

The Musical Evolution of Gazal

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(Published in *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*, Edi. V Subramaniam, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980)

The gazal is perhaps the most popular form of Hindustani light music, in its vocal variety. As a form, it partakes of both literary and musical features and presents a rather complex picture in so far as its musical evolution is concerned.

For many reasons its musical evolution has not been properly traced. Firstly, the recorded versions of gazal-singing do not go back to more than seventy-five years. This means that it is only very late in its historical career that the gazal provides us with any evidence of how it was actually sung and so the recordings are perhaps not very useful in helping us to trace its early development. The gazal developed in the background of the dhrupad-dhamar and the khayal and parallel with the thumri. Obviously the gazal had accumulated a rich musical tradition around it at least since the fourteenth century and this tradition must have gone into its shaping. But no direct evidence of the process is available.

Musical literature, too, is silent in this respect. Firstly, the form was associated with the class of singing girls who did not enjoy a position of respect in the society of the time. Secondly, the form is usually considered as falling in the category of light music and hence our musicologists and theoreticians may perhaps be blamed for being quite thorough in their treatment of it but not very accommodative. Thirdly, it was discussed in detail as a literary form and perhaps that created the impression that the gazal had received an exhaustive treatment. To discuss its musical aspect on the basis of the available recordings seems to be advisable, though somewhat risky for, comparatively speaking, only a few specimens are available.

Musically speaking, the gazal seems to have evolved in three stages. They are the stages of metre-orientation, thumri-orientation and song-orientation. In spite of some degree of overlapping, the stages are clearly discernible in the recorded versions. When it was not advanced musically, the sung version of the gazal stuck to its metre in a rather rigid fashion. It was sung in a fast tempo; it lacked musical elaboration and also rhythmic variation. Quite often similar tunes were used, and without any change, for gazal which differed considerably in content. All metre is cyclical and thus it suggests beats that can be organized into a tala. Even so to follow the beats too regularly

amounts to a negation of musical creativity, although it does offer proof of a strict adherence to prosody. *Katil To Mere Dil* by Malka Jan of Agra and *Parda Nahi Hai* by Pyare Saheb are impressive examples of such adherence to prosody. There is no musical improvisation as such. Music is so regularly and exactly channelized that it ceases to flow. The experience is more that of a recital than of a song set to tune so that it may be remembered. The metrically-oriented gazal is a musical recitation determined by prosody in which the singer is obviously reluctant to deviate from the metrical beats which totally control the expression.

The earliest signs of any conscious attempt to win freedom from these prosodic shackles are discernible in Gauhar Jan, Shamshad Bai, Pyare Saheb, Bai Sundarabai, and others. In her *Jaban Khuli Bhi*, Gauhar Jan's performance reminds one of the Bal Gandharva type of tana patterns. They are fast, straight and vigorous; they are executed with admirable clarity. The patterns seem quite simple but a close analysis betrays traces of the intricacy of design which is the hall-mark of the tappa. This form of Hindustani Music gained stature in the seventeenth century. Shamshad bai and Bai Sundarabai are undisputedly Begam Akhtar's predecessors in so far as they have a masculine and sensuous touch in their voices. They also show an inclination towards an evocative, verbal articulation. Shamshadbai sings *Bamulke Dilbari* in a voice which is full of strength and Sundarabai does the same in *Gam Nahi*. Pyare Saheb made a distinct mark as a singer and experimenter. He amazes us on account of his unnaturally high-pitched voice and wide repertoire. His *Parda Nahi Hain* is typically metre-oriented. But in his *Yaar Ki Koi Khabar* he sings in an astonishingly slow tempo though the rhythm kept by the tabla is, in keeping with the usual tradition, fast enough. All these are attempts at a thumri-oriented style of gazal, which is truly realized in the music of Barkat Ali and Begum Akhtar.

A sub-classification seems to be unavoidable in the sphere of the *thumri*-oriented gazal. Barkat Ali's effort is replete with the tappa accent. Begum Akhtar's is not. Barkat Ali bursts upon the scene like a fresh force. His Patiala style is a combination of intricate and fast tonal patterns and thus an evocative and emotive use of words becomes possible. The tempo slackens and instruments like the harmonium and the swarmandala do not accompany the vocalist with mechanical regularity, but with a sense of mood and creation. Barkat Ali dazzles and moves at the same time. His *Ek Sitam* is a true representation of the tappa-accented and thumri-oriented gazal.

In Begum Akhtar there is a clearer awareness of the existence of untapped musical sources. A greater variety of ragas is used and with amazing flexibility. One finds *Bhoop*, *Mand*, *Gara*, *Tilak Kamod*, *Mishra Bahar* and scores of other ragas exploited

with a probing sensibility. There is a lot of improvisation and in the thumri-oriented thematic elaboration, one notices the unmistakable stamp of the individual artist. There is no dichotomy splitting the artist-composer and the artist-performer. She is fused into one self. *Gam Ki Daulat, Wafa Nahin, Dil Ki Baat* or *Na Socha Na Samjha* are examples of the thumri-oriented gazal in the real sense of the word.

Saigal and Malika Pukharaj illustrate the movement towards the song-oriented gazal. There is no improvisation but there are deliberate and planned tonal movements and pauses along with a slow tempo which allows the music to sink into one's consciousness. The instrumentation is slight, but the tendency towards orchestration is marked. The trend culminates in the post-Saigal period in Lata Mangeshkar, Suman Kalyanpur, Mohammad Rafi, Farida Khanum, Mehdi Hassan (the last two are from Pakistan) and others. In this phase one becomes aware of a larger and more planned presence of tonal colour through careful orchestration. There are obviously more instruments and the technique of harmonization is consciously used. The composer's presence is felt in the tonal and rhythmic element of the compositions. It is intricate and imaginative. For example, *Koi Ummeed Bar Nahin Ati* by Lata Mangeshkar, *Koi Din Gar Jindgani Aur Hain* by Suman Kalyanpur are impressively complex compositions. One cannot hum these after a single listening. The tunes do not appear to have sprung from any particular raga. The raga is only a fleeting shadow. More often than not the raga is only an excuse for a deviation or serves as the original stimulus for the composition. But the composition, as a whole, prefers not to get bogged down in a raga. The performance seems to be fastidiously planned and executed and any 'feeling' on the part of the singer makes sure entries and exits. Nothing is left to chance, or to the mood of the moment. The stakes are too high to permit such a procedure. Interestingly enough, it is only at the song-oriented stage that we find gazal of high poetic merit being sung. Earlier on the artists were of a high calibre but the gazal betrayed a poor poetic standard. This was because it is only in a song that the word-content assumes an importance equal to that of the tonal-content. The song is a balancing act between meaning and music. In a song they interact; neither is passive. It is not as though Galib is sung more often because of his centenary year. He is sung because the gazal has now developed into a song-oriented, musical expression.

Mehdi Hassan and Farida Khanum deserve special analysis. Both have good voices and they do not sing in a high pitch. Their singing is relaxed and assured and the listener experiences a soothing sensation. Our music directors and composers are still fascinated by the brilliance of the high pitch, which itself was a reaction against the uniform base of the Saigal era. But in doing so, they lose sight of the fact that the low

pitch often permits a greater range and fullness of voice. There is less flash but more resonance in it. It also lends itself to an easier acceptance of the song because here the song seems to be within the reach of all voices. In addition, it affords a wider variety of tonal shades. *Na Gavao Naavak-e-Neem Kash* by Mehdi Hassan and *Na-rava Kahiye* by Farida Khanum prove the efficacy of the low pitch.

The song-oriented gazal seems to have reached its zenith. Even though the development of a musical form is in no way predictable, it seems plausible that the gazal will now move to a Free-Song stage where there will be no tala.
