by music is Teejan Bai<sup>[19]</sup> who was born in an interior village in Madhya Prades (now Chattishgarh) of a tribal family, pertaining to the Pardhi Scheduled Tribe of Chhattisgarh state. She turned to be a great exponent of the 'Pandavani' style of folk songs in the teeth of the opposition of the male counterparts who got them excommunicated as a punishment for breaking the tradition as women singers were not traditionally allowed to perform the said folk songs. It can be discerned from the life history narrated in the free encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, that

At age, <sup>[20]</sup> she gave her first public performance in a neighbouring village, Chandrakhuri (Durg) for Rs 10., singing in the Kapalik shaili (style) of 'Pandavani', a first time for a woman, as traditionally women used to sing in the Vedamati, the sitting style. Contrary to the tradition, Teejan Bai performed standing singing out loud in her typical guttral voice and unmistakable verve, entering what was till then, a male bastion.

But her determination to ignore the strictures of male dominated society led her to the making of a legendary figure by carving out her way of success to travel "as a cultural ambassador, to countries as far as England, France, Switzerland, Germany, Turkey, Tunisia, Malta, Cyprus, Romania and Mauritius. She performed sequences from the Mahabharata in Shyam Benegal's acclaimed Doordarshan TV series Bharat Ek Khoj based on Jawaharlal Nehru's book" and acquired the honour of being crowned with title of "Padmabibhusan."

It would be a great lapse in recording the chronicle of the empowered women of India in the arena of music if no reference is made to the contribution of Subhalakshmi<sup>[21]</sup> Who brought the rare honour of presenting the Indian classical Carnatic music in the forum of the United Nations in 1966. Hailing from a poor family, suffering the torments of hunger and poverty and fighting relentlessly, "in the highly conservative, male-dominated genre of Carnatic music, where old-world values and sentiments hold a stronger presence ... Subbulakshmi carved her niche. Her legacy endures to this day ... and became the first musician to be awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour." <sup>[22]</sup>

Lata Mongeskar the prima donna in the realm of Indian music, has been shining like the most refulgent luminary for more than half a century, overcoming the trauma of a hard life in her tender years, she rose

to be the doyen of the Indian vocal music. As goes the report in Britannica,<sup>[23]</sup> “As a teenager she struggled to help support her family and to establish herself as a playback singer in the Hindi film industry of the 1940s, at a time when the profession was dominated by such divas as Shamshad Begum and Noor Jehan.... Notable among her concert performances was her wartime (Sino Indian War : 1962) rendition of the poet Pradeep’s patriotic song “Ae mere watan ke logo,” which moved Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to tears.” Her unceasing and uninterrupted devotion to music has begot her the credit of producing<sup>[24]</sup> “30,000 solo, duet, and chorus-backed song recordings in 14 Indian languages between 1948 and 1987” and the “the Bharat Ratna (2001), India’s highest civilian award for performance of the highest order in any field.”

Madonna the diva of international recognition is an embodiment of iconoclasm who not only is a trend setter in the musical world, has built up another image of herself as a woman of undaunted courage to face the challenges thrown to the women to deter their progress by her total disregard to the traditional norms of the society. Madonna Louise Ciccone's path to the peak of her fame was not covered with the petals of rose, but she had to steer her way through the monolithic obstacles that simply hardened her to stride ahead to climb to the top of a “changing music industry and navigate the trappings of fame.”<sup>[25]</sup> In regard to her religious belief she commented boldly that "I'm a big believer in ritualistic behavior ... But I'm not a big fan of rules.<sup>[26]</sup> “, which even aroused the ire of Pope who even went as far as to call a boycott as a sequel to her belief that "There are certain religious groups who have turned [sex] into a sinful act. I've always tried to open people's minds to the idea that it's not something to be ashamed of." This artist of paramount excellence wrote in Harper's Bazaar.<sup>[27]</sup> "New York wasn't everything I thought it would be. It did not welcome me with open arms." Inasmuch as “She was mugged at gunpoint, raped at knifepoint, and burglarized three times. Still, she was determined to have a successful career in the performing arts.” This legendary songstress is not only marked for her bold manifestation against “Sexism and misogyny”, but is equally distinguished for her generous contribution to the welfare of the hapless Malawians children. In her interview saying to the Los Angeles Times,<sup>[28]</sup> her comments remain to be a landmark on the empowerment of the women, as she declared:

“Women are traditionally raised to be subservient, passive, accepting. The man is supposed to be the pioneer. He makes the money, he makes the rules.”

Fisher<sup>[29]</sup> concludes stating that “Madonna has made great strides in turning those norms upside down, but many of the age-old struggles she faced against sexism are still being fought today. Thanks to her ground-breaking antics, though, the battles continue to become easier.”

#### 4. Tagore songs and empowerment of women

In Bengal, the dissemination of Rabindra Sangeet earned phenomenal popularity both in the remote corners of India as well as in Bangladesh during the last five decades which took an accelerating pace after the Tagore centenary in 1961.

The women singers have played a decisive role in propagating the Tagore songs by their mellifluous rendition of these appealing lyrics to capture not only the hearts of Bengalis but the Indians in general which is amply evident with the spurt of the songs translated in different languages in India.

The forerunners of the women singers who broke the male bastion in this sophisticated area, are Suchitra Mitra, elevated to the position of Sherif of Kolkata, Kanika Bandopadhyay, Ruma Guhathakurata, Purba Dam, Sumitra Sen and the like. It goes without saying that they too got confronted with enormous opposition on their way to success, but overcame the same with their determination and courage shattering the barriers of the male bastion. The rise of Rezwana Chaudhury in Bangladesh also gives a strong testimony to the convincing assertion of the women singers and to their sate of empowerment in the tradition based societies.

#### 5. Conclusion

Music in the history of the human civilization has been acting as a catalyst for the rejuvenation of the human spirit and forever will remain so and stimulation of the influence of music by the talented singers will go a long way to achieve harmony and solidarity among the different ethnic groups beyond the frontiers of any particular country. The contribution of the women singers not only will be recognized as an enlightening factor of the human hearts but will also accelerate the pace of the ongoing process of empowering women through the assertion of bold and powerful women singers who have become iconic symbols by their rebellious attitude to shatter the traditional barriers imposed by the orthodox societies throughout the world.

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