

A true seeker

The semi-classical music form "thumri" is known to have derived its name from thumakna. Loosely translated the word means, "dance-like movements". Thumri was about mild eroticism and dramatic gestures and was the stock-in-trade of courtesans. Girija Devi, who passed away on Tuesday, was amongst those who brought this music form to the proscenium stage from the courts and kothas. She, though, was no prisoner to the semi-classical form's antecedents. Her renditions lost none of the thumri's purbaiya lilt, but in Girija Devi's mellifluous voice, often interspersed with a twang of metallic sharpness, eroticism turned to sensuousness, the song became a carrier of love, longing and despair.

Girija Devi gave her first public performance at the age of 20 on All India Radio Allahabad in 1949 despite the opposition of her mother and grandmother. But 10 years earlier, she had earned the praise of [Mahatma Gandhi](#) at the Jabalpur session of the Congress for essaying the role of an untouchable girl in the film, Yaad Rahe. Though she never acted in a film again, Girija Devi brought the ability to emote in her singing. She would often say that though her training in khayal acquainted her with the grammar of music, that wasn't enough for thumri singing.

The song was also about the rasa. If the rising and falling of her voice in jhir jhir bayat bazaar, prem ras ghole evoked the sensuousness of the wafting breeze, piya milan hum jaibo, Rama throbbed with the restless anticipation of a separated lover awaiting reunion and the strains of babul mora maihar chhuto hi jaye made the listener identify with the sorrow of the Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, who had composed the song equating the bride's bidaai from her father's home with his own displacement from Lucknow to Calcutta.

She took this rare ability to strike the chord of human experience in her renditions of devotional music, much like Nirguna poets whose songs she would sing often. Like them she was a seeker - of the spirituality that musical knowledge bestows.

END

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