

NEGOTIATING GENDER AND TRADITION: NAINA DEVI'S CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH HINDUSTANI SEMI-CLASSICAL MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the contribution of Naina Devi (Nilina Sen) to Hindustani semi-classical music and her role in redefining women's cultural agency in twentieth-century India. Situating her work within the broader frameworks of nationalism, gender reform, and postcolonial cultural politics, the study analyses how she transformed semi-classical genres such as thumri, dadra, and tappa from socially marginalised traditions associated with courtesan culture into culturally legitimate and aesthetically respected musical forms. Through an analytical study of her performances, pedagogy, and institutional engagements, the paper explores the intersections of gender, class, and musical authority in Hindustani classical music. It further investigates how Naina Devi negotiated patriarchal structures while creating new professional and cultural spaces for women musicians through institutions such as Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, All India Radio, and Doordarshan. The study argues that her reinterpretation of semi-classical music through devotional, literary, and aesthetic frameworks contributed significantly to the empowerment of women performers and to the broader transformation of Hindustani musical culture in modern India.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Hindustani Classical Music; Naina Devi; Semi-Classical Music; Thumri; Gender and Music

Introduction

Hindustani classical music, one of the oldest and most sophisticated musical traditions of South Asia, has historically evolved within structures shaped by gender, caste, and class hierarchies. Musical authority largely remained concentrated within male hereditary lineages and elite institutional spaces, while women's participation in public musical culture was frequently restricted by patriarchal social norms (Bakhle, 2005). Although women contributed significantly to the preservation and development of musical traditions, their artistic roles were often marginalised within formal classical discourse.

During the colonial and nationalist periods, these exclusions became increasingly institutionalised. Cultural nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to redefine Indian classical music as a symbol of spiritual refinement and national identity. In this process, musical forms associated with elite male performers gained legitimacy, while semi-classical genres such as thumri, dadra, kajri, and tappa, traditionally cultivated by tawaifs and women performers, were gradually marginalised and associated with moral ambiguity (Mukherji, 1995; Weidman, 2006). As a result, women musicians often faced social suspicion regarding public performance, particularly within genres connected to feminine emotional expression and courtesan culture (Rao, 1990).

Within this socio-cultural context, the contribution of Naina Devi occupies a distinctive place in the history of twentieth-century Indian music. Through her performances, pedagogy, and institutional work, she played a major role in transforming the artistic and cultural status of semi-classical music. Her work challenged the gendered assumptions that marginalised women performers and repositioned semi-classical genres within the mainstream of Hindustani classical music.

Born as Nilina Sen in 1917 into an aristocratic Bengali family in Kolkata, Naina Devi was deeply influenced by the intellectual and reformist environment of the Bengal Renaissance. She was the granddaughter of Keshub Chandra Sen, the prominent nationalist thinker and social reformer associated with the Brahmo Samaj movement. Raised in a culturally liberal household by her parents, barrister Saral Chandra Sen and Nirmala Sen, she grew up in an atmosphere that encouraged literary and artistic engagement. Among her four siblings, Nilina was the youngest and was exposed early to Bengal's evolving cultural and musical milieu.

Her initial interest in music developed during childhood when her uncle introduced her to the performances of the celebrated singer Angurbala at a local theatre in Kolkata. Fascinated by the expressive depth of semi-classical music, she subsequently attended private musical gatherings at Angurbala's residence on Masjid Bari Street. Recognising her growing inclination

toward music, her family arranged formal training under Girija Shankar Chakravarty (1885–1948), one of Bengal's leading vocalists and music pedagogues, renowned for revitalising the khayal tradition in eastern India. Under his guidance, Nilina underwent rigorous musical training for nearly nine years, which laid the foundation for her later artistic career.

Her upbringing encouraged artistic cultivation, although social norms continued to regulate women's public visibility and artistic participation. She received formal musical training under Girija Shankar Chakravarty, whose influence shaped her understanding of classical aesthetics and vocal discipline. Later restarted it with Mushtaq Hussain Khan of Rampur-Sahaswan gharana and Rasoolan Bai of Benaras gharana in the 1950s.

In 1934, at the age of sixteen, she married Ripjit Singh, the third son of Raja Charanjit Singh of the princely state of Kapurthala. Following her marriage, she relocated to Punjab, where aristocratic social conventions restricted her public engagement with music and performance. Although she continued to nurture her musical interests privately, her artistic career remained suspended within the expectations of royal domesticity. The death of her husband in 1949, when she was thirty-two years old, marked a decisive turning point in her life, eventually leading to her return to music and the beginning of her public career as Naina Devi. Her return to music after widowhood represented not merely a personal transition but an important cultural intervention within a society that often confined widowed women to silence and domestic seclusion (Mathur, 2017).

A central aspect of her contribution was the reinterpretation of semi-classical genres such as thumri and dadra. Traditionally associated with sensuality and courtesan culture, these forms were often regarded as aesthetically secondary and morally questionable within nationalist discourse (Bakhle, 2005). Naina Devi, however, reframed these genres through devotional and spiritual aesthetics influenced by Bhakti and Sufi traditions. In her interpretation, emotional longing became associated with spiritual yearning and poetic refinement rather than moral transgression (Solie, 1990). Through this process, she contributed to the cultural legitimisation of semi-classical music within modern Indian classical traditions.

This paper argues that Naina Devi transformed Hindustani semi-classical music into a culturally legitimate and spiritually reinterpreted art form while simultaneously expanding the social and institutional space available to women musicians in twentieth-century India. By examining her life, artistic practice, pedagogical philosophy, and institutional contributions, this study explores the relationship between music, gender, and cultural politics in modern India. It further demonstrates how Naina Devi's work contributed to broader processes of women's agency and cultural participation through the reconfiguration of semi-classical music within postcolonial India.

Material and Methods

The present study is based on qualitative and historical analysis of secondary sources, including books, journal articles, biographies, archival materials, and scholarly studies related to Hindustani classical music, women performers, nationalism, and cultural history. Important texts such as *The Lost World of Hindustani Music* by Kumar Prasad Mukherji, *Two Men and Music* by Janaki Bakhle, and other works on gender and musicology have been used to understand the historical marginalization and transformation of semi-classical music traditions. The study also examines institutional and cultural contributions associated with Naina Devi through published literature related to All India Radio, Doordarshan, and Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra.

Research Methodology

This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining musicology, gender studies, and cultural history. The methodology is analytical and interpretative. Feminist and postcolonial perspectives have been employed to analyse how Naina Devi negotiated structures of patriarchy, class privilege, and cultural nationalism through semi-classical music traditions. The study further investigates how musical performance functioned as a medium of women's empowerment and cultural agency in twentieth-century India.

Study Area

The study focuses on the cultural and musical environment of twentieth-century North India, particularly Kolkata and Delhi, where Naina Devi lived and worked. Kolkata was an important centre of intellectual reform and cultural revival during the Bengal Renaissance, while Delhi emerged as a major institutional centre for Indian classical music after independence.

The research also examines semi-classical traditions associated with Banaras and North Indian courtesan culture, especially genres such as thumri, dadra, kajri, chaiti, hori, and tappa.

From Aristocratic Domesticity to Musical Agency: Naina Devi and the Politics of Respectability:

Following her marriage in 1935 into the royal family of Kapurthala, Nilina Sen entered an aristocratic social world deeply shaped by colonial modernity, elite etiquette, and patriarchal codes of feminine respectability. Relocating initially to Simla, then the summer capital of British India, she encountered the rigid cultural expectations of princely aristocratic life under the

authority of Raja Charanjit Singh, an Anglicised aristocrat closely associated with colonial administrative circles. Although her intelligence, refinement, and cultural sophistication enabled her to adapt successfully to the demands of elite social life, marriage simultaneously imposed severe restrictions upon her artistic identity. Within the royal household, music, particularly female public performance, was considered incompatible with notions of aristocratic womanhood and respectability. Singing was associated with tawaifs, baijis, and women of socially marginal status; consequently, her musical practice was confined to secrecy within the private domestic sphere.

This tension between social respectability and artistic aspiration reflects the broader gendered contradictions of early twentieth-century Indian society, where women from elite families were encouraged toward cultural refinement but discouraged from public artistic participation. Naina Devi's experience illustrates how patriarchal notions of honour regulated women's musical expression, even among socially privileged households. Yet it was precisely within these restrictions that her later artistic consciousness began to take shape.

Her exposure to the cultural environment of Lucknow proved especially influential in shaping her understanding of semi-classical music traditions. Unlike the rigid formality of aristocratic Simla society, Lucknow represented a living world of Indo-Islamic cultural synthesis, poetic refinement, and musical sophistication. There she encountered traditions of thumri, dadra, ghazal, qawwali, and seasonal folk-based genres closely associated with courtesan culture. Through private mehfil and interactions with baijis and hereditary women performers, she developed a deep appreciation for semi-classical music as a sophisticated aesthetic tradition rather than a socially inferior form. Listening attentively from behind the purdah, she absorbed nuances of Purab ang gayaki, Urdu diction, poetic interpretation, and emotional expressivity that would later become central to her own musical style.

These encounters also shaped her intellectual engagement with the figure of the tawaif. At a time when nationalist cultural reform increasingly marginalised courtesan traditions as morally suspect, Naina Devi recognised semi-classical music as a powerful mode of female artistic expression. She later argued that thumri enabled women performers to articulate emotional experience, social suffering, and feminine subjectivity within restrictive social structures. Such reflections reveal her early awareness of the relationship between gender, music, and cultural power in Indian society.

Her husband Ripjit Singh appears to have recognised her artistic sensibilities and quietly encouraged her musical interests despite prevailing aristocratic restrictions. During this period, she recorded her first songs for the Columbia Record Company under the name "Naina Devi," a symbolic act that marked the emergence of an independent artistic identity distinct from princely domesticity (Mathur, 2017). The adoption of this name became significant in her later public career as a performer of Hindustani semi-classical music.

The sudden death of her husband in 1949 marked a decisive turning point in her life. Widowed at the age of thirty-two with four children, Naina Devi confronted both personal loss and social uncertainty. Yet widowhood also became the moment through which she gradually transformed domestic confinement into artistic selfhood. Rejecting passive dependence, she moved toward professional musical life through her association with All India Radio and later with Sumitra Charat Ram and the emerging institutional networks of post-independence Indian culture. This transition from aristocratic seclusion to public cultural authority represents a significant example of women's negotiation of gendered restrictions within twentieth-century Indian music history.

Naina Devi's journey, therefore reflects broader processes through which women musicians redefined artistic legitimacy in modern India. Her life demonstrates how women negotiated structures of patriarchy, respectability, and social control while simultaneously reshaping the cultural status of semi-classical music. By transforming traditions associated with courtesan culture into respected forms of national artistic heritage, she contributed not only to the revival of Hindustani semi-classical music but also to the expansion of women's cultural agency in twentieth-century India.

Life and Career of Naina Devi

Following the death of her husband, Naina Devi relocated to Delhi, a transition that marked the beginning of her public musical career and cultural influence in post-independence India. Delhi, emerging as an important centre of national cultural reconstruction after independence, provided her with the institutional and intellectual environment necessary to revive and redefine semi-classical music traditions. In the capital, she came into close association with Sumitra Charat Ram, noted arts patron and wife of industrialist Lala Charat Ram of the DCM Shriram Group. Through this association, Naina Devi became actively involved with the Jhankar Committee, a small performing arts organisation dedicated to the promotion of Indian music and dance. This initiative later evolved into the establishment of the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra in 1952, one of the most significant cultural institutions of modern India, where Naina Devi served as Artistic Director. Her involvement with the

institution played a major role in integrating semi-classical music into organised cultural pedagogy and public performance circuits.

Alongside her institutional work, she also served as a music producer at All India Radio, Delhi, and later worked with the state-run television broadcaster Doordarshan. Through these national cultural platforms, she contributed significantly to the dissemination and legitimization of Hindustani semi-classical music among wider urban and middle-class audiences. Her broadcasts and productions helped relocate genres such as thumri, dadra, kajri, and ghazal from socially marginalized performance spaces into nationally recognised cultural discourse.

After relocating to Delhi, Naina Devi resumed formal musical training with renewed commitment under Ustad Mushtaq Hussain Khan of the Rampur–Sahaswan gharana and later under Rasoolan Bai of the Benaras gharana, from whom she mastered the Purab ang style of thumri noted for its lyrical delicacy and emotional refinement. It was during this period that she emerged publicly under the name “Naina Devi” and gradually established herself as a leading exponent of Hindustani semi-classical music in twentieth-century India (Mathur, 2017). A defining feature of her musical philosophy was the emphasis on emotional authenticity and aesthetic interpretation. Drawing upon the concept of Nayika Bheda, particularly the Ashta Nayika classifications of the Natya Shastra, she viewed thumri as a sophisticated medium of poetic and expressive communication rather than merely a vocal form. Alongside thumri, her repertoire included dadra, ghazal, and qawwali, reflecting the diversity of North Indian semi-classical traditions.

In later years, Naina Devi developed a deep engagement with the devotional tradition of kirtan, studying its forms in Vrindavan and transmitting them to her disciples. Her contribution as a pedagogue was equally significant. Through disciples such as Vidya Rao, Shubha Mudgal, and Madhumita Ray, she shaped a generation of women musicians by emphasising literary sensitivity, emotional refinement, and artistic dignity. Her pedagogy encouraged women performers to cultivate intellectual seriousness and professional confidence within Hindustani music. The depth of her artistic and pedagogical influence is reflected in Vidya Rao’s memoir *Heart to Heart: Remembering Naina Devi* (2011), which documents her enduring contribution to the transformation of semi-classical music in modern India.

Gender, Nationalism, and Cultural Politics: Naina Devi in Historical Context

Naina Devi’s artistic career must be situated within the broader socio-cultural transformations of twentieth-century India, where gender reform, cultural nationalism, and notions of artistic respectability shaped the structure of Hindustani classical music and the legitimacy of women’s participation within it (Bakhle, 2005).

Influenced by the intellectual legacy of the Bengal Renaissance, she emerged from a reformist Bengali milieu that valued education and cultural refinement while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal ideals of femininity centred upon domesticity and social restraint. Her marriage into the aristocratic Kapurthala royal family further restricted public musical expression, as female performance continued to be viewed as incompatible with elite respectability (Mathur, 2017).

Simultaneously, nationalist reconstructions of Indian classical music privileged male-dominated and spiritually codified traditions while marginalising semi-classical genres such as thumri and dadra because of their association with tawaif culture (Weidman, 2006). Within this context, Naina Devi’s engagement with semi-classical music acquired particular cultural significance. Rather than distancing herself from courtesan traditions, she reinterpreted these forms through poetic refinement, emotional subtlety, and devotional aesthetics influenced by Bhakti and Sufi traditions (Qureshi, 2000). In doing so, she transformed feminine emotional expression into a legitimate mode of aesthetic and spiritual articulation within mainstream classical discourse.

Although positioned within aristocratic cultural privilege, Naina Devi consciously aligned herself with traditions historically cultivated by marginalized women performers, thereby challenging hierarchies that regarded semi-classical music as aesthetically inferior or morally suspect (Mukherji, 1995). Through institutions such as Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, All India Radio, and Doordarshan, she further expanded the institutional visibility and legitimacy of semi-classical music in post-independence India.

Her career therefore exemplifies how women artists negotiated patriarchy, class, and cultural exclusion through artistic reinterpretation and institutional participation, contributing significantly to the redefinition of women’s roles within twentieth-century Hindustani classical music.

Naina Devi and the Revival of Semi-Classical Music

One of the most significant aspects of Naina Devi’s contribution to twentieth-century Hindustani music was her role in the revival and legitimisation of semi-classical traditions such as thumri, dadra, kajri, chaiti, hori, and tappa. Her musical and cultural interventions must be understood within the broader intellectual context of the Bengal Renaissance and Brahma

reformism associated with her family lineage, particularly the reformist ideals of Keshab Chandra Sen. While nineteenth-century social reform movements advocated women's education and moral upliftment, they remained deeply ambivalent toward women's public performance traditions, especially those associated with tawaif culture. Naina Devi's work therefore, represented an important extension of reformist modernity into a domain historically marginalised because of its association with female performers.

Before the twentieth century, women performers, particularly tawaifs and court musicians, occupied a paradoxical position within Indian society. Although they were custodians of sophisticated musical, literary, and aesthetic traditions, colonial morality and nationalist reform movements increasingly stigmatised them by associating public female performance with moral decline and social degeneracy (Gundu Rao, 1989). As nationalist cultural discourse sought to redefine Hindustani classical music as a symbol of spiritual purity and middle-class respectability, semi-classical genres cultivated largely by women performers were gradually excluded from elite and institutional spaces (Bakhle, 2005).

Unlike khayal and dhrupad, which came to embody masculine authority and classical orthodoxy, semi-classical forms emphasised lyrical expressivity, emotional nuance, poetic interpretation, and improvisational flexibility rooted in courtly, devotional, and regional traditions. Consequently, genres such as thumri and dadra were often dismissed as aesthetically inferior and morally suspect because of their association with feminine emotionality and courtesan culture (Weidman, 2006).

Within this socio-cultural context, Naina Devi's intervention was historically transformative. Rather than distancing herself from semi-classical traditions to conform to elite notions of respectability, she consciously reclaimed them as intellectually and aesthetically sophisticated musical forms deserving institutional and scholarly recognition. Trained under Rasoolan Bai and influenced by the Purab ang tradition of Banaras, she preserved the lyrical delicacy and emotive depth of thumri while adapting it to modern concert and institutional platforms (Mukherji, 1995).

A defining feature of her musical interpretation was the reinterpretation of feminine emotionality through devotional and spiritual aesthetics. Drawing upon Bhakti and Sufi sensibilities, she transformed themes of love, longing, and separation into expressions of spiritual introspection and poetic refinement rather than sensuality alone (Solie, 1990). Through this interpretive shift, she challenged patriarchal assumptions that women-centred musical forms lacked seriousness, discipline, or intellectual value.

Naina Devi's contribution extended beyond performance into the institutionalisation of semi-classical music within post-independence India. These institutions enabled semi-classical music to move from socially restricted spaces into mainstream public culture, thereby expanding its legitimacy among urban middle-class audiences.

More importantly, her revival of semi-classical music constituted a significant intervention in the gender politics of Indian music. By restoring artistic dignity to traditions historically cultivated by women performers, she reconfigured the relationship between gender, respectability, and musical authority in twentieth-century India. Her work not only preserved endangered musical forms but also contributed to the broader process of women's cultural empowerment within Hindustani classical music.

Pedagogy and Institutionalisation: Reconstructing Women's Place in Hindustani Classical Music

Beyond her achievements as a performer, Naina Devi made a lasting contribution to Hindustani music as a teacher, mentor, and institution-builder. In post-independence India, when women's access to advanced musical training and professional performance spaces remained limited, she helped create environments in which female musicians could develop artistic confidence and cultural legitimacy. Her work as a music producer at All India Radio and later at Doordarshan further expanded the public visibility of semi-classical music and women performers.

While traditional guru-shishya transmission often functioned within hereditary and gendered hierarchies (Bakhle, 2005), Naina Devi's pedagogical approach emphasized emotional sensitivity, literary understanding, and aesthetic interpretation alongside technical discipline. She encouraged women students to cultivate artistic individuality and intellectual engagement with music, transforming pedagogy into a form of cultural empowerment.

Her influence extended through disciples such as Vidya Rao and Shubha Mudgal, who inherited not only musical knowledge but also an understanding of semi-classical music as a serious and intellectually rich tradition. Through institutions such as Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, All India Radio, and Doordarshan, she contributed significantly to the institutionalization and preservation of genres such as thumri, dadra, kajri, and chaiti at a time when modernization threatened their continuity (Mukherji, 1995).

By legitimizing semi-classical traditions within national cultural discourse and expanding opportunities for women performers, Naina Devi helped redefine women's roles as performers, teachers, and cultural authorities in twentieth-century Hindustani music. In recognition of her contributions, she was awarded the Padma Shri in 1974.

Conclusion

Naina Devi's contribution to Hindustani semi-classical music represents a significant moment in the cultural and gender history of twentieth-century India. Through her performances, pedagogy, and institutional interventions, she challenged the marginalization of women and semi-classical traditions within Indian musical culture.

At a time when genres such as thumri and dadra were dismissed because of their association with courtesan traditions and feminine emotional expression, Naina Devi reinterpreted them as aesthetically sophisticated and spiritually meaningful forms of artistic expression. By doing so, she transformed public perceptions of semi-classical music and expanded its legitimacy within post-independence Indian cultural discourse.

Her career also reveals the complex relationship between gender, class, and cultural authority. Although emerging from an aristocratic background, she consciously aligned herself with musical traditions historically cultivated by marginalised women performers, thereby bridging the divide between elite respectability and courtesan-based musical heritage.

Through institutions such as All India Radio, Doordarshan, and Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, she helped institutionalize semi-classical music while creating greater opportunities for women within public musical culture. Her pedagogical and artistic work contributed to a broader transformation in the cultural position of women in Hindustani music.

Naina Devi's legacy therefore, extends beyond preservation alone. Her work demonstrates how women artists negotiated patriarchal structures through cultural reinterpretation, artistic excellence, and institutional participation. She not only revitalised semi-classical music but also redefined women's agency within twentieth-century Hindustani classical tradition.

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