

Indian Music at Crossroads

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(Published in Indian Horizons, Edi. O P Kejariwal, Vol. XXXXVI, No. 03, July-September 1999)

India is a musical country. Five musical categories thrive in it. Music from these categories has been reverberating through the sub-continental expanse of the land for centuries! In the existence and reality of Primitive Folk, Religious, Art and Popular music-s, lies the secret of the high musical literacy India enjoys. In addition, expanding influence of the media and information explosion have given a new dimension to conception, reception, propagation and preservation of music - irrespective of the category.

The numerous changes taking place in the overall Indian life-pattern are inevitably reflected in Indian music because music has been closely interwoven with the entire fabric of life in India. Obviously, everything happening in Indian music has not met with unqualified approval or acceptance-and yet it is impossible not to be fascinated by the pervasive musical development. For a nation with a long history, a timespan of fifty-odd years can hardly be described as considerable - to think so is an unwarranted act of anthropomorphism!

However, approaching the millennium may be taken as an adequate excuse to take stock of the national situation.

Internationalization of Indian Music

One important feature of a rapidly developing process is the increasing Internationalization of Indian music. Indian music is presented heard examined and discussed from numerous as well as varied international fora. For example, it has become a part of summer festivals in Europe and England where music is presented as a component of a recreation-oriented package of Indian culture along with Indian cuisine, costumes, jewellery etc. There are other occasions when Indian music is discussed in serious meetings of scholars, academicians and policy-makers who have come together to consider multi-culturalism problems of minority cultures. Other themes such as cultural role and efficacy of orality, principle of improvisation, music

and language relationship or the matter of using music for adult education—also inevitably consider Indian music in a major way.

The number of musicians going abroad is yet another facet of the growing internationalization of Indian music. The number is not only considerable, it is also increasing. Gone are the days when the only channel for Indian musicians going abroad was the intra-national cultural exchange programmes sponsored by governmental agencies. Today Indian musicians are engaged in remarkably varied performing situations. They give live concerts, teach music to non-resident-Indians as well as non-Indians. They perform in the entertainment industry (e.g. provide lunch-hour 'soft' music in hotels etc. Use of Indian music as industrial music is not far - one may venture to say!). They also work with groups engaged in creating 'experimental' music.

Equally notable is the fact that an ever-increasing number of institutions abroad is teaching Indian music - a sign that today Indian music is not merely considered to be exotic, novel, ethnic or 'interesting'! At a subtler level, the process and tradition of Indian music-making is by itself registering its presence as an impressive instance of creative music-expression emerging otherwise from non-Indian music-cultures. Another item worth noting is the growing number of non-Indian taking to a serious study of Indian music of one kind or the other.

It is obvious that each of the features mentioned so far can be considered in great detail. However, the listing should be sufficient to clarify what I mean by Internationalization of Indian music.

The Two Directions of Change

At this point what needs to be noted is the fact that in the final analysis motivation to change Indian music-s coming from two quarters. Both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are working - consciously or unconsciously - towards musical change almost in all categories of music identified earlier. In fact, it will not be far off the mark to say that Indian music is changing because both 'insiders and outsiders' are working on it in nearly opposing directions!

There are non-Indians with 'western cultural and musical background' working in Indian music. These are the 'outsiders' and there are 'insiders' i.e. Indians who are working in Indian music. The former seems to value certain features of Indian musical tradition. For example, the ancientness of the tradition, unilinearity of the

melodic development and its linkage to the drone-phenomenon, circularity of the tala-concept, improvisatory strategies built in the ruling conventions that govern elaboration of musical ideas - these and other such features attract a number of outsiders. Their work in Indian music is naturally influenced by their perception of what is valuable in Indian music. They are also impressed by what they perceive as the generally introvert quality in Indian music. They believe that Indian art music has a certain hypnotic effect on listeners who (paradoxically speaking) are and are not contributors to the final form of music. In other words while Indian art-music is generally influenced by the quality of the audience present, in certain cases musicians are so immersed in the process of music-making that the audience becomes superfluous! It is often remarked that on account of the prevailing and comprehensive oral tradition, audiences in reality lack a leverage to control the dynamics of the performance (and the performer!). Finally, outsiders are also appreciative of Indian music partially because it is unpredictable! The aesthetic thinking that accords importance to the element of chance rates Indian art-music high. (Sometimes also undecipherable as some would like to add!)

The New Literacy

What changes are taking place by the insider's initiative?

Indian musicians, by and large, have been without much academic education on account of many cultural and historical reasons. In fact, a view has been apparently advocated that academic pursuit (let alone excellence!) and musical prowess are mutually contradictory. Almost as a corollary to this position: both academic education and theoretical knowledge of music are believed to be inimical to attainment of musical excellence. In the post-Independence era this view has been fortunately losing ground - though gradually. More and more academic degree-holders and often those holding degrees in highly technical branches are taking to music as a profession. Obviously, it is possible to judiciously martial one's intellectual and energy resources in such a way that high musical and academic accomplishments can become a reality! In earlier days these musicians would have perhaps been described as amateur. However, apart from considerable income from music making - their involvement with music is both intense and sincere. Hence one can safely conclude that the present period has given rise to a new class of committed musicians who are about to introduce radical changes in the personality contours/profiles of musicians as social components.

Unfortunately, a similar laudatory description is not possible as far as contemporary musicians' comprehension and study of historical and scholastic aspects

of Indian music are concerned. Even if it is accepted that performers may and do specialize in performance alone and need not be asked to shoulder the responsibility of being musicologists as well—the argument cannot be stretched too far! This is eminently so because exposure of the non-Indian world phenomenon and Indian musicians are increasingly expected to function as cultural ambassadors abroad. It must be understood that the issue of cultural/national identity is immediately connected with that of musical uniqueness in case of every major i.e. fully developed culture. As ethnomusicologists argue, world over music provides one of the surest indicators of national identity. Capt. Augustus N Willard, one of the earliest India-based (and often neglected ethnomusicologists), has succinctly commented, 'The soul of a nation lives in its songs'. To that extent Indian art-musicians must carry an extra occupational load and if required, should take the necessary measures to equip themselves with the needed expertise. If the appeal of Indian music is to be placed on a mature footing, Indian musicians should learn how to explain Indian music. Indian music is not to be portrayed as a side-product of an exotic civilization of sadhu-s fakir-s and snake-charmers! Extravagant claims of myths, legends and hero-stories should not be the staple food for musical thought and explanations.

To put the matter in another perspective, Indian musicians have to accomplish the task of making a smooth transition from a comprehensive oral tradition to a slightly expanded written tradition. Indian oral tradition has never been a tradition of a pre-literate society! India has orality that has for centuries enjoyed co-existence with writing and the written. Indian orality has always meant tendency to select what to write and in what details. The new requirement is to modify this cultural selection and bring to writing and the written stream what was so far kept in the oral-aural segment of reception and expression. Indian musical tradition needs to be (once again) modernized and it is better that those within the tradition themselves take the required steps. For example, they may have to notate more and more of their musical elaboration. They may also have to archive, record and document in other suitable manner more musical material of various kinds—methodically and in a more graded fashion. Some Indian musicians may have to learn staff notation to work more effectively with the non-Indian target audiences/workers. Perhaps, these frontier-men' would do well to use staff-notation with modifications to reflect the maximum possible nuances of Indian music in the written tradition. The task is not as easy as it sounds and it may mean learning many new skills and developing real knowledge in non-Indian systems of music which so far has not been achieved by many. I also feel that in the foreseeable future Indian 'classical' musicians will come under pressure to have more substantial information, knowledge as well as insight into their own 'non-classical

traditions if they want to legitimately continue to claim that they know Indian music! Indian raga-tala-bandish/kriti music can hardly be equated with Indian music in its totality! In addition, the multi-lingual compositional corpus is likely to present some problems. However, unless these matters are looked into, the multi-faceted cultural expression that Indian music is – would be lost to musicians as well as to their new patrons – a majority of whom are from different cultures.

One positive achievement of the new class of musicians which needs to be noted is their successful attempts to introduce new timbres. In the coming years, pitch and volume are going to be less and less important dimensions of sound in creative music-making. It is the timbre which will shape the nuance-language of music of the future. To this end it is necessary to get new timbres and good production of voice and sound as well as conditions ensuring a faultless reception/ reproduction. The new musician is aware of this. He is keen on introducing new instruments or modifications in older types to facilitate exploration of new timbres. He is also more conscious of how the public address systems work. Insiders are certainly aware of the aspect of tonal colour in which Indian music is perhaps a little lacking. Insiders are attracted to Western music and related phenomena mainly because of the abundance of tonal colour in it.

The Expanding Consciousness!

With reference to the expanding consciousness of Indian musicians, some explanation is perhaps necessary.

I have earlier listed major five categories of Indian music as primitive, folk, religious (of which devotional music is a widely prevalent sub-category), art and popular. It may be useful to briefly note salient features of these categories to understand implications of the expansion of musical consciousness I have referred to. The chief feature of adima sangeet (primitive music) is that in many cases it combines dancing, singing and playing of instruments. It may thus prove difficult to come across any primitive expression, which is singing or dancing alone. This kind of composite expression is perhaps connected with the fact that it represents an attempt to respond to three natural cycles which largely determine the course of life in India. The cycles are: day and night, birth and death and the seasons. On account of this larger relationship adima music is not made for its own sake. It certainly appears to be directed at some higher power including Nature. The evocative function of music is reflected in the

special regard displayed for various rituals: they have a place in the conception, presentation as well as preservation of music.

It is not an exaggeration to say that adima music means music for everyone, everything and for each occasion. General participation is encourage to such an extent in the making of adima music that there is a near absence of audience as a separate entity: no one is entirely engaged in listening to music. The role of the community as such is so vital that the cultural group or the community rather than the solitary-composer is said to be responsible for creating music. Normally all activities stressing the collective aspect of human life depend on rhythm as a binding agent. It is therefore natural that adima music gives more scope to rhythm than melody. Very often the former is also more attractive.

By and large, the category holds songs more important than music and yet primitive song can hardly be fitted into the usually accepted definition of song! This is so chiefly because of the norms applied in the category.

To make, receive or appreciate adima music certain identifiable criteria are applied and sweetness is certainly not one of them! The point needs to be stressed because a majority of people assumes that all music has to be invariably sweet! This is as valid as expecting good food to be always sweet! The category holds sound important as sound. This is in contrast to the general tendency to prefer sounds only if they are meaningful (for example, as in language).

Very often primitive music stands for something else outside itself and a very pervasive symbolism is therefore detected. In some respects adima music keeps very close to the day-to-day life and its different aspects. One of the interesting consequences is that ordinary objects and procedures may be used in music-making. It is logical to assume that the sense of hearing would rule supreme in any musical activity. However, in primitive music the sense of touch also comes into a strong reckoning. It is, for example, seen that holding of hands, stamping on the ground, body-thumping etc. become noticeable and notable contributors to the final result.

Folk Music-s of India

Broadly speaking each of the well-defined linguistic regions of the country can be assumed to have its own folk music and hence many researchers now emphasize the plurality while discussing folk music. Certain features however appear to be

common to all regional traditions, a fact indicating the pan-Indian nature of the category as also the essential unity of Indian culture as such. When compared with the primitive, the folk category is distinguished by a clearly felt dominance of melodic songs. A technically sound and an elaborate definition of song is bound to be very complex. But two salient song-features can easily be remembered: firstly it should consist of sustained, unbroken sounds, and secondly, it should be 'hummmable'.

Instrumental music enjoys a king of ubiquity in the folk category of music. It is almost everywhere and yet it cannot be said to enjoy independent operation. Instruments are pressed into service mostly to accompany singers/dancers. Even when music is made solo, instruments try to follow or imitate music originally designed for or produced by voices. The effectiveness and the musical value of musical instruments is judged according to their capacity to approximate vocal music.

Collectivity reigns supreme in creation, presentation, reception and also perhaps in preservation of folk music. Folk music is meant for the entire body of an organized human group bound by specific cultural ties indicating commonality of language, geographical location, social convention and so on. Folk music emerges, circulates and lives as their expression.

A number of items in folk music are linked to certain non-musical activities, tasks or actions in a definite manner. For example, harvesting and pounding of corn and similar other chores have songs associated with them in many regions of India. This is described as the functionality of folk music. Functionality means that the association between music and the tasks mentioned is not a vague psychological or accidental coexistence of the two. It indicates a firmer mutual relationship, which goes much beyond mere suggestivity. Very often, these non-musical acts/activities provide purpose as well as structure to folk music and make the forms functional. The feature usually makes the music concerned more immediate and endows it with a direct appeal not easily paralleled.

It has often been said that folk music has no beginning and no perceivable end! The remark is obviously intended to emphasize the element of continuity it enjoys as representative of a cultural group. Cultural groups can rarely be firmly and exactly placed on the time and space axis. Hence, their music i.e. folk music is also expected to flow on and become one with the life of the community. This is why it is described as eternal.

Contrary to the common perception, folk music does change, though selectively. It accepts changes in certain aspects while in some others it is extremely

reluctant to do so! For example, the more entertaining of its facets and forms are prone to change faster than the religious or ritualistic. Referring to strictly musical contexts for instance, rhythms change less readily than melodies or tunes.

Folk music tends to maintain a two-way relationship with the art music-s of the land of the same period for many reasons. Some features of art-music percolate to folk music or folk musicians try to borrow, change or assimilate them. On the other hand, history is full of instances where art-music seized select aspects of folk-music, to polish or refine them for an easier accommodation in its own existing codified systems. This is the reason why features of art and folk music are detected in one another. Thus many raga-s are 'found' in Indian folk music while folk-flourishes or rhythms etc. have been espied in the repertoires of art-musicians.

A cultural group and its folk music are so intimately connected that the latter can legitimately claim to be the national expression of the community concerned. Normally nations are understood to be homogeneous as political or cultural entities and to that extent folk music can be described as a national expression. However, in a country like India, each region has its own folk music even though the regions taken together form a nation. Folk music-s are therefore to be understood as systems representing regional identities severally. If a nation is defined as a cohesive cultural unit irrespective of its place in the hierarchy of political set-ups then folk music-s in India may be called national expressions.

Folk music, as expected, allocated meaningful roles to both language and literature. Stories and songs are brought together and a unique phenomenon of song-cycles or its variants assume importance in the total corpus of folk music.

Popular Music

Popular music can be defined as a product of many subcultures which co-exist and interact in a society. New waves of migrants, temporary fascination with cults or political movements, sudden exposure to new musical formulae are some of the more obvious factors conducive to the making of popular music. A growing middle class and acceleration of the processes of urbanization also contribute to the making of popular music. Concepts of leisure time, desire and capacity for recreation and a pressing demand for entertainment create an industry to make music.

The mass-media function as a major shaping influence. Media-language, time-restrictions/allocations, transmission-facilities and such other operational features govern the form as well as content of popular music. An increase in population and demographic redistribution generally encourage generation and spread of popular musical products.

The music of the category is patently patron-oriented. Consequently, every change in patronage is reflected more readily in this category than in any other. No other category is more inexorably ruled by market-economy as is the popular music. Demand and supply, distribution, profit-margin etc. come into play forcefully.

The target-audience is less selective and the term 'mass' indicates a rather indiscriminating body of receivers for the music. Fashions, topical interests and prohibitions operate to determine almost every aspect of music from this category. In the final analysis it is the socio-cultural and not the aesthetic criteria that become more relevant in popular music.

Devotional Music

Widely known as bhakti-sangeet in the country, devotional music exhibits some easily identifiable structural features. Compositions in the category invariably carry the name of the composer in the last line. Names of the gurus as well as the worshipped deity also find a mention. Compositions in this category are in different regional languages collectively known as the Prakrits-s (in contrast with Sanskrit). According to many experts there are strong reasons to believe that the Prakrit tongues are inherently more musical.

Devotional music as a category came into existence largely as a result of the saint-poets or their followers in different Indian regions. To begin with, the saint-poets were saint-poet-composers devoted to either Shiva or Vishnu, though in the later centuries deities as well as cult-loyalties became more diverse. The saint-poets composed, sang and passed on thousands of songs through the oral tradition. The songs became common property of the land the people. They continue to serve as models for even contemporary efforts prompted by similar feelings.

It is predictable that metrical moulds employed by the saint-poets are of the Prakrit origin. One special metrical feature of the Prakrit tradition (apart from their notable variety) is their inherent flexibility, which makes the metres more conducive to

making music. An uninhibited stretching of individual words, mid-line breaks, variable line-lengths and such other features obviously allow more freedom to composers as well as performers.

Rhythms employed in the category are less expansive. For example, in most cases they have four beats (or multiples of four). Rhythmic cycles thus constructed are easy to grasp. Rhythms in the category are therefore aptly described as 'catchy'. Rhythms have always proved more effective than melodies in reaching the masses.

In terms of melody too, the category gives priority to mass-appeal. Devotional melodies often have structures describable as dhun raga-s. 'These are raga-s with identifiable and recurring tonal phrases which are free from the constraints imposed by the rigid grammatical frameworks usually displayed by full-fledged raga-s. Further, dhun raga-s used are notably similar to melodies often classified as regional on account of their origin or the greater circulation they seem to enjoy in particular geographical areas. For example, melodies known as Pahadi, Kafi, Des, Mand etc. unambiguously underline the regional affiliations. In addition, devotional music also employs seasonal melodies which have a long and wide-spread tradition in the country. Names of raga-s such as Malhar, Hindol, Des etc. would easily come to mind.

A judicious mixture of solo and the choral modes of rendering is evident in the category. Audiences participate in making music according to the usually unwritten norm prescribed in the tradition. For example, iteration of a deity's name, hailing the god or guru become points at which the entire congregation joins in lustily! Predictable, regular, noticeable audience-participation makes the music intense.

A great majority of the musical instruments used in the category impress as generators of rhythmic pulses. This is remarkably so even in case of instruments ostensibly designed to function as melodic (e.g. string-instruments often supply rhythm-beats in addition to the drone or melody they produce). It is also true that instruments in the category are easily given to grosser musical effects than nuances, subtleties and sophistications. As many musicians have succinctly pointed out, 'devotional instruments require less maintenance!' Indian devotional music normally surges in two streams, one of them flows nearer to art-music while the other remains closer to folk-music.

Art Music

Performers in this category intentionally strive to attain aesthetic or artistic goals. In return, they also bargain for an aesthetic appreciation from the audience. It will not be incorrect to say that in a concert of Hindustani art music, the most crucial test a listener has to pass is to express his approval/disapproval of the musical proceedings at the right moment and a proper manner! One of the most distinctive features of art music is to flow in two concurrent streams: scholastic and the performing. The former stream formulates, systematizes and records rules expected to govern musical operations in the category while the second is related to actual presentations. In the long run the latter out-paces the former - a case which has a parallel in literature and grammar of any language.

Art music deliberately concentrates on expressing entirely (or mostly) through the auditory channel. To that extent, it becomes more abstract, unlike folk or primitive music which are more concrete on account of their appeal to many senses (in addition, of course, to the auditory).

Art music affords more scope to individuals than to groups. The predominance of the solo mode in the Hindustani system is to be placed in this context. An individual performer is consequently, allowed more freedom. He can elaborate or improvise on the basic musical structures according to his own aesthetic intentions and ideas. Thus, unlike the collective quality of folk, primitive and devotional music, art music tends to emphasize the individuality of the artist. The category displays an impressive array of forms (Genres) of music. In Hindustani music, for example, Dhrupad, Dhamar, Khayal, Tarana, Trivat, Gat, Peshkar etc. number among forms of music. Forms of music also exist in other musical categories, but those in the art category result largely from aesthetic and musicological considerations.

It is in this category that styles, schools, guru-shishya and other systems have been set up with more deliberations. Codification becomes mandatory as also the conscious verbalization of rules which are to be meticulously followed. Also notable is the fact that theoretical, grammatical, expository-works in the category are written - as is to be expected in its scholastic tradition.

It is of course obvious that an overall sweetness, appeal of evocative words and gestures or other such factors will fascinate the listener, irrespective of his knowledge of music. And yet, being a product of human efforts at its imaginative best, it helps to know the norms that channelize, govern, guide art music and musicians. To a certain degree music-making is like participating in a game, you can play and enjoy if

you know the rules. Otherwise, you have to rest content with the thrill, the physicality and the exhilaration you feel when blood circulates faster and limbs moves smoothly!

Art music often joins hands with other artistic efforts realized in painting, drama, dance to devise new combinations for attaining new artistic goals. At the same time it needs to assert its independence and achieve aesthetic excellence. Hence it also attempts to sever its connection with the other areas of life! This aspect of the functioning becomes clear when schools of art music, forms and styles are discussed.

Almost as a corollary to the features enumerated so far, art music claims a kind of autonomy. It therefore tries to move away from the incidents, events, and processes that characterize our daily life. With equal alacrity it also shies away from personal (as distinct from individual) joys and sorrows. In some measure this detachment from the mundane makes it appear more enduring. Herein lies the secret of the longevity of ragas, tala-s and bandish-s in Hindustani art music.

On this background it would then become obvious that, never before in the past, have we seen so heavy a musical exchange within the five categories. Ideas, instruments, idioms, imagery and the like are moving from one to the other category with remarkable ease, and sometimes, as a result of notable deliberations and craftsmanship. Admittedly, the results are not always as satisfying as intended, and sometimes the motivation itself may be suspect! However, use, abuse and misuse must be distinguished and deviation ought to be understood as an inevitable step towards creativity. Then would the scene cease to be painful and puzzling. This is the background on which role on contemporary musicians vis-a-vis the categories is to be understood.

Of course, the dividing lines between the categories have never been too rigid because music-s in all these categories have been a part of a living tradition. They are not producer- oriented categories, but largely experimental and structural. Thus music is not primitive because it is produced by tribal groups etc. but because it possesses certain structural features and because it gives some particular identifiable musical experience. The point is that these distinguishing lines are getting more and more blurred today because major practitioners in each category are increasingly exposed to music from other categories. Consequently, they are inclined to imitate, borrow, and assimilate features from all. Popular music (with Hindi film music as one of its main component) heads them, but no category is exempt from the process. The observation is corroborated by frequent comments from musicians, connoisseurs, and critics from all categories about the 'loss of authenticity or purity' in music from each category! What

needs to be taken into account is that the Zonal Festivals, Apna-Utsav-s or the Republic Day programmes etc. are bound to prove conducive to cross-fertilization of performing ideas. If this is backed by a clear appreciation of the nature and functioning of categories, the chances of beneficial changes are greater. The scene is thus exciting. Indian music is at crossroads in the sense it has choices and musicians have sensed them. The freedom to make choices of course entails responsibilities of making the right choices. This is not too difficult - after all - 'Consciousness is all'.
