

Women's Status in Classical Instrumental Music in the Context of Bangladesh Contribution, Obstacles and Possibilities

Sharif Muhammad Arefin Rony (Research Scholar)
Prof. Rajesh Shah (Supervisor)
Department of Instrumental Music
Faculty of Performing Arts
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh
Email: sharif.ar11@gmail.com

Abstract

In the history of Indian classical music, particularly in instrumental genres, very few women could achieve success. The developments that did come about were observed over the past 150 years. Since the early 20th century, it became significantly more common for women to learn Indian classical music instruments. It was a component of a change to a new national consciousness. During the last 300-400 years, approx., Hindustani music originated in royal palaces. Musical compositions were meant for the amusement of the affluent section of society and the musicians who performed were all males of families among whom the art was passed down through the generations.



The circumstances in Bangladesh were not any different. However, the trends are now beginning to change. In every avenue of art and culture, women take charge and demonstrate their successes, just like men. The musical intelligentsia believes there are some obstacles in Bangladesh for women who want to pursue a music career, but this is true for both men and women. Some obstacles are designed specifically for women naturally, but they are used elsewhere. This paper highlights and underlines the contribution of women musicians of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Classical Instrumental Music, Women Artists, Learning and Performance, Challenges, Prospects.

How to cite this paper:

Rony, Sharif Muhammad Arefin. 2024. "Women's Status in Classical Instrumental Music in the Context of Bangladesh Contribution, Obstacles and Possibilities." *Sangeet Galaxy* 13(1): 46-54.
www.sangeetgalaxy.co.in

Introduction:

There are currently very few female Indian classical instrumentalists performing internationally. Many students at the first music institutions in India were female when they started in the 1800s. However, they were not encouraged to appear before audiences outside of their immediate family. Still, they did play a part as singers and dancers (Max Katz, 2020). According to noted musicologist Anindya Banerjee (personal communication, July 17, 2023), ‘The Brahma Samaj was the forerunner of women performing music, but Alam Ara, the wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, had already been a composer and music teacher before that. Now the subcontinent's condition has shifted. In classical instrumental music, as in all other fields, women are performing well.’

Women artists of Bangladesh are also gaining success in the world of classical music. After a long period of political instability, the rise of classical instrumental music has been noticeable over the past decade (Reenat Fauzia, personal communication, July 07, 2023). Discussions should focus on women's participation in particular.

Before the 1947 partition, Bangladesh was a part of India. Many of the finest musicians, including world-famous music maestros Ustad Allaudin Khan, Ustad Ayet Ali Khan, and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, were born in this part of the subcontinent. After the partition, Bengal was divided into provinces, with the eastern portion joining Pakistan as a province known as East Bengal, later renamed East Pakistan, and the western portion was given to India (Ken Hunt, 2021).

After the partition, the majority of classical music enthusiasts and practitioners chose to settle in India (Asit Dey, 2021). Following a bloody Liberation War, Bangladesh, a province of Pakistan for 23 years, gained its independence in 1971. The political, economic, and cultural climate during the Pakistani regime was not favorable for classical music. Four years after the nation's bloody founding, the country's political scenario changed once again and cultural activities took a back seat.

However, Bengalis as a whole are music enthusiasts, which is why the country's music-focused families, meaning those who have been studying classical music for many years, never gave up, and the once-nearly extinct traditions of classical music have returned. Bangladesh has been largely absent in this field for many years due to political volatility. But things are different right now. So many young people are studying and performing vocal and instrumental classical music and a large number of them are female (Reenat Fauzia, personal communication, July 07, 2023).

The situation of women instrumentalists in Bangladesh, their contributions to the field of Indian classical music, the challenges they encounter, and a discussion on the future success of both these musicians and Indian classical music in the context of Bangladesh will all be focused in this paper.

Biographies of Female Artists in Bangladesh:

The majority of the artists play string instruments such as the violin, sarod, and siter. Only two of them— national performers— specialize in percussion. However, there is no noteworthy player of wind instruments.

Anwara Rahman: The Pioneering Sarodist and Teacher

Anwara Rahman is regarded as the first female sarod player of Bangladesh. Born into a family active in art and culture at Sorail Thana of Brahmanbaria district in Bangladesh in 1959, Anwara Rahman was slowly motivated to study instrumental music over time listening to her husband, Afjalur Rahman, play the violin. Afjalur Rahman was visually impaired yet a well-known sarod player and pupil of Ustad Ayat Ali Khan. He is Anwara Rahman's primary guru. On her husband's advice, she began learning to play the guitar for a while and afterward decided to begin studying the sarod. She has been playing the sarod for 50 years and has been performing on Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television since 1988. She now oversees a music school where children with physical disabilities can learn to create music for free (Anwara Rahman, 2022).

Alif Laila: Sitarist, Music Composer, Painter and Sitar Guru

Alif Laila is one of the few rare female sitar players who have been performing globally for over three decades. In addition to performing in concerts of Indian classical music, Alif also composes, directs, and produces such shows. She also works diligently to mentor her pupils. She is the founder and guru of Sitar Niketan and has been teaching Indian classical music for more than 20 years (aramcoworld, 2021). Since 2000, Alif has produced 10 albums. She received lessons on playing Indian classical music on the sitar in Dhaka from Mir Qasem Khan, the nephew of legendary music maestro Ustad Allauddin Khan. Intending to keep South Asian musical traditions alive, she established her music school, Sitar Niketan (abode of sitar), in Maryland, USA in 2015. Laila is aware of her development as an artist and the fact that, particularly as a woman, she has turned into one of the greatest sitar players in the world. Recently she was selected for the Maryland State Arts Council's Maryland Performing Artist Touring Roster. She also got the same organization's Individual Artist's Award in 2014 (Larry Luxner, 2021).

Reenat Fauzia: Sitarist, Music Composer and Teacher

Reenat Fauzia was born in 1967 in a family accomplished in the art of music. She is the granddaughter of Ustad Ayat Ali Khan, the legendary maestro of music of the subcontinent. Her mother, Mrs. Fauzia Khan, is a well-known vocal artist, and her father, Mr. Mobarak Hossain

Khan, is a renowned musicologist and author. She was motivated to play the sitar because of her adoration for it and the musical instrument has a long history in her family. Reenat first began taking music lessons from her cousin, Ustad Shahadat Hossain Khan, a well-known sarod player from Bangladesh. Later, she received training under another cousin, Ustad Khurshid Khan. From 1987, Reenat started playing the sitar in Bangladesh Television. She is an enlisted 'special' grade classical artiste of Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar. She produced the first record of Ustad Allauddin Khan and Ustad Ayat Ali Khan in Bangladesh alongside her own four solo sitar recital CDs. She received a 2010 'Anonna Shirsho Dosh Podok' (Anonna Top 10 Award) for her great work in instrumental music. She is a professor at Bangladesh Home Economics College, Dhaka (thedailystar.net January 10, 2010).

Dr. Nusrat Mumtaz Ruposhi: Violinist, Composer and Music Director

Born into a family prominent in the art and culture scene in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Dr. Ruposhi was raised by the late Mrs. Alpana Mumtaz, a renowned dance artist, choreographer, and head of Kothakali Sangeet Biddalay. She started learning music and dance at Kothakali Sangeet Biddalay in Dhaka at the age of three. Since 1998, Dr. Ruposhi has performed both solo and in ensembles with other classical violinists both at home and abroad. In 1999, she staged solo violin performances as a member of the Bangladesh Cultural Delegation in Jordan and Iraq. She has also held performances in several Indian cities, both solo and with her guru, Sri Ghanekar. She received a Bangladeshi 'Nattya Shobha' award in 2005 and was named the nation's top young musical talent in 2008 with the Ananya Top 10 Award. Dr. Ruposhi now resides in Toronto, Canada (ruposhi.live about, para 1,2,3,4).

Sheuli Bhattacharji: Classical Violinist, Music Composer and Teacher

Sheuli Bhattacharji was raised in Sylhet. Her father was not only her first teacher but also a huge source of inspiration. Sheuli has also been trained by eminent teachers of the subcontinent-VC Ranare, Rakesh J Mahisori, Pandit VG Jog, N Rajan, Shuloya Banerjee, and Shomir Shill. She embarked on her career in Bangladesh completing her studies on music in India between 1994 and 2008. Sheuli Bhattacharji made waves in Bangladesh with her participation in stage productions and TV performances, as a teacher, studio worker, and enlisted artist of Bangladesh Betar. She is currently an Assistant Professor and the department head of instrumental music at Government Music College, Dhaka. She holds a job teaching violin at 'Chayanat Sangeet Vidyathan', the oldest music school in Bangladesh. At her initiative, she has also taken up the role of expertly leading a musical ensemble named 'Sarvajaya', in which both instrumental and vocal music is equally important (thedailystar.net July 6, 2009).

Mohua Rahman Lubha and Antora Rahman Tungtang: Visually Impaired Sisters, Tabla Artist and Classical Violinist

Daughters of Anwara Rahman, the first female sarod player of Bangladesh, and world-renowned musician Ustad Afjalur Rahman, Mohua Rahman Lubha and Antora Rahman Tungtang have

been able to master the arts of playing the tabla and violin respectively despite being visually impaired. Born into a family devoted to music, they have made a name for themselves in Bangladesh's classical instrumental music scene. Mohua Rahman Lubha, the elder of the two, is a classical vocalist who has received 12 national awards. She began playing the tabla to accompany her siblings during practice and now she plays the instrument with her brother and sister during performances. Violinist Antora Rahman Tungtang has won the national award six times (nexus-television, #tumiprothom, Oct 20, 2022).

Afsana Khan and Rukhsana Khan: Twins, Sitarist and Sarod Player

Twins Rukhsana Khan and Afsana Khan represent the fifth generation of the 'Khan Family' of Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh to be actively engaged in practicing art and culture. They are the great-granddaughters of Ustad Ayet Ali Khan and Ustad Allauddin Khan, the granddaughters of Ustad Abed Hossain Khan, and the daughters of Ustad Shahadat Hossain Khan. Born in Dhaka in 1989, Afsana Khan began her musical career with the sitar while Rukhsana Khan the sarod. Their family environment drew them into classical music from an early age. Their father began imparting lessons when they were seven years old. They continue to play instrumental duets throughout Bangladesh's major cities. They have received numerous awards for their exceptional performances at home and abroad (The Asian Age, Dec 23, 2016).

Fuljhuri Sisters: Youngest Sarodists

The Fuljhuri sisters are the most sought-after young musicians in the classical instrumental music scene of Bangladesh. They play the sarod. Their talent and spirited performances brought them the opportunity to perform in the presence of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at a very young age. They took part in a variety of national and international classical music festivals and television programs. These young rising instrumentalists descend from the world-renowned 'Khan Family' of Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh. Their late grandfather, Ustad Fuljhuri Khan, was the descendant of Fakir Aftabuddin Khan, who was the elder brother and first Guru of world-famous music maestro Ustad Alauddin Khan. The Fuljhuri sisters are the disciples of sarod maestro Pt. Tejendra Narayan Majumdar (Personal communication, July 03, 2023).

Sohini Majumder: Youngest Sitarist

Sohini Majumder is a 14 years old girl. This young sitar player has recently established herself in the classical instrumental music domain of Bangladesh. Sohini was born in a family engaged in art and culture in Dhaka in 2009. Her father Mrityunjoy Majumder is a well-known tabla player and teacher in Dhaka. Sohini has been studying music since her childhood. She began learning to play the sitar from Pandit Kushal Das, a prominent Indian sitar player of Maihar Gharana, at Bengal Parampara Sangeetalay in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2017 (Personal communication, June 15, 2023).

Fahmida Nazneen Sumaiya and Nusrat E Jahan Khushbu: Tabla Artists

Two young sisters from Bangladesh who are rising percussionists in the realm of Indian traditional instrumental music are Fahmida Nazneen Sumaiya and Nusrat E Jahan Khushbu. They performed in several prestigious events in Bangladesh as students of renowned tabla master Pandit Suresh Talwalkar. But their story is unlike any other. Every Bangladeshi female classical instrumentalist comes from families engaged in art and culture. However, the two sisters come from no such family. Their immediate family has no tradition of performing music (Personal communication, June 20, 2023).

Challenges:

In the subcontinent, women were not encouraged to perform in front of audiences other than their relatives, but they did play a part as singers and dancers. A few international female celebrities in Indian music are still active today. According to ethnomusicologist Max Katz an Associate Professor of music at Williamsburg, Virginia's College of William & Mary (2020), 'When India's first music schools began opening in the late 1800s, many of its students were women.' He believes, 'Indian classical music was very awkward to perform because the actual origins of Hindustani music were in royal courts. It was designed for elite entertainment, and the people who played that music were hereditary musicians— and all male.'

The situation in Bangladesh is not unique. But things are starting to change now. The musical intelligentsia believes there are some obstacles in Bangladesh for women, who want to pursue a music career.

According to Anwara Rahman, the first female sarod player of Bangladesh (2022)— 'It was difficult to make music for the girls because they were all forbidden from going outside at all during the hour.' But in the present era, Anwara says, 'Women are emerging in every industry and aren't afraid to take on any kind of labor. If we had these opportunities at the time, we could have accomplished much more.'

Bengali sitar guru Alif Laila (2020), who currently resides in America, believes that 'It is well known that a male sitar player has to be supported, but it doesn't work that way for a woman. Career, marriage, and childbirth all get in the way. You will not be able to get up early in the morning and start practicing or doing yoga and meditation. You have to take care of the house and feed the children.'

According to the young sarodist Ilham Fuljhuri Khan (personal communication, July 03, 2023), 'It's quite challenging to be confidently dedicated to music in our society, as we encounter discouraging vibes everywhere. We frequently hear at school from our classmates, some teachers, and family members about the future of our music, some of them enjoy coming at you from the perspective of a religious fundamentalist. However, there is also a reverse vibration that is not insignificant and is equally as inspiring and wonderful.'

Reenat Fauzia (personal communication, July 07, 2023), the female sitarist in the Khan family and a professor at Bangladesh Home Economics College, Dhaka, disagrees with Ilham's view. She claims, 'Only girls in our country are not facing these problems, these are common to the boys as well. I don't believe there is a particular obstacle, especially for female artists. For men and women in Bangladesh, there are equal opportunities and barriers.'

Prospects:

The future of Indian classical instrumental music in Bangladesh is expected to be very bright if current practice patterns are maintained because the upcoming musicians have a strong desire to both study and avail opportunities, according to professional musicians, teachers, and music intellectuals. In their opinion, the political and economic climates must be stable.

Anwara Rahman (2022), the most experienced instrumentalist in Bangladesh, believes, 'The modern period is really simple for people. Anything they want to do is allowed. Many young women are interested in and beginning to play classical instruments. It appeals to me. We, Bengali ladies, are not lagging; we'll keep going. For me, it consistently works.'

According to Professor Reenat Fouzia (personal communication, July 07, 2023), a senior sitar player from Bangladesh, 'Just a few years back, the situation was sufficiently frustrating, so much so that composers of Bangladesh had to recruit classical instrumentalists from our neighboring nation for every recording. However, some of our young musicians, including talented girls, are now pursuing it as a profession, and they are succeeding. Regarding them, I have optimism.'

Some musicians and educators believe that a government push is required to expand the practice of classical music. Asit Dey (2021), a professor in the Department of Music at the University of Development Alternative (UODA) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a classical voice instructor at Chhayanaut, claims that 'The government of Bangladesh should take some action, such as offering scholarships or developing opportunities like educational institutions, programs, and jobs that will allow people to make a living through music. As a result, young people will be motivated to pursue classical music, and their families will support them as well.'

Conclusion:

Bangladesh has a long-standing and well-deserved reputation for its literature, performing arts, and folk culture. There is a strong tradition of Indian classical music in addition to its folk music. The nation's women take the lead in all fields of employment and demonstrate their highest abilities. Similar to male artists, they are successful in the world of Indian classical instrumental music. The success of women in this profession over the past ten years has been evident; some of them are performing internationally. There are now music institutions in Bangladesh where

students can take lessons from renowned Indian gurus while also receiving instructions from local gurus in a stable sociopolitical environment. Over the past 15 years or so, families that have traditionally been engaged in music have begun to encourage their kids to pursue music, a phenomenon that had long been absent.

Musicians think that government action can create the right conditions for the country's classical music tradition to endure. They believe that government action is necessary to address the financial difficulties facing musicians.

References:

1. Personal communication:
 - a. Anindya Banerjee
 - b. Reenat Fauzia
 - c. Ilham Fuljhuri Khan
 - d. Fahmida Najneen
 - e. Sohini Majumder
2. The Life of Music in North India the Organization of an Artistic Tradition Daniel M. Neuman, Manohar, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002, First Edition:1980.
3. Exuberance of Indian Music, Sarod and Sarodist of Maihar Gharana. Dr. Akash Deep, Shubhi Publications #479, Sector-14, Gurgaon 122001, Haryana, India. First Edition: 2016.
4. My Life. An Autobiography by Ustad Allaaddin Khan. Edited by Anindya Banerjee, Thema, 46 Satish Mukharji Road, Kolkata 700026. Extended second edition: 2020. ISBN 9789381703-31-1.
5. Reenat Fauzia- Bengal Classical Music Festival <https://bengalclassicalmusicfest.com> › project › reenat fauzia.
6. Long Music History of Classical Violinist Dr. Nusrat Mumtaz. ruposhi.live <https://ruposhi.live> › about.
7. <https://www.reenatfauzia.com>.
8. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-121289>, Reenat Fauzia: A passionate sitar player/ The Daily Star, Web, Jan 10, 2010.
9. aliflailasitarmusic.com.
10. www.aramcoworld.com/Articles/November-2020/Sitar-Master-of-Maryland.
11. https://en.ntvbd.com/entertainment/144905/Bangladeshi_sitarist_Alif_Laila_to_perform_in_Washington. Aug 17, 2017.
12. Anastasia Tsioulcas, October 23, 20185:09 PM ET www.npr.org/sections/news/.
13. Future of Classical Music in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy live. April 23, 2021.
14. Article by Neil Genzlinger, The New York Times, Oct. 24, 2018.

15. Sheuli Bhattacharjee: The violinist with panache. The dailystar, Cultural Correspondent, Mon Jul 6, 2009 11:00 PM Last update on: Mon Jul 6, 2009 11:00 PM.
16. nexus television #tumiprothom.
17. <https://www.wikipedia.org>.
18. The Rough Guide to World Music the Music of Bangladesh: A Rough Guide, Sunday, September 26, 2021, By Ken Hunt.
19. The Asian Age, 2016.