

WOMEN AT THE HEART OF MUSIC:

GENDER, PATRONAGE, AND
MUSICAL NETWORKS IN
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY NORTH INDIA



Women at the Heart of Music: *Gender, Patronage, and Musical Networks in Sixteenth-Century North India*

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First Edition

Recovering Women's Musical Worlds

The history of North Indian classical music in the sixteenth century has long been told through the achievements of emperors, celebrated court musicians, and elite male patrons. Histories of the period typically center on the consolidation of Mughal authority under Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), the flourishing of imperial patronage, and the emergence of legendary musicians such as Miyan Tansen, whose artistic reputation came to dominate later narratives of Hindustani classical music.¹ While these histories illuminate the development of imperial musical culture, they also reveal a striking imbalance in the historical record. Women appear only intermittently despite participating in nearly every dimension of musical life. They performed in aristocratic households, cultivated devotional repertoires, commissioned musicians, transmitted oral traditions, instructed younger generations, and shaped the cultural environments in which music flourished. Their relative absence from canonical histories reflects not their historical insignificance but the selective nature of the surviving archive.

Recovering the history of these women presents a methodological challenge that extends beyond musicology into broader questions of historical practice. Much of what survives from sixteenth-century North India consists of court chronicles, administrative records, religious literature, and visual art, nearly all produced by male authors or institutions with particular political, religious, or cultural priorities.² These sources illuminate imperial administration and elite patronage with remarkable detail, yet they often overlook the domestic, devotional, and interpersonal settings in which women exercised considerable musical authority. Rather than interpreting these omissions as evidence that women occupied only marginal positions within North Indian musical culture, historians increasingly recognize them as products of archival bias. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to locate women within existing narratives but to reconsider how those narratives were constructed in the first place.

One of the clearest examples of this problem appears in Abu'l-Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*, the most important administrative and cultural account of Akbar's reign.³ The text carefully catalogs musicians attached to the imperial court, documents systems of artistic patronage, and records the emperor's extraordinary interest in music. Yet women receive comparatively little attention. This silence has often been interpreted as evidence that musical life at the Mughal court was overwhelmingly male. Such a conclusion, however, mistakes the priorities of an administrative chronicle for the realities of everyday musical practice. The *Ain-i Akbari* was designed to record imperial institutions rather than the full range of artistic activity taking place throughout Mughal society. Household instruction, women's patronage, devotional performance, and oral transmission fell largely outside its administrative purpose. Reading the text "against the grain" therefore reveals not simply who was documented, but which forms of musical labor remained invisible to imperial record keeping.

This methodological perspective becomes even more compelling when textual evidence is considered alongside visual and devotional sources. Ragamala paintings and Mughal miniatures frequently depict women singing, playing the vina, participating in chamber performances, or

embodying musical modes through symbolic imagery.⁴ These images cannot be read as literal documentary records, yet they preserve cultural assumptions about music that differ markedly from those found in official chronicles. Their abundance contrasts sharply with the relative silence of court administration. Rather than treating these sources as contradictory, they are better understood as documenting different aspects of musical life. Imperial chronicles privilege bureaucracy and public institutions, while visual culture captures ideals of aesthetic experience, domestic performance, and intimate musical practice. When considered together, these sources suggest that women occupied a far more visible place within lived musical culture than official documentation alone would imply.

The same pattern emerges within devotional literature. The Bhakti movement generated an enormous corpus of vernacular poetry in which musical performance served as both religious expression and communal practice. Figures such as Mirabai became enduring symbols of female devotional authority precisely because music provided a means of spiritual expression that often transcended conventional social hierarchies.⁵ At the same time, Sufi devotional communities cultivated musical practices that brought together performers, patrons, pilgrims, and local households across religious boundaries. Although these traditions differed significantly from imperial court culture, they were not isolated from it. Repertoires, performers, and musical ideas circulated between shrines, aristocratic households, regional courts, and urban centers through overlapping networks of patronage, pilgrimage, marriage, and oral instruction. Women frequently occupied pivotal positions within these networks, serving as patrons, educators, performers, and transmitters of repertoire.

Understanding these relationships requires moving beyond a simple opposition between the public court and the private household. The Mughal court and the zenana were not isolated cultural spheres but interconnected institutions linked through artistic patronage, education, and performance. Elite women maintained their own households, controlled significant financial resources, commissioned musicians, organized ceremonial performances, and cultivated artistic communities within aristocratic residences.⁶ Professional performers likewise moved between imperial ceremonies, private gatherings, devotional celebrations, and regional courts, carrying musical practices across boundaries that administrative sources often portray as fixed. Rather than existing on the margins of classical music, women frequently acted as intermediaries through whom repertoires, performance practices, and aesthetic values circulated across early modern North India.

This essay argues that women occupied central—not peripheral—positions within the musical ecology of sixteenth-century North India. Their contributions cannot be understood solely through the recovery of individual biographies, since the archive preserves relatively few names. Instead, their historical significance becomes visible through the reconstruction of musical networks that connected imperial courts, hereditary performance communities, devotional institutions, aristocratic households, and regional traditions. By reading court chronicles alongside devotional literature, visual culture, ethnomusicological scholarship, and

social history, this study demonstrates that the foundations of Hindustani classical music were sustained not only by celebrated male musicians but also by women whose labor, patronage, education, and artistic expertise shaped the musical world from which the tradition emerged.

Historiography, Sources, and Reading Against the Grain

Writing the history of women in sixteenth-century North Indian music requires confronting a fundamental problem of historical evidence. Unlike many of the celebrated male musicians whose names survive in court chronicles, musical treatises, and later genealogies, women rarely appear as the primary subjects of contemporary documentation. Their contributions survive unevenly, dispersed across administrative records, devotional poetry, miniature paintings, household histories, and oral traditions.⁷ This uneven archival landscape has profoundly shaped later understandings of Hindustani music, encouraging historians to privilege the public institutions of empire while overlooking the domestic, devotional, and interpersonal settings in which women exercised significant musical authority. Rather than accepting these silences at face value, recent scholarship has argued that they must themselves become objects of historical analysis.⁸

The most influential written source for the musical culture of Akbar's reign is Abu'l-Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*, completed during the final decades of the sixteenth century.⁹ As part of the larger *Akbarnama*, the text provides an extraordinary account of Mughal administration, cataloguing everything from provincial revenue systems to court ceremonies and imperial patronage. Music occupies a prominent place within this vision of empire. Abu'l-Fazl carefully records Akbar's enthusiasm for music, describes the organization of court musicians, and celebrates the emperor's cultivation of artistic excellence.¹⁰ Because of its breadth and administrative precision, the *Ain-i Akbari* has become indispensable for reconstructing Mughal musical culture.

Yet the strengths of the *Ain-i Akbari* are inseparable from its limitations. Abu'l-Fazl was writing an imperial chronicle rather than an ethnography of everyday musical life. His purpose was to demonstrate the order, prosperity, and sophistication of Akbar's empire through the institutions of the court. Consequently, those individuals whose work occurred beyond the structures of imperial administration received comparatively little attention. Women appear only rarely, not because they were necessarily absent from musical culture, but because much of their activity occurred within environments that lay outside the administrative concerns of the chronicle. Household instruction, private patronage, ritual singing, and informal systems of musical transmission left few traces within a document primarily concerned with imperial governance.

Recognizing this distinction changes how the *Ain-i Akbari* should be interpreted. Rather than asking why Abu'l-Fazl failed to describe women musicians more extensively, historians must ask what kinds of musical activity his administrative framework was capable of recording in the first place. Reading the text "against the grain" shifts attention from the presence of named individuals to the assumptions that structure the archive itself.¹¹ The silence surrounding women becomes historically meaningful because it reveals the priorities of bureaucratic documentation rather than the realities of musical participation.

This methodological approach has become increasingly important within both gender history and South Asian musicology. Bonnie C. Wade has emphasized that North Indian musical traditions were transmitted largely through oral instruction, apprenticeship, and long-term personal relationships rather than written notation.¹² Daniel M. Neuman likewise demonstrates that musical knowledge circulated through hereditary communities whose educational practices depended upon family structures and extended networks of teachers, patrons, and performers.¹³ Read together, these studies suggest that many of the mechanisms through which women acquired and transmitted musical knowledge would have remained largely invisible within official written records. Their absence from administrative archives therefore cannot be equated with their absence from musical life.

The contrast between textual and visual evidence reinforces this conclusion. While imperial chronicles rarely foreground female musicians, sixteenth-century Mughal and Rajput paintings frequently depict women participating in musical performance. Ragamala paintings, in particular, provide an especially revealing counterpoint to administrative sources. These paintings personify musical modes through richly imagined human figures, often portraying women holding the vina, singing in gardens, or participating in intimate musical gatherings.¹⁴ Such images should not be interpreted as literal documentary evidence; they are artistic constructions governed by symbolic conventions and aesthetic ideals. Nevertheless, they preserve contemporary assumptions about the relationship between music, gender, and social life that differ markedly from those presented in imperial chronicles.

The divergence between these sources is historically significant. Abu'l-Fazl's chronicle presents music as an institution of imperial governance, organized through hierarchy and patronage. Ragamala paintings, by contrast, imagine music as an embodied and emotionally charged experience situated within gardens, palaces, domestic interiors, and devotional landscapes. Women appear prominently within these visual worlds not simply as decorative figures but as participants in musical activity itself. The apparent contradiction between textual silence and visual abundance therefore reflects differences in genre rather than conflicting historical realities. Administrative texts documented bureaucracy; painters represented cultural imagination and lived aesthetic ideals. Together they provide a more complete picture of sixteenth-century musical life than either source could offer independently.

Devotional literature offers a third perspective. The poetry associated with the Bhakti movement records musical practice in settings almost entirely absent from imperial documentation. Rather than emphasizing institutions of governance, Bhakti texts describe singing as an act of devotion, emotional expression, and communal participation. Mirabai occupies a central place within this tradition not simply because of the poems attributed to her, but because later communities remembered her as a woman whose authority emerged through musical performance itself.¹⁵ Whether every narrative associated with Mirabai can be verified historically is ultimately less important than the social memory these traditions preserved. They demonstrate that women could become recognized musical figures outside the structures of court

patronage, creating forms of authority grounded in religious practice rather than imperial institutions.

Taken together, these diverse sources illustrate why no single archive can adequately reconstruct the history of women in sixteenth-century North India. Court chronicles document public institutions. Devotional literature preserves religious memory. Paintings capture cultural ideals and social imagination. Ethnomusicology and social history help explain systems of oral transmission that rarely generated written evidence. Only by placing these forms of evidence into dialogue can historians begin to reconstruct the musical networks through which women shaped early modern North Indian culture.

Women, Courts, and Domestic Musical Power

The rise of the Mughal Empire transformed the political landscape of North India, but it also reshaped the institutions through which music was cultivated, performed, and transmitted. Under Akbar, imperial patronage elevated music to an essential component of courtly life, where performance served diplomatic, ceremonial, intellectual, and aesthetic functions. Histories of this period have understandably emphasized celebrated male musicians—particularly Miyan Tansen—whose careers became emblematic of Mughal artistic achievement.¹⁶ Such emphasis, however, has encouraged a conception of courtly music that is narrower than the historical evidence warrants. By concentrating on public performance before the emperor, historians have often overlooked the broader networks of patronage that sustained musical culture beyond the formal audience hall.

The distinction between the imperial court and the domestic sphere has frequently reinforced this imbalance. Court chronicles naturally privilege public ceremonies, official appointments, and the activities of musicians who occupied recognized positions within imperial administration. Yet the Mughal court extended well beyond these public institutions. Elite households functioned as important centers of political authority, economic management, artistic patronage, and cultural education. Rather than existing outside court culture, they constituted one of its principal foundations.¹⁷ Music circulated continuously between these overlapping environments, making it impossible to understand imperial musical life solely through public institutions.

The zenana illustrates this relationship particularly well. Earlier scholarship often portrayed the women's quarters as spaces of seclusion removed from political and cultural life. More recent historical research has fundamentally revised this interpretation. Ruby Lal has demonstrated that elite Mughal women exercised considerable authority within the administration of aristocratic households, overseeing financial resources, supervising extensive domestic staffs, and sponsoring a wide range of cultural activities.¹⁸ The zenana therefore functioned not simply as a private residence but as a political institution whose influence extended throughout the broader court. Music formed an integral part of this environment.

Recognizing the zenana as a center of patronage rather than isolation substantially alters our understanding of women's musical roles. Elite women commissioned performances for

weddings, religious observances, diplomatic receptions, and seasonal festivals. They maintained circles of attendants, educators, and entertainers whose artistic labor contributed to the prestige of aristocratic households. Such patronage required more than passive appreciation of music. Decisions concerning which performers to employ, which ceremonies to sponsor, and which artistic traditions to cultivate represented meaningful exercises of economic authority. Patronage was therefore not merely cultural consumption but a mechanism through which elite women allocated resources, shaped artistic careers, and influenced the circulation of musical knowledge within Mughal society.¹⁹

This broader conception of patronage also complicates the apparent divide between public and private musical life. Professional musicians attached to imperial or regional courts did not perform exclusively before rulers. Many also appeared within aristocratic households, religious celebrations, marriage ceremonies, and seasonal festivals. Their movement between these settings carried repertoires, performance practices, and aesthetic conventions across institutional boundaries. Women frequently occupied central positions within this circulation. A musician engaged for a royal celebration might later perform before noblewomen within the *zenana*, while devotional singers invited into elite households introduced repertoires rooted in regional religious traditions. Musical knowledge therefore moved through interconnected social networks rather than isolated institutions.

Household education further strengthened these connections. Elite girls often received instruction in music as part of a broader aristocratic education that included literature, poetry, etiquette, and religious learning. Musical accomplishment signified refinement, cultural literacy, and familiarity with elite artistic traditions.²⁰ More importantly, educated women became knowledgeable patrons capable of evaluating performers, commissioning appropriate repertoires, and cultivating artistic communities within their households. Their influence therefore extended beyond performance itself to the broader aesthetic standards through which music was appreciated and supported.

The interaction between professional musicians and elite women also suggests that knowledge flowed in multiple directions. Historians have often assumed that artistic innovation originated within male professional circles before filtering into domestic settings. The historical evidence points toward a more reciprocal process. Musicians introduced new repertoires and techniques into aristocratic households, while elite women shaped demand through their patronage, educational priorities, and ceremonial needs. Domestic musical culture was therefore not merely a passive recipient of artistic innovation but an active participant in its development.

Regional courts reveal similar patterns. In Rajasthan, for example, Rajput rulers integrated music into ceremonies of kingship, religious observance, and aristocratic sociability. Royal women participated in these cultural systems as patrons, organizers, and consumers of artistic performance.²¹ Unlike the centralized bureaucracy of the Mughal court, Rajput patronage often emphasized dynastic ritual, local devotional traditions, and regional artistic identities. Comparing these courts demonstrates that women's musical authority varied according to political and

cultural context. In Agra and Delhi, aristocratic households were closely integrated into imperial administration, while in Rajasthan musical patronage became more directly entwined with regional courtly traditions and religious festivals. Such regional variation cautions against treating "North India" as a culturally uniform space.

The economic dimensions of female patronage deserve equal attention. Musicians depended upon sustained employment rather than occasional imperial recognition. Household patronage created stable opportunities for singers, instrumentalists, dancers, poets, and educators whose livelihoods depended upon aristocratic support. Women's decisions regarding employment, remuneration, and ceremonial expenditure therefore had tangible consequences for artistic communities. In this sense, patronage constituted a form of cultural governance. By directing household resources toward particular performers or repertoires, elite women influenced which musical traditions flourished and which gradually disappeared. Their authority was exercised through the management of cultural resources as much as through direct artistic participation.

This perspective also invites historians to reconsider the boundaries between political and cultural power. Too often these categories have been treated as distinct. Yet within early modern South Asia, patronage represented one of the principal means through which political authority was expressed. Architecture, literature, painting, and music all depended upon systems of sponsorship that reflected broader structures of wealth and influence. Women's involvement in these systems therefore constituted a meaningful exercise of political agency. Their patronage shaped not only the cultural life of individual households but also the artistic networks connecting courts, religious institutions, and hereditary performance communities across North India.

Understanding courtly music in this broader sense reveals that women were not peripheral participants inhabiting the margins of imperial culture. They occupied positions at its center, although their authority operated through institutions that administrative chronicles rarely documented in detail. Recovering these forms of influence requires shifting attention away from the public spectacle of imperial performance toward the less visible but equally consequential worlds of household administration, patronage, education, and artistic exchange. When these dimensions are restored to the historical narrative, the Mughal court emerges not simply as a stage populated by celebrated male musicians but as a complex musical ecosystem sustained by the labor, resources, and cultural leadership of women.

Devotional Networks and the Circulation of Musical Knowledge

If imperial courts provided one center of musical activity during the sixteenth century, devotional communities provided another. The rapid expansion of Bhakti and Sufi traditions throughout North India created musical environments that differed substantially from the ceremonial culture of Mughal courts while remaining closely connected to them through performers, patrons, pilgrimage, and oral transmission. These devotional traditions broadened opportunities for

musical participation beyond aristocratic institutions and reveal how women contributed to the movement of repertoires across religious, regional, and social boundaries.²²

Rather than functioning as isolated religious movements, Bhakti and Sufi communities formed extensive cultural networks that connected temples, shrines, villages, market towns, pilgrimage centers, and urban courts. Songs, poetic texts, melodic frameworks, and performance practices circulated continuously through these networks, carried by pilgrims, mendicants, hereditary musicians, merchants, and household devotees. Women occupied particularly important positions within these systems because much devotional music depended upon oral transmission occurring within families and local communities rather than formal institutions. Musical knowledge moved not only through professional performers but also through everyday acts of teaching, memory, and ritual participation.

The Bhakti movement provides one of the clearest examples of this process. Across North India, vernacular devotional traditions emphasized direct emotional relationships with the divine rather than ritual hierarchy or scholastic authority. Music became one of the principal vehicles through which these devotional experiences were expressed. Congregational singing, poetic recitation, and shared musical performance transformed religious practice into a participatory activity in which artistic expression and spiritual devotion became inseparable.²³

Among the women associated with this tradition, Mirabai occupies a singular place. Her historical significance extends beyond the poems attributed to her or the biographical traditions surrounding her life. More fundamentally, Mirabai demonstrates that musical authority could emerge outside the institutions of imperial patronage. Later devotional communities remembered her not because she occupied an official position within a court but because singing itself became an expression of religious legitimacy. Her poetry presents music not as ornament or entertainment but as a mode of spiritual knowledge through which devotion, identity, and community were continually reimagined.²⁴

Mirabai's legacy also illustrates the limitations of relying exclusively upon documentary evidence. Historians continue to debate many details of her biography, yet the persistence of her songs across centuries demonstrates that cultural memory can preserve forms of historical significance unavailable within administrative archives. The continued performance of her compositions throughout North India suggests that musical influence cannot always be measured by documentary visibility. In many cases, the repertoire itself became the archive through which women's contributions survived.

The devotional sphere also created opportunities for musical participation that differed from those available within aristocratic households. Courtly performance generally depended upon systems of patronage, rank, and ceremonial etiquette. Devotional singing, by contrast, often emphasized collective participation, emotional sincerity, and spiritual commitment. Although gender norms continued to shape access to religious institutions, these traditions frequently provided women with greater opportunities to participate publicly through congregational singing, pilgrimage festivals, and domestic religious observances than were available within the

more formal settings of imperial ceremony. Such opportunities varied considerably according to region, sectarian affiliation, and local custom, underscoring the importance of avoiding generalized conclusions about women's experiences across North India.

Sufi devotional culture reveals similar patterns while expanding the geographical scope of these musical networks. Chishti shrines, particularly those centered at Ajmer and Delhi, had long cultivated traditions of devotional listening (*samāʿ*) in which music functioned as a means of spiritual contemplation. Gatherings brought together religious specialists, patrons, travelers, musicians, and ordinary devotees within environments distinct from both temples and royal courts.²⁵ Women participated in these communities in diverse ways—as pilgrims, patrons, household devotees, and transmitters of devotional repertoires—even where direct participation in public musical assemblies was limited by local custom.

Thinking in terms of networks rather than isolated religious traditions reveals important patterns of musical circulation. Consider, for example, how a devotional composition might travel during the sixteenth century. A hymn learned by a woman at a Vaishnava pilgrimage center in Braj could later accompany her through marriage into an aristocratic household in Agra. There the song might be adapted for domestic performance, taught to younger members of the household, heard by visiting musicians employed for court ceremonies, and eventually absorbed into broader performance traditions. No surviving document records such a journey from beginning to end. Yet when devotional literature, household history, ethnomusicology, and patterns of pilgrimage are considered together, this form of transmission becomes historically plausible.²⁶ Reconstructing these pathways demonstrates why networks provide a more useful historical framework than the search for isolated biographies.

Marriage itself constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which musical knowledge moved across regions. Aristocratic marriages created political alliances between ruling families while simultaneously linking households possessing distinct linguistic, religious, and artistic traditions. Women entering new households frequently carried songs, ceremonial repertoires, devotional practices, and performance customs acquired during childhood. Musical exchange therefore accompanied political diplomacy. Rather than functioning merely as passive participants in dynastic alliances, women often served as cultural intermediaries through whom regional musical traditions entered new social environments.

Pilgrimage operated in much the same way. Sacred centers such as Vrindavan attracted devotees from across northern India, creating temporary communities in which songs, melodies, and devotional practices circulated among participants from diverse regions. Women returning from pilgrimage carried these repertoires into households and local communities where they became incorporated into domestic religious life. Through repeated cycles of travel, worship, and teaching, devotional music acquired a remarkably wide geographical reach despite the absence of centralized institutions responsible for its dissemination.

These processes challenge conventional distinctions between "classical," "folk," and "religious" music. Such categories reflect later musicological classifications more than sixteenth-

century musical practice. Performers frequently moved between courts, temples, shrines, village festivals, and aristocratic households, adapting repertoires to suit different audiences while preserving recognizable melodic and poetic traditions. Women participated in every stage of this circulation—as patrons who commissioned performances, as educators who preserved repertoires within families, as devotees who sustained religious singing, and as performers whose artistic labor connected multiple musical worlds. The boundaries separating devotional and courtly music were therefore considerably more porous than later histories have often suggested.

Understanding these devotional networks also transforms our conception of musical transmission itself. Musical traditions did not survive solely because great performers trained distinguished disciples. They endured because countless individuals sustained songs within households, ritual practices, seasonal festivals, and everyday acts of remembrance. Much of this labor remained undocumented precisely because it occurred within spaces historians have traditionally regarded as peripheral. Yet without these domestic and devotional systems of transmission, many of the repertoires later incorporated into Hindustani classical music could not have endured.

Women's contributions to devotional music therefore cannot be understood simply as participation within religious life. They constituted an essential component of the broader musical ecology of early modern North India. Through pilgrimage, marriage, household education, patronage, and communal worship, women helped create networks through which repertoires circulated across political boundaries, religious communities, and social classes. Recovering these interconnected systems allows historians to move beyond the search for exceptional female figures and instead recognize the collective processes through which women shaped the musical world of the sixteenth century.

Labor, Patronage, and the Political Economy of Music

Music in sixteenth-century North India depended upon far more than gifted performers or enlightened rulers. Every performance required systems of patronage, education, material support, and institutional stability that enabled musicians to devote themselves to artistic practice. The flourishing of musical culture under the Mughals therefore cannot be explained solely through the patronage of emperors such as Akbar. Rather, it emerged from a complex economy sustained by courts, temples, shrines, hereditary communities, and aristocratic households. Women occupied important positions within each of these institutions, not simply as performers but as employers, patrons, educators, and managers of cultural resources.²⁷

Traditional histories of Hindustani music have often privileged individual virtuosi while overlooking the infrastructures that made artistic careers possible. Court chronicles celebrate exceptional musicians, yet they rarely describe the household economies through which performers obtained steady employment, apprentices received instruction, or repertoires were preserved between public performances. This emphasis reflects the priorities of elite historical writing rather than the realities of artistic life. Musical traditions endure because institutions

continually reproduce them. In early modern North India, women helped maintain many of those institutions.

The hereditary organization of musical professions illustrates this relationship. Long before the formal emergence of *gharanas* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, musical knowledge was already being transmitted through extended family networks in which education depended upon sustained apprenticeship rather than written notation. Bonnie C. Wade emphasizes that oral transmission formed the foundation of North Indian musical practice, while Daniel M. Neuman demonstrates that hereditary communities organized professional life through kinship, patronage, and long-term pedagogical relationships.²⁸ Read together, these studies suggest that women were indispensable to musical continuity even when later genealogies emphasized male teachers and performers.

Within hereditary communities, education rarely occurred in isolation from everyday domestic life. Children encountered music from early childhood through observation, participation, and repeated exposure to rehearsals, ceremonies, and family performances. Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and other female relatives preserved songs, corrected pronunciation, reinforced performance etiquette, and maintained repertoires associated with ritual and seasonal observances. Their instruction frequently preceded formal apprenticeship under recognized masters. Although these contributions seldom appeared within written genealogies, they constituted an essential stage in the formation of future musicians.

The economic dimensions of this labor deserve particular attention. Music provided livelihoods for numerous hereditary communities whose income depended upon ceremonial performance, court employment, religious festivals, and aristocratic patronage. Women contributed directly to these household economies through singing, dancing, teaching, and ritual performance. Their artistic labor generated income, strengthened patronage relationships, and enabled families to maintain professional reputations across generations. Music was therefore not simply an artistic practice; it was productive labor embedded within broader systems of household survival.

Recognizing music as labor also changes how patronage should be understood. Patronage has often been described as an expression of aristocratic taste or generosity, yet it functioned equally as a mechanism of economic organization. Musicians required reliable employers, regular commissions, and stable audiences. Noblewomen who retained household performers or sponsored ceremonial music therefore exercised considerable influence over artistic careers. Decisions regarding whom to employ, how frequently performances occurred, and which repertoires were cultivated affected the distribution of resources throughout the musical profession. Patronage represented an allocation of labor as much as an appreciation of art.

This perspective is particularly important when examining the Mughal *zenana*. Elite women controlled substantial household budgets and supervised large domestic establishments that included attendants, artisans, tutors, entertainers, and musicians. Ruby Lal has demonstrated that these households operated as centers of political administration rather than secluded

domestic retreats.²⁹ Musical patronage formed part of this administrative authority. Commissioning performances, employing musicians, and supporting artistic education were not merely recreational activities but expressions of institutional leadership. Through these decisions, women shaped the cultural priorities of elite households while simultaneously influencing broader networks of musical employment.

The political significance of patronage becomes even clearer when compared across regions. Within the Mughal heartland, imperial patronage operated through centralized administrative structures closely associated with the emperor and the nobility. Rajput courts in Rajasthan developed somewhat different patterns. There, music became deeply intertwined with dynastic ritual, regional identity, and temple patronage. Royal women participated actively in these systems by sponsoring musicians for court ceremonies, religious festivals, and household celebrations.³⁰ Although the institutional forms differed, both Mughal and Rajput contexts demonstrate that women exercised authority through the management of artistic resources rather than simply through participation in performance.

These regional comparisons also illustrate why women's musical experiences cannot be reduced to a single model. An aristocratic woman in Agra, a hereditary performer attached to a Rajput court, and a devotional singer in Braj occupied different social positions and possessed different forms of authority. Yet each participated in systems through which music acquired social, economic, and political significance. Understanding these differences requires attention not only to gender but also to class, occupation, regional identity, and institutional setting.

The relationship between labor and patronage further complicates conventional distinctions between public and private musical life. Household performances frequently prepared musicians for appearances at court, while ceremonial performances strengthened relationships between aristocratic patrons and professional communities. Repertories learned within domestic settings later appeared in religious festivals, and devotional songs acquired new meanings when incorporated into courtly entertainment. Rather than existing as separate spheres, household, court, shrine, and marketplace formed a continuous musical economy sustained through reciprocal exchanges of labor and patronage.

This broader understanding of musical labor also helps explain why women disappear so readily from historical narratives. Administrative chronicles generally recorded appointments, honors, and public achievements, while domestic instruction, household management, and informal education rarely generated documentary evidence. Much of the labor performed by women occurred within precisely those settings least likely to be preserved by official archives. Their absence from written records therefore reflects the invisibility of reproductive and educational labor rather than its historical insignificance. Similar patterns have been observed across many fields of social history, where the maintenance of institutions often depends upon work that remains undocumented because it is considered ordinary rather than exceptional.

The political economy of music therefore reveals another dimension of women's contributions to sixteenth-century North Indian musical culture. They were not only performers

whose names occasionally appeared in chronicles or devotional traditions. They also sustained the institutions that enabled musical knowledge to survive across generations. Through patronage, household administration, education, and artistic labor, women participated in the continuous reproduction of musical culture. Recognizing these forms of work shifts attention away from exceptional individuals toward the broader systems through which Hindustani music was preserved, adapted, and transmitted.

Visual Culture, Musical Memory, and the Gendered Archive

Historical knowledge of sixteenth-century North Indian music has traditionally depended upon written documents. Court chronicles, administrative records, literary texts, and musicological treatises provide the foundation upon which most histories of Hindustani music have been constructed. Yet these sources privilege forms of authority associated with literacy, bureaucracy, and political administration. They record appointments, court ceremonies, imperial patronage, and the accomplishments of celebrated musicians while leaving comparatively little evidence of the everyday musical worlds that existed beyond official institutions. Visual culture offers an important counterbalance to these textual archives. Rather than simply illustrating musical practice, paintings reveal alternative ways in which contemporaries imagined music, performance, and gender.³¹

Among the most significant visual sources are the Ragamala paintings that flourished across North India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The term *ragamala*, or "garland of ragas," refers to a tradition in which melodic modes were personified through painted figures situated within carefully constructed emotional and seasonal landscapes. Although individual painting traditions differed across regions, women appear prominently throughout many Ragamala series. They are depicted singing, holding the vina, waiting for absent lovers, performing in palace gardens, or participating in intimate musical gatherings.³² These recurring images invite an important historiographical question. If women occupy such a visible position within visual representations of music, why do they appear so infrequently within contemporary administrative records?

The answer lies not in choosing one source over another but in recognizing that each reflects different cultural priorities. Abu'l-Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari* was written to document the institutions of empire. Its purpose was administrative and political. Ragamala paintings pursued a different objective altogether. They sought to visualize musical experience by associating melodic modes with emotion, landscape, poetic imagery, and human relationships. These distinct purposes produced distinct archives. Imperial chronicles privileged institutional visibility, while painters preserved aesthetic imagination. The contrast between textual silence and visual abundance therefore reveals differences in genre rather than contradictory historical evidence.

This distinction becomes particularly evident in the representation of musical instruments. Written sources frequently identify celebrated performers without describing the visual dimensions of performance itself. Ragamala paintings, by contrast, devote considerable attention to posture, gesture, costume, architecture, and instruments. Women are often shown

holding the vina with confidence and technical familiarity rather than merely serving decorative roles within courtly scenes.³³ Such representations cannot establish the biographies of individual musicians, yet they do demonstrate that women performing sophisticated musical repertoires belonged to the visual vocabulary through which early modern North Indians imagined musical culture. The paintings therefore preserve assumptions about musical competence that written administrative texts seldom articulate explicitly.

Mughal miniature painting reinforces this conclusion. Court ateliers produced numerous scenes depicting musical gatherings in gardens, palaces, and domestic interiors where women appear as singers, instrumentalists, dancers, and attentive listeners.³⁴ These images rarely emphasize imperial hierarchy in the manner characteristic of official chronicles. Instead, they foreground social interaction, artistic refinement, and the shared experience of musical performance. The intimate settings portrayed in these paintings suggest that much musical life unfolded within spaces largely absent from administrative documentation. Household performances, private celebrations, and aristocratic gatherings become historically visible through visual evidence even when written records remain silent.

Visual sources also illuminate relationships that textual evidence often obscures. Paintings frequently depict groups rather than isolated individuals, emphasizing the collective character of musical performance. Musicians, listeners, attendants, and patrons appear together within carefully arranged social environments. Such compositions remind historians that music was rarely an individual activity. Performances depended upon communities of participants whose contributions extended beyond the featured performer. Women appear within these collective settings as active members of musical ensembles, audiences, and household circles, reinforcing the argument that their participation formed part of the ordinary fabric of artistic life rather than exceptional departures from prevailing norms.

The symbolic dimensions of Ragamala painting further complicate modern distinctions between representation and reality. Female figures often personify the *raginis*, the feminine counterparts of male *ragas*, embodying emotional states associated with longing, devotion, anticipation, or fulfillment. These allegorical representations should not be mistaken for documentary portraits of historical musicians. Nevertheless, symbolism itself constitutes historical evidence. The repeated association of femininity with musical knowledge demonstrates that contemporaries understood women as legitimate bearers of musical meaning. Symbolic representation does not prove that every woman depicted corresponded to an identifiable historical performer, but it does reveal the cultural imagination through which music and gender were understood.

Reading visual evidence alongside written sources therefore enriches rather than replaces traditional historical methods. The relative silence of court chronicles becomes more intelligible when contrasted with paintings that repeatedly place women within musical settings. Rather than dismissing visual sources as merely artistic or literary sources as uniquely factual, historians can recognize that each records different dimensions of the same cultural world. Administrative

documents reveal institutions of patronage; paintings preserve ideals of aesthetic experience; devotional literature records religious memory; ethnomusicology explains systems of oral transmission. The historical task lies in integrating these archives rather than privileging any single form of evidence.

This interdisciplinary approach also challenges long-standing assumptions about historical authority. Written records have traditionally occupied a privileged position within music history because they appear more concrete and verifiable than paintings or oral traditions. Yet written archives are themselves selective cultural constructions shaped by political priorities and institutional purposes. Recognizing this selectivity does not diminish their value. Instead, it encourages historians to ask different questions. Rather than assuming that documentary silence reflects historical absence, scholars can examine why particular forms of activity became visible while others remained unrecorded. In the case of sixteenth-century North Indian music, this shift in perspective allows women's participation to emerge not through isolated discoveries but through the cumulative comparison of multiple kinds of evidence.

Visual culture therefore serves a broader historiographical function than simply illustrating musical life. It exposes the limitations of archives built primarily upon administrative documentation and demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary historical reconstruction. Women appear more consistently within paintings because painters sought to represent musical experience itself rather than the bureaucratic organization of empire. When visual and textual sources are considered together, a richer picture of early modern musical culture emerges—one in which women participated as performers, patrons, listeners, educators, and symbolic embodiments of musical knowledge. Their visibility within visual culture does not contradict the written archive; it reveals the dimensions of musical life that official records were never designed to preserve.

Colonial Canon Formation and Historical Erasure

The relative absence of women from standard histories of North Indian classical music cannot be explained solely by the limitations of sixteenth-century sources. Equally important are the ways later generations interpreted those sources and transformed them into historical narratives. Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, changing political institutions, colonial scholarship, and emerging nationalist histories reshaped understandings of India's musical past. During this process, women who had occupied diverse roles as patrons, performers, educators, and transmitters of musical knowledge became increasingly marginalized within canonical accounts. Their disappearance therefore reflects not only the silences of early modern archives but also the priorities of those who later organized those archives into modern histories.³⁵

British colonial administrators approached Indian music through intellectual frameworks that differed markedly from those of early modern South Asia. Influenced by Victorian moral ideals, colonial observers often classified performers according to rigid distinctions between respectable domestic femininity and public entertainment. Musical professions that had long occupied recognized positions within courts, temples, and hereditary communities were

increasingly interpreted through the language of morality rather than artistic expertise. Women who performed professionally were frequently described as socially suspect, regardless of the historical complexity of their occupations.³⁶

These judgments profoundly influenced the preservation of musical history. Colonial writers generally preferred written treatises, court chronicles, and Sanskrit texts that appeared analogous to European literary traditions. Oral transmission, hereditary education, household performance, and devotional practice received comparatively less scholarly attention because they left fewer written records and fit less comfortably within European models of historical documentation. As a result, many of the social institutions through which women participated in music became progressively less visible within academic scholarship.

The reorganization of musical life during the nineteenth century intensified this transformation. The decline of Mughal political authority and the gradual dissolution of many princely courts altered longstanding systems of patronage that had supported hereditary musicians for centuries. Urban centers such as Calcutta, Bombay, and later Allahabad emerged as important sites of musical reform, where educators sought to redefine Hindustani music as a respectable national art suited to modern institutions rather than aristocratic courts.³⁷ These reforms expanded access to musical education and encouraged systematic pedagogy, yet they also reshaped historical memory by privileging particular lineages, repertoires, and social identities.

One of the most influential figures in this process was Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, whose efforts to classify ragas and standardize musical education transformed twentieth-century Hindustani music. His work provided an invaluable foundation for modern pedagogy and remains indispensable to contemporary musicians. At the same time, Bhatkhande's project necessarily emphasized repertoires that could be organized into coherent theoretical systems and traced through identifiable pedagogical lineages.³⁸ The everyday labor of household musicians, devotional singers, female patrons, and informal educators proved far more difficult to incorporate into this framework. As a consequence, many women's contributions remained outside the emerging canon, not because they lacked historical importance but because they operated through institutions that resisted systematic classification.

Similar processes shaped public perceptions of hereditary performers. Throughout the nineteenth century, women associated with professional musical communities—including *tawaifs* and other court performers—were increasingly viewed through reformist and colonial moral frameworks that emphasized respectability over artistic accomplishment.³⁹ Earlier courts had recognized many of these women as highly trained musicians, poets, dancers, and educators. Colonial discourse, however, often reduced them to stereotypes centered upon sexuality while overlooking their sophisticated artistic training and their roles in preserving musical repertoires. This moral reinterpretation contributed significantly to their exclusion from later histories of classical music.

Nationalist scholarship, although challenging many colonial assumptions, often reproduced similar patterns. In seeking to establish Indian classical music as an ancient, unified,

and morally elevated tradition worthy of international recognition, historians frequently emphasized great composers, celebrated male performers, Sanskrit theoretical texts, and uninterrupted lineages of musical genius. Such narratives successfully demonstrated the richness of India's musical heritage but tended to privilege exceptional individuals over the broader social institutions through which music was sustained. Women's contributions as patrons, educators, ritual specialists, and household musicians remained comparatively difficult to accommodate within histories organized around canonical masters and formal schools.

Recent scholarship has begun to challenge these inherited narratives. Historians such as Katherine Butler Schofield, Bonnie Wade, Daniel Neuman, and Ruby Lal have demonstrated that musical culture cannot be understood solely through the biographies of celebrated performers or the study of theoretical texts.⁴⁰ Instead, music emerged through complex interactions among political institutions, devotional communities, hereditary professions, domestic education, and systems of patronage. Within this broader framework, women reappear not as isolated exceptions but as integral participants whose labor connected many of these institutions simultaneously.

This historiographical shift has important methodological implications. Recovering women's musical history does not simply require discovering forgotten names. In many cases, such names may never survive. Instead, historians must reconstruct the social relationships through which music circulated, examining who commissioned performances, who transmitted repertoires, who educated children, who organized ceremonies, and who maintained the institutional conditions necessary for artistic continuity. Such questions redirect attention from individual celebrity toward collective historical processes.

The cumulative effect of this approach is a reconsideration of what constitutes historical evidence. Administrative records, visual culture, devotional literature, oral traditions, and ethnomusicological research each preserve different dimensions of musical life. None alone provides a complete account of women's contributions, yet together they reveal patterns that remain invisible when any single archive is privileged. Rather than treating documentary silence as proof of absence, historians can understand it as evidence of the selective processes through which archives—and later historical canons—were constructed.

The history of women in sixteenth-century North Indian music therefore illustrates a broader lesson about historical scholarship itself. Every historical narrative reflects choices concerning which sources deserve authority and which experiences merit preservation. The relative invisibility of women within standard histories emerged not because their contributions were insignificant but because successive generations repeatedly privileged forms of evidence that documented public institutions while overlooking domestic, devotional, and interpersonal worlds. Recovering these neglected dimensions does more than restore women to an existing story. It fundamentally changes the story being told.

Rewriting the History of Hindustani Music

The history of sixteenth-century North Indian music has traditionally been organized around emperors, celebrated male musicians, and the institutions of imperial patronage. Such narratives have illuminated the extraordinary artistic achievements of the Mughal period, yet they have also narrowed the historical lens through which musical culture has been understood. By privileging administrative records, court chronicles, and the biographies of exceptional individuals, earlier scholarship often overlooked the broader social systems through which music was created, transmitted, and sustained. Women consequently appeared only intermittently within standard histories, giving the impression that their contributions were peripheral to the development of Hindustani classical music.

This essay has argued that such an impression results less from historical reality than from the structure of the surviving archive and the historiographical traditions that have interpreted it. Reading administrative chronicles alongside devotional literature, visual culture, ethnomusicological scholarship, and social history reveals a much richer musical landscape than official records alone suggest. Women emerge within this broader archive not simply as isolated performers but as participants in interconnected systems of patronage, education, household administration, devotional practice, and artistic labor. Their contributions cannot always be reconstructed through individual biographies, yet they become increasingly visible when historians examine the networks through which musical knowledge circulated across early modern North India.

Viewing music through these networks also changes how the Mughal court itself should be understood. Rather than functioning as a self-contained institution populated primarily by celebrated male musicians, the court formed part of a larger musical ecology linking imperial administration with aristocratic households, hereditary performance communities, regional courts, temples, shrines, and pilgrimage centers. Repertoires moved continually between these environments through professional performers, religious devotees, political alliances, and systems of oral transmission. Women occupied important positions within these exchanges as patrons who directed cultural resources, educators who preserved repertoires, performers who contributed artistic expertise, and intermediaries who carried musical traditions across households and regions. Their influence therefore extended well beyond the moments in which they entered written historical records.

Recognizing these interconnected systems also challenges modern distinctions between public and private musical life. Administrative sources naturally emphasized public institutions because they were created to document imperial governance. Much of women's musical activity, however, occurred within domestic, devotional, and ceremonial settings that generated comparatively little written documentation. These spaces were not peripheral to musical culture. They were among its principal sites of continuity. Household instruction prepared future performers. Devotional communities preserved repertoires across generations. Aristocratic patronage sustained musicians economically. Regional courts adapted and reshaped musical

traditions according to local political and religious priorities. Together these institutions created the conditions through which Hindustani music flourished.

The comparison of textual and visual evidence further demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary historical methods. Ragamala paintings, Mughal miniatures, devotional poetry, and oral traditions preserve dimensions of musical life largely absent from administrative chronicles. None of these sources provides a complete historical account in isolation, yet together they expose the limitations of archives built primarily upon bureaucratic documentation. Rather than treating documentary silence as evidence of historical absence, historians can recognize that different forms of evidence preserve different aspects of cultural experience. This approach allows women's participation to emerge through the cumulative weight of multiple archives rather than through the discovery of a handful of exceptional individuals.

The historiographical implications extend beyond the study of gender. Recovering women's contributions requires historians to reconsider what constitutes evidence, how musical institutions functioned, and whose labor made artistic traditions possible. Music did not survive solely because emperors patronized brilliant musicians or because celebrated masters trained gifted disciples. It endured because countless individuals maintained the institutions through which musical knowledge could be learned, remembered, adapted, and transmitted. Much of this work occurred within households, devotional communities, and hereditary professions where women played indispensable roles. Restoring these forms of labor to the historical narrative transforms our understanding of how musical traditions develop over time.

This perspective also invites future scholarship to move beyond the search for forgotten names alone. Although recovering individual biographies remains valuable, equally important is reconstructing the relationships that connected courts, households, shrines, pilgrimage routes, and regional artistic communities. Such an approach recognizes music as a social practice sustained through networks rather than isolated acts of genius. It also encourages greater dialogue among musicology, art history, gender studies, religious history, and social history, each of which preserves evidence unavailable to the others.

Ultimately, the history of women in sixteenth-century North Indian music is not simply a story of overlooked individuals waiting to be restored to an existing narrative. It is a reminder that the narrative itself must be reconsidered. When the archive is read across its many forms—administrative, visual, devotional, oral, and ethnographic—a different history comes into view. In that history, women were not peripheral figures standing at the margins of Hindustani musical culture. They were among the people who sustained its institutions, shaped its circulation, preserved its repertoires, and ensured its continuity across generations. Recovering their contributions does more than complete the historical record. It changes how the history of North Indian classical music is understood.

Notes

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2. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 1–25.
3. Abu'l-Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, 1:603–611.
4. Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* (Basel: Ravi Kumar, 1973), 17–39; Milo C. Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 44–67.
5. John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45–79.
6. Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87–141.
7. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women*, 1–25.
8. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–1075.
9. Abu'l-Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, 1:603–611.
10. Ibid.
11. Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*, 1–25.
12. Bonnie C. Wade, *Music in India: The Classical Traditions* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), 57–108.
13. Daniel M. Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 86–146.
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16. Katherine Butler Brown, "If Music Be the Food of Love: Masculinity and Eroticism in the Mughal *Mehfil*," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 42, no. 2 (2005): 241–282.
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18. Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 87–141.
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23. John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 128–162.
24. Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices*, 45–79; Nancy M. Martin, *Mirabai* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41–68.

25. Qureshi, *Sufi Music*, 49–75.
26. Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88–124; Neuman, *Life of Music*, 86–146.
27. Brown, "If Music Be the Food of Love," 241–282.
28. Wade, *Music in India*, 57–108; Neuman, *Life of Music*, 86–146.
29. Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 87–171.
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31. Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting*, 44–67.
32. Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting*, 17–39.
33. Ibid.
34. Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting*, 44–67.
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36. Ibid., 43–78.
37. Ibid., 79–132.
38. Ibid., 133–186.
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