

Evolution of Tabla Accompaniment in Purabang Thumri According to Different Tabla Maestros: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Thumri singing occupies one of the principal segments of Indian vocal music. But till date, there has been least attention given to the evolution of the accompanying stylization and techniques of this beautiful art form. Tabla acts as the principal accompanying rhythm instrument but there are very few works available focusing on the evolution of Tabla accompaniment with Thumri throughout the past century. Tabla accompaniment needs a sharp mind and the ability of understanding the main artiste's taste and requirement. To do this, the accompanist should have a thorough knowledge of the art. The role that the accompaniment can play in forming the character of a song is immense. Accompaniment always serves as a complementary factor to the development of a song. The quality and playing style of the accompaniment acts a decisive factor in the characterization of the song. In the past century (1905-2015) India has gone through vast political as well as socio-cultural changes which naturally keep a prominent impression in the evolution its musical and art forms. Thumri singing and its accompaniment is no exception. Thus an analytical study is made to assess from information and opinions gathered from interviewing Tabla maestros. This qualitative study focuses particular on this same aspect of the role that accompaniment plays, aiming at exploring the changes through the playing styles of Tabla accompaniment with Thumri singing through the past century.

1. Introduction

Indian Classical Music is one of the oldest art forms of India and is one of the richest heritages of this country. This particular genre of music is regarded as one of the most intricate, content rich yet soulful among all the musical genres throughout the world. From the earliest days, vocal rendition of the music has occupied a principal role in the tradition of Hindustani Music. And along with the progression of human civilization, the music has seen a lot of changes in its structure, content and approach. With the advent of time, Hindustani vocal music has evolved into different branches and sub-branches of classical as well as semi classical like Dhrupad, *Dhamar*, *Khayal* and *Thumri*, *Kajri*, *Chiati*, *Tappa* etc. respectively (Dutta, 2003). Although all genres can be traced back to melodic patterns embedded in ragas, these genres have fundamental differences. Hindustani music, and in general Indian classical music is based on melody and rhythm, nevertheless it uses the Tanpura as its constant accompaniment. Traditionally for practicing and performing this vocal music, apart from the Tanpura, there is an immense importance of some other accompanying instruments and accompanists. Any vocal performance is incomplete without the proper *Saathsang* of its accompanists. Among the accompanying instruments, generally, the rhythm or *taala* support is given by Tabla or *Pakhwaj* while the Harmonium, *Sarengi* or Violin follows and imitates the vocalist. Simultaneously, it can be mentioned that while the melody instruments like *Sarengi*/*Harmonium*/*Violin* creates the background for the vocalist, it is the *taala* section comprising of Tabla or *Pakhwaj* which acts as a complementary to the vocal

music and is inseparable from a vocal performance. With the political and social changes in India, changes occurred in its art and culture along with the music, dance and other forms of performing arts. Vocal music especially travelled a long way from Dhrupad to *Khayal* to *Khayal* repertoires mingling with regional vocal forms (Manuel, 1989). *Thumri* is one of such semi-classical vocal forms said to have gained its prime importance and blossom in Awadh, Uttar Pradesh in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (1847–1856). The lyrics are typically composed in a proto-Hindi language called *Brij Bhasha*, *Awadhi*, *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri* etc. and are usually romantic (Talwar, 2007). Traditionally Tabla, *Sarengi* and Harmonium remain as the principal accompanying instruments for the rendition of a *Thumri* (Mudgal, 2013). With both these genres of music, accompaniment has always complemented the vocal presentation in every aspects and has remained one of the decisive factors in the way it is catered to as well as accepted by the audience.

2. Review of Related Literature

Accompaniment being an indispensable part of the vocal rendition of the Indian Classical Music, the accompanying instruments and their playing stylizations play an extremely important role. The legendary Tabla maestro Pt. Shankar Ghosh states in his book *Anaddha* that, while accompanying, a Tabla player requires much more intelligence and dexterity in his performance than that of Tabla solo playing. Accompanying vocal music is the challenging most role for a tabla player and it needs much more maturity and knowledge of vocal music to do so. *Thumri* accompaniment is an essential part for a Tabla

player. For a good vocal accompaniment bayan is the most essential part as it is through bayan and difference in pressures of wrist that the modulation in thekas occur (Ghosh S. , 1994). Tabla maestro Pt. Aneesh Pradhan states in his article The Reality of the Accompanist that, when a Thumri was performed, dance played an important part of the rendition. The *Tabla* player had to reproduce, anticipate and suggest rhythmic passages that were in tandem with the singer-dancer's footwork. This section known as *laggi* or *laggi-chanti* was once again a requirement of the form (Pradhan, 2006) . In his book Hindustani Music, Ashok DA. Ranade explains *laggi* playing styles of Tabla accompanists and how it excites the audience: After elaborating the chosen compositions, a singer enters the final phase by doubling the tempo of the taala and inviting the Tabla accompanist to employ special compositions known as *laggi*-s, which are delicate and sprightly rhythmic patterns woven in order to electrify and arouse the audience, as also to allow the singer some respite (Ranade, 1997). In a seminar of the ITC Sangeet Research Academy, tabla maestro Pt. Nayan Ghosh states the importance of tabla accompaniment and *laggis*: It is very important that a Tabla player must understand vocal music. It is very important to empathize with the main artiste (Ghosh N. , 2003). Author Ramakrishna Das aptly states in his article Secrets of Taal and Tabla accompaniment that Tabla accompaniment needs a sharp mind and the ability of understanding the main artiste's taste and requirement. To do this, the accompanist should have a thorough knowledge of the art (Das, 2006). The main function of the Tabla in accompaniment is to keep time for the main. Upon careful scrutiny of any Tabla player's accompaniment of different artists, one may even recognize distinct changes in accompaniment style with each artist, as well as each raga. Such is the hallmark of a sensitive and artistically empathetic accompanist (Gopikrishna, 2016).

3. Methodology

A number of Audio-Visual recordings, Books, Journals, Research Papers and Online publications are assessed and used as tools to create an open end self made questionnaire. This particular questionnaire is produced to the selected five tabla maestros, viz. Pandit Anindo Chatterjee, Pandit Kumar Bose, Pandit Nayan Ghosh, Ustad Sabir Khan and Pandit Subhankar Banerjee and they are interviewed. Their opinions regarding the subject of accompaniment are gathered and the answers are discussed and analyzed.

4. Analysis and Discussion

While answering the question about the evolution of the course of accompaniment in the past century Pandit Nayan Ghosh (Interviewed on 28.08.2018, Kolkata) states that along with time the style of accompaniment has changed a lot. In the older days People had ample time and the performances were much longer. Similar opinions are given by maestros Pt. Anindo Chatterjee (Interviewed on 03.01.2019, Kolkata) and Pt. Subhankar Banerjee (Interviewed on 04.07.2018, Kolkata) and they agree on the fact that through the past century there has been quite a phenomenal change in the course of accompaniment due to various reasons. In the same question senior tabla maestros Ustad Sabir Khan (Interviewed on 23.02.2019, Kolkata) and Pandit Kumar Bose (Interviewed on

08.09.2018, Kolkata) comments that due to the way the songs were performed has a remarkable difference from that of the present days, the stylization of accompaniment has got changed noticeably. Pandit Subhankar Banerjee further states that in older days the style of the tabla accompaniment was much difference to that of the present days. The tabla players in the older days knew vocal and dance by their heart. Thus, their style of accompaniment was much different to those of the present days. In this context mention can be made of Pandit Aneesh Pradhan's book A Tabla Player's Approach, where he states how the response to the melodic framework often, listeners wonder whether the *tabla* players rehearse every piece of Hindustani music that they are accompanying. A negative reply astounds them no end. But beyond the mystique lies a clear structure and vocabulary that allows the *tabla* player to enter into a spontaneous and unrehearsed dialogue with just about any practitioner of Hindustani music. In other words, performers share an understanding of the basic design involved in the structuring of compositions, their presentation and elaboration, and other such details that form the core of any Hindustani music performance.

In answering about the evolution of Laya, Syllables and Khanapuris of Theka, Pandit Kumar Bose states that Tabla accompaniment has evolved a long way from the older days to the present days and that has reflected in the laya and khanapuris. The stylization of tabla accompaniment has changed along with time, and taste of the audience. Tabla accompaniment has seen a huge difference because along with time the stylization of tabla playing has changed a lot. In the modern world the gharana system is more open unlike the rigidity of the older days. Which has its good points and bad points? Thus, naturally the tabla accompaniment has changed a lot. Pt. Nayan Ghosh as well as Pandit Anindo Chatterjee opines that the style of tabla accompaniment has changed due to the fast lifestyle of the audience. In the older days there were longer performances thus allowing the accompanist to showcase his art of accompaniment in an elaborate manner. Tabla players have changed the style of accompaniment due to the change in the style of singing. Tabla accompaniment has traveled a long way as many new tabla players have come up with many ideas and the application of those ideas have gave birth to new styles of tabla playing – both solo and accompaniments.

While discussing about the development of *laggi* styles, Both Pt. Nayan Ghosh and Pt. Kumar Bose come to the opinion that the style of *laggi* playing in tabla accompaniment has changed due to change in the knowledge of musicians. According to him in the older days both the vocalist and the tabla player had sound knowledge of vocal music and dance. Naturally that reflected in the performances. Along with this the fast lifestyle of the audience. In the older days there were longer performances thus allowing the accompanist to showcase his art of accompaniment in an elaborate manner. Pt. Anindo Chatterjee says Tabla accompaniment has seen a huge difference because along with time the stylization of tabla playing has changed a lot. In the modern world the gharana system is more open unlike the rigidity of the older days. The role of Bayan plays another important role in the tabla accompaniment. While accompanying, a tabla player requires

much more intelligence and dexterity in his performance than that of tabla solo playing. Accompanying vocal music is the challenging-most role for a tabla player and it needs much more maturity and knowledge of vocal music to do so. Thumri accompaniment is an essential part for a tabla player. For a good vocal accompaniment bayan is the most essential part as it is through bayan and difference in pressures of wrist that the modulation in thekas occurs.(Ghosh S. , 1994). In the older days the tabla players got ample time for the *laggi ladi* which is rare in the present days. Pt. Kumar Bose acknowledges Tabla players have changed the style of accompaniment due to the change in the style of singing. Along with that comes the modernization of tabla playing. Due to easy access to social media the gharanas have opened up and merging different gharanas many new dimensions have evolved. Pt. Anindo Chatterjee (15.12.18, Kolkata) also mentions that Tabla accompaniment has traveled a long way as many new tabla players have come up with many ideas and the application of those ideas have gave birth to new styles of tabla playing – both solo and accompaniments. Pt. Nayan Ghosh opines that the style of tabla accompaniment has changed due to the fast lifestyle of the audience. In the older days there were longer performances thus allowing the accompanist to showcase his art of accompaniment in an elaborate manner. Pt. Nayan Ghosh and Ustad Sabir Kahn discuss that in older days the style of the tabla accompaniment was much difference to that of the present days and explains that tabla players have changed the style of accompaniment due various influences. While accompanying a thumri when the tabla player is given his part to play he must try to follow the similar sentiment of the song and create his imaginations. That is why the *laggi* sections of a thumri are always weaved into patterns along with the tabla player's imaginations turning it into another form of abstract music The theka has grown much faster and the use of Khanapuris have increased much more than the older days due to varied taste of the audience as well as the vocalist. Along with that comes the modernization of tabla playing. Due to easy access to social media the gharanas have opened up and merging different gharanas many new dimensions have evolved.

Finally in the question about whether the popularity in the use of microphone has been a positive or a negative influence on music and accompaniment, all maestros agree on the fact that it has brought a vast positive change in the playing styles of the accompanists as well as the overall performances. Pandit Anindo Chatterjee, Pandit Kumar Bose as well as Ustad Sabir Khan mentions that due to the use of microphones the music can reach to the audience in the very last row of the auditorium. Pandit Nayan Ghosh and Pandit Subhankar Banerjee agree on the fact that due to the use of microphones the playing style of tabla players' has changed quite a lot too. Their strokes have become much more controlled than open hand playing which points out why in older days the style of the tabla accompaniment was much difference to that of the present days.

Through the comments of the maestros it becomes clear that the tabla accompaniment in the past decade did travel a long way to establish its present structure and practice. But most of them agree in the fact that the accompaniment stylization did change a certain bit in the aspect of the *laya* approach. And they site one of its reasons to be the varying pace in the daily lifestyle of the present day society. The change in the pace of the daily lifestyle obviously leaves an impact on the music as it's a reflection of the society. Thus naturally the performances get remarkably shortened leaving an impact on the approach of the theka tempos. Thus naturally the *laya* of the thekas have grown a lot faster since the older days in context to faster and shorter performance spans.

5. Conclusion

The embodiment of a particular song lies in the stylization of its accompaniment. The accompaniment of a song actually complements it to the final production that gets catered to the audience. Accompanying a thumri is always challenging for a tabla player as the whole performance is abstract and he has to follow the vocalist's imaginations and sentiments. (Pradhan, Tabla: A Performer's Perspective, 2011). Through the interviews it becomes clear that most of the maestros opine that the accompaniment has gone through a change and the change is positive. But different maestros have opined varied reasons for this transformation.

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1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0jc_Fx2Ki0
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zileP6OGj8s>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nd27rzGPzCY>
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bx4DxKTLzHU>
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