

The History and the Origin of the *Thumri* with Special Reference to *Gharanas* and Styles

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The *thumri* is the most popular form of Indian music cultivated by individuals, as distinguished from that spontaneous form of music cultivated by communities or social groups. It is, therefore, designated as classical music, as distinguished from folk music. It is comparatively more free of those restrictions of strict discipline which form part of orthodox classical music. For this reason it is called 'light' classical music.

As denoted by its feminine name the *thumri* is characterised by a striking note of tenderness and the theme of its songs is invariably related to some or the other phase of human love in a stage of separation or union. The *thumri* lacks that virility of musical expression associated with the *dhrupad* and *khayal* styles; we must remember that both these are masculine names. The songs in these manly styles do not always have love for their theme.

The Origin of the *Thumri*

The most widely current theory attributes the origin of the *thumri* to the royal court of Oudh, especially that of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. This causal theory of the origin of a musical style, like all causal theories of interpretation of historical problems, is at best rather partial in its compass, if not wholly superficial. Causal theories do not take cognizance of the inner, homogeneous continuity of human affairs, to which causal factors have to be related to have any real significance. In order to understand and interpret the basic trend which made possible the evolution of the *thumri*, attention has to be paid to the continuity of fundamental trends in the Indian tradition of classical music which comes in an unbroken current from very ancient times and reflects India as an organic and vital cultural entity with a spiritual foundation too strong for any secular influence which does not owe loyalty to it.

Historically speaking, the true significance of the development of a new art form can only be grasped when its understanding is related to preceding cultural trends. Intrinsicly any classical musical form has to be judged with reference to the fundamental concepts of musical theory. Indian society has nourished such a strong spiritual base for the cultivation of the arts that incompatible influences of a political or exotic kind have made only a slight, superficial and evanescent impact on the fundamental concepts of art which are rooted in the very soul of the people.

As is well-known, the theory of classical Indian music is enshrined in our traditional *Sangitashastra*. In studying any musical style and its charac-

teristics an attempt has, therefore, to be made to relate them to the concept of musical forms as given in that *Shastra*.

The Characteristic Features of the *Thumri*

The characteristic features of the *thumri*, as a musical style, can be enumerated thus:

- (i) The musical effect of the *thumri* is far more dependent on its poetic content than is the case in the orthodox style of the *khayal*;
- (ii) The poetic theme of songs sung in this style deals most often with *Shringara Rasa*, and has sometimes a dual significance, spiritual and mundane;
- (iii) Its lyric form is due to the restricted range of *ragas* suitable for its rendering and to its latitude of elaboration. It is, at present, the most lyrical of all forms of Indian light classical music;
- (iv) Judged by the familiar principle of art design, 'Unity in Diversity', this form dwells more in its melodic pattern on the element of diversity than on that of unity;
- (v) It requires a special quality of voice, natural or cultivated, for its proper rendering;
- (vi) Its association with the *Kathak* style of dance, looked upon as an inferior dance style, led to the exponents of this musical style being assigned a low social status until quite recently;
- (vii) The *talas* identified with this form of music constitute one of its features;
- (viii) The embellishments are tonal-verbal for the most part and not purely the tonal ones which preponderate in orthodox classical music.

The *thumri* is an ephemeral evolute or a variant out of a long series of forms, beginning with the *Dhruvas* mentioned in Bharata's *Natya Shastra*.

Bharata deals with verbal-tonal rhythmic compositional patterns in the Thirty-Second Chapter of *Natya Shastra*, entitled *Dhruva-Vidhana*. He speaks of five types of *Dhruva* in the context of drama (*Natya*): *Praveshiki*, *Akshepiki*, *Naishkramiki*, *Santara*, and *Prasadiki* or *Prasadini*. *Prasadini* is described as that which gives rise to colourful delight (*Rangaraga*) and self-engrossing happiness (*Prasada*). As is to be expected, this type is specially allocated to the delineation of the *Shringara Rasa*. The following lines are significant in this context:

प्रसादने संभ्रमे च तथानुस्मरणेऽपि च ।
तथातिशयवाक्येषु तथा च नवसङ्गमे ॥

गर्वे च प्रार्थने चैव शृङ्गाराद्भुतदर्शने ।
ध्रुवा प्रसादिनी कार्या तज्जैर्मध्यलयाश्रया ॥

It may incidentally be noted here that Bharata has aptly enjoined the use of *Madhya Laya* (medium tempo) in this type of *Dhruva* which is specially suited to the *Shringara Rasa*, whereas he has enjoined the *Vilambita Laya* for the *Dhruvas* suited to the *Karuna Rasa* and *Druta Laya* for those suitable for *Vira*, *Raudra* and *Adhbhuta*.

Matanga, the next important extant author after Bharata, has dealt with compositional patterns under *Prabandhadhyaya*. He speaks of *Nadavati*, a type of *Gana-Ela Prabandha*, specially suited for the *Shringara Rasa*:

नन्दावती तृतीया च तुर्या भद्रावती स्मृता ।
ऋग्वेदादिसमुद्भूता विचित्रध्वनिरञ्जिता ॥
इत्येला गणमार्गेण बुधैरुक्ता चतुर्विधा ।
एला नादावती रम्या वर्णालङ्कारशोभिता ॥
गीयते मद्दृतालेन नादयुक्ता पदे पदे ।
टक्करागो भवेत् तत्र सर्वेषामनुरञ्जकः ॥
श्लेतो वर्णश्च विज्ञेयः शृङ्गारः कथितो रसः ।
कैशिकीवृत्तिराख्याता पाञ्चाली रीतिरिष्यते ॥

The following characteristic features of this type of *Prabandha* can be noted from the above quotation:

- (i) A remarkable beauty and variegated graceful embellishments;
- (ii) Deployment of special rhythmic patterns (*talas*);
- (iii) The universal appeal of the *raga* or melodic pattern of this form. (I shall shortly review this feature in some detail);
- (iv) The presence of the *Kaishiki Vritti* and *Panchali Riti*; the former of these, the *Kaishiki Vritti*, represents the graceful, sportive tendencies of love in drama and the latter, *Panchali Riti*, represents a special style of diction which is marked by the absence of compounds on the analogy of which it can be construed that this form makes use of short and sweet embellishments and avoids elaborate and intricate ones.

It will be interesting and useful to review the special features of the *raga* chosen for this compositional form. It may be noted that *Takka* is an important *Grama Raga* known as *Bhasajanaka*. It gives rise to a large number of *Bhasas* and *Vibhasas*. *Bhasa* is described as *Alapavishesha* or a particular variety of improvised elaboration of a *raga*. It is well-known that only a few *ragas* permit of unrestrained variety in elaboration. *Bhasas* and *Vibhasas* imply a licence for such variety as is evident from the following words of Matanga regarding these two *Gitis* or style-forms of rendering *ragas*:

प्रयोगैर्गात्रजैः श्लक्ष्णैः काकुरत्तैः सुयोजितैः ।
 कम्पितैः कोमलैर्दीप्तिमल्लिखी काकुनान्वितैः ॥
 ललितैः सुकुमारैश्च प्रयोगैश्च सुसंयतेः ।
 भाषागीतिः समाख्याता एषा गीतिविचक्षणैः ॥
 यथा वै रज्यते लोकस्तथा वै संप्रयुज्यते ।

The last line deserves special notice as it speaks of the ascendancy of *Loka-ranjakata* over all rules and regulations. Similarly he says for *Vibhasa Giti*:

ललितैर्बहुभिर्दीप्तैः कम्पितै रौरसेः समैः ॥
 तारातितारैर्मसृणैर्मध्ये मध्यमदीपितैः ।
 गमकैः श्रोतृसुखदैर्ललितैस्तु यदृच्छया ॥
 विभाषागीतिस्तु संयोज्या यथा लोकोऽनुरज्यते ।

It is clear that *Rakti* or *Ranjakata* and not rule or regulation is the main consideration in *Vibhasa Giti*. Thus such *ragas*, as have been described by ancient authors as *Bhasajanaka* may be understood to permit of somewhat loosely restrained elaboration.

Sarngadeva gives a similar treatment of *Nadavati*, the type of *Prabandha* which we have just spoken of on the authority of Matanga. He also says that novelty is to be preferred to conventional rules in certain varieties of *Prabandha* forms. For example, he says:

नूतनै रूपकं नूलं रागः स्थायान्तरैर्नवः ।
 धातू रागांशभेदेन मातोस्तु नवता भवेत् ॥

That means to say, in certain *rupakas* (compositional forms) the melodic structure (*dhatu*) is endowed with novelty through new *sthayas* which may be somewhat extraneous to the intrinsic structure of the *raga* concerned.

This element of novelty is supplied by either the latent potentialities of the *raga* itself (*Mulaja Bhasa*) or by the regional melodies known to the performer (*Desaja Bhasa*) or by the shadow of a different *raga* (*Chaya Bhasa*) or by the mixture of a number of *ragas* (*Sankirna Bhasa*).

Sarngadeva's discussion of the varieties of *Alapti*, or improvised tonal elaboration, is also interesting in this context. He divides *Alapti* into *Ragalapti* and *Rupakalapti*, the former being concerned with *Ragaprakatikarana*, that is with an unfolding of the tonal potentialities of the *raga* without any reference to the *Rupaka*, or the verbal-tonal-rhythmic pattern, and the latter being devoted to the *Rupaka* itself. Naturally, the verbal content of the *Rupaka* gets an important place in *Rupakalapti* which expresses the finer shades of significance of words through appropriate tonal variations. Viewed in terms of Sarngadeva's definitions of *Ragalapti* and *Rupakalapti*, the *thumri* has to be treated as a musical pattern of the latter form of *Alapti*, and not of the former.

A rough similarity of the *Bol-banavas* of *thumri* can be traced to the varieties of *Rupakalapti*, mentioned by Sarngadeva namely *Pratigrahanika*,

Sthayabhanjani, and *Rupakabhanjani*. When the artist's attention is concentrated more on the tonal-verbal variations with the purposes of expressing musically the suggestions implicit in the words of the songs than in the effective exposition of the *raga* concerned, there is bound to be some deviation from the conventional pattern of the *raga*. Kallinatha has beautifully explained this idea by saying that in *Rupakalapti* the *raga* concerned is just like a pearl which is set in the midst of multi-coloured gems.

Reverting to the topic of *Prabhandha*, it may be remarked that subsequent writers after Sarngadeva either avoided a treatment of *Prabhandha* or were generally content with reproducing Sarngadeva's text on the subject almost verbatim. It is, therefore, not possible to connect the link of parallel trends with the *thumri* in our musical tradition relative to the period between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century.

It will not be out of place to give now a short account of the trends in folk music which may be taken to have supplied the raw material for a refined and classicised light musical form like the *thumri*. The *Chaiti*, the *Biraha* and the *Kajari* forms of folk music of the eastern Uttar Pradesh, as also the *Padas* and *Ramainis* of the Kabir Panthis (who have exercised a marked influence on the folk music of eastern U.P. and Bihar) may be mentioned in this connection. These must have contributed to and inspired the evolution of the *thumri* in Banaras. The theme of songs of the *Chaiti*, *Biraha* and *Kajari* is mundane love and that of the music inspired by Kabir and his followers has a double significance of spiritual and mundane love. These have considerably influenced the songs of the *thumri*, especially of the Poorbi *anga*. Some popular *thumri* songs with the following opening lines, inspired by the Kabir cult, have a double meaning of spiritual love clothed in the garb of the mundane and may be cited as an example:

बाबुल मोरा नैहर छुटोई जाय ।
मैं न लरी थी श्याम निकल गये आज ।
रे दिन कैसे कटि हैं जतन बताय जैहो ।

Songs of somewhat similar content of erotic mysticism are known as *Padams* in Karnatak music, and those having mundane love as their theme are called *Javalis* in the South. The *Lavanis* of Maharashtra are also a variety of erotic folk music. All these forms of folk music on the one hand and classical forms on the other must have made possible the evolution of light classical forms in all parts of the country as a manifestation of a spontaneous cultural movement.

The *thumri* will thus be seen as one of the varieties of light classical music emerging in its time as a result of the impact of classical music on the one hand and folk music on the other in Northern India in line with similar developments in other parts of the country and as an incident in the normal course of musical history.

As regards the special quality of voice possessed by women for rendering of light classical forms such as the *thumri*, reference may be made to Sarngadeva's remarks on the subject. He mentions *Madhura*, *Sehala*, *Komala*,

Karuna, Snigdha, Raktimana as qualities of the natural female voice which have generally speaking to be cultivated in the male. When Bharata wrote the following *shlokas*, he had probably in mind the qualities naturally to be found in males and females.

प्रायेण तु स्वभावात् स्त्रीणां गानं नृणां च वादनविधिः ।
स्त्रीणां स्वभावमधुरः कण्ठो नृणां बलत्वञ्च ॥
यः स्त्रीणां वाद्यगुणे भवति नृणां च गानमधुरत्वम् ।
ज्ञेयः सोऽलंकारो न हि स्वभावो भवति तेषाम् ॥

Bharata says that it is only natural that women should sing and that men should play on instruments, because women are endowed with a sweet voice by nature, and men with a forceful voice. If, however, men are found who are adept in singing and women who are adept in playing on instruments that should be deemed a kind of ornament to their respective natures.

The qualities of *Komalata, Karunatva*, are not compatible with those required for singing the manly style of the *Dhrupad*. Hence the popular belief that the voice of *Dhrupad* singers is unfit for the *thumri*. This is true as a rule, though there are exceptions to be found in actual experience. For example, the late Chandan Chowbey of Mathura was a great singer of *Dhrupad* as well as of the *thumri*. Moreover, in the *Dhrupad* style itself there are the *Dhamar-Hori* forms which have an erotic content and call for *madhurya* of voice.

Similarly Kathak dances with whom the origin of the *thumri* of Lucknow is associated do not as a rule perform the *thumri*, since the voice of dancers is said to become unfit for graceful singing. However, those dancers who do *ada* while sitting on the stage have been known to be excellent performers of the *thumri*. (This tradition of Kathak dancers is now dying out.)

Literary trends contemporary with the development of the *Thumri*

The fundamental theory of Indian classical music, as indeed of all Indian art and poetry, is grounded in the theory of *Nada Brahman* or *Shabda Brahman* and is thus linked with the Vedic religion. Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, based on Vedic concepts, is the Bible of all branches of Indian art and poetics. Bharata applies the same sets of rules to the triple arts of song, dance and drama. As a consequence of this basic factor, historical developments in the field of poetry, music and other arts exhibit a clearly identifiable common trend. Parallels can easily be discerned, for instance, in the fields of music and dance and poetry and may be cited to explain and elucidate developments in other fields.

The very strong upsurge of spiritual poetry centred round the divine eroticism of the Vaishnava cult (beginning with the poems of Jaideva, Vidyapati, Chandidasa, Gyanadasain and others in the eastern parts of the country and of Suradasa, Nandadasa, Kumbhanadasa and Haridasa Swami in the western) released literary torrents which inundated Northern India with works depicting amorous sentiments. The period is known as the *Riti-kala* of literature. Kesava, Bihari, Matirama, Deva, Padmakara and Ghananada were the representative poets of this period.

This poetic literature gradually came to be appreciated by middle-class society. Soon the need must have been felt for a form of music which would be fit for cultivation by this social stratum and which could be used for expressing the popular poetry of the period.

Parallel developments are clearly evident in the fields of the three arts of poetry, music, and dance. All these three have an erotic bias. This is a fact which militates against any theory ascribing to the Nawabs of Oudh the origin of the *thumri*.

Thus the *thumri* was a form of music that evolved during the course of the development of the three arts of music, poetry and dance. It cannot be studied in isolation from allied currents. The poetry of this class of people was neither pedantic nor commonplace; it represented a compromise between two extremes. A similar development took place in the musical field blending the two extremes of orthodox classical music and folk music. Thus a social need was supplied by the *thumri*.

The *thumri* was thus expressive in music of the prevailing trend in poetry. A similar development took place in the field of dance. The Kathak variety is a compromise between orthodox forms and the folk dance.

Aesthetic Value

In its aesthetic content the *thumri* abounds in the *Madhuryaguna* and *Prasadaguna*, but lacks *Ojas*. There should be no objection to the use of literary concepts in musical analysis since our *Sangitashastra* has bodily borrowed its aesthetic terminology from the field of literature and has no independent aesthetic terminology of its own. *Madhurya* brings about melting of the heart. *Chittadruti* and *Prasada* instantaneously permeate the whole consciousness. *Ojas*, on the other hand, is known for brightening or exciting the heart, (*Chittadiptikarakah*), leading to *atma-vistriti* or *self-exceeding*. Mammata speaks of these three aesthetic qualities or *gunas* in the following verses:

आह्लादकत्वं माधुर्यं शृङ्गारे द्रुतिकारणम् ।
करुणे विप्रलम्भे तच्छान्ते चातिशयान्वितम् ॥
दीप्त्यात्मविस्तृतेर्हेतुरोजो वीररसस्थिति ।
बीभत्सरौद्ररसयोस्तस्याधिक्यं क्रमेण च ॥
शुष्केन्धनाग्निवत् स्वच्छजलवत् सहसैव यः ।
व्याप्तोत्यन्यत् प्रसादोऽसौ सर्वत्र विहितस्थिति ॥

According to Mammata, *Samyoga Shringara*, *Karuna*, *Viyoga Shringara* and *Shanta* are graded in the ascending order of this enumeration for excellence and abundance of *Madhurya*. *Karuna* (as distinct from *Vipralambha Shringara* and *Shanta rasas*) rarely constitutes the theme of *thumri* songs. According to Mammata's aesthetics, therefore, the *thumri* of *Viyoga Shringara* has to be rated higher than that of *Samyoga Shringara* and the *bhajan* which delineates *Shanta rasa* has to be ranked higher than the *thumri*. Before passing on to a discussion of the *gharanas* and styles of the *thumri*, it will be more convenient to conclude the foregoing discussions in the following summary.

Concluding Remarks on the History and Origin of the *Thumri*

From the account of the origin and history of the *thumri* given in the foregoing paragraphs, it can be concluded that the main characteristics of the *thumri* are: latitude in elaboration of the *ragas*; a predominance of the amorous sentiment in songs; greater emphasis on verbal-tonal embellishments rather than on purely tonal ones; a preference for the feminine voice. These are all features of light musical patterns recognised by the traditional *Sangitashastra*. This means that styles resembling the *thumri* must have been in vogue from times immemorial and the *thumri* must have had a parent style and owing to the absence of notated records no definite information is available about them. It has, therefore, to be deemed as one of the ephemeral popular upsurges in the domain of classical music. The fact of royal patronage of the popular varieties of music is not to be treated as indicative of the genesis of those varieties. Royal patronage is to be viewed as an incident in the development of this style, and should not be exaggerated as a genetic element independent of the current of a spontaneous art movement of musical expression of the people.

The *thumri* marks one of the occasional manifestations of the indigenous trends in forms and modes of musical expression. The desire for freedom from the rigid restraint of the rules of orthodox classical music, or the urge to prefer *Rakti* or *Ranjakta* to the sobriety or solemnity of orthodox styles, asserts itself normally in society and cannot be attributed to any single causal historical factor. The *thumri* is an example of this perpetual musical urge in human nature. The rigorous disciplines of classical music appeal to a smaller group in any civilised society, and larger groups desire to cultivate less exacting disciplines.

Style forms which originate from this kind of urge of that musical strata which constitute the dividing line between the aristocracy of orthodox classical music on the one hand and the ordinary folk music of the masses on the other, appear and re-appear in history. They appear with variations from the preceding forms, in line with the styles of orthodox classical music and of folk music. The *thumri* may be rated lower in the scale of standards of orthodox classical music, but it has an important place in our social life. It is significant that the *thumri* or its religious counterpart, the *bhajan*, is an almost essential part of a musical concert these days. And without it no musical treat is deemed completely satisfactory.

The *Gharanas* and Styles of the *Thumri*

As regards the *gharanas* of the *thumri*, it must be stated at the outset that there appear to be no special *gharanas* of this style-form of Indian music resembling the *gharanas* of *Dhrupad* or *khayal* or those which can be associated with the names of their founders or originators. This is the view of all the living musicians whom I have met. Before writing this paper, I specially interviewed Shrimati Vidyadhari Bai, the great exponent of this style. She is now over eighty years of age. What she told me confirmed the fact that there never have been any exclusively *thumri gharanas*.

No performing musician is known to have attained eminence in the Indian musical world solely on the strength of his rendering of the *thumri*. All the musicians celebrated for their merit in the excellent rendering of *thumri* have primarily been exponents of the *khayal* style. The finer shades of rendering the *thumri* as practised by eminent musicians have never been individualised as distinct *gharanas* of *thumri* singers; they have always been identified with the *gharanas* of the *khayal* style to which particular musicians owed allegiance.

For example, the late Khan Sahib Abdul Karim Khan, and Khan Sabib Fayaz Khan, the best known exponents of the *thumri* in recent times owed allegiance to the Kirana and Agra *gharanas* respectively. They are not known as the founders of any *gharanas* of *thumri* singing as separate from their *khayal gharanas*, notwithstanding the fact that their rendering of the *thumri* had a much greater appeal for average listeners than their singing of the *khayal*.

Although *gharanas* are absent in the *thumri* forms, two regional styles are quite well-known: the Poorbi and Pachahin *angas*, identified broadly with the eastern and western parts of Uttar Pradesh respectively. Banaras has been the centre of the former and Lucknow of the latter. The Poorbi *anga* is in vogue in the whole of eastern U.P., some regions of western U.P., for example the Vrajapradesha and in Bihar. It has all along been favoured by the musicians of Bengal, Madhyapradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. The Pachahin *anga* has been confined more or less to the districts of Lucknow, Moradabad, Saharanpur, Meerut and Delhi.

The differentiating element of these two styles has been that whereas the Poorbi *anga* is characterised by a certain grace, tenderness, sweetness and elegance of rendering and flexibility of tonal embellishments, the Pachahin *anga* is comparatively less tender and somewhat less elastic. This distinction is prominent equally in the dialectical peculiarities of the regions with which the two styles are identified. The tonal tenderness of *Vrajabhasha* or the *Bhojpuri* dialect which are the media or expression of the *thumri* in the Poorbi *anga* is in marked contrast with the toughness of *Khariboli* which is the medium of the Pachahin *anga*. Apart from the distinction of tonal quality there is a further distinction in the thought content of songs of the two *angas*.

In addition to the Poorbi and Pachahin *angas* of the *thumri* there is a third style known as the Punjabi *anga* which has become quite popular nowadays. Khan Sahib Bade Ghulam Ali Khan is known as the most outstanding exponent of this style. The style is of quite recent development, if not origin. The ancestors or predecessors of contemporary singers of this style of the *thumri* were all musicians belonging to the *gharanas* of the *khayal*. The most notable characteristic of this style is the influence which it bears of the *tappa* style form which originated in the Punjab. This is probably the reason why the style has been given its name.

A profuse deployment of successive tonal embellishments, that is elaborate turns and trials (*murkis*, woven into *tana* patterns) in quick tempo, which is a characteristic feature of the *tappa* has been adopted as its feature in the Punjabi *anga* of the *thumri*. Although the Poorbi *anga* singers also use *murkis* of the

tappa anga, they do it with better grace and less elaboration. Another peculiarity of the Punjabi *anga* is its most frequent rendering of the Pahari pattern of melody.

This brief account of the styles of the *thumri* may be concluded with the remark that the Poorbi, Punjabi, and Pachahin *angas* deserve to be graded in a descending order when we apply the criterion of sweetness, grace and popular appeal.
