

# **SILENCED ECHOES OF RESISTANCE: FEMALE EXPRESSION IN INDIAN MUSIC FROM FOLK TO POP**

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## **Abstract**

Songs and music have served as alternative archival spaces for gendered and cultural memory, enabling women to express themselves, whether it is for a spiritual union with the divine, voicing their desires, participating in the freedom struggle, or using it as a tool to resist the colonial state and patriarchal norms. One of the most notable features of India's musical diversity is that historically, women have occupied both prominent and informal public spaces in performative vocal cultures. This research paper argues that Indian musical genres have been a site of female expression in cultural memory and gendered history in South Asia. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theory, this paper explores the female voice across various Indian musical traditions, including Hindustani classical, Rajasthani folk, and contemporary pop music, renegotiating women's power, desire, and agency. Through the analysis of lyrics, historical performance contexts, and secondary scholarship, I explore the metamorphosis of female expression from respectable courtly culture to cultural stigmatisation in the colonial period, with further reclamation of power in the modern music industry. Ultimately, my paper demonstrates that music has acted as an archive for suppressed female expression and reclamation of agency through resistance.

## Introduction

The music culture of India is the only major system, outside the West, that has succeeded in maintaining its traditions largely unmarked by the West and a colonial past, and it has also journeyed away from its cultural home to be welcomed elsewhere (Neuman, 1990). India, with its vast linguistic diversity, is home to varied musical traditions performed in different cultural contexts – from ritualistic singing to courtly culture to televised programs. Within these spaces, Indian women express themselves through songs and oral traditions so they can be identified as living subjects with a political voice in the historical archives. This paper challenges the dominant patriarchal narratives by conserving the memory of Indian musical traditions in a gendered counter-archive. While this paper majorly focuses on Rajasthani folk, Hindustani classical, and Contemporary pop, these musical genres are representative of broader Indian musical patterns where women's voices are regionally distinct but collectively sustain memory and agency across time.

Although Indian music is rich in female representation through performance, much of the published scholarly work focuses on the theory of gender, sexuality, or tradition and rarely considers Indian music as a gendered expression within counter-archives. This could be better understood through Taylor's theory.

“‘Archival’ memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change...The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory...” (Taylor, 2003)

Diana Taylor (2003) distinguishes between the archive and repertoire in ‘Acts of Transfer’. Deriving from her work, I argue that the musical

genres of India embody the features of repertoire which shift constantly but safeguard the central 'knowledge'. It records and regenerates the female expression in collective memory, and therefore, serves as a counter-archive when historical records seem to neglect the feminine expression and voice.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity assists in understanding how women tackle gendered expectations while navigating their agency. Furthermore, Gayatri C. Spivak's revolutionary article – 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' – aids in the comprehension of women performers whose voices have been misinterpreted, erased, or suppressed by dominant institutions. Bell Hooks' conception of marginalized spaces as radical resistance illuminates us towards non-mainstream female artists and their struggle for visibility in a market-oriented and androcentric audience. Ultimately, drawing on Diana Taylor's understanding of the repertoire, this paper situates Indian music in a living and gendered counter-archive.

Methodologically, this paper closely engages with the lyrical content of the songs in historical and performative contexts. The theoretical reading of gender, voice, and archive further extends the research by an analysis of female expression across genres and historical and cultural contexts, including rural Rajasthani folk songs, semi-classical *thumri* music, and contemporary pop music. These voices, though historically unheard or misinterpreted, create an alternative continuing genealogy of female voice and expression that expands recorded history.

This paper begins with an examination of Rajasthani folk songs and the modes of expression for rural women in India. Moving on from folk traditions to the classical traditions, a shift in female perception is evident due to patriarchal and colonial influences. Additionally, the last section argues partial reclamation and resistance of female agency in the

contemporary pop tracks. Overall, the analysis of lyrical content in the following paper elaborates on female desire and autonomy from the classical genre to contemporary pop culture, redefining gendered perspectives in Indian music as a counter-archive.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This section of the paper lays a theoretical framework for the assessment of female expression in Indian music as a site of gendered archive. However, before diving into the analysis of the female voice and expression, it's necessary to interrogate what constitutes a woman and her 'voice.' The female voice is not only about the literal sound but also a symbol of visible social presence. Earlier feminist scholars have worked based on the universality of the 'category' of women. Butler questions this theory by pointing out the diversity that exists in women worldwide. By assuming that all women are the same, we are enabling the erasure of the silences that linger in subaltern history. Feminism must recognize that women are not a stable or a universal group; instead, they are, like gender itself, a flexible and contested entity. Gender is socially constructed by various power structures that enforce a set of rules, such as medicine, law, political structures, and culture. Therefore, characterization of women must be diverse, not universally fixed. These women belong to different regions, races, castes, classes and economic backgrounds. Moreover, the social and cultural construction of the female performers must be understood to analyze the female voice and expression effectively. Contemporary feminist debates focus on the multiplicity of 'women' at social, political, and cultural intersections. Similarly, this research paper brings the multiplicity of the character of Indian women to the forefront by incorporating rural women, singers from the contested 'courtesan'

category, and pop singers. Historically, when the voices of women have remained suppressed and undocumented in the formal archives, music emerged as an alternative site for gendered expression.

To further situate the paper within the feminist and postcolonial theory, I argue that certain Indian musical genres hold the voices of marginalized women, particularly rural performers and non-mainstream pop singers. Following Spivak, I am using the term ‘subaltern’ to refer to these women because their voices have been socially, politically, and culturally marginalized. However, since gender is not innate, but performed, these female singers are continuously compelled to behave a certain way. For instance, Butler points out that the bodies of female performers have been shaped by social powers and norms. The body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related (Butler, 1990). She suggests that the body is an instrument on which cultural appropriateness and interpretations are implied, as is the case with contemporary pop singers. Similar misinterpretations of the female expression exist in other genres as well. As male chauvinism looms over Hindustani classical in the ‘respectable’ high classical music, women sang semi-classical genres like *thumri* and *dadra*. The women singers who perform in these unconventional genres are overwritten by colonial and patriarchal structures, eventually losing their voice in the process. The lyrical content of these songs is misinterpreted by these structures to portray women as helpless figures without any sense of self-identity. Such gendered bias in artistic spaces reveals the problem of the representation of the subaltern. Spivak, in her insightful essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, asks whether the subaltern is really being listened to or just spoken for. She clarifies that the subaltern woman is not one without voice; instead, her voice is

misinterpreted or erased by colonial and patriarchal structures. This further compels me to counter the crucial assumptions made regarding the voice of the women.

As noted earlier, Indian musical traditions have served as alternative sites for gendered archives. Although music cannot substitute the intricacies of documented histories, it indeed functions as a space where subaltern history can be portrayed through lyrics.

“Women have dealt with the limiting and confining spaces available to them, physically or ideologically, by enduring them, claiming them to be meaningful and powerful or by breaking out of and rejecting them. They have also extended their limited spaces in dignified, creative encounters in ways that are qualitatively different from surrender, manipulation or destructive confrontation. One way has been to extend this space without rejecting or evacuating it but by exploring and working within it with unexpected richness” (Rao, 1990).

The passage resonates with Spivak's theory of misrepresentation of the women's voice. While Spivak focuses on the misinterpretation of the female expression by authoritative structures, Rao extends the theory by suggesting '*thumri*' as a way to navigate within those structures. Women have been recipients of patriarchal and cultural confinements, including in artistic spaces. For instance, the lyrical content of *thumri* articulates female desire but is constructed such that it caters to the male gaze. However, as Rao (1990) suggests, women create their own space within these confinements, music being the foremost. She emphasizes the *thumri* genre as an alternative space for the feminine voice to be expressed, heard, and understood. Therefore, Indian music enables women to express themselves

within restrictive structures and situate music as a counter-archive to the dominant historical archives. Hence, these lenses guide my analysis of lyrical content across all genres.

## **Rajasthani Folk**

Ritualistic folk songs of the women in Rajasthan act as an oral archive in subaltern history. One of the unique features of Rajasthani folk music is that even though it is highly sexually segregated society, the folk songs depict sexually explicit content. Women may not sing with men, but they often sing at them and very often in close proximity to them (Raheja and Gold, 1996). These songs are typically sung during communal festivities like weddings, births, harvests, and communal spaces like the courtyards and domestic spaces. According to Diana Taylor (2003), the repertoire consists of embodied memory, which encompasses within itself ‘acts of transfer’ or non-reproducible knowledge, like performance, stories, songs, and dance. Rajasthani folk music thus becomes a gendered repertoire which functions within the dominant patriarchal written archives. Under the umbrella of Rajasthani Folk, there are different genres, including *kesya*, *gali*, *maand*, among others. Most of these are ritualistic performances within the female community. Raheja and Gold (1996) in their work, ‘Listen to the Heron’s Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India,’ suggest an alternative portrayal of South Asian womanhood by scrutinizing these folk traditions. Documentation of these oral performances of subaltern women provide an alternative counter-archive to acknowledge their voice and expression in the dominant patriarchal history.

The following excerpt is from the song ‘*Kesariya Balam*’, which was composed by Allah Jilai Bai. One of the most famous renditions was sung

by Maand Gayaki Mangi Bai. *Maand* is a singing style in Rajasthani folk, which is similar to the *thumri* and *ghazal* of Hindustani classical music. This is one of the more sophisticated styles of folk music in India, unlike *kesya* or *gali*, which are sexually explicit:

केसरिया बालम आवोनी,  
पधारो म्हारे देश जी |  
पियाँ प्यारी रा ढोला, आवोनी,  
पधारो म्हारे देश |  
गिणताँ गिणताँ घिस गई,  
म्हारे आंगलियाँ री रेख ||  
केसरिया बालम आवोनी,  
पधारो म्हारे देश |  
(*Come my saffron lover,  
Come to my homeland.  
Beloved, sweetheart, my husband, come  
Come to my homeland.  
The lines of my fingers  
Have worn out counting.  
Come my saffron lover,  
Come to my homeland.*)

This Rajasthani song is sung by or on behalf of women to express their feelings of love, affection, and respect for their beloved husband or lover. 'Kesariya' means saffron; the word can be interpreted by the qualities of bravery, courage, good health, and wealth. The song expresses the desires of a woman inviting her lover back to her homeland, hinting at the longing felt by her. She is exhausted, and the lines of her fingers have worn out counting the days for the arrival of her beloved. Rajasthani folk songs are

sung in groups of women. Therefore, these songs act as a mode of expression for women to vent their emotions. Visibly, the passive emotions of waiting and longing are evident. The passivity of feminine desire and agency is expected by patriarchal cultural norms across genres, including *thumri*. These emotions play the role of gendered labor and emotional exhaustion when seen through Butler's lens of gender performativity. The female gender is expected to be submissive and display emotions which mirror a lack of agency. Such lyrical content adds to the prescribed gendered norms in a patriarchal society. While *maand* embodies longing, the following are more provocative subgenres.

Wraps and shawls (*odhnis*) play a provocative role in Rajasthani folk songs. Although the purpose of these *odhnis* is to cover the female body, these very garments play a central role in *kesya* to illustrate erotic and infidel emotions. Thus, Raheja and Gold (1996) help us contextualize the paradox of *purdah* in traditional Indian society with 'shameless' lyrical content. They discuss the importance of the female voice in a regional vernacular and the alternative perspectives it provides about female perception.

*Kesya, I brought a skirt from Agra, Lover.  
And a wrap from Sanganeer;  
Lover, through the wrap, the whole body shows,  
Through the veil, the fair cheeks show.  
Bite, bite, the whole body,  
Don't bite the cheeks or husband will beat you.* (Raheja and Gold, 1996)

*Kesya* is a genre named after the first word of each verse. It represents an 'illicit lover' or a 'red flower'. The above extract depicts the scenery of

infidelity. Herein, women are flexible regarding their sexuality and sing openly in choral groups. These women are not shy to talk about flirtations and exciting meetings. Rajasthani women attempt to reclaim the positive energies inherent in female bodies through their loud, chorused singing and graceful dances. Therefore, female desire and expressions of eroticism are displayed remorselessly in Rajasthani folk.

*Gali* is another type of folk song in rural Rajasthan. It translates to an 'insult' or 'abuse'. *Galis* are usually sexually oriented and almost always directed towards women. Yet, despite being able to sing erotic songs chorally, Rajasthani women are the recipients of patriarchal injustice. These injustices are embedded in the folk songs as well, which reinforces concepts of female submission and inferiority in society. One of the prominent themes in *galis* is infidelity. In contrast to the actual condescending act of adultery, it is forgivable or even encouraged when it is aligned with procreation for the sake of a continual lineage. Often, it is the husband's brothers who engage in this act, thus reducing women's bodies to a mere reproductive tool. Lyrics like – "Yes, useless and empty she remained" (Raheja and Gold, 1996) - imply that being a 'barren' woman is more dishonourable than adultery. Raheja and Gold (1996) indicate that a lover is a boon to the 'barren' woman, resultingly. However, labeling them as such overlooks the complexities of fertility and intimacy in their lives by reducing their identity to a mere reproductive 'tool.' This further shows how old ideas about power in society treat women as only valuable for having babies and take away their control over their own bodies. Therefore, these subtle nuances insinuate towards the rewriting of women's character within patriarchal discourse. Furthermore, it extends Spivak's theory of misrepresentation of women in the archives. Therefore,

folk songs function as an alternative method of female expression where formal means of protest are inaccessible within male-authored archives.

### *Thumri*

Among other forms of Hindustani classical music or North Indian classical music, which includes *khayals*, *dhrupads*, *ghazals*, etc., also lies a semi-classical genre called *thumri*. Originally, *thumri* is tied to the old roots of folk music of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Eventually, it was associated with the *margi* tradition, which was a classical genre during the nineteenth century. *Thumri* is primarily associated with the courtesan performers – *bais* and *tawaifs* – of the nineteenth century. This musical genre conveys female desire in its lyrical content but is mostly perceived through the patriarchal male gaze. Therefore, *thumri* becomes a site where female expression is misrepresented because of these authoritative structures. Drawing on Judith Butler's gender performativity and Gayatri Spivak's misrepresentation of subalternity, this section analyses how *thumri* has been subjected to the male gaze historically, even with prominent female singers at play.

Initially, *thumri* was performed with a dance performance, but later it was limited to dancing with the voice of the vocalist. The poetry of *thumri* draws upon Vaishnavi and Sufi traditions of passionate bhakti. While these poetic traditions treat human carnal love as a metaphor for metaphysical love, *thumri* uses similar song texts to signify *shringar* (romantic/erotic love, desire) (Rao, 1996).

मिरे दर्द-ए-दिल की कुछ भी जो तुझे खबर नहीं है  
ये बता दे मुझ को क्या तू मिरा चारा-गर नहीं है  
जो ये इतिहा नहीं है मिरे सब्र की तो क्या है

कि भरा है गम से सीना मगर आँख तर नहीं है  
तिरी जुस्तुजू में आखिर मैं कहाँ पहुँच गई हूँ  
मुझे कुछ पता नहीं है मुझे कुछ खबर नहीं है

*(You have no idea of my hurting heart,*

*Tell me, are you not my healer?*

*What is this if not a test for my patience?*

*My chest is filled with sorrow, but my eyes are not wet.*

*Where have I reached in your search?*

*I don't know anything.)*

This emotive *thumri* composition was first recorded by Gauhar Jaan, who was also called the 'Queen of the Gramophone.' As understood from the reading of the above stanza, the composition holds space for the expression of feminine desires, but within the restrictive norms of the patriarchal structures. Spivak indicates that the subaltern woman has a voice, but it's being overshadowed by the masculinist perceptions. This *thumri* composition indeed hints at the desires of a lovelorn woman. However, lines like "What is this if not a test for my patience?" imply the lack of agency in the woman. She merely performs the role of a passive lover, always yearning or waiting. Therefore, *thumri* has features similar to Rajasthani folk in reference to female passivity. Such implications also direct us toward the theory of gender performativity of Judith Butler and can be extended through the following excerpt of Rao's article 'Thumri as Feminine Voice.'

"There is little escape from the fact that *thumri* is a form constructed squarely in the male gaze. Women sing, articulating female desire, but as patriarchally constructed. Their audience consists entirely of men, and the singers will later, entertain these men not only musically but sexually as well." (Rao, 1990)

*Thumri* has been sung by prominent male performers like Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan as well, but it is generally associated with females because of the feminine nature of its lyrical content. In patriarchal discourse, the masculine is at the center, and the feminine is pushed towards the category of ‘other.’ Such social norms point towards the eventual disgrace of *thumri* to a ‘less’ respectable form of musical tradition. As colonial roots deepened in the country, Indian musical traditions were labelled as lame and obscene. The colonial masters were unable to understand the rich courtesan culture of India and the idea of patronized performing arts. With the decline of princely states and loss of patronage, the courtesans had to shift to the kotha culture. The British mockingly labelled the highly respectable female performers as ‘nautch-girls’. Thus began the gradual decline and disrespect of the performative feminine discourse.

Certain *thumris*, which were explicitly erotic, were never taught or sung. These lyrics were sanitized by the patriarchal and colonial structures. As *thumri* was fashioned into devaluation, certain lyrics were deliberately replaced to make it more ‘decent.’ The word ‘अगिन्या’ was replaced with ‘चुनरी’ to denote a scarf instead in the following excerpt.

‘मोरी अगिन्या केसर रंग दरी

मोरी भीजे तन सारी’ (Rao, 1990)

(*My blouse is the color of saffron.*

*My whole body is drenched.*)

Using Butler’s argument, we find that the bodies of female singers are thus culturally appropriated through this sanitization. Furthermore, Rao (1990) compares the female body with *thumri* itself. She states that the female body is incapable of closure. Instead, it is open and vulnerable. Like

the female body, *thumri* is also entirely open with small scales and light singing. Within colonialism and patriarchy, such complex emotions relating to female bodies and desires began to be erased from the song texts, thereby eliminating the authenticity of these compositions. Unfortunately, the redemption of *thumri* music was only accepted within the concept of nationalization. Ashok Mitra refers to the nationalization of Akhtari Bai, or the process by which a young singer named Akhtari Bai Faizabadi was appropriated by the nation and recast as a national treasure called Begum Akhtar (Rao, 1996). Vocalists who could make it with their art and recast as 'nationalized' became respected artists, while others were more likely to be identified as *tawaifs*. The transformation from '*bai*' to '*begum*' held major significance in terms of honor and respectability. The devaluation of *thumri*, along with the shame that came with expressing the feelings of love, longing, and desire during the twentieth century, minimized the cultural scenario of Hindustani classical music.

Although the women depicted in this music are portrayed as helpless lovelorn ladies, the singers are largely female. These female singers own themselves and have their agency. The *thumri* singers are intellectuals who are distinguished in the fields of music, art, culture, and dance. These independent women play an extremely significant role in promoting the classical culture and carrying forward age-old traditions, while also evolving them to suit a changing society. Begum Akhtar and Gauhar Jaan were a few of the singers who assisted in the popularization of the *thumri* genre. Artists like them have extended their restrictions and created a dignified and creative corner to confront patriarchy. Similarly, reclamation of self and agency of the female singers continues in modern pop culture through non-mainstream performances.

## Contemporary Pop Culture

In recent years, contemporary pop culture has become a dynamic music genre for female expression. While in traditional or folk genres, women sing and encircle themselves around love, longing, and domestic life, contemporary pop culture offers greater female agency. Female artists are not restricted to the aforementioned themes anymore and express themselves much more freely and unapologetically in the themes of ambition, self-love, body positivity, and female autonomy. Despite being empowering in certain aspects, this contemporary genre of music is also shaped by patriarchy and the male gaze. As Budd Boetticher has put it:

“What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.”  
(*Mulvey, 2006*)

This passage was written in the context of sexualized feminine presence in visual culture, such as cinema. Similarly, Mulvey (2006) suggests that “woman as image, and man as bearer of the look” decides the visual contents of the music videos and appearance of the female singers. This section examines how contemporary pop music culture, while enabling female expression, is also influenced by market and patriarchal forces.

In ‘A Labour of Love: The Affective Archives of Popular Music Culture’ (Long et al. 2017), the authors talk about two kinds of archives – DIY archives and authorised archives – which in this paper’s context may be associated with independent female artists and record labels,

respectively. The conventional music industry and popular record labels usually conform to the market forces and the patriarchal male gaze, which promotes the commodification and objectification of the female body. As these institutions are backed by powerful but orthodox structures, they are widely visible in the mainstream media and documented archives. However, female artists like Sona Mahapatra, who do not conform to these biased traditionalist structures, are excluded from the mainstream due to institutional gatekeeping and thus remain marginalized in the music industry. Yet, these margins act as radical spaces of resistance which critique, subvert, or challenge norms. Hooks' (1989) theory of resistant marginal spaces, as she famously quotes, 'these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance...', can be extended to contemporary pop culture in India, where independent artists create space for autonomy and feminine expression.

The following song, *Bekhauff*, was sung by Sona Mahapatra in the television show *Satyameva Jayate* (a social and gender justice Indian TV show). It embodies the reclaiming of radical marginal spaces by the artist and stands against the mainstream entertainment channels.

दीवारों ऊंची हैं गलियां हैं तंग  
लम्बी डगर है पर हिम्मत है संग  
पाऊं पे छाले हैं सांसें बुलंद  
लड़ने चली हूँ आज़ादी कि जंग  
बेखौफ़ आज़ाद है जीना मुझे  
बेखौफ़ आज़ाद है रहना मुझे

*(The walls are high, the streets are annoyed,  
It's a long journey, but my courage is with me.  
My feet have blisters, but my breath is strong,*

*I have come to fight the battle of freedom.  
Fearless, I want to live freely,  
Fearless, I want to be free.)*

The song mentions the struggles faced by a young woman in the journey of her life. It further elaborates that even with constant obstacles, the girl has the will to move forward. She wants to fight for her freedom, her freedom of expression, her freedom to live freely, and the freedom to live fearlessly. The lyrical content of the song indicates opposition towards the male gaze. Consider the following excerpt from Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film':

“The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form – illusionistic narrative film.” (*Mulvey, 2006*)

Originally written for cinema, this theory could also be applied to modern musical traditions of television shows and music videos because of its visual nature. The song *Bekhauff* was sung in a TV show which celebrates the voice and justice of the marginalized communities. It creates its own space, separate from the traditionalist mainstream culture, and portrays women not as mere 'sexual objects' but living subjects with a political voice. Yet Bollywood blockbuster songs continue to portray women as objects of desire and lust, in songs such as *fevicol se* and *sheila ki jawani*, indicating that mainstream channels still carry patriarchal scripts and views. According to Brara (2010), Bollywood 'item' songs mentioned as such assist in objectification of the men or women through sensuous singing/dancing in visual narratives.

रीति कि जंजीरें खा गयी जंग  
न्याय के मंदिर भी हो गए भंग  
जमाना चले ना चले मेरे संग  
बोलूंगी हल्ला, आवाज़ दबंग  
बेखौफ़ आज़ाद है जीना मुझे  
बेखौफ़ आज़ाद है रहना मुझे

*(The chains of tradition have rust now,  
Temples of justice are now banned.  
The world may or may not walk with me  
I'll speak with a strong voice.  
Fearless, I want to live freely,  
Fearless, I want to be free.)*

This part illustrates a woman who wants to break free from the shackles of an orthodox society. She has a strong voice and wields it to resist the societal norms and create an identity for herself. The lyric 'आवाज़ दबंग' translates to 'a bold voice'. In context with Spivak's argument that the subaltern woman's voice is misinterpreted, Sona Mahapatra's song is a declaration to reclaim their voice and resist the silences. This song also challenges the market frameworks of commodification of the female body. She does not just represent women but is also an active agent in the resistance against the commodification of women under profit-oriented market frameworks. Pop music may not solve the gendered disparities, but artists like Mahapatra continually strive to work against and perform despite them. Through songs like *Bekhauff*, contemporary pop music is building a counter-archival space for greater female autonomy and voice in the industry.

## Conclusion

This research paper has examined Indian musical genres across diverse cultural contexts, including folk, *thumri*, and pop music. Although the paper focused on these three regional genres, they do not act as isolated instances instead they reflect the broader musical traditions where women's voices across regions continually negotiated their agency through songs. Indian music has served as an alternative outlet for female voice, desire, and agency in the subaltern history. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theory, this paper affirms that Indian music has acted as a living and gendered counter-archive, despite institutional, colonial, and patriarchal structures at play. Rajasthani folk music assists in preserving the longing of the subaltern women while *thumri* moulds and adjusts itself within colonial erasure. Lastly, contemporary pop music oscillates between reclamation and objectification of the female bodies while creating DIY counter-archives. By treating music as a gendered counter-archive, this study shows how songs hold women's voices that written records fail to incorporate. Through these voices – rural, semi-classical, and contemporary – Indian women challenge these dominant patriarchal narratives through these musical traditions. Hence, this paper aims to initiate future works on cultural memory and modes of resistance within counter-archives. Future research may also map the evolving female expression by tracing it on digital platforms and support new enlightening debates. Ultimately, this paper seeks to resurface and inscribe the silenced sonic voices of female singers whose echoes have remained buried in history long enough, now aching to be heard, thereby redefining music as a counter-archive.

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