

THE DHRUPAD TRADITION

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Of the various genres of North Indian classical music, that known as dhrupad is generally regarded, by musicians, listeners and scholars, as the 'oldest' 'purest', 'serious' most 'demanding', 'highest', most 'sacred', and above all perhaps, most 'traditional'. It is also generally assumed to be extinct, or at best moribund. Indeed, faced with the burgeoning popularity of other styles of classical or semi-classical vocal music-khyal, thumri, ghazal-and of instrumental music, to say nothing of film music, dhrupad retreated into semi-obscurity during the middle decades of this century. During this period, for example, commercial recordings of dhrupad could be numbered on the fingers of one hand. Nevertheless, during the last twenty years, dhrupad has reemerged from the shadows. It can now be heard on the concert-platforms of India and the West, festivals devoted exclusively to the genre have developed in a number of places, and the volume of recordings publicity available is steadily increasing. Thanks to the efforts of the various pairs of Dagar brothers, members of the Mallik family, their disciples, and a number of supportive promoters, dhrupad is once again playing a prominent role in Indian musical culture.

1. A body of authoritative knowledge and practice inherited from the past and transmitted to the future. In the case of dhrupad, this is represented by a repertory of special compositions, and partly by the distinctive style, techniques of improvised expansion and other performance practices through which such compositions are rendered.

2. Well established social Institutions through which such knowledge and practice is normally transmitted, dhrupad, like other genres of North Indian classical music, has been handed down from generation to generation mainly through families of hereditary musicians, the commonly accepted term for which is gharana.

3. An over-arching ideology or world-view, which may extend to other areas of life besides music, by which the transmission of traditional knowledge is justified or required. Dhrupad is regarded by its performers as a form of sacred or spiritual music, and this conception determines their attitude to musical style and performance practice, to teaching and performing, and to other aspects of life.

In all three respects – substance, transmission, and ideology – dhrupad could be regarded as 'a tradition', and a living tradition at that. But should we speak of one tradition, or many? There are the tradition of temple-based singers in Mathura, the Dagar family from Rajasthan, the Agra gharana of khyal (which still preserves a dhrupad repertory), the Talwandi gharana in Pakistan, the traditions of Darbhanga and Betiya in Northern Bihar, and the Vishnupur gharana in Bengal. What unifies this multiplicity of dhrupad traditions is, firstly, the musical style, which can be recognised as characteristically dhrupad despite idiosyncratic variations; and secondly, though again with many variations, the ideology and mythology that are associated with the musical content.

1. The substance of the tradition

The Hindi word dhrupad (Urdu : dhrupad), from Sanskrit Dhruva-pada, denotes a short poem for

signing (pada), part of which functions as a refrain (dhrupad)⁴. A dhrupad poem, normally in Braj bhasa but often heavily laced with Sanskrit, comprises two or four rhyming lines of roughly equal length; there is no standard metre. These lines correspond to the same number of musical section. In performance the first line, or its opening words is repeated as a refrain between the other sections, and from time to time during the ensuing improvisation. The four-line structure is unique to dhrupad among the North Indian classical vocal genres, but similar musical structures are to be found in some types of temple music, and in the South Indian Kriti and Kirtana repertoires (Widdess 1981). This is but one of a number of factors that link dhrupad with South Indian music, and with historically-attested pan-South Asian musical practices, rather than with relatively recently-developed genres specific to the North Indian classical-music tradition, such as khyal and thumri.

The words of dhrupad compositions are typically religious or spiritual in character. Some are in praise of Siva, Krishna, Ganesa, other Hindu Gods and Goddesses, or Allah; others discuss abstract philosophical concepts. There are two principal sub-genres appended to the dhrupad repertory, dhamar and sadra dhamar compositions frequently describe the Holi festival as celebrated by Krishna and Radha, while many sadra compositions are on sufi themes (Sanyal 1992). Although dhrupads on more secular subjects exist, such as the eulogy of mortal rulers, the seasons, the beloved musical theory, and other praise worthy subject, it is the religious and philosophical text that are most often heard today.

Each dhrupad composition is set to music in a classical melody-type (rag) and metre (tal). The rags of dhrupad are the standard rags used in other genres of North Indian classical music, but the tals are special: although these special tals Cautal, Dhamar, Tivra, Sui-would once have been commonplace, they are now almost exclusive to dhrupad, having been superseded by more popular rhythms in most other genres.

A complete, concert performance of dhrupad begins with an improvised exposition of the rag, the alap, sung in unmetred rhythm without percussion accompaniment; this is typically the most extended part of the performance, lasting anything between 10 minutes and an hour. The composition is then sung to the accompaniment of the drum pakhavaj; this takes no more than a few minutes, but may be followed by open-ended rhythmic improvisation (laykan) in which the singer sets the words of the poem to intricate rhythmic patterns.

In addition to denoting a type of musical composition, and the pattern of improvised expansion, the term dhrupad also denotes the particular style in which such compositions are performed. Indeed, it has been argued that dhrupad is defined by its style rather than by structural features (Lath 1987). By 'style' is meant particularly the manner of inflecting individual notes and proceeding from one note to another. Despite variations between regional traditions and between individual performers, the dhrupad style can usually be recognised as such, by anyone familiar with the vocal genres of North India, even when it is rendered on an instrument instead of vocally (Lath *ibid.*). It is normally considered to be a more disciplined, restrained style than the more highly embellished khyal and thumri styles; there are specific techniques of embellishment, characteristic of Khyal and thumri, that are rigorously excluded from dhrupad, just as there are ornaments and techniques that are only employed in dhrupad. To quote Captain Willard, writing in 1834, 'The style is very masculine, and almost entirely devoid of studied ornamental flourishes... the few turns that are allowed are always short and peculiar'. Willard is of course using the word 'peculiar' here in its proper sense, meaning special to dhrupad.



Within the overall dhrupad style, there are said to be four sub-styles of banis, which are believed to have originated with four musicians at the court of Akbar though I have not come across any documentary evidence from before the 1850's. Of the four banis-Gaur, Nauhar, Khandar and Dagar -only the last two are performed today; singers originating from Mathura or Rajasthan are believed to sing the Dagar bani. those from Punjab, Bihar and Bengal, the Khandar (see Basra and Widdess 1989). Musicians interviewed are not able to say precisely what the distinctive features of these banis are. but the Dagar seems to be predominantly melodic, and to cultivate smoothness of line and exactness of intonation, whereas the Khandar is more robustly rhythmical in emphasis. While it is now the case that each school of dhrupad claims to sing one or other of these banis, there may have been greater flexibility and versatility in the past, with individual singers cultivating one or more banis according to inclination.

Dhrupads is normally performed by a solo singer, or by two singers (who sing the composition together and improvise alternately), accompanied by one or more drone lutes (tamburaltanpura) and the horizontal double-headed (double-conical) drum Pakhavaj. The use of the pakhavaj rather than the pair of small drums called tabla, used for accompanying all other genres of vocal music in North India, is another distinguishing feature of dhrupad, though it is paralleled by the mridangam used in South Indian classical music. The melody instruments specifically associated with dhrupad style are the rudra, vina or bin, a plucked stringed instrument of impressive size, sonority and antiquity, and the surbahar, a bass sitar the size and deep pitch of these instruments make them particularly appropriate, mechanically and aesthetically, to the restrained dhrupad style. Nevertheless attempts have also been made to render the dhrupad style on higher-pitched instruments such as the sitar, sorod and flute.

The substance of the dhrupad tradition thus comprises a repertory of compositions, a group of tals, techniques of improvised expansion, a style and sub-style, and a small selection in instruments.

It is difficult to trace the history of dhrupad in detail, because there is little solid evidence for musical style and performance practice until the recording era. Most of the structural elements -the structure of the composition, the alap. the rhythmic expansion of the composition can already be identified in the 13th century treatise sangitaratnakara of Sarangadeva, where they are associated with a form called dhruva-prabandha, this was a vocal genre that was also used for dance. The dhruva-prabandha and related forms seems to have become widespread in the succeeding centuries, for they evidently underly the south Indian Kirtana and Kriti, and the North Indian classical dhrupad and related templemusic forms. It is particularly the repetition of the first line as a refrain that distinguishes these dhruva-prabandha type genres from an older structure, represented by the Buddhist carya-padas and by the ashta-padis of Jyadeva, where it is the second in a sequence of couplets that forms the refrain.

The 15th-century ruler of Gwalior, Man Simh Tomar, is credited with developing dhrupad as a vocal form using vernacular texts rather than sanskrit (Faqrullah 1661) the vernacular in question was that of the Madhyadesha (Faqrullah loc. cit.; Bhatkhande n.d. 72-3 quoting Bhavabhata), an area that included Gwalior, Agra and Mathura. The connection between dhrupad and the traditions of Braj, manifested in the language and subject-matter of many dhrupads today, may date from this time; but it has been argued that the Vishnupad, the genre of devotional lyric sung at this lime in the temples of Braj, is a distinct genre, and that the contemporary dhrupad was a court-music genre of largely secular character (Delvoye 1990). It is certain that the leading musical atelier of Northern India, specialising in vocal

dhrupad, was established at Gwalior, for in the 16th century Mughal emperor Akbar drew on it to stock the ranks of his own court musicians. The most important Gwalior singer at Akbar's court was Miya Tansen, one of the 'Nine Jewels' of that court, famed ever since as a composer and singer of dhrupad. Was the dhrupad of those times the dhrupad we know today? 17th century sources associated with the Mughal court tell us that dhrupad was a poem of 4 Lines, sung in classical ragas and tals of the day, with a prefatory alap. So far, the resemblance to modern dhrupad is clear. The sources do not, however, tell us anything about the style in which dhrupad was performed. We do not know whether or not we would have recognised Tansen's performances as dhrupad by today's stylistic criteria.

THE LIVING TRADITIONS OF DHRUPAD

The Dagar Tradition

The family history of the Dagers and the Dagar sampradaya i.e. Dagers as maestros and their disciples and fans is a microcosm of the history of Indian Classical music. The continuity and contribution of the tradition of nineteen generations bears rich testimony to the excellence of the Dhrupad style of singing and playing amongst the Dagers and their handful of disciples already performing on national and global level.

The Dagarvani's forte is the Merukhand alap which is structured for singing on ten finesses (svara-Iksanas) artistically named aakar, dagar, dhuran, muran, kampita, andolita, lahak, gamak, hudak and sphurti. As we make the myriad tonal patterns in alaaap and dhrupad, we directly experience the joy it occasions. It relates to what existentially supports and surpasses us. The tonal vacillations are so subtle, so deep that they become hardly noticeable to the unskilled and untutored ears. Voice culture in this tradition is delicate and demands correct use of the microtones. Also singing and rudra veena playing have been together-one complementing the other. When the singer expounds the raga, all the finesses induce a field of mystical feeling, exuding the overall shanta rasa around the rasas of bhakti, adbhuta and srungara.

The Darbhanga Tradition

Seven generations back from now (around 18th century) two brothers named Radhakrishna and Kartaram went to Lucknow to learn music from Bhupat Khan, who was patronised by the Nawab of Avadh, Shujauddaullah Khan. No written evidence is there to corroborate this fact regarding Bhupat Khan. The brothers performed in Lucknow and the ruler of Darbhanga had a chance to hear them. He wanted to appoint them as court-musicians but the Nawab was unwilling to part with them. Finally it was settled to stay for six months in Lucknow and Darbhanga each in a year. A huge jagir of 1200 Bighas of land including the villages of Amta, Gangadah and Narayandohat was bestowed on them. All the descendants were ever since attached to the Darbhanga court. The Mallicks and the Pathaks represent this tradition mainly representing dhrupad and pakhawaj. They owe its connection to the Gauhar vani. Depth and sobriety of tone-production, richness in the repertoire of compositions, profuse use of gamaks in fast laya, use of layakari in simple compositions which abound in excellence of the text are the qualities of the tradition.

The Vishnupur Tradition

The Vishnupur Gharana started in Bengal with the discipular lineage of Bahadur Khan of the Senia Gharana in the 18th century, began with Ramshankar Bhattacharya and took shape and flourished with

innumerable Dhrupadis of eminence for almost two centuries. The tradition is gradually disintegrating in Bengal and there are very few practising Dhrupodias today trying to preserve this tradition.

The Bettiah Tradition

The Bettiah tradition is noted for its originality and excellence, being famous for the Singh brothers -Anand and Navalkishore. All the four vanis were sung in Bettiah, the Khandar and Nauhar vanis being rather more highlit. It became more popular in Bihar and Bengal. The interwoven patterns of svar-tala-pada in its complexity determine the Bettiah Dhrupad. The original beauty lies in the unity of all the technical characteristics in the Dhrupad performances which are short and pleasing.

The Talwandi Gharana

A lone Dhrupad tradition of Talwandi Gharana is practised today by Mohd. Afzal Khan and Ustad Hafiz Khan of Lahore. They identify themselves with the Khandarvani. Alaap and Dhrupad for them are religious in an Islamic guise. Alaap has four stages -Sariat, tariqat, haqiqat and marafat. They also have extremely fast concluding portions of alaap and precomposed rhythmic variations in che'gun and ath'gun.

The Temple Tradition

The temple tradition of Dhrupad encompassing the Braj area is pivoted around Mathura and Vrindavan. The Haveli Sangeet characterising the pustimarga was founded by eight poetic composers (astachapa) of Vallabhacharya sect. Today this is a well guarded tradition of pada-oriented dhrupad of the temples along with Lilagana and Kirtana.
