



AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF THE HERITAGE OF INDIAN MUSIC AND THE ROLES OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Indian music, with its profound historical roots, has undergone a process of evolution spanning centuries, encompassing diverse traditions, styles, and influences. Women have played a significant yet often underrepresented role in this evolution, contributing as performers, composers, patrons, and educators. This study investigates the historical and contemporary contributions of women in Indian music, analysing their roles within classical, semi-classical, folk, and devotional traditions. Through an interpretive approach, the research examines challenges encountered by female musicians, societal perceptions, and the gradual transformation in gender dynamics within the field. It also elucidates the contributions of pioneering women who have shaped the musical landscape and the ongoing efforts to create an inclusive space for future generations. By examining the intersections of gender and musical heritage, this study provides insights into the resilience and creativity of women in Indian music, advocating for a more balanced and acknowledged representation in scholarly discourse and performance traditions.

Keywords: *Indian music heritage, women in music, gender and music, classical and folk tradition, societal perceptions, music and empowerment, gender dynamics in performing arts.*

Introduction

The study of Indian music is significantly enriched by a critical examination of the role women have played throughout its history, emphasizing the intersection of culture, gender, and artistic expression. Historically, the contributions of women have often been overlooked or marginalized, leading to a cultural narrative that fails to recognize their substantial impact on musical traditions. This interpretive study aims to illuminate these voices and reclaim the agency of female musicians, analysing their historical representations alongside contemporary practices. By investigating various forms of Indian music, including classical, folk, and devotional genres, the research seeks to uncover the socio-cultural dynamics that have both constrained and empowered these artists. Understanding women's roles within this framework not only enhances our appreciation of Indian music but also reflects broader themes of identity, power, and resistance within the artistic heritage of a diverse nation. The Indian music heritage is intricately woven from centuries of diverse cultural influences, fostering a rich dialogue among various regional traditions, styles, and practices. At the heart of this heritage lies the dichotomy between classical music, represented by the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions, and popular music forms, each reflecting unique cultural narratives and community identities.

The evolution of music in India has frequently been supported by social gatherings and festivals, where collective participation plays a crucial role in the continuity of these art forms. (Saxena, 2020). Additionally, the roles of women within these musical traditions, both as performers and custodians of heritage, highlight a dynamic interplay of identity and cultural expression. Thus, the music heritage of India not only embodies artistic expression but also serves as a repository of social history and intergenerational memory (Opperman, 2010). The significance of women's roles in music, especially within the context of Indian classical traditions, cannot be overstated. Women have not only excelled as performers but have also played vital roles as teachers and patrons, facilitating the transmission of musical heritage through generations. Their contributions demonstrate a deep engagement with cultural practices, often challenging societal norms through their artistry. Indeed, women have been pivotal in preserving and transmitting Indian classical music traditions. As performers, educators, and supporters,



they have been essential in ensuring the continuity of these art forms across generations. Women have played an essential role in preserving and transmitting the traditions of Indian classical music. As performers, educators, and patrons, they have been pivotal in ensuring the continuity of these art forms across generations. Historical figures such as the devadasis, who were integral to temple music, alongside contemporary artists who are redefining the boundaries of music today, highlight the breadth of their involvement. Analysing their contributions deepens our understanding of India's musical landscape and emphasizes the dynamic interplay between gender and cultural expression (Zarubin, 2015)

Purpose and Scope of the Study

This study aims to explore the rich heritage of Indian music, focusing on the significant roles that women have played within this cultural sphere. By investigating how various historical contexts have influenced women's participation and expression in Indian music, the research seeks to highlight not only their contributions but also the evolving nature of their identities as performers and cultural custodians. This inquiry aligns with other studies on cultural expression, such as the analysis of inter-tribal identity formation through events like huddles, which underscores the distinct roles of men and women in shaping cultural narratives (Klade, 2023). Additionally, parallel to the acknowledgment of Indigenous women's crucial roles in movements advocating for cultural rights, this study aims to uncover the often-overlooked narratives surrounding women's involvement in Indian music (Opperman, 2010). Ultimately, the research aspires to enhance the understanding of cultural vitality by emphasizing the essential voices of women in this artistic heritage.

Historical Context of Indian Music

The historical context of Indian music reveals profound connections to the social structures and cultural narratives that have shaped its evolution over centuries. Central to this landscape is the role of women, whose contributions have often been overlooked or silenced within patriarchal frameworks. The interplay between music and gender reflects broader societal trends, as women's voices have been redefined in response to political and religious influences. Recent research underscores that the intersectionality of gender and music exposes the ongoing struggle against dominant ideologies that seek to marginalize female agency in artistic expression (Haldar, 2020). Furthermore, an analysis of the historical transmission of Indian music unveils the complexities of power dynamics, where traditional norms dictated women's participation and performance (Anim-Addo). By understanding these historical contexts, one can discern the critical pathways through which women's roles in Indian music have been constructed, contested, and ultimately transformed (Dias, 2019).

A. Evolution of Indian classical music through the ages

The evolution of Indian classical music is a testament to its rich culture and its adaptive nature through the ages. From the Vedic chants that laid the foundation of melodic structures to the emergence of regional styles reflecting distinct socio-political landscapes, Indian classical music has continuously transformed while retaining its core elements. The introduction of prominent instruments, such as the sitar and tabla, exemplifies this dynamism, serving as conduits between tradition and innovation. Furthermore, the roles of women in this musical heritage cannot be understated; they have historically been both performers and custodians of oral traditions. As highlighted by (Dias, 2019), the representation of women in music often mirrors broader societal perceptions, illustrating their complex roles within a male-dominated framework. As we explore the intertwining paths of music and gender, the importance of women's contributions becomes increasingly prominent in understanding the evolution and sustained vitality of Indian classical music.



B. Influence of regional styles and traditions

The intricacy of Indian music is profoundly shaped by its diverse regional styles and traditions, serving as a crucial axis through which women's roles are defined and navigated. Each region's unique musical heritage not only resonates with local cultural values but also reflects the societal status of its women, often intertwined with broader themes of identity and representation. For instance, the performance practices found in South Indian Carnatic music highlight women's contributions, positioning them as both creators and preservers of cultural narratives, much like the historical representation of Brazilian women that was shaped by both racial and sexualized perceptions (Dias, 2019). Furthermore, the challenges faced by women in adapting to diasporic cultural landscapes echo findings from studies on consumer acculturation and acculturation, emphasizing how these transitions affect personal and cultural identity (Zarubin, 2015). Thus, the intricate relationship between regional traditions and women's roles significantly informs the understanding of Indian music within a global framework, highlighting its dynamic and evolving nature (Karki, 2023). In mapping these intersections, one can discern a rich dialogue that not only honours historical legacies but also propels contemporary discourse in musical heritage.

C. Key historical figures in Indian music

Throughout history, Indian music has been profoundly shaped by key figures whose contributions transcended regional and cultural boundaries. Legendary artists like Tansen and later figures such as Ravi Shankar not only popularized classical music but also helped to merge traditional and contemporary styles, thereby expanding the music's reach. These musicians were pivotal in integrating women into the music narrative, demonstrating how gender roles in performance evolved. For instance, the emergence of prolific female vocalists and instrumentalists marked a significant shift in the representation of women in the arts, challenging prevailing norms and inspiring new generations. Furthermore, as explored in (Alan S Brown, 2008), women's roles in cultural engagement through music festivals have been instrumental in preserving heritage while fostering community identity. This intersection of gender and musical legacy underscores women's vital part in the ongoing evolution of Indian music, as discussed in (Opperman, 2010).

Women in Indian Music: Traditional Roles

The traditional roles of women in Indian music offer a rich tapestry of cultural significance, yet they have historically been marginalized. Predominantly, women served as courtesans or devadasis, whose mastery of music and dance positioned them as pivotal guardians of musical heritage. As noted, the traditional role of women in Indian music was primarily that of a courtesan or devadasi, who were highly trained in music and dance.

"The traditional role of women in Indian music was primarily that of a courtesan or devadasi, who were highly trained in music and dance. These women were often the repositories of musical knowledge and played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of musical traditions."

Amelia Maciszewski

This training not only equipped them with exceptional artistic skills but also facilitated the preservation and transmission of intricate musical traditions. The societal perception of these roles often relegated them to the background, overshadowed by their male counterparts, which stifled broader recognition of their contributions. Despite these challenges, women have continuously influenced Indian classical music, and their evolving roles reflect a dynamic interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary musical practices, warranting further exploration and appreciation (Saxena, 2020).



A. Historical contributions of women in classical music

The historical contributions of women in classical music, particularly within the context of Indian music, are often undervalued and overlooked. Women like M.S. Subbulakshmi and Mira Bai have significantly shaped the landscape of Indian classical music, exemplifying the diverse roles they have played beyond mere performers. As highlighted in,

"Women have played a pivotal role in the various forms of Indian music. From classical of MS Subbalakshmi to devotionals of Mira Bai to Bollywood of Lata Mangeshkar to many more. Let's learn more about these notable women who have left their mark on history for their contribution to Indian art & culture."

Sakshi Priya

Women have played a pivotal role in the various forms of Indian music, showcasing their influence not only in performance but also in the composition and innovation of musical forms. This pattern of exclusion parallels broader societal trends, wherein women's achievements are marginalized in various disciplines, including music education. Studies indicate that historically, music has been a male-dominated profession which has erased women's contributions, fostering environments that diminish their artistic value (Thomas, 2019). Thus, acknowledging the intricate histories of female musicians is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Indian music (Kitchener A, 2022).

Name	Era	Contribution	Genre	Significance
Andal	9th century	Devotional poetry	Bhakti movement	Only female Alvar saint-poet
Mukta Bai	13th century	Abhanga-s (devotional poetry)	Bhakti movement	Early Marathi poet
Lal Ded	14th century	Vatsun compositions	Kashmiri poetry	Influenced Sufism and Shaivism
Mira Bai	16th century	Devotional bhajans	Bhakti movement	Widely popular across North India

B. The role of women in folk music traditions

The significance of women in Indian folk music traditions cannot be overstated, as they function not only as performers but also as cultural custodians. Women are often the primary caregivers within families, tasked with the vital role of preserving and transmitting folk music through generations, a process that takes place in domestic and communal settings. This informal education is complemented by their active engagement in performances, which helps to cultivate a vibrant musical heritage. As one source notes, Women have played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting folk music traditions in India. Additionally, female artists have been pivotal in innovating and reshaping various folk genres, thereby contributing to the dynamic nature of the musical landscape. Their experiences and insights inform the evolution of traditional forms, leading to a rich dialogue between past and present in the realm of Indian folk music (Swamy, 2018).

C. Representation of women in music-related rituals and ceremonies

The representation of women in music-related rituals and ceremonies is a vital lens through which to understand their roles within the cultural heritage of India. Women are often at the forefront of ritualistic musical practices; their bodies not only perform but also embody the cultural narratives that shape community identity. As seen in the Catholic Gawda womens rituals, the aesthetic elements of dance and



music serve to reinforce social bonds among participants while simultaneously communicating deep-seated cosmological beliefs (Pereira, 2019). Such performances illustrate how women enact and negotiate their identities within the context of spirituality and tradition. Similar dynamics can be observed in other cultural settings where musical expressions reflect societal attitudes towards race and ethnicity, as highlighted in studies of Dominican identity (Tallaj-García, 2015). This intermingling of personal and communal identity through musical practices reveals a broader trend of female empowerment and agency within traditional frameworks, prompting a re-evaluation of their historical marginalization (Long, 2022).

D. Contemporary Perspectives on Women in Indian Music

The evolving role of women in Indian music reflects not only a transformative cultural shift but also a profound reimagining of artistic contributions within this heritage. Contemporary female artists are increasingly leading the charge in redefining traditional forms, demonstrating that their presence is significant beyond mere numbers. As highlighted, the increasing visibility of women in Indian classical music today is not just a matter of numbers, but also of the quality and depth of their contributions. Their innovative fusions often challenge entrenched gender roles, fostering a new narrative that is both empowering and nuanced. This progression is evidenced by the rise of all-female ensembles and women assuming leadership positions in music institutions, as observed in recent studies examining ethnic media and audience engagement strategies (Aujla-Sidhu, 2019). Furthermore, these changes resonate with broader societal transformations, embedding richer, more diverse expressions of India's musical heritage within contemporary contexts (Swamy, 2018).

E. Modern female musicians and their impact on the industry

The emergence of modern female musicians has significantly reshaped the landscape of the music industry, challenging historical paradigms rooted in male dominance. As we observe contemporary artists, it becomes evident that their contributions are not merely artistic but also socio-political, influencing broader discussions on gender equality and representation within cultural spheres. Female musicians often navigate the complexities of an industry that has historically marginalized women's contributions, suggesting a layered reclaiming of cultural heritage. This dynamic is reflective of a larger narrative where traditional forms, like Karnatic Music, are reinterpreted through the lens of gender, prompting a reconceptualization of female roles in performance arts, as noted in recent studies emphasizing the erasure of women's achievements in music history (Thomas, 2019). Moreover, these artists have the dual challenge of embracing their cultural roots while innovating to fit the global market, thus highlighting the economic potential embedded within cultural industries. The interplay between cultural preservation and commercial success reveals the intricate ways modern female musicians are redefining their identities and the industry itself, transcending rigid binaries historically imposed on gender and artistry (Hayford, 2014). In this context, traditional forms of music are not stagnant; they evolve, punctuating the importance of cultural sensitivity in performance arts, while also resisting commodification that disconnects them from their historical and cultural significance (Kannan, 2013).

F. Challenges faced by women in the music profession today

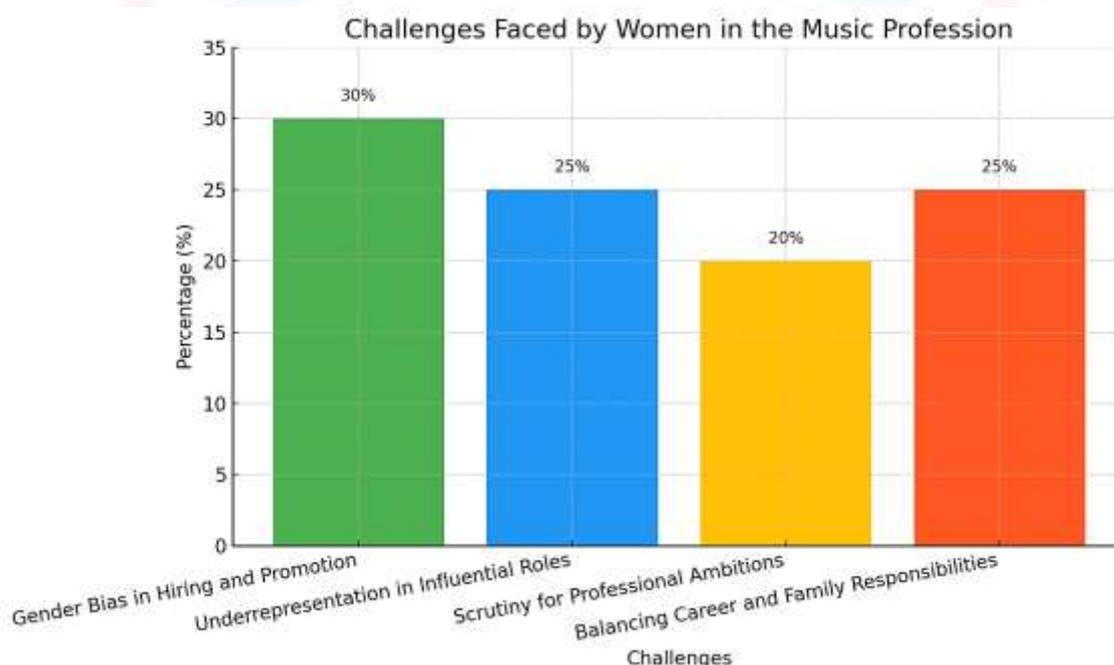
In the contemporary music profession, women continue to encounter formidable challenges that obstruct their full participation and recognition within the industry. Despite their increasing presence, gender bias in hiring and promotion remains pervasive, often resulting in underrepresentation in influential roles. Such disparities are magnified in cultures where traditional values still hold sway, leading to women facing scrutiny for their professional ambitions alongside familial responsibilities. Indeed, the heritage of Indian classical music exemplifies this tension; as noted, Despite the increasing number of women

entering the music industry, they continue to face significant challenges, including gender bias in hiring and promotion, sexual harassment, and the struggle to balance career and family responsibilities.

"Despite the increasing number of women entering the music industry, they continue to face significant challenges, including gender bias in hiring and promotion, sexual harassment, and the struggle to balance career and family responsibilities. These obstacles often result in women being underrepresented in leadership positions and receiving less recognition for their contributions."

Erin Wehr-Flowers

Furthermore, historical narratives often downplay women's contributions to the arts, complicating their quests for legitimacy and success in a predominantly male-dominated landscape (Martis, 2016)

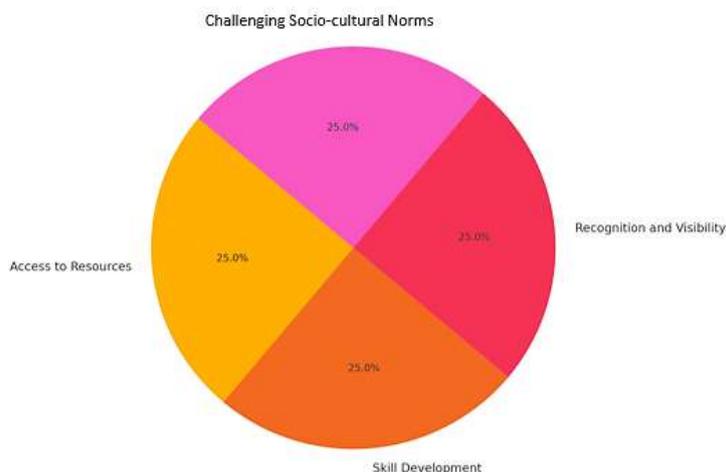


This bar chart illustrates the key challenges faced by women in the music profession today, highlighting gender bias in hiring and promotion, underrepresentation in influential roles, scrutiny for professional ambitions, and balancing career and family responsibilities. The data reflects these categories, emphasizing the persistent barriers to women's full participation and recognition within the industry. (Jain A, 2025)

G. The role of education and institutions in empowering female musicians

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in empowering female musicians by providing them access to resources and opportunities often denied by traditional societal structures. In the context of Indian music, these institutions can serve as platforms for women to develop their skills and gain recognition, fostering an environment where their contributions to music are valued. Furthermore, the establishment of music hubs, reveals a strategic effort to dismantle barriers hindering local artists, particularly marginalized groups (Maseko, 2017). By intertwining education, cultural context, and institutional support, female musicians can achieve greater visibility and agency in their careers, ultimately reshaping cultural narratives surrounding women's roles in music.

Roles of Educational Institution in Empowering Female Musicians



This pie chart illustrates the key roles of educational institutions in empowering female musicians. The data reflects equal emphasis on providing access to resources (25%), skill development (25%), recognition and visibility (25%), and challenging socio-cultural norms (25%). These categories highlight how institutions contribute to reshaping cultural narratives surrounding women's roles in music. (Face H, 2025)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate vision of Indian music heritage is profoundly interwoven with the evolving roles of women, showcasing their influence within a traditionally patriarchal structure. The recognition of cultural forms such as the Kālbeliyā dance highlights the shifting perceptions of women's contributions to the musical landscape, emphasizing how their performance roles can reshape cultural narratives and identity (Joncheere, 2015). Furthermore, the complex dynamics within organizations like the BBC Asian Network demonstrate the ongoing struggles for representation and the negotiation of cultural identity by women of minority backgrounds (Aujla-Sidhu, 2019). These narratives significantly illuminate the localized efforts within anti-racist movements that gave rise to unique expressions of identity among marginalized communities, reinforcing the importance of grassroots activism in shaping musical heritage (Ramamurthy, 2011). Lastly, the exploration of identity through culturally centered practices reveals the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity, particularly for women negotiating their roles in a globalized context (Swamy, 2018). Together, these elements underscore the vital contributions of women to the heritage of Indian music, necessitating ongoing recognition and appreciation of their narratives.

The exploration of Indian music highlights the profound influence of gender roles and cultural identity on its heritage, revealing intricate dynamics within immigrant communities. Key findings indicate that women play a pivotal role in both preserving and innovating musical traditions, often acting as cultural custodians within their families and broader communities. Research underscores how female musicians navigate complex cultural narratives and assert their identities, thus challenging traditional norms surrounding gender and ethnicity. This aligns with findings from CCMI studies, which suggest that music can unveil multifaceted aspects of ethnic identity, particularly among Indian diaspora communities (Swamy et al., 2018). Furthermore, the emphasis on cultural organizations as facilitators of cross-cultural understanding illustrates their essential role in promoting diversity in artistic expressions (Haastrecht IV et al., 2014). Ultimately, the study underscores the need to recognize women's contributions to Indian music and their efforts to reconfigure identity within an ever-evolving global landscape, as indicated by



recent migrant consumer research (Pradhan, 2020). Addressing the contributions of women to Indian music is essential for a thorough understanding of its heritage, as these contributions have historically been overshadowed by patriarchal narratives. The recognition of female artists not only enriches the tapestry of Indian music but also challenges existing power dynamics within the industry. By highlighting the works of women, we uncover a wealth of creativity and innovation that has often been marginalized; this shift is crucial for fostering a more inclusive narrative. Furthermore, as explored in various scholarly discourses on public history, acknowledging women's roles is a form of social justice that allows for the re-evaluation of historical records and practices in music, thereby fostering civic discourse and equality (Meringolo, 2022). As digital technologies expand the platforms for expression, the importance of these contributions becomes even more pronounced, showcasing the dynamic interplay between traditional and contemporary narratives in Indian storytelling.

The future of research and advocacy in the realm of Indian music and women's roles is ripe with opportunities for deeper exploration and systemic change. As cultural landscapes diversify, it becomes crucial to recognize and support the contributions of women in Indian music, which have often been marginalized. Initiatives similar to those identified in ethnocultural organizations can serve to amplify these voices, acting as cultural advocates and facilitators of cross-cultural understanding (Haastrecht, 2014). Furthermore, addressing the social inequalities entrenched within music education, which historically favour male perspectives, will be essential to fostering an inclusive environment that values the artistic expressions of women (Thomas, 2019). By embracing the recommendations from the Alliance of California Traditional Arts, stakeholders can pave the way for the recognition and empowerment of women as taproot artist-leaders, thereby ensuring their vital contributions are celebrated and integrated into the broader narrative of Indian music. Moreover, arts and culture strategies that promote equitable development can significantly enhance community engagement and cohesion, supporting efforts to create a platform for women in music to thrive.

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