



Research Article

Challenges in Contemporary Hindustani Classical Music Performances

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Abstract

The tradition of Hindustani Classical Music is very old. Over time, different forms of this music developed from Indian Classical Music. The main part of Indian Classical Music is the Raga, which is also an important part of our cultural tradition.

Many forms of Hindustani Classical Music, such as Dhrupad, Dhamar, Khyal, Tappa, Thumri, Tarana, etc., were performed by court musicians and famous maestros from different Gharanas (musical lineages) since the medieval period in North India.

The Gharana system is a special feature of Hindustani Classical Music. It helps in maintaining both quality and variety in music. For a long time, musicians followed their Gharana traditions very strictly, especially up to the twentieth century.

But in recent times, the quality and richness of Hindustani Classical Music seem to be declining. This is happening even though many music institutions have been set up by the Department of Higher Education, and students are learning both in institutions and privately. This paper aims to study the reasons behind this problem and also suggest possible solutions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indian Classical Music implies an organized as well as supreme state of music. The term Raga is very significant in Indian Classical Music. Because it expresses proper mood with the help of exact rendition of structured swaras (Musical notes), articulation of sound, voice modulation, and necessary embellishments. It is undoubtedly a unique discovery that took several years to explore, dedication, experimentation, and

perfection as well. The history of Indian music is vast and intricate, too. Detailed information about the evolution of this music is found in the age of the Vedas. The origin of the Swaras and their gradual development, irrespective of Vedic (Marga or Classical) and Laukik (Deshi or regional) Swaras, occurred during this time. The practice of Vedic music became obsolete in the Classical period, which begins at about 600—500 B.C. (Prajnanananda 44). Extensive research on the development of

Indian music, as well as Ragas and their classifications, was initiated from this time

The Gandharvas, the creators of the Gaandharva Sangeet or Marga Sangeet, are

regarded as setting the idea of several musicological aspects. The Gandharvas like Narad Muni, Bharat Muni, Matanga Muni, and many more from different ancient times emerged with exemplary contributions towards Indian Classical Music, which have definitely established the perpetual foundation of the same. Musicological intricacies such as Jati-raga, Gram-raga, etc., which were varied classification systems of ancient Ragas, have continued the journey with various other systems through evolution. The history of Indian music, thus, has come across the Raga-ragini system, Mela-raga system, etc., during the medieval period and the Thaata-raga system, Raganga-raga system, etc., during the modern period. Before the beginning of the Christian era, Indian music was divided into Marga and Deshi (Prajnanananda 44). Marga or Gaandharva Sangeet was bound with certain rules of Raga (melody), Taal (beats), Chhanda (rhythm), Dhatu (tune), Matu (lyric), and Geeti articulation. This music remained unchanged irrespective of regions. On the contrary, Deshi before the beginning of the Christian era, Deshi Sangeet expressed its regional traits and was devoid of the excessiveness of musical elements like Gaandharva Sangeet. Deshi Sangeet, having been modified with some musical elements of Gaandharva Sangeet, later appeared in a new form called Abhijaat Deshi Sangeet, which was known as Prakirna in Sanskrit and Pakinnak in the local language. These songs were further modified into a new type called Biprakirna. Both Prakirna and Biprakirna remained popular until the beginning of the Christian era. After that, Gaandharva Sangeet slowly disappeared. The Biprakirna songs went through more changes, and over time, a new style called Prabandha Sangeet developed.

Prabandha Sangeet had three main types: Suda, Alikrama, and Biprakirna. With changing times, many new classical styles of music grew out of Prabandhas, both in North India and South India (Goswami Preface: 10).

In North India, Indian Classical Music gradually evolved into what we now call Hindustani Classical Music. This development took place between the 14th and 18th centuries A.D., when the older Prabandha forms were either changed or stopped being used (Ghosh 26, 41). From the 16th century onwards, several new forms like Dhrupad, Dhamar, Khyal, Tappa, Thumri, and Tarana became popular. Other forms like Dharu, Sadra, Vishnupada, Ragmala, Tribat, Chaturang, Pancharang, Haptarang, Quaul, and Gulnaksh also existed but later faded away. Among these, the most important and still-practiced forms are Dhrupad, Khyal, Tappa, and Thumri.

Dhrupad and Khyal are considered the main Classical styles, as they can express a Raga fully and in depth. Tappa and Thumri are seen as semi-classical styles. They were later adopted by court musicians and gharanas (musical lineages) and often performed under royal patronage, earning the name Darbari Sangeet (Court Music). One of the most important developments was the rise of Dhrupad. It is believed that

Dhrupad was created by modifying an older style called Dhruvpad (or Dhurpad). This was done under the guidance of Raja Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior (1486–1516 A.D.), along with his team of musicians (Roy 79). Raja Man Singh not only helped create this new style but also established a music institution to promote it. With his support, Dhrupad flourished and became a major form of Hindustani Classical Music.

Growth of Dhrupad and Khayal

Raja Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior created a supportive and artistic environment for music to grow. Even the great musician Tansen praised him and acknowledged him as his patron. In this cultured atmosphere, Dhruvpad (later known as Dhrupad) flourished (Deva 100).

Dhruvpad came from Dhruva Prabandha, which was a branch of Salag-Suda Prabandha. The Prabandhas were early classical compositions that did not include Alaap or Vistar (improvised elaboration of notes).

There were three types of Prabandhas

1. Geet-Prabandha (vocal music),
2. Vadya-Prabandha (instrumental music), and
3. Nartan-Prabandha (dance).

These were performed all over India before the idea of formal “musical forms” developed. Geet-Prabandha, which used regional Ragas and Taals, was devotional and often sung in temples. The composer was called a Vaggeyakaar (one who wrote both lyrics and music). This music sounded like an early form of Dhrupad, but without Alaap, Bol-Baant, or ornamentations. In the medieval period, it was also known as Haveli Geet in northern India (Ghosh 22–25).

Khayal became popular as Court music, especially during the reign of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan (Mitra Preface: 12). Like Dhrupad, the modern form of Khayal also spread widely from Gwalior. Musicians like Shakkhar Khan, Makkhan Khan, disciples of Ustad Ghulam Rasool, and their descendants are credited for spreading this style, which was called Qawwal Bacchon ki Gayaki (Mukhopadhyay 78).

Over time, the concept of Gharana emerged in both Dhrupad and Khayal traditions among court musicians.

The Gharana System

One of the special features of Hindustani Classical Music is the Gharana system, which does not exist in Carnatic (South Indian) music or other northern branches.

The word Gharana comes from the Persian word “Ghar”, meaning “house” or “family.” It refers to a school or lineage of musicians who follow a particular style of singing, playing instruments, or dancing. Each Gharana is known for: its unique presentation style, creative improvisation, and maintaining its own sequence of methods called Silsila (Ghosh 99-100). The Gharana system in Hindustani Classical Music is not about simply copying or imitating. It survives through Taleem (rigorous training), skill, and creative improvisation. A Gharana is truly recognized only when at least three generations of musicians continue the same tradition with dedication and

consistency. The great performers (exponents) of a Gharana may bring in new ideas, and if these innovations are accepted by other members, they become part of that Gharana's unique identity. Over time, these qualities form a special style called Gaayaki (exclusive way of singing).

A Gharana is usually named after a place, person, or family. For example:

Gwalior, Agra, Kirana, and Patiala Gharanas – named after places.

Alladiya Gharana – named after Ustad Alladiya Khan.

Seni (or Senia) Gharana – named after the family of Miyan Tansen.

Qawwal Bacche Gharana – named after the family of Qawwals.

Cultural Tradition

The Guru–Shishya tradition (teacher–disciple system) is very old in India. Gurus, often saintly figures, lived simple lives with noble thoughts. Their wisdom deeply enriched Indian music and culture. In ancient times, education was given in Ashramas (hermitages), where disciples lived with their Guru. Learning was completely residential. The two main methods of study were

- Shruti – listening,
- Smriti – memorizing.

While the basic principles of music remain the same across all Gharanas, differences arise in how each one applies and develops its style. Over time, the Gharana tradition spread widely and shaped the identity of Hindustani Classical Music.

• Guru–Shishya Parampara and Cultural Traditions According to Bharat Muni's Natyashastra, an ideal Acharya (Guru) should have six special qualities:

1. Jnan – deep theoretical knowledge,
2. Vijnan – practical and specialized knowledge,
3. Karan – regular skill through practice,
4. Vachan – ability to recall and quote from memory,
5. Prayog-Siddhi – skill in applying music and drama to real-life practice,
6. Nishpadan – ability to train and produce capable disciples.

These qualities made the Guru not just a teacher but also a spiritual and cultural guide for the student.

In the Gurukul system, learning was residential – the student (Shishya) lived with the Guru and learned directly through observation, practice, and memorization. This Guru–Shishya Parampara (teacher–disciple tradition) continued for centuries.

With royal support, Gurus were able to teach freely without worrying about money. They considered teaching a moral duty, not a profession. They wrote down their ideas and innovations in manuscripts. Temples became centers of both performance and research in music, where practical demonstrations and logical discussions were carried out. Decisions made by groups of Acharyas, often in the presence of kings, became accepted as theories of music. Most of these theories matched with each other, showing little disagreement (Ghosh 94).

Gayak–Vadak–Nartak Parampara

Alongside the Acharya–Shishya Parampara, there was also the Gayak–Vadak–Nartak Parampara – performers of singing (Gayak), instruments (Vadak), and dance (Nartak). These were professional entertainers who learned by imitating the music taught in temples. They performed both in royal courts and for the public.

Until the 15th century A.D., Indian music could be divided into three main categories:

1. Temple Music – led by Acharyas, devotional and spiritual,
2. Deshi Music – enjoyed by kings and royal families,
3. Folk Music – for the common people.

During the Sultanate period (1192–1526 A.D.) and the Mughal period (1526–1757 A.D.), Court Music grew in North India, while the Guru–Shishya Parampara slowly declined.

In the time of Alauddin Khilji (1296–1316 A.D.), Khayal singers were called Qawwals.

In the time of Akbar (1556–1606 A.D.), Dhrupad singers were called Kalavants.

Both Qawwals and Kalavants enjoyed high social respect, as described by Muhammad Karam Imam in his book *Muadan-ul-Musiki*.

When the Guru–Shishya Parampara started fading in the North, some Acharyas migrated to South India, where they continued to reform and uplift music.

Guru–Shishya Parampara (Teacher–Disciple Tradition)

In the Gurukul system, students lived with the Guru, observed, practiced, and memorized.

- Gurus taught as a duty, not for money, and were supported by kings.
- Temples became centers of learning and performance.
- Groups of Gurus discussed and created music theories, which were widely accepted.
- Gayak–Vadak–Nartak Parampara (Singers, Instrumentalists, Dancers)

Apart from Gurus, there were professional performers:

- Gayak – singers
- Vadak – instrumentalists
- Nartak – dancers

They learned by imitating temple music and performed in courts and public places.

Three Main Types of Music (till 15th century A.D.)

Changes in Medieval Times

- During the Sultanate period (1192–1526) and Mughal period (1526–1757):
- Court music became popular in North India.
- Guru–Shishya tradition declined slowly.

Under Alauddin Khilji (1296–1316), Khayal singers were called Qawwals.

Under Akbar (1556–1606), Dhrupad singers were called Kalavants.

Both Qawwals and Kalavants were highly respected.

When tradition weakened in the North, some Gurus moved to South India and continued their performances.

In the past, Deshi music gave rise to the tradition of Gayak (singers), Vadak (instrumentalists), and Nartak (dancers), who later became respected court musicians. The term “Gharana” started being used in the late 18th century, although its roots were present much earlier (Ghosh 94–99).

A Gharana reflects the growth of social and cultural attitudes among professional musicians. Over time, professionalism became more important than the old traditional values of the Guru–Shishya system. In the older system, theory and practice were equally important, but during the medieval period, theoretical and analytical study declined, while practical performance gained more importance with the rise of the Gharana tradition.

- By the late 19th century, some scholars and educationists started paying attention to music again, which brought changes in society and culture. In the early 20th century, institutional training in music began. Two great figures, Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, are remembered for their major contributions. They worked to spread the basics of Hindustani classical music among common people. They organized seminars and concerts with famous maestros and set up music institutions, which still influence music education today.

Many other contributors also helped in the growth of Hindustani classical music in different ways, encouraging both analytical thinking and practical learning. Today, the basics of Hindustani classical music are taught as part of the curriculum in many North Indian institutions, and research continues in this field.

Critical Analysis

India has a very rich cultural heritage. Raga, an important cultural tradition, enriches both Hindustani and Carnatic music styles. Hindustani classical music especially uses two terms:

Nayaki – style of presentation

Gayaki – a style of singing

A disciple learns many lessons from his Guru during training. After gaining enough knowledge, the disciple develops the ability to go beyond the style of his own Gharana. He can then mix his training with personal experience, and this unique expression is called Gayaki. The same Raga may sound different in different Gharanas, because of changes in the number of notes, the choice of Thaats (scale structures), or other variations. So, Gharana training is important, but blending ideas from different Maestros makes a Raga performance richer and more dynamic. Important elements like Meend (gliding between notes), Shruti (microtones), and Gamak (fast oscillation of notes) are necessary to bring out the true character of a Raga. In the medieval period, old Geetis (styles of composition) like Shuddha and Bhinna, connected with traditions like Gaurhaar and Daagar, were used in Dhrupad. Ragdari refers to the unfolding of a Raga. It can be shown either by the gradual development of notes in Dhrupad or

through the proper use of musical phrases (special combinations of notes belonging to that Raga).

Four types of Varnas—Shayee, Arohi (ascending), Avrohi (descending), and Sanchari (mixed)—along with ten essentials of Dhvani (sound) explained by Bharat Muni, are important in creating a complete Raga:

1. Graha – starting note
2. Angsha – main/important note
3. Taar – upper note
4. Mandra – lower note
5. Nyas – resting/prolonged note
6. Apanyas – temporary resting note
7. Alpatva – rarely used note
8. Bahutva – frequently used note
9. Shadav – use of six notes
10. Audav – use of five notes

A performer must understand these and other musical terms to present a Raga with its true identity.

Today, many youngsters are learning Hindustani classical music, which is a positive sign. But the deep understanding and contemplation of Raga and Ragdari are slowly decreasing. Because of this, the true passion for music is often missing. Wrong singing styles, lack of proper ornamentations, and too much meaningless juggling of notes make performances mechanical and emotionless. These issues reduce the beauty and excellence of Hindustani classical music.

CONCLUSION

There is no keen difference between a Song and a Raga. The purpose of both the

Music is an expression of proper feeling. In the case of a song, proper feeling is expressed with the perfect rendition of Lyric, Tune, and Rhythm. In the presentation of a Raga, the lyrical portion is replaced with Pakad or Phrases (a combination of certain notes), and proper feeling may be obtained with the perfect blending of the melodic structure, definite articulation, and rhythm. Alaap covers a vital portion to expose a Raga which may rightly be executed either in the form of Dhrupad or that of Khyal. The renowned performers of all times might have excelled with certain limbs of the Classical Forms, but a Learner of Hindustani Classical Music, irrespective of Institutions as well as Traditions, should be aware of all the Angas (components) such as Behlawa, Badhat, Bol-bat, Boltan, etc., and should also be capable of performing the same instead. A wise learner must know both the Theoretical and Practical portions. They are supposed to be the preservers of the Cultural Heritage, keeping up all the Forms and Styles intact instead. A wise learner must know both the Theoretical and Practical portions. They are supposed to be the preservers of the Cultural Heritage, keeping up all the Forms and Styles intact. Performers, Musicologists, Researchers, Critics, and Appreciators will come up out of the generation who will definitely cherish and save our Culture.

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About the Corresponding Author

Dr. Tawseef Ahmad Wani is a researcher and scholar specializing in Hindustani classical music. His academic work focuses on contemporary challenges in performance practices, cultural preservation, and evolving musical traditions. Through his research, he aims to contribute to safeguarding classical heritage while addressing modern artistic and pedagogical concerns.