

Transmission of Nonclassical Traditions

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In the Indian context, as to some extent in all major Asian contexts, nonclassical traditions of music are generally described as regional and tribal. However, dividing Indian traditions into five musical streams - art (or classical), popular, devotional, folk, and tribal - provides a better understanding of the Indian response to musical performance. In this scheme, nonclassical music traditions would comprise the four categories of music other than art music. This article focuses on the process of musical transmission in devotional, folk, and tribal musics.

Various general features pertaining to the transmission of devotional, folk, and tribal musics can be identified. Principally, the transmission of music can be distinguished from the larger process of cultural communication. Both transmission and communication are processes for conveying the ideas, skills, and experiences of one person, group, or society to another. However, transmission aims at creating as a consequence another agency to carry on the practice of the skills being transmitted.

Certain features of musical transmission serve to differentiate devotional, folk, and tribal musics from the art music of India. These three musical categories are commonly distinguished from art music as being less under the influence of urbanization. Furthermore, because urbanization relies heavily on writing, ultimately the written or printed word emerges as the main if not the sole avenue of transmission. In contrast, nonclassical traditions are generally transmitted through what is broadly described as oral tradition. In fact, oral tradition is held to be their sine qua non, permitting transmission of the entire body of musical structures and experiential more accompanying them.

Two other common features of devotional, folk, and tribal musics keep the apart from art music. First, compared with art music the other three assume a broader definition of music in the latter, music can be placed anywhere on a continuum from mere sound production to song. Second, song in these three categories may be music oriented, dance oriented, or drama oriented; within the music-oriented class, songs may have a melodic or rhythmic focus. The very concepts of "music" and "song" in the three nonclassical musical categories differ radically from those in art music. The following discussion of the transmission process identifies the features that separate India's tribal, folk, and devotional music from its art music, as well as specific technical features within particular genres.

Prestige of The "Word"

Perhaps the most important and easily discernible feature of devotional, folk, and tribal music is the significance attached to words. When a word is written it is transformed, and the transformation is achieved with the help of accepted signs known as letters. Indian culture, on account of the primary importance given to oral tradition, holds the word in high regard in its unwritten form.

A prominent example of this feature is the high regard for and comprehensive practice of mantra incantation. Mantra is broadly defined as a cluster of meaningful or meaningless syllables intended as a formula of prayer to any deity or supernatural power or as a formula of meditation. In chanting such a formula an individual may or may not seek to achieve a practical goal, ethical or otherwise. In general, there are two overarching aims of mantra recitation: securing the desired and avoiding the unwanted. A significant portion of music in the three categories involves mantras. Following ancient practice, some mantras are metrical and meant to be recited aloud, such as the R̥gvedic hymns composed by various Vedic seers. A second variety is couched in prose and intended to be muttered in low tones, as in the Yajurveda formulations, whereas a third is metrical and meant to be chanted to melodies as, for example, the Samavedic hymns. Mantras are taught by a qualified person to another individual after certain preconditions have been fulfilled. The related acts of transmission are preceded and succeeded by rituals that ensure effective transmission. Examples of such rituals are propitiatory incantations in tribal life-cycle observances, snake charming, and snakebite cures in the folk category, often accompanied by instrumental performance, and the incantation or recitation of the names of God in devotional genres. Participation at various levels, according to the requirements of the

occasion, is the main avenue of transmission. Through participation, which may involve such actions as hand clapping, joining the hands in supplication, or reciting the deity's name, the nonverbalized norms of performance are absorbed.

Oral/Aural Transmission

Articulation (the production of sound) and hearing (the reception of sound) are physiologically interdependent processes, and oral tradition heightens their dependence by insisting on the importance of the receiver's role as a listener. A critical distinction is made between hearing and listening, and thereby between the hearer and the listener. One major factor that distinguishes listening from hearing is attention.

If the oral nature of music is exemplified by acts of speaking and singing its aural aspect is made concrete by the audience. In the three categories of nonclassical music under discussion, the audience is held in veneration-although to varying degrees. The audience's contribution in all music-related processes is praised. Certainly the oral/aural identity of oral tradition in India has led to the status high enjoyed by the audience. The critical value of audience response has been recognized in India since antiquity. The sage Bharata, in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. 200 B.C.-A.D. 200) acknowledges the contribution of audience response to the quality and success of performance by enumerating the ways and means in which the audience registers its approval or disapproval. Within Indian culture, the qualifications of a good auditor are mentioned with clarity and firmness. Norms of behavior for audiences are also laid down. Indian scholars today generally believe that such observations made in this ancient treatise can greatly enhance the study of nonelite traditions such as folk music genres.

In folk, tribal, and devotional music, listening is encouraged as an obligatory strategy, even if due to age or the lack of previous or adequate exposure, the receiver is unable to understand the nature and import of the proceedings. Performers, for example, often bring children with them to carry out manual chores such as handling property, collecting alms after the performances, and feeding the animals, but also so that the children can listen. They may also ask prospective performers to keep the rhythm, join in the refrains, or play simple instruments (idiophones, for example), which establishes for them a more direct musical connection with the tradition. Such exposure, interspersed with the intent listening involved in following musical cues during a performance, is also part of the transmission process.

The Coexistence of Oral and Written Traditions

Oral traditions do not exclude writing and written material, even nonclassical traditions. Indian culture does not regard the oral and the written as mutually exclusive. In nonclassical traditions, the process of writing is thought to reduce the potency and quality of certain items, and a dependence on writing and silent reading is expected to dilute the performer's mastery over the material. However, this does not mean that nothing at all is written down. In fact, choices are made about what is and what is not to be written down. Further, reference to the written is not forbidden but placed in a carefully constructed procedural chain. The Vasudevs, for example, are itinerant singers of auspicious songs of the Vaishnav cult in Maharashtra; they keep their corpus of songs in notebooks called *bād*, which they pass on within the family lineage and regard as sacred, to be kept away from general view. Another example is the Kalgi-turra of Madhya Pradesh, who perform music dramas involving question and answer competitions among parties owing loyalties to different sects. The competing parties carry large texts with them from village to village. These texts (*pothi*) have been ceremoniously bound together, and are reverentially stored and respectfully consulted.

The Guru

The emergence of the guru as an institution, and the supremacy of this master musician-teacher in the transmission of Indian music, result from the importance of tradition in this culture. The guru transforms mere words into meaningful directions, converts information into knowledge, and replaces isolated facts with a coherent whole. He makes many decisions about the method, timing, depth, and rigor of his teaching (master musicians are predominantly male), according to the capacity of the trainee. For example, to organize a performance of *bharata nat*, a theater genre of the tribal peoples in the Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh, a *Naṭ* (theater) guru is invited to train those hopeful of becoming performers. For weeks he trains the participants for the selected play, following a rigorous schedule. The village takes care of all his needs and provides resources in the form of paddy, rice, or money. The performance, which involves face painting and masks as well as a handwritten script (*champu*), naturally requires a central controlling force, which is aptly provided by the *Naṭguru*. Among the highly musical Santals of West Bengal and adjoining areas, *dasae* is a vocal form named after the festival that precedes the worship of the goddess Durga. Members of the community who have been initiated by a guru sing these "songs" as a test of the merit they have acquired. The songs are invitations to various spirits to possess the singers as

a result of their effective rendering. The guru in this case not only teaches but also tests the trainee.

The sūtra

Broadly speaking, sūtra may be defined as a versified prescription, a concise technical sentence used as a memorized rule. A well-circulated definition of the sūtra reads (in translation) as follows: Sūtra is known to the knowledgeable as consisting of few syllables, unambiguous, an embodiment of essence, interpretable from varied aspects, not interpolated, and free from censure. The content and form of musical traditions are preserved and passed on through sūtra prescriptions. The sūtra, however, is hardly ever entirely self-explanatory. Explanation and interpretation are necessary for its understanding. In oral tradition this is achieved through discussions based on a sūtra. Discussions vary in intensity, variety, and depth according to the qualification (adhikār) of the discussant. With his disciples, a guru does not so much discuss as maintain a dialogue generally in question-and-answer form. In response to a disciple's question, a guru may begin by quoting a sūtra, which he then goes on to explain by replying to additional questions that he deems valid and permissible. Thus a kind of catechism appears to be the standard format for communication between guru and disciple.

To use a sūtra is to transmit an idea in seed form that will be processed and expanded later as a result of interaction between participating personalities. The question-and-answer format is well suited for communication designed to exchange ideas, influences, and experiences. That it should find a place in the formation of many genres should not come as a surprise. In the devotional category, for instance, members of the Jogira and Kabira sects in northern India, who owe allegiance to Saint Kabir and the older Nath cult respectively, travel from village to village organizing singing parties in which they throw metaphysical riddles in song form at each other, vying for supremacy as performers and philosophers. On the occasion of Holi, a festival in which participants smear colors on each other, these parties entertain as well as spread didactic messages. Through an agile combination of composing and extempore performing skills, they pass on their lore, their songs (often including references to contemporary matters). Thus rivalry and revelry go hand in hand. The manch, a form of musical theater in Madhya Pradesh, features dialogues composed in question-and-answer format. Performances are all-night ventures, attesting to the efficacy of the format and the effectiveness of the practitioners.

Memory

Sūtra formulas function as a means of focusing the intellect, and are therefore to be memorized and expected to surface as and when required, to bring about the progressive enrichment of knowledge and experience while allowing adequate scope for the particular moment, event, or feeling. If the sūtra represents the relatively constant element in any experience, then memory and recall, which affect the sūtra, represent the variable element. This process ensures the essential dynamism of the act of transmission as part of the wider process of communication.

Mnemonic aids, the methods of employing them, and the contexts in which they are employed are invaluable components of the transmission process. These include repetition and chanting aloud, but also the deliberate and well-controlled use of nonverbal elements. For example, in the mancha performances mentioned above, actors deliver the last lines of their dialogues to the accompaniment of specific, repeated, and sonorous strokes on the ḍholak 'double-headed drum'.

Ritualism

In practice, South Asian oral tradition involves elements of ritualism. Whatever the particular performance practice or genre, there are deliberate rituals before, after, and sometimes during the performance itself. Ritualistic acts that take place before include, for example, remembering one's guru or deity, doing namaste (greeting with palms together) to the performing space, or bowing to the audience, instruments, or sacred objects; similar respects are paid to the deity, guru, or elder audience members after the performance and occasionally at ecstatic moments during the performance, when someone may lie prostrate in front of the performer or may dance as in a trance. The ritualism particularizes the oral tradition itself by bringing into play multiple aspects of life and assigning them definite roles. The oral tradition, and therefore the performance taking place within it, becomes more "real" because a firmer relationship with other areas of life is thus established. The physiomenal action through which ritualism seeks to operate is known as sanskāra (literally 'mental impression'). This term has great prestige in oral tradition, especially since the goals of oral tradition include not merely the conveying of information but also the transmission of knowledge and the communication of experience.

Ritualism is also expected to carry out the twin tasks of registering an impact on the conscious and effecting a permeation of the unconscious. To help in this psychocultural maneuver, activities indirectly or loosely connected with performance are intently explored. Ritual activities are often, but not necessarily, sacred. In oral tradition, no human activity can be totally realized through recourse to intelligibility, rationality, and objectivity. In order to grapple with the totality of reality, it is essential to accept the legitimacy of emotion, contradiction, and subjectivity. This is what the comprehensive role of ritualism in oral tradition seeks to achieve.

The processes of song creation and performance preparation for a particular occasion are often collective activities that not only ensure transmission of the concerned musical lore to a group rather than to an individual, but also involve ritual activities. The performing group ensures the continued involvement of the community in the creative process over a period of time, and invokes the sanction of the sacred by such acts as beginning regular rehearsals with salutations to the gurus and deities. In Mathura (a major center of Krishna worship in Uttar Pradesh), for example, various performing groups (akhārā) with fierce loyalties to gurus or locales compose and rehearse songs in secret throughout the year with the aim of performing them in public for the annual Holi festival. The songs (choupai) are presented by parties of poets, dancers, and musicians, all of whom have been involved to varying degrees in creating them over a long period.

Multiplicity of Communicators

The oral tradition encompasses a considerable variety of communicators or performers, each with a specific task allotted to him or her. Naturally, each type of communicator has developed skills and methods appropriate for the tasks he or she undertakes. In the related transmission processes, these get reflected in many ways. Transmission occurs through a multiplicity of communicative channels—movement, dress, language, emotion, prose/poetry, dance, for example—even when, for all practical purposes, the general activity or the genre involved is mainly “musical.” In many song forms, for example, the textual content is delivered in prose and is then followed by a sung rendition, with appropriate gestures, thus involving two other communicative channels (prose and gesture) besides singing. Many nonclassical songs, musical dramas, and other musical performances have a story attached to them. These stories are usually accessible to members of a cultural group through different channels.

A story may be conveyed in one musical category such as a song, and then retold in a different category such as a dance or drama.

As already indicated, the effects of oral tradition on transmission in the nonclassical music traditions constitute only half the story. Other more technical items play a role.

Centrality of Performance

Beyond the consequences of the oral-transmission process considered so far, the centrality of performance in the musical expressions under examination must be stressed. An understanding of the features of nonelite musical expressions requires actual "doing"-observation with participation. Appreciation from a distance or a detached observation without any participation whatsoever are almost entirely ruled out. No doubt different levels of participation and involvement are possible, but simple passive reception of the performing stimulus is almost nil, and is never present to the extent imaginable in art music. Unlike the case in art music, scholarly endeavors of magnitude are rarely associated with the musical aspects of the nonelite expressions. In other words, it is not possible to read/write/talk about them, touching their essence or core, without performing (according to the established norms). The transmission of performing ideas through nonperforming channels is extremely suspect in nonelite musical expressions.

Musical accretion

Musical influences, experiences, and materials are transmitted through a process that can best be described as musical accretion. Instrumental pieces, songs, stylistic elements or technical formulas, for example, are not transmitted at one time but are absorbed by the subject gradually, sometimes over a period of years, and at no set pace (except in extenuating circumstances such as religious compulsions or orders from authorities). Song rhythms may be grasped first followed later by melody, gesture, literature, and other aspects of a song. A possible scenario for this manner of transmission begins with initial exposure to performances at a very early age: a child, reclining on its mother's lap or perched on its father's or elder brother's shoulders, is a spectator, perhaps clapping, admiring, and joining in choruses in a half-hearted and mumbling manner. A few years later, the child is allotted a task, such as holding or

arranging items or carrying messages. Doing simple imitations follows until the youth becomes a knowing participant in developing the multifaceted performance. Receiving the material is a process of slow, gradual, and often unconscious absorption. The training and rehearsing centers (akhārā) of many folk performing genres are places for such unconscious transmission, as are the youth dormitories of tribal societies.

Economical use of variation

The element of variation appears to have been used sparingly in nonclassical music traditions. Variation is used here in the sense of avoidance of repetition, search for novelty, and desire to impress by being different or original. In the music-, dance-, and drama-oriented songs in the three categories of devotional, folk, and tribal musics, variation is not given undue importance. In fact, concepts such as originality, creativity, and modernity seem to have been relegated to the background, with more attention paid to authenticity, propriety, and effectiveness. Hence it is logical that repetition and stylization are accepted, and stereotypes as well as stock responses are regarded as legitimate. Marriage songs of the Santals, for example, are known as *bapla* 'marriage'. The tribe passes on the tunes with the help of meaningless syllables (*tahareta*), since the tunes will not be changed but the texts may be. Variation is expected in the text according to the parties or persons involved. Another manifestation of this tendency is to keep one tune unchanged for all successive stanzas of a long composition. *Powada*, a genre of heroic ballads practiced in Maharashtra, even today uses this strategy to narrate hero stories. With a slight modification in the strategy, the same song is used in two different contexts: *don*, a song form of the Santals named specifically after a dance, is performed as part of the marriage ceremony; the same song is also performed in other contexts, except in the months of December and January, which may contain auspicious days for marriages. Variation in this instance is effected in the function associated with the song. A similar case is the *ṭīpaṇī*, a work song sung lustily by women in Gujarat, particularly when they are hired to level newly laid earthen floors in temples and other buildings. The women hold wooden poles in their hands and rhythmically pound the ground with them. The songs they sing are the same Krishna songs sung during *garbā* dance festival, but the songs' function has changed.

Affinity with nature

The relationship between music and nature is prominent in regional music traditions, not so much in the form of an aesthetic response to nature, as in descriptions of natural beauty, but rather in response to the natural cycles of birth and death, day and night, and the seasons. The music and dance of the three categories makes reference to the world of animals, insects, and birds, thus showing a special affinity with nature. The music is transmitted as a part of daily life; it does not remain an external repertoire of pieces to be transmitted through formal procedures. In the northern state of Madhya Pradesh, for example, dance songs are named after the a birds of that state, such as the lion, peacock, deer, serpent, buffalo, cock, cuckoo, parrot, elephant, python, horse, lizard, goat, monkey, bee, and bear. Since the participatory activity of performing these dance songs represents a learning process and group dancing is an enjoyable activity, musical transmission becomes a natural, automatic process within the culture. The choumasa and barmasa songs, describing the four months of the rainy season and the full year respectively, are other instances of the same spirit of closeness to nature expressed through music; they are also transmitted unobtrusively. These and other such links with nature make musical processes more organic.

Structural features

Textual features of devotional, folk, and tribal songs are significant because they facilitate memorization by performers and at the same time provide aural interest for the listener. For example, assonance, alliteration, and rhymes (especially end-rhymes) play an extremely important role, creating patterns of sound that are by themselves attractive to the ear and are felt with an unmatched immediacy. They also generate a rhythm of expectancy and fulfillment among listeners, who thus become participants in the performance.

Distribution of choral and solo singing also constitutes an important structural component, although admittedly this is closely connected with the presentational aspect of songs. In jindua, a song genre of the Punjab, one performer sings a stanza and others join in with the chorus line, interjecting the seemingly meaningless words "āhā, āhā". A common jindua theme is the beloved's plea to the lover not to leave her, and yet the song's presentation is a judicious distribution of choral and solo elements ensuring accessibility - an essential precondition for transmission. The wider the involvement, the easier the transmission of the song

corpus. In rūf, a women's dance song in Kashmir, parties of women face each other in semicircles, swaying as they sing without accompaniment. Two or more choral groups sing in alternation, an arrangement that ensures close coordination. Dhalo, a women's dance song genre in Goa, exemplifies the same phenomenon. Women form parties arranged in close semicircular ranks facing each other, and sing in question-and-answer format. Young and old alike can participate freely. Those sitting in the audience obviously absorb the lore, and the processes of participation and transmission merge.

Chakri, a religious and secular song form of Kashmir, incorporates into a solo-chorus structure a patterned use of musical instruments. The participants perform sitting down (women now also perform a secular form), and all sing the refrain to the accompaniment of instruments such as the ghada 'clay pitcher drum', ghuñghrū 'metal bells tied to the feet', and tumbaknarī 'goblet-shaped clay drum'. When the main singer sings his solo stanza, the chorus and instruments are silent, thus musically framing the stanza. This structure is important for the transmission of the song content.

A yakṣagāna folk drama performance in Karnataka includes dance and music, the material both memorized and improvised. The characters learn the songs by heart and improvise the prose dialogues. Since the dialogues are based on the songs, the main content of the two remains the same; the improvised dialogues vary in every performance according to the abilities of the actors involved. Many theatrical forms in India are constructed in a similar manner.

Widely understood metaphors are sometimes employed in structuring songs. Among the Santals, for example, a charm song known as jan tells of a sorcerer driving away a tiger from a person suffering from a malady. Another Santal charm song, addressed to the goddess Mansa, describes the charm working from the forehead downward, the song text line always the same except for the body part. Listeners know what to expect, as the age-old formula of the human body as symbol comes into play. They can easily guess the sequence of the lines, based on human anatomy, and the repetitive nature of the song text makes it relatively easy to memorize: "See the power of the goddess Rohini, O sister: The charm has come down from the hair to the forehead, the charm has come down from the forehead to the stomach, the charm has come down from the stomach to the waist, the charm has come down from the waist to the water, and finally it has come down to the ocean."

Family traditions

Perhaps the strongest aid in the transmission of devotional, folk, and tribal music in South Asia is the long-standing tradition of musician families in which exposure, assimilation, and direct (and sometimes minimal) teaching play time-honored roles. Such performing castes are numerous in India. In Rajasthan and the Malwa region, for example, performing castes include the Bhavāī, Dholi, Dhādhi, Mirasi, Manganihār, Phadali, Kalāvant, Kanchni, Langā, Naṭ, Nāth, Patar, Qawwal and Rawal. In central Punjab in Pakistan, families of professional musicians include the Bharain, Dāstāngoh, Garvi Valin, Jafri, Kanjri, Khusrā, Malang-fakir, Mirasī, Qureshi, and Tawāif. Similar families carry on devotional music traditions, and even musical theater traditions thrive on transmission from one generation to another. Family traditions are also part of the larger network of the patronage (jajmāni) system, in which performing services are exchanged for monetary reward and other forms of recompense, which also helps with the continuity of musical traditions.

In the Kutch region of Gujarat, a kind of bird whistle is played dexterously by the tribal people. During the course of an interview, I asked a main player how he had taught his son the complicated blowing technique. After many reluctant turns in the conversation he took up a straw I was using to sip a cold drink, filled a glass with water, and started blowing into it; when the pace of the upsurging bubbles satisfied him he said, "I tell him to practice this to my satisfaction before allowing him to touch the whistle!" In a similar attempt to elicit a response from a folk sārangī player about the age at which he began teaching his son, I was eventually told by the player, "He was that small ... [he] was just able to hold his head. I used to sit him in my lap and play the sārangī. He used to fall asleep and I continued to play".