From self-discovery to self-assertion

The musical journey of Janki Bai challenging the courtesan's liminal space

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Among the most prominent vocalists of Hindustani music and stars of the gramophone era, Janki Bai Ilahabadi stands out not only as a fine singer and poet but also as a legendary artist whose life was marked by travel as the dominant trigger of change. In this article, I focus on the three journeys that, from songstress courtesan, led Janki Bai to become an accomplished artist who challenged stereotypes. The first journey represented for Janki the opportunity to debunk the cliché of the attractive *gānevālī* and to assert her autonomy as an artist. The second coincided with the transition of music from *mahfil*s to the living rooms of the middle class through the gramophone. The third was crucial in solemnising Janki's iconic image. The twilight of her career ran in parallel to the end of the golden era of the *tavāyaf*s, the emergence of the Anti-nautch movement fostered by reformists, and the decline of courtly patronage. This article explores the function of the journey as a catalyst in Janki Bai's life, emblematic of the broader condition of female performers in colonial India. It also examines how *tavāyafs*, like Janki, used their journeys to articulate and extend their agency and autonomy beyond the limited spaces they inhabited. As Janki's story demonstrates, the construction of the female artist's identity challenges societal expectations of a woman's image and role. Finally, her journey is framed as one of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-assertion in a complex social milieu.

Keywords: Janki Bai, Hindustani music, courtesans, *tavāyaf*, *ṭhumrī*, Indian female performers, colonial India.

1. The journey of an artist across courts, social spaces, and inner realms[1]

The Indian musical and cultural scene of the colonial era was dominated by itinerant courtesans, the *tavāyaf*s who were among the most talented artists of the time. In contrast with the marginality of the

[1] The transliteration of words originally in Devanāgarī script and the use of Hindi follows the method adopted by McGregor (*Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 1993) mediating between a phonetic transcription and scientific transliteration. Therefore, I

restricted sphere they lived in, their mobility should be seen as an expression of their self-reliance that defies social female clichés sedimented within twentieth-century Indian society.

The present article focuses on a woman musician's subjective and actual journey which overlaps with significant historical, social, and cultural changes that affected music and its audience at the turn of the 1800s. This article intends, in the first place, to explore the function of the journey in the life of songstress courtesans of the colonial period as an opportunity and challenge to assert both their subjective self and artistic public image. Through the incidents of the life of a distinguished courtesan artiste, Janki Bai Ilahabadi, travel emerges as a means for *tavāyaf*s to articulate and extend their agency and autonomy beyond the limited physical and social spaces they inhabited.

The ideas of 'mobility' and 'movement' appear to be inherent to the very word *tavāyaf*. The etymological origin of the term is debated: if one school of thought relates it to the Arabic that indicates the circumambulation of the *Ka'ba*, others link it to the Urdu-Persian denomination of a wandering tribe or community of performers and entertainers. Regardless of which derivation is considered correct, both etymologies give prominence to the concept of circling and movement (Rao 2011: 183, Sampath 2010: 19, Singh 2014: 1) and reflect the itinerant nature and dynamism of female singers and dancers.

The journey acted as a catalyst in Janki Bai's personal and musical life which can be regarded as emblematic of the place of female performers in Indian colonial society. The mobility that characterised several female artistic biographies towards the end of the nineteenth century influenced the music forms sung by *tavāyaf*s. Genres such as *ṭhumrī* and its allied forms remodelled themselves by moving out from *mahfil*s[2] and elite private *jalsā*s[3] to reach the wider and ambivalent setting of the public stage of the concert hall and the recording studio. Once these song forms were decontextualised and deprived of their original purpose, they underwent a gradual process of redefinition. The 'functional shift,' resulting from an actual displacement, led certain genres to adapt to new socio-cultural contexts and, by doing so, to develop new features and a high degree of 'intra-genre heterogeneity' or, in other words, diversification which accounts the existence of a music form in a variety of expressions across different genres, styles, and languages (Henry 1991: 238-239).

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have opted for the transliteration system of Sanskrit omitting the 'a' when silent. Hindi terms in common use—such as Hindustani, maharaja etc.—which have entered the English dictionary are written with their English spelling. Geographical names, names of languages, and names of performers and institutions are given in their anglicised form, without diacritic marks.

[2] An intimate gathering for music and dance performance or recital of poetry.

[3] A gathering for entertainment (song, dance, or concert).

Retracing Janki Bai's musical and existential journey sheds light on the condition of female performers in India's colonial society and reveals a composite musical landscape where *tavāyaf*s held a special place since the majority of them were custodians of the *tavāyaf bāzī*, the courtesan culture as a synthesis of different artistic expressions, etiquette, and finesse.

Among the most prominent female performers of Hindustani music and the early stars of the gramophone era, Janki Bai Ilahabadi (1880-1934) stands out as a talented and iconic artist. Her figure has been overshadowed to some extent by the more celebrated vocalist Gauhar Jaan (1873-1930), a glamourous and cosmopolitan diva of her times. Only recently Janki Bai's faded story has been re-discovered and revived on the wave of a renewed interest in lost treasures of a vintage era. The novel *Requiem in Raga Janki* by Neelam Saran Gour, published in 2018 and recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2023 in the English language category, features a re-telling of the biography of Janki Bai. This revival comes amidst a growing scholarly and popular interest in the world of courtesans in India, their societal position, and their role in cultural history. Notable songstress-*tavāyaf*s have become the subject of both academic research and literary works, such as biographies, novels, and movies addressed to a general audience. Such is the case of the 2010 book *My Name is Gauhar Jaan: The Life and Times of a Musician* by Vikram Sampath which narrates the story of the eminent courtesan-diva from Kolkata. The legendary singer-dancer Gauhar Jaan, in particular, has inspired several theatrical adaptations, including *Gauhar*, directed by Lilette Dubey and performed across India in 2016, and the solo musical play *My Name is Jaan*, directed by Abanti Chakraborty and starring Arpita Chatterjee, which was staged in 2024. Remakes of iconic Bollywood films, such as *Umrao Jaan* and *Pakeezah,*[4] as well as television series,[5] should be analysed within the same framework, even when they portray fictional characters.

These works highlight the rich cultural heritage associated with *tavāyaf*s by bringing forth marginalised subjectivities of female performers in the patriarchal society of British India. After all,

[4] *Umrao Jaan* is a 2006 musical romantic drama film, produced and directed by J. P. Dutta, remake of 1981 *Umrao Jaan* directed by Muzaffar Ali and starring Rekha as the eponymous character. The remake of the classic Bollywood film *Pakeezah* (1972)—regarded as one of the most iconic films in Indian cinema and featuring the legendary Meena Kumari in the lead role—has been a topic of discussion for years and is currently in production, with Pakistani actress Meera cast as the protagonist (see HT Correspondent, "Pak actor Meera").

[5] The Netflix series *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* is a 2024 Indian Hindi-language period drama created and directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. It portrays the lives of *tavāyaf*s in the red-light district of Heera Mandi in Lahore during the Indian independence movement.

intriguing and shadowy life stories of *tavāyaf*s and *bāījīs*[6] are lost in legends and rely mainly on anecdotes and fragments of oral narratives that underwent denial and silencing. One such tale is the story of the courtesan of Allahabad, Janki Bai, brilliantly told by Neelam Gour in her fictionalised biography. This work merges history and story: the lacuna in events and biographical facts are filled with imagined thoughts and words drawn from a thorough psychological exploration of an intriguing persona (Das and Tripathi 2021: 2).

Born in Banaras, Janki was just a child when her father, a wrestler-confectioner *halvāī* deserted her and her family. After a series of unfortunate events, they found themselves in a *koṭhā*, the courtesans' salon, in Allahabad where Janki and her mother became *tavāyaf*s to escape extreme poverty. From that moment, Janki's destiny was inextricably bound to the city of Allahabad, to the point that the name of the capital of the United Provinces became embedded in her sobriquet. The epithet *Ilahabadi*[7] hints at the mobility marking her career as a clear declaration of belonging to a place different from her hometown. In her city of adoption, Janki was not only trained in *khayāl* and *ṭhumrī* by the legendary *ustād* Hassu Khan—founder with his brother of the Gwalior *gharānā*—but she also learned Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit, and English. Such a cultural background significantly influenced Janki's musical formation. Furthermore, later in her life, she wrote poetry in Urdu and eventually published a collection titled *Dīvān-e-jānkī*.[8]

A travelling performing artist from a young age, Janki was popularly known as *chappan churī vālī*—'she of the 56 knife gashes.' Her nickname reveals her painful history as a victim of a violent attack. The assault, the reasons for which are shrouded in mystery and mostly rest on anecdotes, left her scarred and disfigured for life. It seems that Janki herself cleverly romanticised the incident in her later years to add to the mystique of her persona. Interestingly, the Hindi phrase *chappan churī*, acquired the meaning of a haughty, lofty, and dismissive woman. This is to some extent emblematic of the personality and resilience of a woman surviving and elaborating a trauma. Indeed, such an experience moulded Janki's life and ushered in her journey: travel, in its multifaceted dimensions, emerges as a constant of her existence in its function of a dominant trigger of profound change.

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[6] *Bāījī* is another word used to refer to courtesans. Du Perron explains how most singers who had this word affixed to their name changed it to *devī* to remove the association with the world of the *tavāyaf*s (du Perron 2007: 243).

[7] The location-related sobriquet distinguishes *bāījī*s of the same name. A Janki Bai from Udaipur was known by the nickname 'Marwardin' due to her entirely Marwari repertoire.

[8] The collection, not easily available, is entirely in Urdu and apparently no complete English translation has been produced to date. In *Requiem in Raga Janki*, Neelam Gour intersperses the narration with the English translation of a few *ġazal*s and poems by Janki Bai (in English).

In this article, I focus on the three important journeys that shaped Janki Bai's life path from songstress courtesan to accomplished artiste who challenged the stereotypes surrounding female performers and built her name on the power of her musical talent asserting her subjectivity and agency in a colonial male-dominated society.

2. Three stages of an existential journey in music

The first important journey shaping Janki Bai's artistic identity is the trip to the princely state of Rewa, in central India. Janki was invited by the maharaja—Venkat Raman Ramanuj Prasad Singh Ju Deo Bahadur (1876-1918)—to sing at court on the occasion of a grand soirée part of the Daśahrā celebrations following a ceremony at the royal house. The story goes that, since rumours about Janki's unattractive looks were rife, she decided to sing behind a curtain. When the king mesmerised by her voice ordered the curtain to be removed, Janki bravely urged her listener to judge the performance exclusively on the basis of her vocal talent instead of her appearance, pronouncing the famous comment *mahfil meṃ sūrat kī nahiṃ, sīrat ki fatah hai* (Siṃh 2002: 119), "In the *mahfil*, it is not the face that wins, but the qualities." This episode, as fictionalised as it might be, reveals the significance of the visit to Rewa in Janki's life. Firstly, it allowed her to debunk the cliché of the good-looking and submissive *gānevālī*[9] (Dewan 2019: 4) and, just as importantly, she could assert her autonomy as an artist. Indeed, she declined the offer to stay on the royal *darbār* and become a lifelong performer for the king. The achieved economic autonomy resulted in a highly active, 'agentic' attitude shaping Janki's identity and life choices. Back in Allahabad, she bought the *koṭhā* she was sold to as a child and made it her abode. She gained fame, name, and considerable wealth; she invested in properties while founding a charitable trust committed to the building of shelter houses for homeless women and rest houses for both Hindu and Muslim pilgrims.

It is important to note that the achievement of financial self-sufficiency attained by courtesan professionals, before British hegemony and the redefinition of women's roles, meant for several women artists having an independent life or, better, being responsible for their own existence and proudly asserting their creative and artistic power which made them influential within courts (Singh 2007). Nevertheless, this degree of freedom they enjoyed does not imply their emancipation from the norms of a patriarchal society since their careers had always been precarious and dependent on

[9] This term, together with its synonym *gāyikā*, defines a female singer or vocalist in general and neutrally. Unlike the word *tavāyaf*, they are not value-loaded and prevent any bias surrounding the world of the courtesans. See also Dewan (2019: 4).

patrons (Rao 1996a: 55). However, the musical space occupied by *tavāyaf*s granted the subversive power to challenge female stereotyped attitudes and existing pre-established social roles (Rao 1996a: 55). In this sense, Janki's artistic and existential parable is paradigmatic of the precariousness and risk characterising a female artist's life at the end of the nineteenth century.

The second significant journey which marked a turning point in Janki's career coincided with that of music from the restricted space of the elite to the living rooms of the middle classes via the gramophone. Music, especially what is known as semi-classical genres, traditionally performed by songstress courtesans, moved from the limited space of *mujrā*s[10] and private *mahfil*s enjoyed by an exclusive audience made of noblemen, patrons, and aristocrats to reach a wider and heterogeneous group of listeners encompassing the newly emerging business classes. The technological development introduced by the recording industry[11] represented a crucial step for the 'democratisation of music' (Shah 2016: 5). The popularity Janki Bai and many other of her contemporary female performers hailing from *koṭhā* culture achieved was immense and certainly unparalleled if compared with the fame gained at the time of the *darbār* performance. As noted by Vidya Shah, the opportunities offered to courtesans by gramophone recordings led them to create "new images of themselves" while "recasting classical and light music," besides providing "new avenues of self-expression" (Shah 2016: 16). Most importantly, the 'gramophone fame,' leading to unprecedented wealth and prestige, was for professional women singers their "way around societal taboos" (Shah 2016: 16). In a context of changed spaces for entertainment determined by the introduction of new technologies, former courtesans recast themselves as celebrities within a modern society. Differently from their male counterparts, who looked at the 'talking machine'—as the gramophone was then called—with mistrust and suspicion, women singers were not reluctant to share their repertoire[12] and proved to be highly versatile and extremely open to the Western novelty. Furthermore, thanks to singing courtesans several Hindustani music forms, including regional ones, gained unprecedented diffusion and popularity.

Janki Bai's visit to Delhi in 1907 resulted in her first recording for the newborn Gramophone Company. Her voice was recorded during a session conducted by William Conrad Gaisberg, the pioneer of the gramophone industry in India who had been assigned the task of acquiring "a catalogue of native records" (Gaisberg 1942: 48). Gaisberg himself describes Janki Bai in these terms:

[10] The term *mujrā* designates a musical or dance performance by a courtesan.

[11] On the impact of the gramophone industry on society and music see also Farrel (1993: 31-53).

[12] This is also due to the fact that courtesans did not belong to *gharānā*s or lineages of hereditary musicians in Hindustani art music. See also Neuman (1990: 100-102).

> Janki Bai was one of the best classical singers and her fee was 3,000 rupees for a recording session. To attend a wedding celebration her fee varied with the standing of the parties; from a wealthy family she would get 5,000 rupees, and the festival on such occasion would last several days (Gaisberg 1942: 57).

Although several rising recording companies (such as Beck Record, Pathephone, and Typewriter Company of Calcutta) offered her appealing contracts, Janki refused to be tied to any exclusive agreement and chose to record on her own terms on a song-to-song basis. Her payments rose and Janki became a star: some of her records were reissued in 1994 by His Master's Voice (HMV) in the Chairman's Choice series on audiotapes. Exploring Janki Bai's rich discography means retracing her journey to the main musical and cultural centres of her times, the urban headquarters of the flourishing recording industry. From 1907 to 1928 she recorded approximately 250 songs in studios across Delhi, Lucknow, Calcutta, and northern India. The discographic information provided by Michael Kinnear—pioneer in discography and research into early recordings of South Asia—in his work *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings* (Kinnear 1992, 1994) offers valuable clues on the mobility that informed Janki Bai's career.

The height of success and popularity brought about crucial developments in Janki's personal and professional path against the backdrop of a changing socio-cultural scenario.

The ability to discern her own grounds in terms of actions, needs, independent choices, and beliefs resulted for Janki in the long-awaited and hard-fought conversion to Islam, a religion she felt more congenial to her disposition. Her belief did not exclude her original Hindu faith, rather it was grounded in a syncretic attitude reflecting the composite and hybrid culture of the *koṭhā*. The retention of her original name could be viewed, to a certain extent, as a sign of the will to retain her roots as a part of her composite identity. Meanwhile, the fusion of religious practices and aesthetics characterising the world of Hindustani music under the nationalist and reformist impetus had to be somehow resisted, as an element of social dissent, through the promotion of a 'great' Indian-Hindu culture.

The third journey paradigmatic of Janki Bai's existence was the one to Delhi in 1911, when she was selected to sing at the coronation ceremony of King George V. The Delhi *darbār*, reminiscent of the pomp of the Mughal courts, was historically and politically significant: it was the first time that a ruling monarch visited the subcontinent, and it represented an opportunity to announce the shift of the imperial capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Most importantly the coronation event functioned as a public display of a mighty British Empire over a subjugated India, reinforcing the colonial hegemony endorsed by the local aristocracy and nobility. The opulent one-week-long celebration, preceded by an exhibition of arts, crafts, agricultural, and industrial excellence of India, included entertainment shows

and performances. The most celebrated artists of the time were invited to perform in the presence of the King and the Queen of England and Janki Bai was asked to sing along with her famed rival-friend Gauhar Jaan. The two, along with the best pieces of their repertoire, presented in a duet a composition especially created for the occasion titled *Yah jalsā tājpośī kā mubārak ho* ("Congratulations on this grand coronation ceremony)." Such a performance praised and rewarded by George V, marked the peak of Janki Bai's fame and solemnised her iconic image as a diva of her time. Unsurprisingly, the duet at the royal court met with harsh criticism and derogatory remarks from the press and reformists since it openly brought to light a reality that should have been silenced, thus legitimising to some extent the place of *tavāyaf*s within society. On the other hand, the participation in a ceremony that enshrined the colonial authority apparently contrasted with her sympathy for the Indian nationalist movement manifested by several courtesan artistes, often in the form of financial support. A closer look at the story of these women—frequently intermingled with fictitious anecdotes—reveals not only their often ambiguous and ambivalent social position but also the limits of their freedom of action and continuous need to affirm themselves as respectful and admired individuals. Although women of the performer communities might have exerted political vicissitudes, being associated with the Independence movements (Singh 2007: 1678) certain narratives, such as the one depicting Janki Bai donating money to Motilal Nehru (Gour 2018: 29), seem to respond to the archetypal representation of inspirational women. As aptly pointed out by Lata Singh, there are fictions about *tavāyaf*s that make them iconic figures surrounded by a halo of charm and mystery. In order to detach themselves from moralistic bias,

> when they did speak, they had to reinvent themselves through polite myths to reinforce their self-esteem, which had consistently been battered by references to them as fallen and dangerous women. They had to constantly camouflage their personas, a crucial process to make them into the legends they were (Singh 2007: 1677).

3. Janki Bai through the journey of *ṭhumrī*

Janki reached the peak of her popularity by 1920, a critical time for the music she performed, *ṭhumrī*, which was undergoing a process of sanitisation and re-adaptation facilitated by the advent of the gramophone recordings and the appropriation of the genre by male vocalists. The very fact that *ṭhumrī* started to be sung by men paved the way for the classicisation of the genre and a prevailing devotional interpretation of amorous and often erotic lyrics born in a secular context. Janki Bai specialised in

singing *ṭhumrī* and, especially, its related forms of *horī*,[13]*caitī*,[14] *kajrī*,[15] and *jhūlā*,[16] considered peripheral since traditionally they had been almost exclusively sung by women, not only professionals or courtesans but also amateurs, typically in women's gatherings held on special religious and seasonal festivals. Rooted in regional music and characterised by freedom in the use of 'mixed' *rāg*s (modes) and *tāl*s (rhythmic cycles) of folk origins, these genres have been marginalised throughout their history.[17]

Flourished in Lucknow in the nineteenth century at the court of Wajid Ali Shah, the last *navāb* of Awadh, *ṭhumrī* was initially sung by songstress courtesans and used to accompany *kathak* dance performances. The texts of the older form of the genre (called *bandiś ṭhumrī*), characterized by rhythmic fixed compositions suitable to dance, depict Kṛṣṇa as described in the *dān-līlā* ('play of the toll') accredited to the sixteenth-century poet Surdas. When *bandiś ṭhumrī* began to lose currency at the beginning of the twentieth century, *bol banāo ṭhumrī* emerged as a new style born in the city of Benares and focused on folk motifs and meters. Its main feature is the expression of the emotional shades of the text which results in an emphasis on vocal virtuosity. The genre deals mainly with the themes of the 'pangs of separation' (*virah*) of the female protagonist who suffers from the absence of her lover.

The music forms of *caitī*, *kajrī*, and *jhūlā*, despite their great stylistic diversification, are generally labelled as 'semi-classical' and described as 'sub-genres' of *ṭhumrī* or even assimilated to it, since they

[13] An intermediate song form sung during the spring festival of Holī and part of the *ṭhumrī* repertoire. *Horī* is rooted in the folk genres of the Braj, area, in the places dear to the Krishnaite devotion, but it exists in a variety of forms and styles, such as*: horī dhamār* , included in the *dhrupad* repertoire, and *horī ṭhumrī*, usually considered a 'semi-classical' form usually presented at the end of a *khayāl* concert. *Horī* lyrics portray the frolicsome plays typical of the festival of Holī and feature Kṛṣṇa throwing coloured water and powder to the *gopī*s, the milkmaids of Braj.

[14] An intermediate song form sung during the first month of *cait* (March-April). It is considered a 'sub-genre' of *ṭhumrī.* It is especially associated with the festivity of Rāmanavamī, when the birth of god Rām is celebrated. *Caitī* texts deals with a variety of themes; along with song dedicated to Rām, there are several compositions describing springtime romantic scenes. A recurring motif is the brevity of spring associated with the fugacity of youth ebbing away even more quickly in the absence of the beloved.

[15] A highly diversified intermediate music genre related to *ṭhumrī,* born in Mirzapur and typical of the Bhojpuri speaking area of western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Traditionally performed during the monsoon and associated with the month of *sāvan* (July-August), it voices the beauty of the rainy season that sharpens the longing of a lonely lovelorn female protagonist, suffering from the absence of her lover who has gone to a foreign land and/or is in the company of another woman.

[16] An intermediate music genre—also called *hiṇḍolā* — (literally "swing") is considered a 'sub-type' of *kajrī* and subsumed in the *ṭhumrī* repertoire. Compositions focus on the motif of a woman singing on a swing during the monsoon and celebrate the coming of the long-awaited rain. This trope is associated with the reunion of lovers in the most romantic time of the year. Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa represent the archetypical couple traditionally depicted singing in the rain with the *gopī*s of Braj.

[17] *Dhrupad* and *khayal* are considered 'classical' or art music par excellence. The former is considered the most ancient genre of Hindustani music, whereas the latter arose in the eighteenth century and became the most prominent vocal and instrumental style.

are part of the repertoire presented during performances reserved for the time of the year they are related to. Therefore, the designation of 'seasonal,' commonly attributed to those genres, appears as an oversimplification and reductive characterisation imposed on otherwise multifaceted musical expressions, spanning from simple folk to refined and elaborate forms and even purely art music-oriented styles. For this reason, this kind of music can be better understood as 'intermediate' (Manuel 2015).

In the process of redefinition of Hindustani music, these forms, polished through expunging overtly ribald and explicit lyrics, underwent a process of standardisation. They significantly changed when they entered the recording studio and started to be addressed to 'respectable' middle-class listeners. The appropriation of essentially 'feminine' forms by male performers marked their transformation through their inclusion in the repertoire of art musicians, the loss of their predominantly mundane, suggestive, and even coquettish connotations, in favour of a stylistic sophistication aimed at acceptability and respectability within a reformed society. When male singers began to perform—and, subsequently, record—those genres, a devotional meaning was imposed upon the lyrics that, far from sounding like an invocation to the lover or patron, started to be assimilated to and treated as *bhajan*s. Du Perron in her monography on *ṭhumrī* has illustrated how the spiritual and religious reading has been functional to the survival of the genre that had to adjust to the changed cultural environment. This shift can be better understood as a process of negotiation for *ṭhumrī* in its relocation into modernity (du Perron 2007: 20).

The complex interweaving of cultural and social processes and their influence on music-making and performance has been the focus of scholarly works (Rao 1990, Maciszewski 2001, Qureshi 2001, Schofield 2010, Morcom 2013, Zadeh 2015) and has highlighted how the gendered discourse, which began with the social reform movement of the Anti-Nautch campaign and continued through colonialism and independence, has profoundly impacted music.The Anti-nautch movement, promoted by British authorities and supported by missionaries and Western-educated Indian elites at the end of the nineteenth century, led to the persecution and ban of *devadāsī*s (temple dancers) first, and later, all the *tavāyaf*s. The socio-cultural transformations brought about by British colonial rule and the rise of Hindu reformist movements—such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj—inspired by a desire to modernise and align Indian society with Western values, started fostering social changes, including the redefinition of women's status, in line with a reinterpretation of Hindu traditions. In a moralising attempt to create a 'great' Indian cultural heritage, the ideals of the 'respectable woman' as the epitome of virtue, cultural and moral integrity of the nation—defined by her roles as mother, wife, and daughter (Lal 2002)—were advocated. This shift reinforced the dichotomy between the idealised figure of the

woman within the domestic sphere—the embodiment of chastity, piety, and self-sacrifice—and the courtesan, who symbolised a perceived moral and social decline (Basu 2006, Sen 2000). The nonconformist courtesan's life was seen as threatening to the imagined purity of the nation, leading to intensified opposition, pressure, and marginalisation of those who did not fit into this redefined and stereotyped model of womanhood (Sarkar 2001).

4. The twilight of a diva and an iconic era

The twilight of Janki's artistic journey ran in parallel with the end of the golden era of the *tavāyaf*s, the emergence of the Anti-nautch movement, and the decline of courtly patronage. From being urban cultural institutions, female performers, and courtesans—having lost status, fame, and financial support—from the 1920s started to be the target of moralising campaigns which resulted in the marginalisation and condemnation of their profession and art. Several 'dancing and singing girls' faced discrimination and hardships and had to resort to prostitution for a living. Many once-renowned courtesans aged in strained circumstances and died in penury.

The last years of Janki's life were characterised by loss, grief, betrayal, and misfortune. While becoming more introspective, she renounced to the material pursuit and concentrated on charity. Like many courtesans in those years, she lost a considerable part of her assets and made a living with music tuition and singing classes until she died in 1934. The charitable trust she founded, which provided support to underprivileged students, and shelter for the needy and pilgrims, regardless of their belief or religious affiliation, represented a remarkable legacy for her hometown, Allahabad, and held a special place in the collective memory of the and great cultural heritage of the city.

Discovering Janki's life, intertwined with the story of music and songstress courtesans, means shedding light on the condition of women at the turn of the nineteenth century, on the role and identity of female artists, unveiling an important—and often denied or forgotten—chapter of the history of Hindustani music. Indeed, music forms traditionally associated with *tavāyaf*s were considered inferior and re-defined in line with the moralistic and rigorous reformistic approach aimed at the creation of a 'Great' Indian cultural heritage. Moreover, genres like *ṭhumrī* faced drastic changes in their shift from the salons to the stages of vast auditoria and in their fruition on gramophone records.

It is evident that complex aspects of socio-musical relevance coalesce in the story of Janki Bai as well as of several other female performers living in India between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. As Janki's story shows, the construction of the female artiste's identity is challenged by a complex social context and, therefore, is fraught with tensions between

pride and disrepute derived from belonging to a tradition that does not meet the expectations and construction of a woman's image and role imposed by a patriarchal society.

Finally, the journey in its broadest sense is outlined in its different nuances and dimensions: the journey of the self, through circumstance and choice, undertaken by self-reliant women like Janki Bai. The journey of the artist through geographical and inner space, a journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-assertion in a changing and convoluted social milieu.

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