

## 'My name is Gauhar Jan'

### 'First dancing girl, Calcutta'

(cntd.)

by

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Gauhar Jan at a 1902 recording session;  
Source: 'Music on Record' by F W Gasberg, 1942



Gramophone Company 'Concert' 1907 Label  
Gauhar Jan singing 'Dhun Kalyan' at Town Hall, Bombay

Around 1883, the trio moved to Kolkata, a place of great patronage for music and the other arts. In those days, both Hindu and Muslims Baijis from Benares, Agra and Lucknow used to settle in the Bow Bazaar area. The place was famous for courtesans or Kothewalis who would entertain wealthy Zamindars and Babus with their art. Some Ustads would train this community after a proper gandabandhan.

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had settled at Matiaburj near Kolkata in his last days and his court was full of musicians and artists. In such an atmosphere Badi Malka Jan soon established herself, and within three years she purchased a building at 24 Chitpore Road for Rs.40,000. Little Gauhar, too, was fond of dance and music and took her initial lessons from her mother. She had a sharp memory, intelligence and learned very quickly, so Malka appointed special teachers to teach Gauhar languages, literature, and of course, dance and music. Kale Khan of Patiala, alias 'Kalu Ustad', and Ustad Vazir Khan of Rampur trained her in pure and light classical Hindustani vocal music, whereas Ali Baksh and Brindadin Maharaj taught her the Kathak form of dance. Srijanbai taught her dhrupad dhamar, and Charan Das trained her in Bengali Keertan. She also learnt from her contemporaries, viz. Mojuddin Khan, Bhaiyya Ganpatrao and Pearsa Saheb. She sang Tagore songs even before the word Rabindra-Sangeet had been coined. She penned several compositions under the name 'Hamdam', and she also wrote, composed and recorded ghazals.

She could read, write and sing in several languages including Bengali, Hindustani, Gujrati, Tamil, Marathi, Arabic, Persian, Pushto, French, and English.

After such an intensive training, she first performed at Darbhanga State at the age of fifteen, and 1896 onwards she began to perform in Kolkata. She used to sing and dance at the houses of rich Zamindars and her remuneration was in thousands of rupees. She was in great demand and even ordinary citizens wanted to listen to her music. Gaisberg noticed this and made her music available to listeners through her gramophone records. Gauhar Jan recorded prolifically, a total of over 600 songs over the period 1902 to 1920, and she sang in more than ten languages. From 1903, her records began to appear on the Indian market, and were always in great demand. Thousands of copies were imported after being pressed at Hanover, and they were best-sellers throughout India. In 1908, a record-pressing factory was built at Sealdah (close to the present Sealdah railway station), Gaisberg was invited for this occasion and recorded a few more songs of Gauhar Jan, for which the announcement of her name at the end was not required.

The early records of Gauhar Jan are labelled 'First dancing girl, Calcutta'. The word 'first' indicates her elevated position as the premier vocalist in the Kolkata musical world of 1890-1910. She cut records of raagdari sangeet, thumri, dadra, kajri, chaiti, bhajan, tarana and she popularised various types of 'Kachha' gana through her records. This was remarkable when several great stalwarts of Indian classical music ignored the gramophone and recording medium completely and refused to record. She mastered the technique of presenting a musical item in just three minutes, and this became a model for the vocalists of the future. She recorded the music taught by her Ustads, which meant that she helped preserve our musical tradition of at least three-four generations preceding her own. Thus her recordings are very useful for students and also for researchers who might wish to trace the development of Indian classical music over the last two or three hundred years. One of her records was cut in 1907, performed at the Town Hall in Bombay, as mentioned on the record label.

Through the wide circulation of her records, she became popular throughout India and received invitations to several prestigious music conferences. Thus in 1911, she was invited to participate in the Prayag Sangeet Samiti, for which she was paid 1000 rupees. Later, the same year, during the coronation of King George V at the Delhi Darbar, she was invited to sing a duet with Jankibai of Allahabad. They sang a Mujra song - *Ye Hai Tajposhi Ka Jalsa, Mubarak Ho Mubarak Ho* and received 100 guineas each as a gift from the King.

Gauhar Jan used to travel all over India, as a guest of patrons in the various Princely states. She also gave public performances, in which she would present ticketed programmes, distributing an advance schedule of items to be sung in her concert. She was fond of horse-racing and hence would visit Bombay during the racing season. She used to stay with Anjanibai Malpekar, spending the day at the Mahalakshmi racecourse, and the evenings and nights at concerts. She was a great admirer of Heerabai and offered to adopt her when Abdul Karim Khan's family separated and the mother moved to Pune with her five children. She taught a number of bhajans and thumris to both Heerabai and Sunderabai, which they in their turn duly recorded on gramophone records. Because of Gauhar Jan the songs *Radhe Krishna Bol Mukh se* and *Krishna Murari Binat Karat* became popular bhajans and several singers sang them in concerts and on records.

Gauhar Jan lived a very affluent life, and she also donated generously to a number of causes. Numerous legends are associated with her. In Calcutta, she used to ride in a carriage driven by four horses, throw a party spending 20,000 rupees when her cat produced a litter of kittens, and donated only half the promised amount to Gandhiji's 'Swaraj fund' when he did not keep the promise of attending the 'fund raising' concert and deputed a representative instead. In her personal life, she was deceived by her friends and relatives. She married her personal secretary - Saiyyad Gulam Abbas - a young man from Peshawar. He was ten years younger than her, and when she discovered his liaisons with other women, she was bitterly disappointed in him, and this led to several court cases and unpleasant incidents. Later, she stayed with Mr Amrut Vagal Nayak in Bombay - a handsome actor on the Gujrati stage. This relationship lasted 3-4 years, and she learnt several songs composed by him including the famous *Dadra Aan Ban Jiyamen Lagi*. The sudden death of Amrut Nayak was a big jolt that left Gauhar Jan mentally disturbed. Relatives persuaded her to return to Kolkata. But she did not stay there long. The machinations of selfish and cunning relatives forced her to stay in Darbhanga State for a while. Finally she joined the service of the Mysore State, where she died in 1930.

Gauhar Jan has left over 150 records and most of them are in the safe custody of record collectors. The Gramophone company reissued 18 songs in 1994 on audio tape and CD under the banner of 'Chairman's Choice', which no one (except perhaps the Chairman) noticed, due to lack of adequate publicity. It is necessary to preserve the legacy of Gauhar Jan in a more full-scale way for posterity, and some die-hard collectors and music lovers have committed themselves to accomplishing this task.

*Note:*

*During the period of Gauhar Jan, the following ladies of similar name were performing and recording in the musical world: Gauhar Jan of Patiala; Miss Gohar - associated with Parsi Theatrical Company, Bombay; Gohar Mamajiwala - singer actress associated with and mistress of Sardar Chandulal Shah of Ranjit Films (studio), Bombay; Miss Gohar (Bai) Karnataki of Bijapur - associated with, and mistress of, Bal Gandharva, alias Narayanrao Rajhans.*

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