



Sarangi : present state and role in contemporary Hindustani classical music

Ujwal Nagar

Abstract

Research Scholar, Department of Music, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak

Sarangi is one of the most refined and sophisticated bowed string instruments in Hindustani classical music. The tone of sarangi is considered to be closest to the human voice, which enables this remarkable instrument to replicate most of the embellishments in voice. Therefore it is considered to be the most ideal instrument to accompany Hindustani classical vocal music. With the rising popularity of Khyal and Thumri gayaki, sarangi took the centre stage in Hindustani music accompaniment and also began to be actively used for playing 'lehra' in Dance and Tabla solo performances. It is due to the contribution of some great sarangi players, that sarangi started getting recognized as a solo instrument. In today's world of exposure and experimentation, we can hear the voice of sarangi on various platforms and projects such as fusion bands, films, recordings, experimental music albums etc. However, with changing times and for various reasons the sarangi is no longer looked upon as a primary instrument for accompanying Hindustani classical vocal music. At the same time, one also doesn't get to see solo sarangi performances that frequently as compared to its contemporary instruments like Sitar and Sarod.

The objective of this article is to study the present state and the role of this remarkable instrument in Hindustani classical music in present times. This article has taken references from books, articles and seminar proceedings related to this subject and discussing various performing formats and analyzing some of the works of sarangi players to understand their role in present Indian music scene. Through this article will be exploring the present state of sarangi in contemporary Indian music scene, the reasons behind its decline in Indian classical music and the challenges this instrument faces today and in the coming future.

Keywords: Sarangi, Colour, Kathak, Khayal, Thumri, Lehra player

Research Paper

While watching a rare clip of Ustad Amir Khan singing raag Rageshri, one is amazed by the Artistic nuances and grace of this great Ustad unfolding the layers of the raga with soulful modulations and alapchari. Khan sahib's every vocal modulation is beautifully echoed by the sound of a remarkable instrument almost shadowing the singing truly accompanying every vocal embellishment and playing along, at the same time creating the 'mahaul' of the raga. This fascinating instrument is sarangi and the artist playing it is Ustad Munir Khan.[¹] This is one of the many examples of the performances where one can see this beautiful instrument flawlessly accompanying the vocal performances and elevating the mood of the Raga.

This was just a glimpse of the many times when sarangi accompaniment was mostly a regular feature in classical vocal concerts as compared to the present times. sarangi

is one of the most refined and sophisticated bowed string instruments in Hindustani classical music. According to some musicians, the word sarangi is a combination of two words 'seh' (Persian equivalent of three) and 'rang' (Persian equivalent of colored) corrupted as sarangi. The term seh-rangi, seh represents the three melody strings and sarangi is widely believed to mean "a hundred colours" indicating its adaptability to a wide range of musical styles, its flexible tunability, and its ability to produce a large palette of tonal colour and emotional nuance. Another school of thought believes that sarangi is Hindi for 'of a hundred colours' or "the voice of hundred colours". The Idiom is derived from two words of Hindi: "sau" means "100" and rangâ which means "colour".[²]

The reference to the multiplicity of colours is often said to refer to the richness of the sound of the instrument and its

ability to adapt to various styles whether its Khyal, Thumri, Tappa, Dadra, Bhajan etc. In the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians the Sarangi is described as follows 'a bowed chordophone occurring in a number of forms in the Indian subcontinent. It has a waisted body a wide neck without frets and is usually carved from a single block of wood, in addition to its three or four strings it has one or two sets of sympathetic strings. Sarangi originated as a folk instrument but has been used increasingly in classical music.[3]

The sarangi is revered for its uncanny capacity to imitate the timbre and inflections of the human voice as well as for the intensity of emotional expression to which it lends itself. In the words of Sir Yehudi Menuhin: "The sarangi remains not only the authentic and original Indian bowed stringed instrument but the one which... expresses the very soul of Indian feeling and thought." [4]

One of the most remarkable bowed instruments of Indian music initially made its mark predominantly as an accompanying instrument. With the popularity of Khyal and thumri/gayaki it became quite synonymous with vocal music accompaniment. Be it from Abdul Karim Khan, Kesarbai Kerkar, Faiyaz Khan, Amir Khan, Kishori Amonkar, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan etc. they all at some point had sarangi accompaniment by sarangi legends such as Ram Narayan, Sultan Khan, Sabri Khan, etc. The legacy of sarangi has a deep connection with some of the legends of classical vocal music. Ustad Amir Khan came from a traditional family of sarangi players, his father Ustad Shahmeer Khan was a great sarangi expert of that time, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan began his musical career as a sarangi player and his gayaki reflected the voice of sarangi with those perfect intonations and three octave taans. Even in the current times famous artistes like Pandit Rajan Sajan Mishra had received guidance from their uncle sarangi virtuoso Pandit Gopal Prasad Mishra, also Ustad Mashkoor Khan from Kirana Gharana had received his talim from his father Ustad Shakoor Khan a great sarangi maestro. The Gayaki of all these great artistes reflects the tone and subtleties of sarangi, and it can be said that the contribution of sarangi to the classical music went beyond just being an accompaniment instrument.

Role of sarangi in different Performing formats

In present times things have changed quite a bit and Sarangi accompaniment is no longer a regular feature in the

concerts. There are very few concerts with sarangi accompanying the vocal music. Dance performances especially 'Kathak' is an exception where sarangi can still be seen playing the 'nagma' to keep the reference of the Taal for the dancers and accompanying instrumentalists to perform within a framework.

So does it indicate that sarangi as an instrument is losing its place in these modern times? Honestly there is no simple answer to this question. To understand the depth of this issue we need to first discuss the role of sarangi in various performing formats of Indian music to ascertain its present state.

In traditional Hindustani classical concerts sarangi has always had various roles to play. The tone of sarangi is considered to be closest to the human voice, which enables this remarkable instrument to replicate most of the embellishments of voice. Therefore it is still considered to be the most ideal instrument to accompany Hindustani classical music. With the rising popularity of Khyal and Thumri/gayaki, sarangi took the centre stage in Hindustani music accompaniment but in the present times it won't be an exaggeration to state that it's rare to see a vocal concert with sarangi player accompaniment. It seems that it is no more the preferred accompanying instrument for Hindustani vocal concerts and it's being replaced by harmonium, an instrument whose roots of origin are considered to be foreign but now can be seen and heard at almost every vocal concert.

Another role which a sarangi player plays in classical concert is that of 'nagma' or 'lehra player'. In 'Kathak' dance performances a sarangi player's primary job is to play 'lehra' in which the dancer showcases his/her repertoire. In a Kathak performance he is one of the accompanists apart from the tabla player and other instruments such as flute or sarod. He would also occasionally accompany the vocalist in whatever compositions they are singing for the dancer. This is one format in the present times where sarangi still holds its place. One can get to see various sarangi players accompanying Kathak dancers and also being employed in institutions like Kathak Kendra in New Delhi, Lucknow Kathak Kendra etc since sarangi is still considered an integral part of a Kathak performance.

Another format of performance where a sarangi player is relevant is in tabla, pakhawaj solo performances. Here

sarangi Player mostly acts as a lehra player, but is the only accompanist. A sarangiplayer mostly gets anaalap probably in the beginning before establishing the 'lehra' or 'nagma' and therefore it is basically keeping time in form of a melody. This format was taken a step ahead by Zakir Hussain and Sultan Khan. If one hears and watches the solo performances of Zakir Hussain along with Sultan Khan on sarangi they seem almost inseparable. Zakir Hussain had the vision and the respect for Sultan Khan by not restricting his role to just doing an occasional aalap in the beginning and gave him the freedom to improvise for a couple cycles of the taal post every couple minutes of continuous Tabla playing as one can see for themselves in one of the clips of the masters. [5]

In the mentioned video clip one can observe how Sultan Khan is setting the mood of the performance by taking a free flow aalap in the beginning and how smoothly he is establishing the lehra. The initial aalap is not a mere formality but is an important piece in the performance leading the way for Tabla to enter in the stream of the Taal. Even the lehra played by Sultan Khan in the first couple minutes is beautifully kept fluid with slight melodic ornamentations and slides which is setting the mood for Zakir Hussain to build the 'Peshkar'. At 8 minutes into the clip Zakir Hussain finishes a composition and Sultan Khan does an improvisation for couple cycles of the Taala and then he again smoothly comes back to keep the lehra for the next composition. There is this amazing display of understanding between these two artistes who exactly know what to expect from each other. It is a musical partnership between these two masters and this partnership redefined the concept of Tabla solo, and I feel one should credit Sultan Khan for bringing his own insight and understanding into the art of lehra playing.

In her book "Master Musicians of India: Hereditary sarangi Players Speak", Regula Burckhardt Qureshi asks a question to the late Ustad Sultan Khan to which he replies, "A good lehra is that I stick with the rhythm through out, you understand that. And with in that I embellish the melody and add sweetness to it." [6]

He also emphasizes the importance of good lehra by mentioning an incident when Zakir Hussain just played for 41 min since he could not rescue the lehra player all the time. In the same interview Regula also asks a question about whether playing lehra for dance still gives sarangi

players work, to which Sultan Khan answers "Yes, the dancers have preserved the 'traditional' way, and that is very good: sarangi players are employed in dance schools, etc. And most of all, All India Radio has preserved the sarangi until now, by giving jobs to sarangi players." [7]

However in the contemporary times tabla solo concerts can also be seen with harmoniums the accompanying instrument instead of the sarangi. Especially in Maharashtra and Kolkata many of the Tabla solo concerts one gets to see harmonium players playing the role of keeping the nagma. But this could also be a case of convenience since it is becoming relatively easier to find a good harmonium player in those cities which, I am afraid is becoming the case more or less everywhere. One can watch examples of solo performances of accomplished tabla players such as Yogesh Samsi, Kumar Bose, Anindo Chatterjee who are playing with the harmonium accompaniment indicating this changing trend.

Although apart from being an accompanying instrument thanks to legendary players like Bundu Khan, Ram Narayan, Sultan Khan who contributed in a major way in establishing sarangi as a solo instrument. Pandit Ram Narayan needs to be given credit for fighting the system and taking a stand on giving solo sarangi performances. Panditji mentions an incident in one of the interviews with Joep Bor in his book 'The Voice of sarangi' which led him to pursue sarangi as a solo instrument, "I played with Amir Khan sahib in 1948. He sang a composition in Raga Gujari Todi. I don't know what came over me, but when he began singing taans. I put down my bow and listened to him attentively. When he reached the sam I started playing the same tanas, literally forcing him to listen to me. We were equal artists and the musicians who were present applauded my effort. The majority of singers, however, maintained that the accompanist should remain subdued. I thought if there is so much music in me, why should I stay in the background, remain a slave and get more and more frustrated." [8]

Sarangi in experimentation and collaborations

Sarangi is in a very interesting space right now speaking in terms of collaborating with different genres of music. Today when there is a huge impact of globalization and we are living in the age of multiculturalism and experimentation sarangi has got a unique space as far as collaborations and fusion music is concerned. Various

sarangi players can be seen collaborating with other genres of music, playing in bands, ensembles while exploring new avenues of performances and exploring new possibilities. Late Ustad Sultan Khan did a lot of experimental and fusion work with Zakir Hussain and with popular names in electronic music such as Talvin Singh, Karsh Kale etc. He was also a member of the Indian fusion group Tabla Beat Science, with Zakir Hussain and American bassist Bill Laswell.

In the present times Suhail Yusuf Khan who is the grand son of late Ustad Sabri Khan is part of various bands and projects in India and abroad, to name a few are Advaita, 'Yorkston Thorne Khan' (Trio) etc. He has done recordings for international artists like Stevey, Bombay Dub Orchestra etc.. He is currently in USA and doing his masters in ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University. In Suhail's own words, "Today's India is hit by Globalization. We now have gentrified areas, multiculturalism, and urbanization impacting our metropolitan cities. To survive a sarangiya doesn't have to be dependent on a classical vocalist/kathak dancer/ghazal singer. In today's day and age, where internet is the biggest platform to showcase your own work, you could possibly do anything." [9]

Apart from Suhail, Murad Ali is a popular and renowned artist from Delhi who can be seen playing in almost all formats, whether its accompanying vocal performances with greats such as Ustad Rashid Khan or whether its playing solo or fusion concerts. He has his own band named 'Soul Samvad' where Both Murad Ali (Sarangi) and Fateh Ali (Sitar) collaborate with different genre of instruments such as drums and keys while playing classical melodies at the core of it.

Kamal Sabri is the Son of Late Ustad Sabri Khan who has been involved in various collaborative projects as well some of them even include composing music for albums such as Sabri Ensemble, Sarangi Funk, Indian Contemporary Music Orchestra, Vienna Chamber Orchestra etc. He has also recorded for bands like 'Massive Attack', 'One Giant Leap'. Ahsan Ali Khan is also another accomplished sarangi player from Delhi who has been composing music and playing and composing for Projects like Sufi Gospel Project lead by Sonam Kalra which also performed in Coke Studio@MTV. Apart from this he also experiments while composing melodies with influences from jazz music and also performs his concept of a sarangi ensemble as

'Ahsan Ali & The Sarangi Collective'.

Dilshad Khan and Sabir Khan are another Dynamic young sarangi players who are carrying the legacy of Ustad Sultan Khan to a new height. Dilshad Khan who is the nephew of Ustad Sultan Khan has had the honor to perform with artists like Ustad Zakir Hussain, Trilok Gurtu, Shankar Mahadevan to name a few. He has played sarangi with Ustad Zakir Hussain in the album Global Drum Project which won the prestigious Grammy Award in 2009. Dilshad Khan is also a famous name in Bollywood music industry, he has played for more than 500 Bollywood movies. [10]

Whereas Sabir Khan, son of Ustad Sultan Khan is also a well known name in the music circuit. He has performed alongside artists such as Ustad Zakir Hussain, Pt. Kumar Bose to name a few and has also played for various feature films as well. He was also part of A.R. Rahman and Shreya Ghoshal's episode for MTV Unplugged. [11]

Decline of sarangi in Classical Performances and vocal accompaniment.

An important aspect that we need to pay more attention to is the declining role of sarangi in classical music performances and why we get to see such few vocal concerts with sarangi accompaniment. I think one of the reasons is that sarangi is a very difficult instrument to play. Being a fretless bow instrument and the technique and positioning of left hand to produce notes is quite unique and unlike any other instrument. In the left hand technique most sarangi players use the part of the nail under cuticle (and some use the skin above the cuticle) with fingertips touching the fingerboard. This involves both sliding from one note to other and articulating separate notes. [12] To develop such a technique for any student is quite difficult and painful in the initial stage of learning. It needs rigorous training and supervision and for a long time a student of this instrument has to struggle to even stay in tune. Also most of the players belong to a family of musicians who have inherited the skill of playing the sarangi from their father or someone in their family. Another reason is that apart from mastery in the Raagas and Taals, a player has to get acquainted to the art of bowing as the slightest changes in pressure of bowing can change the intensity and feel of the note. Third and the foremost reason is that with knowledge of various raagas and taals and after

receiving a rigorous training, a sarangi player is an accomplished artist and has his own imagination and creativity and therefore, while accompanying there is a sense of competition between vocalist and the sarangi player which may bother the vocalist since he is the soloist in that setting. But such conflicts also lead to some great accomplishments, for instance in the case of Pandit Ramnarayan where a feeling of dissatisfaction for not being able to present his own interpretation of the raaga led him to become a soloist and further expanded the pathway of sarangi players of today. A solution if we may suggest is that a vocalist should also offer enough space and chances for the sarangi player to showcase his creativity and nuances of his playing.

Great singers like Kishori Amonkar and Ghulam Mustafa Khan Saab had some interesting views on this issue which were presented in the ITC SRA seminar in 1994 which I think is very relevant in present scenario.

In one of the recorded interviews of Kishori Ji taken by Roshan Shahani she was asked about possibility of instances when the sarangi player goes ahead of the vocalist while the vocalist is doing his/her badhat. To which Kishoriji responded by saying, "We must understand one thing, the sarangi accompanist who goes ahead in playing can only be a musician of a high class. But this question of superseding the vocalist is not important. Sometimes the sarangi player may want to express something spontaneously, then we must support him. There are sarangi soloists. Doesn't it mean that they are artists in their own right." [13]

Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan had an interesting and rather different view which he shared while speaking in the same seminar, where I would like to quote him on the reason behind sarangi not being visible in the current classical scenario "One reason could be, that the sarangi player tries to take control of the performance in place of vocalist. A competition develops and the sarangi player starts overshadowing the performance of the vocalist. Let's suppose that I go to a foreign country with large luggage. I ask my friend for assistance and they comply by picking up my luggage as well as me. This is sure to cause discomfort to me. Similarly When a sarangi accompanist takes control of a performance instead of accompanying the artist, he is sure to cause discomfort. When a vocalist pauses in his performance, the sarangi player should step

in but not for long. For eg If I say "Sa re Ga" and the sarangi player plays Sa re ga after a second it is sure to disturb me. Instead of that it would be better if he/she only plays the 'Ga'. This would help the vocalist greatly." [14]

The declining role of sarangi in classical music format is not just a current issue but it has been discussed and talked about for a long time. The rise of harmonium in Indian classical music as an accompanying instrument was seen as a threat to the status of sarangi. In an effort to preserve the sarangi, All India Radio had also put a ban on the harmonium from the national broadcasting network. More than three decades later AIR held a seminar to review the ban where eminent scholars presented their views. V.H Deshpande, a disciple of Govindrao Tembe had mentioned what he considered as one of the challenges of sarangi, "the foremost hurdles in the way of sarangi is the very virtue of its resonating strings, which are so many that they take annoyingly long time for being tuned in correct intonation. And it is much more difficult to do so in an AIR studio in the few minutes just before the programme. It is again next to impossible for the sarangi to change... scale in between two items where every second wasted is a dead weight on the singer." [15]

Above mentioned statement is certainly a challenging task for sarangi players as with so many sympathetic strings, it is quite difficult for a sarangi player to tune all the strings perfectly with a change in the raaga presentation during the performance. Although it might not hold true with experienced artistes with a total mastery over their instruments, still it is important that the vocalist give sufficient time for sarangi player to tune the strings without letting this break the momentum of the performance.

Conclusion

As compared to its contemporary instruments such as sarod and sitar which are predominantly solo instruments, sarangihold a unique place since it is both an accompanying and a solo instrument. Therefore, the challenge it faces is also bigger in terms of its role in the Indian music. Often the blame shifts towards the rise of harmonium being one of the prominent factors of the diminishing role of Sarangi in accompaniment, but researcher believe it would not be wise to focus only on that. In one of the interviews of Dhruva Ghosh (part of the monthly baithaksat Arvind Parikh's home), he mentions, "If you notice the old 78 rpm

records, there is sarangi as well as harmonium accompaniment in many of the vocal performances. Ustad Faiyaz Khan is an example where there is Ghulam Rasool on harmonium along with sarangi accompaniment. So harmonium was already there in the main stream so to say. But later it gained exclusivity and sarangi became less and less... In society lots of shifts take place, this was one of them.”[16] We need not criticize a particular instrument for the downfall of another. Rather, criticism should be based on facts, and the fact of the matter is that harmonium has proved its success in present times. There is no doubt that Sarangi is a far richer sounding instrument, but there are certain problems that must first be accepted and seriously looked into. Some of the major issues with sarangi’s role pertain to the approach and style of playing rather than the instrument. Talim along with the right attitude and approach needs to be instilled in the students of sarangi to do justice in different roles of performances. Sarangi has various styles and can be performed in various settings whether its folk, semi classical, classical and so on. Therefore it has immense chances of growth and survival but steps must be taken to raise overall awareness and knowledge regarding this instrument. Past initiatives like sarangi mela organized in Bhopal was a positive step in this direction and such events should be encouraged and supported by the government and the artistes as well. Unfortunately, such occasions are less and few where all the music community comes together to show their support for a particular cause. This instrument needs a 360 degree initiative which involves the government, the organisers, the audience and most importantly the artistes and its practitioners. The government has many resources and can help by awarding financial assistance for research and further studies. Organizers of any classical music festival, may consider keeping atleast one or two solo performances of sarangi. This will give encouragement to sarangi players to showcase their talent as a solo artist which will positively affect their attitude while accompanying vocalists where they need to take a back seat while playing. While giving a solo performance, it’s important for the players to select ragas and compositions while gauging the audience. It would also be a good idea if they end the concert with a folk piece or thumri while singing couple lines as well, this will attract the masses to this instrument and will establish a relationship with the audience. Senior vocalists and instrumentalists should come forward to groom sarangi players and conduct workshops focusing not only on the technique but the psychological and emotional aspect of sarangi playing while accompanying or solo performances. Ultimately it’s the

artiste community and its practitioners who have to do the real job and the classical artiste community has to show trust in sarangi players. Disappearance of sarangi from classical concerts will truly be an unfortunate loss for Indian music.

References

1. <https://www.youtube.com>, Performance of Ustad Amir Khan with Ustad Munir Khan on sarangi, Web accessed on 20th Oct 2017, 10 : 30 hrs.
2. <https://sherazhyder.wordpress.com>, sarangi, past, present, and future, web accessed on 26th Oct, 2017, 17 : 30 hrs.
3. Bor, Joep, J.J Bhabha, National Centre for the performing arts, Nariman Point Bombay 400021, First edition - 1986 p. 9
4. <http://www.Sarangi.net>, The sarangi, Web accessed on 28th Oct, 2017, 16 : 15 hrs.
5. <https://www.youtube.com>, Performance of Ustad Zakir Hussain along with late Ustad Sultan Khan on sarangi, Web Accessed on 30th Oct 2017, 15 : 00 hrs.
6. Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt, Master Musicians of India: Hereditary sarangi Players Speak, Publisher: Routledge, 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN, 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY10017, USA, Page 173
7. Ibid, Page 175
8. Op. cit., Bor, Joep, p. 95
9. Interview over email on 11th Nov 2017.
10. <https://www.virasatfoundation.com>, album, Dilshad Khan, Web Accessed on 2nd Nov, 2017, 17 : 15 hrs.
11. <https://www.revolvy.com>, Sabir Khan, Web accessed on 5th Nov 2017, 18 : 30 hrs.
12. Op. cit., Bor, Joep, p. 30
13. Proceedings, Seminar on sarangi, Sangeet Research Academy, p. 26
14. Ibid, p. 34
15. AIR seminar on the Harmonium, Journal of the Sangeet Natak akademi, Ravindra Bhawan, Firoze Shah Road, New Delhi, p. 17
16. <https://www.youtube.com>, 5th Baithak Pt. Dhruva Ghosh in Dialogue with Pt. Arvind Parikh on sarangi and its evolution, Web accessed on 5th Nov, 2017, 19 : 00 hrs.