

# RECORDING ARTISTS OF ALL CASTES IN INDIA (2)

Calcutta, Madras and Bombay – A Recording Expedition of Over 12,000 Miles, Recording Only Oriental Artists – A Most Interesting Experience in Far Off Lands.

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The weather was so oppressively hot in Madras that I was compelled to record with only my pajamas on, and those of the thinnest silk obtainable. I was to record only native artists, and there was no fear of "shocking" their modesty.

Of the artists, I will mention but one; the one that I had come to Madras to record. **Miss Godavari**, the first artist in the Tamil language. We visited the woman's house for the purpose of discussing terms (this is always a tedious and worrying business.). The house was a great surprise, for the interior was constructed of marble and a faint glimmer of a blue-shaded light cast an interesting and warm sensation over the interior that was at once fascinating and seductive. It was presented to her by an admirer and had cost 180,000 rupees (\$60,000). We were compelled to pay two visits before ultimately coming to terms. We secured her for sixteen titles for the sum of 300 rupees per song. I may add that she held out consistently for two days for 900 rupees per record [= recording].

The trouble we discovered was through the agents, who are a most arbitrary set of men. They persuade most of the artists to ask for large fees in order to swell their commission and at the same time advise us that such and such a price is usual for a particular artist.

She came to the hotel to record, accompanied by a retinue of seven servants, including two accompanists. One of the instruments for accompanying was the most extraordinary musical (?) instrument <sup>1</sup>, I should imagine, in the world; it is best described as a large earthenware pot, which is held in the lap of a man who plays it by beating a series of taps on the periphery, certain parts of which give out various tones. (This was not perceptible to the writer.). The accompanist's fingers have to be particularly hard and dexterous for to continually beat on such a hard surface sufficiently loud for recording purposes requires an appreciable amount of strength and adroitness. A clearer impression can be observed in the photograph.

The other accompanist was a young girl playing the harmonium, whilst **the artist herself** was playing another instrument bejeweled in most elaborate fashion

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<sup>1</sup> Ghatam or ghata.

The instrument was valued at 12,000 rupees (\$4,000). She was covered with gold and precious stones of great value. It was for the express purpose of guarding these jewels that she possessed a guard of four men. An Indian artist by-the-bye, invariably dons her finest jewelry in the presence of a white. Round her throat she wore a necklace of English sovereigns, the clasps holding each to the other were studded with diamonds. There being in all fifty sovereigns and fifty clasps, the value can be appreciated. On the toes she wore platinum and gold rings. I secured a photograph but she insisted on removing from her person all jewels, for what reason I was never able to comprehend. In the photograph nevertheless, can be seen the rings on her toes and the large diamonds in the ears.

She sang exceptionally well, her high cadenzas being particularly loud and clear, which is always a great necessity and advantage for recording.

It may be interesting to state here that the broker present was so enraptured with the singing that he immediately ordered three thousand of each title. She, herself, ordering from the broker fifty of each title for distribution amongst her friends. Having made records before, she was little troubled and in fact was a great assistance, for it was that [= *she who*] instructed the accompanists exactly what to do and where to sit, explaining to me that the position in which she placed the men was the best position, for the so-and-so company had already experimented with the placing and had lost two days before ultimately succeeding. I therefore left it to her and the result proved eminently satisfactory.

After having recorded **Godavari**, I visited **another woman** at her home in the native quarter of Madras, but this time the house was not constructed of marble. In the worst part of the town we were compelled to climb a flight of stairs into a dirty, evil-smelling room, where one or two men were squatting, smoking and talking, which at our approach diminished into murmurs of surprise. We were conducted through the room into another (certainly cleaner), where sitting on the floor was the artist. With her were two Indians with diabolical and satanic faces, who regarded us with invidious glances which seemed to infer: "*We own this female, don't touch her without first displaying your gold.*" We stated our business and they were a little more agreeable and regained less vindictive countenances.

We listened to the young girl sing a couple of songs, and found her voice sufficiently good for recording. We accordingly arranged terms; not with the artist, however, but with the men who were apparently her bodyguard, with the emphasis on the body.

The girl was retained by the men as a business proposition, and she was compelled to obey all their desires and instructions, both as regards singing and otherwise. She was but sixteen years of age, with a perfect figure, large sympathetic eyes and a charm of manner.

The following morning she arrived at the hotel, accompanied by her two guards and accompanists. The former, I immediately dismissed from the

recording room, and out of the hotel, bidding them return after three hours for their charge.

During the recording she regained her vivacity and sung with appreciable amount of enthusiasm, and appeared to wish the recording would continue for time indefinite. She beseeched us not to give her fees to the men in full, but to tender but half, and with the other buy bracelets and trinkets. A proposition in which we readily acquiesced.

I afterwards learned that the Indians were incensed against us for buying the bracelets, for they only received half the amount they anticipated. They dare not strike or ill-treat the girl, for they were cunning enough to conceive that under such circumstances the poor girl's attractions would immediately disappear. I often think of and pity that poor little Indian girl in Madras.

I here returned to beautiful Bombay for the final recording. My first duty was to visit the native theatre, in order to hear the artist of most importance, a **Miss Cohar** [= *Gauhar*], of Bombay<sup>2</sup>. To my surprise, I afterwards learned that there was but one female in the performance and that was Miss Cohar, the other female parts were played by young men, and the difference was imperceptible to the uninitiated.

Miss Cohar is the most beautiful of all the Indian artists, and her voice the sweetest, but unfortunately the latter is very weak and I was a little dubious as to whether a commercial record could be secured. I constructed specially sensitive diaphragms and succeeded in obtaining a number of satisfactory commercial records. She was intensely nervous, and it was over an hour before she regained her self-possession after first hearing her voice reproduced.

As with most Indian women, she was reserved, timid and exceedingly dainty. She was the wife of a prosperous Bombay merchant, and has one son. The theater is her own concern and is filled every night of the year. She spoke English in a manner which made our language appear strangely musical and fascinating. (This artist was the first I had recorded in India that was not ostracized socially.)

I next recorded a **Mohammedan priest**; he recited a number of verses from the Koran, with much feeling, and made a very clear, fine record.

An incident illustrating the depth of the Eastern mind is worth recalling. The priest, being short of stature, it was necessary to requisition a few books for him to stand on. To my surprise he apologetically refused, and gave for his reason one of the multifarious commandments in the Mohammedan decalogue, "*It is a sin to look invidiously or treat with contumely—'knowledge in all forms'.*" I was amazed, but who cannot appreciate such wonderful tribute to knowledge?

A **Parsi orchestra** was my next recording. It was constituted of three dilapidated clarionets, two split cornets, a flute which had been broken and repaired with glue, a trombone of such obvious antiquity, tone and shape, that I

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<sup>2</sup> Not the same person as Gauhar Jan of Calcutta.

am inclined to believe it to be the original ancestor of the trombone family which entertained the "Ark". Drums, tum-tums and bells galore. With these things they attempted to play native music. Fortunately, the indescribable slaughter and heartless massacre of music which I was compelled to record, can be better imagined than described—or, better still, not heard at all. The brokers informed me that the records would certainly sell, so I went ahead and made a dozen, afterwards retiring to my hotel to partake of a bath in a vain endeavor to cull my sorely wounded imagination of music.

The next day I received a similar worrying gruelling [= *grilling?*], which, nevertheless, has caused considerable since [= *inconvenience?*]. I was to record **an artist** four songs and anticipated in getting through in an hour or so. After giving careful instructions as to where to finish, also when to commence, explanations which occupied fully fifteen minutes. I began to record. As an example, in one he would commence perfectly correct, but after a minute's singing, would suddenly stop and shout across the horn: "*Is that enough?*" Another time, just after the start, he stopped and asked: "*What is the hissing noise I can hear?*" Again halfway through another record he exclaimed: "*Did you say four or five verses?*"—and then he attempted to continue. I eventually succeeded in obtaining the four records of him in three hours, and spoiled fifteen master blanks in the attainment.

His imbecility was so provoking that I actually threw a record at him. It was at the third attempt of his third song, and he was within half a minute of the finish, when he again stopped and with a most tantalizing stupidity, observed: "*I shall not sing the last verse, I may make it too long.*" (We had already timed it five times). In momentary disgust I threw the wax record at his feet, smashing it into a hundred pieces. Strange to say, it had a most exhilarating effect, for he made the next round perfectly and the fourth song at his first attempt. Possibly he thought if he committed another mistake the record would be thrown higher up. In Bombay, other than Miss Cohar [= *Gauhar*] <sup>3</sup>, there was no one of note, but she was compensation for all. Her beautiful voice was fascinating and I believe she would prove interesting to an American audience, as did Miss Jan, of Calcutta, prove to a London audience in 1910 <sup>4</sup>.

I experienced the same trouble in India as in Turkestan, with mercenary artists who dally and shillyshamble around for days over their fees.

The usual custom is to fix a price, they (the artists) then leave and the following morning send word that their price is so much, generally twice the amount you have virtually agreed on. You naturally refuse and they will send

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<sup>3</sup> Miss Gohar/Gauhar was associated with Parsi Theatrical Company in Bombay (Mumbai)

<sup>4</sup> It is not known to me if Miss Gauhar Jan ever visited England. Gauhar Jan first visited Madras in 1910, for a concert in the Victoria Public Hall.. In December, 1911, she was famously invited to perform at the coronation of King George V at Delhi Durbar (source: internet).

another message in the afternoon reducing their price somewhat, again you refuse, and once again they reduce until they ultimately arrive at the recording room and without speaking, commence to make preparations for recording at your price. Half-way through the numbers, they will again commence asking for more money. A more arbitrary and perverse man of business than an Indian would be hard to find, and if found, would certainly be in the Orient.

After having recorded approximately 850 records, I left India for Paris on the ill-fated steamship, the Oceana.\*

During my stay I often witnessed curious happenings, examples of caste distinctions, religious customs and funeral rites. Of these, I will write in my next and last article, together with one or two incidents, amusing and otherwise, which happened to me in recording in Europe, Caucasus and Turkestan; I shall also outline the expenses during the whole of my recording for the last three years, artists fees, waxes used and persons met.

\* The P. & O. Liner "Oceana" it may be remembered collided with another vessel and sunk in the English Channel in March 1912. She sunk with \$3,750,000 in bullion. The latter was afterwards recovered.

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### **Original illustrations:**

- *Making Records by Miss Godavari* (p. 48)
- *Mohammedan Priest, Bombay* (p. 48)
- *Miss Cohar, Bombay* (p. 48)