

Exploring Hindustani Raga Music Components in Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's Qawwali Performances



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Abstract

This research paper explores integrating Hindustani raga music components from Khayal into the Qawwali performances of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (NFAK), a renowned figure in Sufi music. By analysing 25 selected performances, focusing on two key pieces, the study employs a content analysis approach to investigate elements such as Gamak, Alap, Sargam, Meend, and Khatka. The findings highlight NFAK's innovative fusion of classical techniques within his Qawwali framework, demonstrating how these integrations enrich the genre and contribute significantly to its evolution. This paper aims to comprehensively understand NFAK's unique style and its broader implications within South Asian music traditions.

Keywords: Qawwali, Hindustani Raga Music, Khayal, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Sufi Music.

Research Paper

Introduction

Qawwali is a semi-classical music genre, a devotional music of Sufi-s, inspired by the works of Sufi poets like Rumi, Hafiz, Bulleh Shah, Amir Khusrow, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid. Qawwali is the best-known and most famous form of Sufi music found in Sufi culture in South Asia. Qaul^[1], qawwal is someone who often repeats (sings) a qaul and qawwali is what a qawwal sings (Bhattacharjee 211). Qawwali has always been considered a devotional song of Sufi-s, which includes repetition of the Prophet's name, which is undoubtedly true. It is also connected with the samā' of the Chishtiya order of Sufism, established in India in the 13th century (Sakata 87). Still, the musical aspect of the genre was never explored in detail anywhere because the structure was simple and didn't include many technical aspects of Classical music.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, an internationally acclaimed Qawwali singer, is considered one of the greatest voices ever recorded. He possessed an extraordinary range of vocal abilities and could perform at a high level of intensity for several hours. In 1965, after his father's

death, Nusrat became the leader of the "party," which is the group of musicians and supporters—usually akin—needed to perform qawwali. Nevertheless, humbly convinced of not being able to match the talent of his predecessors, Nusrat began to innovate his performance style by using the components of classical music to reach a broader audience. NFAK blended his learnings of classical Music and Qawwali training together and gave a different musical structure to the genre. He shortened the songs and increased the space for improvisation. The perfection of his rapid melismatic passages was the fruit of deep training in the khayal and thumri, virtuoso genres of Hindustani classical music, which he learned from his father (Jacoviello 324).

This synthesis of classical music and Qawwali not only expanded the appeal of the genre but also positioned Nusrat as a bridge between two significant musical traditions of the Indian subcontinent—Dhrupad and Qawwali. A series of interviews between 1989 and 1999 traced his lineage and its dual inheritance, tracing a profound connection between Dhrupad and Qawwali. In an in-depth interview with the Lok Virsa Institute in Islamabad, he elaborated on his gharana's history,

linking its genealogy to both the Dagar Bani of Dhrupad and the legacy of Behram Khan (Kalra 6). We can say that Nusrat's innovative blending of Qawwali with classical music techniques can be considered a cultural statement rather than merely a stylistic evolution.

Objectives

This study conducted a Performance-Based Content Analysis based on 25 selected samples of NFAK's performances. The objectives include :

1. To investigate the integration of Hindustani raga music components from Khayal into the Qawwali performances of NFAK.
2. To analyse the incorporation of Khayal elements such as Gamak, Alap, Sargam, Meend, and Khatka into Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's Qawwali performances.
3. To analyse 25 selected samples, with an in-depth focus on two key performances, to identify and document the use of classical music components.
4. To understand how Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's blending of classical elements enriched the Qawwali genre and contributed to its evolution.

Methodology

This study was based on 25 video and audio samples collected from YouTube. Content collected from YouTube was studied, focusing on the components of Hindustani Classical Music. A content analysis approach was used to analyse the data.

The data for this study was recorded in July 2024 from YouTube. A total of 25 performances by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (NFAK) have been selected as the sample, comprising audio and video recordings. The selection criterion included a minimum duration of 15 minutes for each performance. Notably, the sample includes four performances of approximately 25 minutes and two performances exceeding 40 minutes in length. Among the 25 performances, the time period for 12 recordings is not available. The remaining 13 performances occurred between 1980 and 1996, as indicated in their YouTube descriptions. Regarding the venues, six performances were held in the United Kingdom, one in the United States, one in France, and one in Faisalabad.

For the 12 performances with no information on time period, the upload dates on YouTube range from 2011 to 2022. This diverse temporal and geographical spread highlights the global appeal and enduring legacy of

NFAK's music, providing a rich dataset for analysis.

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that the studied performances predominantly feature common ragas such as Yaman Kalyan, Bhairavi, Bahar, Bhairav, Hameer, Jaunpuri, Gawati, etc. and some in very rare ragas like Bahadurkauns, Sanamkalyan, Khambavati, some performances are in ragas created by blending two different ragas like Natkauns, three performances are in ragas Vachaspati, Hansdhwani and Saraswati which are taken in HCM from Carnatic Music.

Raga description: Table 1.1

Common Ragas	Rare Ragas	Carnatic Ragas
<i>Bhairav, Bhairavi, Mishra Khamaj, Yaman Kalyan, Madhmad Sarang, Bahar, Tilang, Hameer, Jaunpuri, Bilawal, Kalawati, Gawati</i>	<i>Khambawati, Bahadurkauns, Ahirbharant, Hijaj Natkauns, Sanamkalyan. [2]</i>	<i>Saraswati, Hansdhwani, Vachaspati.</i>

Taal description: Table 1.2

Taal	Performances
<i>Teental</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Keherwa</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Jhaptal</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Tilwada</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Dadra</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Sitarkhani</i>	<i>1</i>

Table 1.2 gives a layout of the taal-s and the frequency of using these tala-s by NFAK. Out of 25 performances, one performance is set in Sitarkhani Tala^[3], one performance in Dadra, one in Tilwada, three in Jhaptala, seven in Keherwa and twelve performances are performed in Teental.

Table 1.1 shows that most performances have been composed in common raga-s. Bandish-s in these ragas are also commonly performed in HCM performances. However, some rare raga-s might have also been popular at that time in HCM performances. Still, these days, performances in these raga-s like Khambawati

and Hijaj, etc. are very rare. Looking at the tala aspect of the performance, table 1.2 shows that Teentala has been used for a maximum number of performances. Teentala, the 16-beat cycle, is the most common taal, in which compositions of HCM are set. Like Hindustani Khayal music performance, Harmonium and tabla are the main accompanying instruments played in Qawwali. Harmonium was used as the melody accompaniment, and Tabla was used for the rhythm of the performance. The performance starts with a Jugalbandi of Harmonium and Tabla, where lead Harmonium was played by Farrukh Fateh Ali Khan, who was trained under NFAK and tabla was played by Dildar Hussain Khan, shagird of Alla Rakha Khan. Music starts with a slow melody played on Harmonium with rhythm on tabla. Gradually, tempo increases, and this jugalbandi generally ends with a tihai.

Like the khayal performances, the performances by NFAK taken for this study started with a slow alaap starting from the lower or middle octave and slowly reaches to taar saptak with adding one note gradually in the alaap structure and proceeded until taar shadaj. This alaap will consist of the majorly used phrases of the raga; the raga can be clearly recognised by these phrases. Unlike khayal music performance, which is performed by a solo vocalist or a duo in some cases, NFAK's performance includes 2-3 supporting singers who sing along with him and take part in improvisation like alaap and tana-s; apart from these, there are 4-5 accompanying singers who mainly repeats

S)NRG - - - (G)RM - - - - G - GMP - - - R(G)R - - - (R)S

(P)MDN - - - (M)DP - - - - P - MGR , (S)NRG - - (P)R - - - S

A very important aspect of HCM in this alaap is Swar-Lagav. Noticeable components in the alaap phrases are full of the ornaments used in Hindustani classics: khatka, murki, ghamak, kan swar, meend, etc. After the following alaap-s, NFAK starts the composition, and the whole group joins the mukhda with him after one avatar. Mukhda of the composition is of 10 matra-s, it starts from the 7th matra of this 16-beat cycle. After singing the mukhda 2 to 3 times, NFAK sang the mukhda in 4.5 matra, which is originally in 10 matra-s. This practice is called Bol-Baant; it includes dividing the bol-s of the song in an improvised manner, playing with the rhythm, and taking the mukhda back after this process sounds aesthetically pleasing. He started the mukhda from 1.5 matra and completed it on the 6th matra. In the very next avartan, he sang the mukhda from the 1st matra, which is the sam of the rhythm cycle, and he sang it with an improvised melody and then finished it on the 7th and

the mukhda of the composition. In NFAK performances, following the akaar alaap, comes the improvised alap in some Poetry, Kalaam or quotes by Sufi saints. After the alaap gets completed, NFAK starts the composition with the mukhda and all the vocal accompanists sing after him and with him. Here is a detailed analysis of two of his performances:

Case Study I: Man Kunto Maula

NFAK starts the performance with an introduction to the composition. He stated that this composition is a Qaul (Sufi Hymn) for Hazrat Amir Khusrau, composed in raga yaman kalyan, set in sitarkhani taal, a 16-beat cycle. There were nine artists, including NFAK, in the performance, five accompanying singers who clapped and sang the mukhda of the composition, two harmonium accompanists and singer, and one tabla accompanist; one tabla and two harmoniums accompanied the performance. The tabla used in the performance differs from the tabla used in Hindustani Classical Music, as the face of the qawwali tabla is narrow, and the body is slim compared to the table used in Hindustani classical music. Music starts with playing the composition's melody on the harmonium, and tabla joins the melody played on the harmonium with sitarkhani tala. The moment tabla is played with the harmonium, the vocalist starts clapping with the rhythm. NFAK starts the alaap with a phrase of yaman kalyan as follow –

then again picked the mukhda from the 8th matra. In the next avartan, he again did the bol-baant, sang the mukhda bol-s with improvised melody from 16th matra and ended it on 7th matra and then picked the mukhda from 8th matra. After this, he sang the second line with heavy Gamaka-s. Once the mukhda gets completed, then a different aspect of this Qawwali comes, where the lyrics used are of the bol-s like a Tarana. Bol-s of this parts are as follows–

*“Dara dil-e dara dil-e dar-e daani,
Hum tum tanana nana, Nana nana ray,
Yalali yalali yala, Yala yala ray”*

This shows us the blending of tarana, a popular form in Hindustani Classical Music, with qawwali. This part of the tarana is also set in yaman kalyan raga, where the nature and mood of the raga are kept intact. The pattern and structure of this performance also resemble the



structure of a short-duration khayal performance, where chhota khayal is followed by a tarana.

After the tarana part is over, the sthayi of the composition starts again, and the tala gets changed to Keherwa, which is an 8-beat cycle, and the tempo also starts to increase gradually. NFAK improvise the mukhda by singing it on a high pitch, and the whole group repeats after him. In between the mukhda repetitions, he and the many alaaps filled with heavy Gamakas, meend, octave jumping, etc. Examples of alaap-s are as follows –

(P)GRṂ - - G̣ - - -
 ŚRŚNRGṂ - - - - (G)RS - -

After these alaap-s, then he improvises with Sargam tana as follows –

NRGR GMGR GMPM GRGR DNRS NDPM GMDP MGRG MG-R
 GRSR NR-S
 NRGG RGRM M, GGP P, ṂMD D, ṂMN N, DDD P - - M - - G - - R -
 - - - S

After these above-mentioned and many other tana-s and alaap-s, he did a tihai and picked the mukhda of the composition. Amidst the repetitions of the mukhda of the composition, NFAK sang Bol-alaap-s of Sufi Kalams by famous Sufi Saints. After the Bol-alaap-s, tempo increases rapidly and then comes long akaar taan-s with heavy gamaka-s. At the end of the performance, NFAK gradually reduces the vocals, the tabla is played at a single speed, and the performance ends.

Case Study II: Raag Mala

This sample is a 10-minute excerpt from a long qawwali performance by NFAK. In this part of the performance, NFAK informs the audience that he will be presenting Raga-Mala and states, "Raga is something which makes effects not only on humans but also on animals". He sang all the "Raag Pravesh" phrases of the raga-s and started the raga-mala with multani as follows –

- ṢṆṢ[̣]G̣ṂP̣ - ṆḌP̣ḌṂ[̣]G̣Ṣ[̣] G̣[̣]ḌṂP̣G̣^RṢ
 - G̣ṂP̣ṆṢṚṚṢṆṢNḌP̣ Ṃ[̣]-P̣ḌP̣G̣^RṢ

Second *raga Bahar*

- SMM P̣[̣]G̣ṂNḌṆṢṆṂP̣ṆṂP̣G̣ - - G̣MSR - - S(S)Ṇ - - ṆḌṆṢ

Third *raga Lalit*

- ṢNṚNḌṂḌṂṂ - Ṃ - Ṃ[̣]MG̣ - G̣ṂḌṂḌṆṂḌṂṂ[̣]MG̣ - ṚG̣ṂḌṂGṚGṚṢ - - -
 Ṛ^SṆṚGṂ - ḌṂḌṂṂ - - - - -

Fourth *raga Madhuvanti*

- ṢṆṢ[̣]G̣ṂP̣ - - G̣ṂP̣ṆṢṆ[̣]ḌP̣ḌṂP̣[̣]G̣ṂP̣[̣]ḌP̣G̣ - RS
 - ṢG̣ṂP̣ṆṢ - - - ṆṢḌP̣ṂP̣ṆṢḌP̣ṂP̣G̣^RṢ

Fifth *raga Bairagi Bhairav*

- ṆSṚṂP̣ṆṂṆP̣ṂṚṂP̣ṂṚṆRṢ

Sixth *raga Desh*

- S N S R M M - - - P P - - - M P D P M - M - - M G S R P M G R (S) N
 P N S M R N D P - - - D M P N - - - - S - - - - S R M M - - G R
 R M P M P N P P D P M P D P M M G R - - - - S

Seventh *raag Jaijaiwanti*

- N S R D N P R - - - - R G M P D M G R - - - G - R - S

Comparison of the Components in Hindustani Music and Qawwali : Table 1.3

Components	Hindustani Music	Qawwali
<i>Swar-Lagav</i>	✓	✓
<i>Khatka</i>	✓	✓
<i>Murkhi</i>	✓	✓
<i>Gamak</i>	✓	✓
<i>Kan Swar</i>	✓	✓
<i>Meend</i>	✓	✓
<i>Teherav</i>	✓	✓
<i>Bol-Baant</i>	✓	✓
<i>Sargam-Taan</i>	✓	✓
<i>Bol-Alaap</i>	✓	✓
<i>Akaar-Taan</i>	✓	✓

Table 1.3 shows all the HCM components identified in the Qawwali performances of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. These elements are present from the beginning of alaap till the Drut taan-s at the end of the performances. For example, in the beginning, alaaps, Nusrat maintained the purity of the ragas with proper Swar-Lagav as per

N R R R G G G M M P P D D D N N N S - S N N N D D D P P P M M M G G R R R S

S R S R R - R G R G G - G M G M M - M P M P P - P D P D D - D N D N N - N S N S S

This study of Qawwali performances by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan states that how Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan has blended the components of HCM in his Qawwali performances.

Conclusion

This research reveals the innovative blending of Hindustani raga music components into the Qawwali performances by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, highlighting his in-depth understanding of both musical traditions. By seamlessly integrating elements such as gamak, alaap, sargam, meend, and khatka, he redefined the traditional confines of Qawwali, enriching its aesthetics

the raga and other components, like Vadi-Samvadi swar, pakad, etc. The alaap is sung with badhat with one-on-one notes, which is exactly the style of alaap in Hindustani classical music. Mostly, alankarik and sargam tana-s with heavy gamak-s have been used.

and expressive dimensions. The findings demonstrate how NFAK's mastery of HCM added a different texture to Qawwali's technical depth and contributed to its global appeal and cultural relevance.

Relevance

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's fusion of classical music with Qawwali exemplifies a significant evolution within the genre, offering insights into how traditional art forms can adapt and thrive in changing cultural contexts. This study contributes to the academic discourse on analysing the cross-genre innovations of NFAK and highlights the



potential for interdisciplinary study within musicology, bridging devotional and classical traditions to understand their shared heritage and contemporary transformations better.

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5. YouTube sample links –

S.No.	Name of Qawwali	URL
1	Man Kunta Maula	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_HmZF-tK3c
2	Sanso Ki Mala	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7AqPH-Lgml&t=1136s
3	Aaj Rung hai	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vqv0TpbUKI
4	Nit Khair Manga	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-s4mM9ls8o
5	Sakhi ri mohe piya	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5_O-3QKJ6w
6	Balam more ghar aayo	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcSf88Sx0RY
7	Piya more ghar aaye	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J26eb6U4cig&t=1022s
8	Araj sunlijo meri	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBjaKWhLMrk
9	Nazare karam kro	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcnL2GzHRLM
10	Balam ghar nhi aaye	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv_sTL0HLAQ
11	Raag Maala	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UC_y8KFum-g
12	tan man tumpe vaaru	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1Yjr6ewU7w&t=1761s
13	Kaaj kro humre poore	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xMGLt7CVU
14	Hazrat Khwaja sang kheliye dhmar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFgGD8X0oVA
15	Koi bole raam raam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7yro9YaTzY
16	Raag tilang presentation	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDnfebybN6Y
17	Hameer Khayal	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5ikUqJU4I
18	Rakho mori laaj	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orxwIUtTx0w
19	Presentation of Raag Ahir Bharant	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhPnmrfBTb4
20	Todi karo nayiya Paar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmOMBkpR3JM
21	Raag Sanan Kalyan classical	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Zf0FSs19eE
22	Raag Bhairav classical	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKKrWufPJfM
23	Raag Bahar classical	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0b41FWO0NA
24	Raag Bilawal Sargam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2fHVAOtUdg
25	Humare Poore Kaaj kro	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVcedKklQf0

Foodnotes

1. Arabic word which means an utterance of the Prophet.
2. These ragas are not found in general search. It looks like NFAK has created these raga-s as per his creative requirements.
3. Sitarkhani is also known as Punjabi Theka or Addhha of Teentala.

