

Socio-political and economic contributions and grievances of the women musicians of India since, Vedic to modern period



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Abstract

Throughout the ages, women have been subjected to various forms of exploitation. It is no different in the world of music. In the Vedic period women are seen to have established themselves as composers of hymns, but their numbers are very small. Then in the Buddhist period women were again seen composing Gathas or Buddhist hymns. There too the number of Therigathas is very less compared to Theragathas. During the Mauryan era, Ganikas or courtesans were employed by the state as spies and they had to endure a miserable life for the sake of the state. During the era of Muslim rule, women were veiled. At that time, the life of women artists was very difficult. Even today, it can be seen that female artists (especially in Bollywood or other regional film industry) are more exploited than male artists. Primary and secondary sources have been used in writing this paper to prove the socio political & economic contribution of women musician.

Key Words : Women Musician, Socio Political, Economic Contribution, Vedic Period, Therigatha, Buddhism, Modern Period

Research Paper

Introduction

Since ancient times, the place of women as artists or 'Nati' has been recognised in Indian music society. History bears witness to the emergence of different civilizations in different parts of the world at different times and since the dawn of all those civilizations, the promotion and dissemination of music and art, and the contribution and skill of women as well as men involved in it, is undeniable. Our country, India, did not do otherwise. Since ancient times, Indian society has been the patron of art and culture, along with the role and contribution of women as artists. That is why the woman has taken the highest seat of music in our culture in the form of Goddess Saraswati.

Discussions

Looking at the role of women in ancient Indian music, it can be seen that it has often surpassed men in many ways. For example, women have a special place in the ancient Vedas, Gathas, Puranas and various historical books as musicians or 'Nati's. It shows that the women involved in music were not only involved in entertainment but also had their control

and contribution on the socio-economic and political situation of India at that time. For an example, Nati Amrapali can be mentioned. Author Anurag Anand's book 'The Legend of Amrapali' tells the story of an ancient dancer of Vaishali city who lived in the time period of 500 B.C. and she was the most influential woman of the country. In this ever-present patriarchal society, the woman who takes up music as a profession and is compelled by the lust of men to get the title of 'Nagarvadhū', there after the relentless struggle of her life and later became a prominent figure in political, economic and social life – all these life events of Amrapali have been narrated in the book. From the book review article of Ipsita Mitra on 'The Legend of Amrapali' by Anurag Anand, she says, "Author Anurag Anand in his latest book 'The Legend of Amrapali' reveals a legendary character to readers still struggling to remember the famous courtesan of Vaishali, Amrapali in the pages of male-dominated history."^[1] Further she says, "People remember her not only for her incomparable beauty but also her political acumen, bravery to overthrow a power-drunk ruler and compassion for the society in constructing schools, roads, temples and other institution."^[2]

It is said that once seeing Amrapali's extraordinary beauty and dance performance, Vaishaliraj Manudev made a cunning plot to get her and on the day of her marriage to her childhood lover, Pushpakumar, he killed Pushpakumar and declared her as the 'Nagarvadhū'. From here, the life battle of a unique dancer begins. This is the story of an indomitable struggle of a music devotee who was forcefully converted into a prostitute by the injustice of this patriarchal crooked society and later achieving an immortal placement in the pages of history as a political icon. In this way, women artists have always been the victims of neglect and deprivation till date. Prof. Upinder Singh has shed light on this matter. He said, "... Although conclusive evidence is lacking on this point, a custom supposedly practised by the Lichchavis is suggestive. The story goes that among Lichchavis, an exceptionally beautiful woman (e.g. Ambapali) was not allowed to marry, but was to belong (i.e. be available) to all the Lichchavi men. This may have been an extension of clan rights over other resources such as land."^[3]

This same incident is beautifully described by Sudraka in his play 'Mricchakatika'. Monami Mukherjee in her essay 'Representation of Society in Mricchakatika by Sudraka' sheds light on the placements of the women like Vasantasena in the society of that time period and she said, "...Prostitution was treated as a socially validated profession. The prostitutes were often well trained in music, dance and art of sexual service. Both married and single men had mistresses without being secretive about it. However, society never allowed courtesans any right of ancestry or property. This is understood when we see that Vasantasena's wealth is centred around her jewellery, not any land or other object. She is aware of Charudatta's love for her. However, she is also aware of her inability to own him. Her maternal love for Rohasena, her need to transfer her wealth to his clay cart, is born out of this sense of loss. Her children could never be legitimate heir to Charudatta. No matter how much gold she had, she was poorer than Rohasena's mother in terms of social standing."^[4] So if a woman is not socially protected, she is deprived of the right to ascend to a place of honor, no matter how virtuous, learned, beautiful, or industrious she may be. Unprotected women have always been oppressed, deprived, mentally and physically exploited. The picture will remain the same regardless of the history and current observations of any part of the world.

If we review the Vedic age long before the period of Amrapali or Vasantasena, we will get a glimpse of it too. There, women may have once had the right and honour to compose Vedic hymns, but only because of the compassion of the men of that era. There may have been a little more respect for women than in later times, but it's credit goes to the erudite male society of the Vedic sages of that era. Sankhyatirtha Madhavadasa Chakraborty has said, "Females along with males were highly educated. Some of them (Apala, Visvavara, Ghosa, Surya, Yami) were even seers of Vedic hymns. The condition of women was highly superior to what we find now. There was no purdah system which is certainly an outcome of the Mahomedan rule. It is found in Bengal, the Punjab, and the North-Western provinces, where the Mahomedan rule was dominant, while women of Madras and Bombay still enjoy freedom of the movement."^[5] But even though the Vedic women like Apala, Ghosha, Visvavara, Surya, Yami etc., are the authors of Vedic hymns, Mr. M. Chakraborty could not give any explanation as to why the volume of their compositions is so less than the volume of the entire Vedas. Prof. Upinder Singh has explained this, "In the older writings, a great part of the discussion about women of the Vedic age focused on elite women, ignoring the less privileged members of this sex. Although the RigVeda mentions goddesses, none of them are as important as the major gods. The social implications of the worship of female deities are complex." Further he said, "The proportion of hymns attributed to women in the RigVeda is miniscule (just 12-15 out of over 1,000), as is the number of women sages. This suggests that women had limited access to sacred learning. There are no women priests in the RigVeda. While women participated as wives in sacrifices performed on behalf of their husbands, they did not perform sacrifices in their own right ; nor do they appear as givers or receivers of dana or dakshina."^[6]

Women composers of Vedic hymns were called 'Brahmavadini'. They were the equivalent of Brahmins. However, women of the elite class were the ones who deserved this recognition and respect, and history remains silent till today about the women of general classes and what kind of place they had in the society of that period. It is said that the foundation of Indian music is based on the ancient 'Prabandhas' which was laid during the composition of those Vedic hymns, 'stoves' and 'stoms'. The overall details of the Pre-Vedic music history is not yet available. The

excavations of Mohenjodaro and Harappa of Indus Valley Civilization have uncovered a bronze dancing statue of a naked woman and a carved stone of a man playing 'Mridangam', as the musical evidences from which nothing has been disclosed about the society and culture of that era. So it can be considered that the beginning of the flowing stream of Indian music is from 'Samgaan' of Vedic period. The volume of compositions of the Brahmavadinis of that era such as Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Ghosha, Gargi, etc. is very insignificant next to the thousands of hymns of the Vedas. Subhamoy Das has shed some light on this subject in an article written by him. He says, "Women of Vedic period (circa 1500-1200 BCE), were epitomes of intellectual and spiritual attainments. The Vedas have volumes to say about these women, who both complemented and supplemented their male partners. When it comes to talking about significant female figures of the Vedic period, four names – Ghosha, Lopamudra, Sulabha Maitreyi and Gargi – come to mind."^[7] Here are some excerpts from what he said while measuring the contribution of these four Brahmavadinis in this regard, "Vedic wisdom is encapsulated in myriad hymns and 27 women-seers emerge from them... Ghosha has two entire hymns of the tenth book, each containing 14 verses, assigned to her name. The first eulogized the Ashwins, the heavenly twins who are also physicians; the second is a personal wish expressing her intimate feelings and desires for married life... The Rig Veda ('Royal Knowledge') has long conversations between the sage Agasthya and his wife Lopamudra that testifies to the great intelligence and goodness of the later... She wrote a hymn of two stanzas making an impassioned plea for his attention and love... The Rig Veda contains about one thousand hymns, of which about 10 are accredited to Maitreyi, the womanseer, and philosopher. She contributed towards the enhancement of her sage-husband Yajnavalkya's personality and the flowering of his spiritual thoughts... Gargi, the Vedic prophetess and daughter of sage Vachaknu, composed several hymns that questioned the origin of all existence. When King Janak of Videha organized a 'brahmayajna', a philosophic congress centered around the fire sacrament, Gargi was one of the eminent participants. She challenged the sage Yajnavalkya with a volley of perturbing questions on the soul or 'atman' that confounded the learned man who had till then silenced many an eminent scholar."^[8] Thus it is clear that with the exception of Gargidevi, most of

the Brahmavadinis motivation and purpose in studying and composing Vedas on theology was based on the interest of their husbands. The number of hymns composed by them is so insignificant to the total number of Vedic hymns that it is not possible to say that the entire women of Vedic age were entitled to read and compose education and theology.

In the Post Vedic period of Buddhist society also maintain the same as its previous era (approx. time period of 5th – 3rd century B.C.E.). Though there is a significant role of Buddhist women had been shown since Lord Buddha agreed the placement of Bhikkhunis and Theries in the Samgha appealed by Bhikkhu Ananda, but as soon as his Mahaparinibbana (the great liberation) happened, the Buddhist Samgha became an institution dominated by a male-oriented system. In this regard K. T. S. Sarao has said, "Some of the bhikkhunis had their own following, and were capable not only of introducing the dhamma, but also of bringing new aspirants to full liberation without the meditation of the Buddha or some other senior bhikkhu. There is enough evidence to suggest that women not only were conspicuously present in the earliest community, but also seem to held prominent and honoured places both as practitioners and teachers. It cannot be denied that the Buddha unfolded new horizons for women by laying the foundations of the Bhikkhuni-samgha.(...) In the post-Mahaparinibbana period, the Buddhist Samgha became an institution dominated by an overwhelmingly androcentric-patriarchal power structure."^[9] There are Therigathas, a bunch of poems of first Buddhist women of ancient period depicts the examples of the extraordinary insightful songs with their personal expressions of spirituality which is also relevant in our modern society and touches the sensible hearts even today.^[10] But as the women of Vedic period we find the amount of their work is too little besides the bulk amount of the other buddhist literatures including the Thergathas, the ancient songs of Buddhist monks. After the Mahaparinirvana (the Great Liberation) of the Buddha, women began to be referred to as 'gates to hell' in male-dominated Buddhist Sanghas.

Later phase of Buddhist era, during the Mauryan rule, conspiracies between different dynasties often took place. At that time courtesans were employed by the states as spies. Their activities were somewhat similar to today's state intelligence agencies. In that era, with the aim of making them adept in various aesthetics theories and other arts including music,

the state took measures to create and appoint suitable people for the posts of Ganikadhyaksha, Nati, Varangana, Ganika etc. for teaching. Sir R. Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot mentioned about the courtesans of Maurya Empire were very powerful tool working as a diplomat and spies. According to them, "...In fact in the powerful espionage system of the great Mauryan King Chandragupta Maurya, the courtesan was a very important contingent of his espionage team. The ruler could get information from the prostitutes, which no other spies could get for him. Kautilya's Arthashastra- the treatise of politics even puts them within the structures of a civil society where the courtesan also paid taxes on the money she earned through her talents."^[11] Despite enjoying various happiness, benefits and comforts, these musicians and courtesans of that era were forced to lead an ugly and painful life to protect the larger interests of the state.

In medieval India, under the strict Muslim rule, the freedom of women in ancient times was completely taken away. In those days, women did not even have the right to get a general education, let alone music education. From this time on, women became the object of luxury as a commodity. It is not that women were not a product of luxury even in ancient times, but during the foreign invasions of that era, 'Nats', 'Natis' and musicians had a special status. Nat, Natis, Ganikas were created by the state of that era to help in the security of the country and in foreign and diplomatic matters and to play an important role in suppressing the enemy. But in medieval India, these artisans lost their important status and became only the object of luxury, and it was at this time when the 'Baiji' profession began. Where some of the male artisans held the honourable positions as the court musicians, most of the women musicians were placed in the harem of the Badshah or the King's court as the prostitutes. Even in the British India, the place of women musicians was no better than it was during the Mughal period. An example of this is the sound of humming and singing found in the 'Baiji Kothis' of Lucknow and Benaras at that time. Indian Semi-Classical music became a kind of luxury for the 'Babu' community at that period. At that time period Nawab Wajid Ali Shah reformed 'Thumri' and the renowned court musician Shori Mian reformed 'Tappa' and made these two different types of musical forms suitable for the royal court. Which later took place in the royal court or in the assembly of zaminders. Later it was seen that the circulation of 'Khadi Thumri' was more prevalent in all these Baiji

communities than the Tappa. However, in Punjab (now a part of Pakistan also) the Tappa style of musical form was more prevalent.

Since the independence of India, Indian public life, politics, economy and social context have changed and its impact on Indian music has also been observed. In the fifties and sixties, a great change in Indian music began with the advent of radio, theatre, bioscope, cinema and television. It was during this time that music became one of the mainstays of the culture, and the practice of music was liberated from the 'Kothi' into the practice of the common people and gained a respectable place. The period from 50's to the 90's bears witness to the debut of many great musicians. In the 30's, before the independence, the first Indian Classical music to step on the International frontier was through Pandit Uday Shankar's dance troupe. In the post-independence period, Indian Classical Music and other genre of music, cinema, film and various arts continued to flourish in this International arena. At that time classical music was practised in various festivals and 'Jalsha'. Apart from this, various regional songs such as folk music, kirtan, akhrai, half-akhrai, kavigan, jatragan, baul, bhavaiya, garba, maand etc. were also widely practised all over the country. It was this time when, along with these musical genres a special kind of musical practice began to be used for screenplays in the theatre or cinema-bioscope or movies of the time. Originally, it was from this time that a special genre of music, called 'playback song', was introduced in films as music used for screenplay needs. On the other hand, the usage of various 'Raga-Raginis' were widely seen in the songs of the films of that time. Although there was an abundance of female singers in this period, the position of composer or lyricist or music-director was completely devoid of women. Yet this is the time for women to achieve their due status as musicians. At that time, the names of many famous and timeless female artists came up in Hindi Bollywood Music. Such as Johrabai Ambalewali (1918 - 1990 classical & playback singer), Amirbai Karnataki (c.1906 - 1965, actress/singer), Samshad Begum (c.1919 - 2013), Geeta Dutt (c.1930 - 1972), Lata Mangeshkar (Born on 1929), Asha Bhonsle (Born on 1933), Arati Mukherjee (Born on 1943), Sudha Malhotra (Born on 1936), Usha Uthup (Born on 1947) etc. In the 70's, 80's and 90's, a lot of women in Bengali as well as other regional movies also worked side by side with men as vocalists. But since after the year 2000, little by little the picture has begun

to change. Since the launch of 'Reality Shows' on different channels and due to the competition between the channels, women artists are becoming more of a commodity than a good performer. In this day and age, direct visual representations are gaining more importance than the work of artists. Nowadays, in any regional or Bollywood film, the influence of Western art culture is much greater than that of Indian art and culture, so the performance, production, singing style, lyrics, melody and the usage of harmony in songs are more in imitation of the West. As a result, artistic essence present in traditional music is terribly missing in today's performance. But now it is seen that the modernization of clothes, attire, mannerisms, speech and exaggerated showmanship is getting more priority than the songs or singing of the artist. Nowadays, even if it is not necessary, the singer is more likely to present the song through various distorted lyrics and gestures as if it has become an unwritten rule of the music industry. It would be wrong to say that the use and commercialization of Indian Classical music and regional songs and folksongs is no more, but it is insignificant compared to the Hindi and various regional filmy songs. Naturally in this situation the demand for female artists has increased as a commodity. The tendency to work at low cost with unknown less educated or inexperienced artists is now much higher than with established educated artists. Although the new generation is getting more and more opportunities, the efforts of a large section of the patriarchal artist community such as art directors, producers, financiers, film directors, music directors to make cheap bets continue to hamper the quality of art. In this regard Samrat Bee said, "Women artists are often encouraged by producers, fellow musicians, directors of videos, record company A & R as well as fans to reveal their bodies in videos, or dress outrageously on stage or even project their sexuality via lyrics, via propaganda and online presence : As much they are reminded of the money, fame and power bestowed on them, upon becoming a 'global pop diva'. The darker side of this exploitation has always been ignored and often hushed-up by a vehemently male dominated industry. Or merely scandalized as an occasional 'lewd splash' on the tabloids. Do we care about the 'catalogue of indignities' hurled at women artists following celebrity status – as seen on social media where many female artists are often attacked or smeared as "sluts" or "whore" or "sell-out" – The systemic demeaning of women in popular music is very deeply ingrained

itself in the culture-industry and seldom questioned by the thousands of women engaged in the quest for stardom and fame." [12]

However, a good aspect of the current media internet age is that the promotion of other art forms is also gradually increasing. The same is happening in the field of music. Now, thanks to social media, even unknown artists from far-flung places are able to gain fame. Originally female musicians have been gaining ground as singers for so long. But nowadays, women musicians are gradually getting involved with other musical instruments like flute, tabla, harp, guitar, sarod, sitar etc. For example, Annapurna Devi (y.1927 – 2018) in Sitar and Sharan Rani Devi (y.1929 – 2008) in Sarod have been featured as female artists since 60's. Currently Rimpa Siva, Reshma Pandit, Anuradha Pal on tabla; Debopriya and Suchismita Chatterjee, Rasika Shekar, Sruthi Balamurali on flute; Jayanthi Kumaresh on Saraswati Veena; Ragini Trivedi on both Sitar and Vichitra Veena; Dr. Radhika Umdekar Budhkar on Vichitra Veena; Mohini Dey on Bass Guitar; Jyoti Hegde on Rudra Vina and Sitar; Mahima Upadhyay, Chitrangana Agle Reswal on Pakhawaj; Anushka Shankar, Anupama Bhagwat on Sitar; Dr Troilee Dutta, Rajrupa Chowdhury on Sarod are the few names coming up for the last few decades. In addition to these names, there are many more female artists emerging through Indian Classical Music. Indian Classical music is still practised today, but its popularity is dwindling, and the place of honor for female artists is still intact here. Indian Classical music is performed with proper decorum till the date. Besides, no matter how popular or successful the playback singers of popular Bengali, Hindi and various regional film industries are, maximum female musicians are still oppressed. A change in this situation is not possible unless society and its attitudes towards women change. The main reason is that everyone, from politicians to govt. employees or entertainment organizations, are part of this society. So if the society does not change, women will be deprived in any work-place.

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