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Tradition and changes in presentation of Khyal genre of Hindustani classical music

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Abstract

A Genre is developed from the roots of the ancient genre or style gradually comes into existence. All art forms undergo changes. No art is steady. Every art form is progressive in nature. Like all Indian classical music, Khyal is modal, with a single melodic line and no harmonic parts. The modes are called raga, and each raga is a complicated framework of melodic rules. The Tradition and Change brought new audiences, quite large in number compared to the few who could have access to classical music in feudal societies, do not so much enjoy as consume. Music is no longer savoured with patience; it is devoured in a hurry. Not that the feudal patrons of yesteryear were perfect, but they did allow the musician his own space and the freedom to develop artefacts of tremendous intricacy and complexity. Also, even when their own musical literacy was less than adequate, they did not betray any intolerance. These norms are no longer operative in the milieu of the musician today. The slow pace, the reflective strain, the subtle nuance, the eloquent silence is all becoming rare, if not altogether extinct. The pace of music has quickened without earning any meaningful intensification.

Key Words : Khayal, Dhrupad, Prabandha, Dhamar, Bhakti

Research Paper

The process of change is essential to the survival of an art. When tradition repeats itself it becomes mechanical, a habit, but when non-conformity does not connect with tradition it fails to communicate.

A Genre is developed from the roots of the ancient genre or style gradually comes into existence. All art forms undergo changes. No art is steady. Every art form is progressive in nature. Like all Indian classical music, Bonnie Wade said, "Khyal is modal, with a single melodic line and no harmonic parts. The modes are called raga, and each raga is a complicated framework of melodic rules."[1]

The Genre Khyal came into existence in Indian Classical Music with the concept of imagination in music. During the course of this process the phenomena of the gharana system has emerged, and, due to its temporal nature, seems likely to disappear or at least change its relevance to the continued evolution of khyal as a vocal style. In evaluating the subject of gharana-s it is important to make a distinction between musical style and social system. From the socio-cultural point of view the subject of gharana-s has been extensively explored by many musicologists .The extent to which diverse influences have amalgamated to create what is recognisably a distinct style becomes very apparent.

In relation to khyal performance, the discussion surrounding this complex subject of sometimes gharana-s obscures the purpose for which they arose; namely, to cultivate, protect and transmit a musical tradition. The relevance of the gharana system as a socio-cultural institution and as a generator of differing styles cannot be entirely overlooked. Once the urban elite became interested in learning and demanded an expansion in the teaching of classical music, traditional modes of instruction too underwent change, generating shifts in the guru uiuyaparampara. Current practitioners range from the hereditary musicians to the first generation ones and even to non-Indian scholars and performers. The *gandabandh* tradition where a student is formally inducted into a system of tutelage is today almost non-existent. And while these

changes are more marked in non-lineal arrangements, there is also a tendency for the gharana-s to emerge among families of musicians.

For, just as aspects of musical phenomena relate to the context in which they occur, so khyal as a performance genre relates to a larger socio-cultural context which has provided the environment in which it has grown and flourished.

North Indian classical music originated from Samaveda, the oldest scripture of India. Genres such as *dhrupad* and *prabandha* (another type of prayer) created eloquent but rigid compositions. Slowly and steadily, with Muslim influence, there was a natural movement away from a strict adherence to structure and text and toward experimentation with improvisation—toward the creation of khyal. In a book titled–The evolution of Khayal transcript of monograph prabandh and Khayal clearly mentioned, "Where the songs of *dhrupad* or *prabandha* were always related to devotion (prayers to the deities) and performed by the Brahmins (the highest caste), khyal emphasized love, emotion, and other worldly matters and featured singers from many different races, religions, and castes. Thus, the rendition of the 'Khyal' assumed a more expansive and flexible character without infringing any of the essential characteristics of North Indian classical music.[2]

North Indian classical music underwent tremendous change through the influence of frequent foreign invasions and conquests. Persian influence was the most predominant, as India was ruled by Muslims for a few hundred years. Originally, the genres of *dhrupad*, *dhamar*, and *prabandhas* were sung by only the Hindu Brahmins. When Muslims occupied and ruled India, they learned these genres and some became great musicians. North Indian classical music never lost its unique characteristics (of improvisation) and identity (the ragas), but was enriched enormously by assimilating ideas from foreign music such as formation of new ragas, having more worldly themes, and less strict structure.

In India, knowledge, erudition, and art are always highly esteemed. Therefore, over time, artists from different religions, cultures, and castes are often integrated into Indian musical culture. If an artist displays sufficient skill and knowledge in performance, she is generally welcomed by other North Indian classical musicians and by the general public.

'Nobody appreciates its great utility. People will certainly repent one day. The next decade will kill most of the leading musicians and scholars.' In the year 1922, so wrote Pt. Vishnu Narayan Bhatkande, a seminal figure of Indian musicology, about the steady decline of Hindustani classical music in India in a letter to a close friend.[3] Nearly nine decades later, despite a vastly different and rapidly changing social world, the refrain that classical music is deteriorating and suffering with each passing day, remains. Typically old is gold and the new or contemporary can certainly not meet the mark. A combination of rapid social changes and technological advances pitted against the rather organized structure that classical music lives within, makes the situation somewhat confusing and a discussion on the future of this tradition difficult. It is, however, important to remember that this very culture of music has persisted through major changes – be it wars or the rise and fall of kingdoms. This is also a culture that has journeyed away from its 'home' only to be welcomed in other parts of the world. The spread of Indian classical music is reflective of its ability to thrive and adapt across time and space.

The nervousness around the falling standards of classical music is perhaps linked to a perceived purity and classicism that has come to be closely associated with this form. Through this period it has undergone several transitions – redefining audiences, their expectations and those of the 'performer'. These changes become visible, to use Weidman's categories, in performance, context and practice. Most documentation on the subject marks the 13th century as a period when Muslim musicians were an important force in India. This continued through the 17th and 18th centuries with musical activity in North India increasingly dominated by them. Extensive patronage by the Mughals and their nobility continued well into the 19th century despite seminal political events, including the British expulsion of the two major Muslim rulers around the 1857 Mutiny (Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to Calcutta in 1856 and Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal king, to Rangoon in 1858). Author Van Der Meer said, "The *gharana* was an important vantage point of artistic identity that indicated a comprehensive musicological ideology. The gharana's emerged in their present form in the late 19th-early 20th century. The gharana system was a direct result of music being patronised in the courts of

medieval India as exemplified by their names – Gwalior, Jaipur, Patiala, and other princely kingdoms. An important aspect of this tradition was the *gurushishya parampara* that embodied the living and learning relationship between teacher and the pupil in a very personalized manner in the oral tradition. Although notation of the *cheez* also came into practice more vigorously around the same time, there is little documentation of what was handed down to a student in class. Referred to as *seena-ba-seena*, students of Indian classical music even today learn by ear. These gharana-s, tightly structured kinship groupings, monopolized the production of professional musicians until well into the 20th century."

Simultaneously however, music in the 20th century was also becoming a product of cultural modernity, of a new national identity which, on the one hand, was part of a framework of liberal secularism and, on the other, created a divide between the Hindu and Muslim music communities. The construction of the Hindu Brahminical national tradition, such as through the efforts of D.V. Paluskar, brought in 'Bhakti Nationalism', connecting performance with religiosity, *talim* with worship. Classical music came to be viewed as an important expression of successful cultural resistance to colonialism.

Post Independence in 1947, non-hereditary musicians too started gaining importance as performers, given the social respectability that music had begun to achieve professionally. Also some of the Muslim hereditary musicians moved to Pakistan after Partition, partly due to entrance of other musicians into a profession otherwise dominated by hereditary groups. What happened to music in Pakistan post-Partition is, however, another story, one which highlights the death of many traditions associated with it. Musicians and experts lament the impact of laws that banned various forms of classical music – often terming it as Hindu – especially during the Zia-ul-Haq years. Even through these challenging times, there were small efforts to maintain and strengthen the traditions, though they met with little success. All this is indicative of the fact that democratization of the art forms in India clearly provided the basis and opportunity for survival if not a renaissance.

This period also witnessed major changes in the gharana system, a process that in fact continues apace. For one, the reasons behind the emergence of these groupings are perhaps less significant today; this is not to take away from their musical contributions. People are now much more open to incorporating different styles into their music.

Once the urban elite became interested in learning and demanded an expansion in the teaching of classical music, traditional modes of instruction too underwent change, generating shifts in the guru shishya parampara. Current practitioners range from the hereditary musicians to the first generation ones and even to non-Indian scholars and performers. V.H. Deshpande indicate a tradition which is on the verge of extinct and said, "The *gandabandh* tradition where a student is formally inducted into a system of tutelage is today almost non-existent. And while these changes are more marked in non-lineal arrangements, there is also a tendency for the gharana-s to emerge among families of musicians.[4]

Another important reason for a decline in the strongholds of *gharanedar* singing is the impact of technology on the way we listen to music, significantly increasing the exposure to different styles of music. There are two worlds that still exist around the world of technology – one that believes in this change and the other that feels it has done intense damage to music. Deshpandey further said, "A noted connoisseur and collector based in Ahmebdabad, now in the '90s, reminisces how till even as late as the 1960s, *baithaks* and *mehfils* were regularly organized in the homes of wealthy patrons. These soirees would go on till the early hours of the morning, providing artists an opportunity to present a range of time-appropriate ragas, elaborating each to the audience's delight, and making it possible to express a more versatile and varied repertoire. This discussion continues even a hundred years after technology first entered the world of Indian music. Recorded music came to India in 1902 with the recording by Gauhar Jan, the star of her times. Gramophone companies, initially run by Americans and Europeans and not by upper caste Indians, actively recruited the Baiji's for their early recordings.[5]

The gramophone record not only began to revolutionize ways in which music was heard, but gradually started to craft new social norms associated with it. Initially there was resistance from the Ustads who felt that recordings might mean giving away their precious repertoire or that it was devaluing their music by making it available to the

public at large. However, the commercial success of the record made this avenue an attractive option for many musicians, both performers and accompanists.

While the gramophone companies were purely capitalist enterprises, the All India Radio started in the 1930s as a nationalist venture to further institutionalize and make music respectable. Ironically, the rules governing broadcasting, more than provide an opportunity, actually served to marginalize several popular performers of the time, significantly the Baiji's. The Baiji's notably had to put up with the indignity of the All India Radio, which made it compulsory that female singers be married, even insisting that they use a separate entrance to enter the studio.

Even as these changes impacted the social complexities of music, both making it difficult for hereditary musicians and attractive to other communities, the 21st century has seen a frenzied growth of technology redefining the listening experience. People now increasingly listen to music on iPods and mobile phones, even as a lot of the music is downloadable from the internet through sites that indulge in piracy and have little concern for intellectual property rights.

Technology actually has the power to create new genres – Asian Underground is one such popular and commercially successful example. The market-electronic media nexus now dictates creative spaces. There is a blurring of categories, a mushrooming of new genres (Sufi-Rock), much of which goes into one large melting pot of popular or film music. In fact we are at a point when most top-ranking classical musicians have at some point been tempted to engage with popular music – film or otherwise – to ensure visibility and to some extent impact their public popularity. It would not be incorrect, for instance, to say that a repeated appearance in a reality show as a judge, or as a columnist in a newspaper supplement which may or may not talk about music, or doing a one-off playback song for a film, gets an artist the visibility and attention which hundreds of concerts may not be able to. Reality shows and film music appear to be the only kind of music that satiates the Indian and even international palette. Today the idea of success has been converted into visibility in magazines and on television.

Then there are other faster paced changes underway, ones that can overwhelm both the performer and listener. Digital music has been spreading large and wide, giving opportunities to even non-musicians who may not have any formal learning, do not sing or perform live, to create music through machines. The popularity and commercial potential of this genre of music makes classical music a less attractive option. The use of computers has also resulted in amazing changes within the recording and music industry. Recorded sound can now be processed, manipulated and altered more than ever before. What would have been sacrilege to the purist at one time is now quite acceptable – pitch correction for instance.

Every generation needs to define its own version of the classical. Though music history in India has so far largely relied on the memories of communities of musicians, this may not always be a sound source, particularly in the context of future planning. A good starting point might be to identify what information we actually have on classical music in India. An audit of the living conditions of artistes would reveal the many difficulties faced by this community. Some researchers and scholars even suggest that information on musicians should become a part of the census data, instead of merely categorising them as 'self-employed'.

The Tradition and Change brought new audiences, quite large in number compared to the few who could have access to classical music in feudal societies, do not so much enjoy as consume. Music is no longer savoured with patience; it is devoured in a hurry. Not that the feudal patrons of yesteryear were perfect, but they did allow the musician his own space and the freedom to develop artefacts of tremendous intricacy and complexity. Also, even when their own musical literacy was less than adequate, they did not betray any intolerance. These norms are no longer operative in the milieu of the musician today. The slow pace, the reflective strain, the subtle nuance, the eloquent silence is all becoming rare, if not altogether extinct. The pace of music has quickened without earning any meaningful intensification. The poetics of the loud, of the broad and the obvious, of the theatrical and the tantalising, of the verbose and the sensuous are taking over. The lyrical excess overtakes the epic grandeur. The tough and the stubborn form yields to soft options and ever-shifting contours of musical delineation. The warm chamber has been stretched to become the cold proscenium, the mehfil [intimate gathering] yielding plæce

to the conference. Classical music in India has succeeded in creating the general impression that it is very ancient and has remained in its present form for a very long time. This, of course, is not true. What is true is the fact that there is a hard core, a certain orthodox component, which seems to have survivied for centuries and which gives classical music its essential structure. Perhaps without such orthodoxy, the classical can hardly hope to survive. But, on the other hand, it ought to be immediately acknowledged that the present format is very much a construct or, shall we say, a series of constructs in the present century. They are new versions, edited, refined and expanded, of several old ideas and structures revived as new and exciting discoveries. In any case, the rag structure has its own unique dialectics of rigidity and freedom, of convention and invention, of adherence and improvisation. The many schools and gharanas, and the strong individual assertions within a gharana, do create a rich multiplicity which cannot be adequately explained away to us as so many versions of a single tradition, or as so many innovative departures signifying change.

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