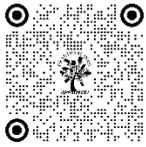


THUMRI: A STUDY OF TRACES THE HISTORY OF HINDUSTANI MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

Thumri, a genre of Indian classical music, occupies a unique space in the country's rich musical heritage. Known for its emotive expressions, lyrical beauty, and intricate improvisations, Thumri is often described as the "song of the heart". It stands out as one of the most popular forms of vocal music today and is almost invariably a concluding item of a classical performance. Thumri, which is an improvised vocal form of the semi-classical genre, is a short amatory text with devotional overtones, and until recently, typically performed by courtesans as accompaniment to interpretive kathak dance through spectacular action, rhythmic movements, and gestures. If historians of Indian classical music have been obliged to rely primarily upon a finite and often enigmatic set of treatises and iconographic sources, historical studies of semi-classical genres like thumri confront even more formidable challenges. Such styles and their predecessors were largely ignored by Sanskrit theoreticians, who tended to be more interested in hoary modal and metrical systems than in contemporary vernacular or regional-language genres sung by courtesans. It is thus inevitable attempts to reconstruct the development of such genres involve considerable amounts of conjecture, and in some senses raise more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, thumri, and earlier counterparts, which we may retrospectively call "light-classical", have played too important a role in South Asian music to be ignored by historians. In this article, I tried to explore this apparent contradiction, and further suggest how the divergent trajectories of thumri in the later twentieth century illustrate the distinctive form that modernity has assumed in Indian music culture. The findings of the study will help to understand what we can practice to ensure the sustainability of the thumri genre of Indian music and History

1. INTRODUCTION

Thumri, a genre of Indian classical music, occupies a unique space in the country's rich musical heritage. Known for its emotive expressions, lyrical beauty, and intricate improvisations, Thumri is often described as the "song of the heart". It stands out as one of the most popular forms of vocal music today and is almost invariably a concluding item of a classical performance. *Thumri*, which is an improvised vocal form of the semi-classical genre, is a short amatory text with devotional overtones, and until recently, typically performed by courtesans as accompaniment to interpretive *kathak* dance through spectacular action, rhythmic movements, and gestures. If historians of Indian classical music have been obliged to rely primarily upon a finite and often enigmatic set of treatises and iconographic sources, historical studies of semi-classical genres like *thumri* confront even more formidable challenges. Such styles and their predecessors were largely ignored by Sanskrit theoreticians, who tended to be more interested in hoary modal and metrical systems than in contemporary vernacular or regional-language genres sung by courtesans.¹ It is thus inevitable attempts to reconstruct the development of such genres involve considerable amounts of conjecture, and in some senses raise more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, *thumri*, and earlier counterparts, which we may retrospectively call "light-classical", have played too important a role in South Asian music to be ignored by historians. In this article, I tried to explore this apparent contradiction, and further suggest how the divergent trajectories of *thumri* in the later twentieth century illustrate the distinctive form that modernity has assumed in Indian music culture. The findings of the

study will help to understand what we can practice to ensure the sustainability of the *thumri* genre of Indian music and History.

Thumri did not begin to emerge into historical daylight until the mid-nineteenth century, and hence it is not entirely surprising that publications continue to appear that attribute the origin of *thumri*, to Wajid Ali Shah's Lucknow court (1847-56).ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, if the *ghazal* song's prehistory remains obscure, serious scholars of Indian music have established that *thumri* itself in some form predates the Lucknow *nawabs* era by nearly two centuries and that it can be seen to have counterparts, if not direct or indirect roots, in a set of comparable light-classical genres which date back to the time of the *natyashashtra*.ⁱⁱⁱ The first extant reference to *thumri* appears in Faqirullah's '*Raag Darpan*' of 1665-66, in which he states that the Indian raga or *naghma* Barwa is similar to and occasionally referred to as *thumri*.^{iv} Mirza Khan's 1675 Persian text *Tuhfat al-Hind* similarly describes *thumri* as a modal entity; specifically, it is listed as a *ragini* of Shri-raga, sung mostly in the Doab region, containing elements of ragas Shankara bharana and Maru, and linked at least indirectly in this fashion to contemporary ragas such as *kafi* and *pahari*.^v While these descriptions are ambiguous, Shukla convincingly argues and suggest that *thumri* was a mixed mode containing elements of modern-day *kafi*, *Bilaval*, and *Khamaj*. Accordingly, Pratap Singh's *Radha Govind Sangeet Saar* of 1803 also describes *thumri* as a *raga*-again, like modern *kafi*, using lowered seventh and both raised and lowered third degrees.^{vi} The pre-modern *thumri* thus appears to have been a kind of vernacular, light-classical mode or song-type, which, like most modern *thumri ang ragas*, freely mixed raised and lowered forms of the third and seventh scale degrees (*ni*, and *ga*). Quite probably it was a relatively simple and idiom that functioned mostly as a courtesan dance-song, as suggested by the root *thumak* (a choreographic stamp of the foot).^{vii}

Moreover, as some musicologists have argued, *thumri* did not emerge out of a vacuum but can be seen as a recent variant of a long line of earlier counterparts. These precursors, whether or not directly related to *thumri*, shared its traditional function as a vehicle for interpretive dance (*abhinaya*, *nritya*), its use of vernacular dialect, its affinities with folk music or folk-derived- light-classical elements, its erotic character, its flexible rather than scrupulous adherence to *raga*, and in some cases its association with Krishna it's *bhakti* and the vernal *holi* festival. An early antecedent to such songs would be the light, erotic *catuspadi* dance-song described in the *natyasastra*, which was to be performed by women, in the *lasya* (graceful. effeminate) manner^{viii}. Subsequent similar genres would include the *nadavati* outlined in the eighth-century *brhad desi*, the *panika*, as described in the *dattilam* (c.200-800), and the *dombika* dance-song discussed in the eleventh-century *abhinava bharti*. From the latter era on, the spread of the *bhakti* movement and the rise of Krishna worship in the *Braj* region stimulated the flowering of several folk and folk-related dance and music genres which Vaishnava devotionism with a worldly eroticism.

Thumri became a more distinct genre by the 1830's. According to Willard's 1834 essay, it is a well-known style in *Braj Bhasha* and is ranked fourth in significance, behind *Dhrupad*, *Khayal*, and *Tappa*^{ix}. There are also surviving *Bandish thumri* compositions that are credited to contemporary artists such as Javan Singh (who ruled Kisangarh and Naghdar in the 1830s) and Man Singh (who ruled Jodhpur from 1803 to 1843). The texts of dozens of *thumris* (designated as such) in light *ragas* currently employed for that genre are included in the *rag kalpa* drum. Thus, the *thumri*, which became famous in Nawabi Lucknow, is a polished, standardized, and widely accepted version of an older genre rather than a completely unique composition. Its development was intimately associated with that of *Chota Khayal*. Its growing dependence on a specific collection of light, mixed ragas, its focus on rhythmic word-division (*bol bant*) as opposed to virtuosity or meticulous raga delineation, and its connection to dance, courtesans, and a specific group of male, primarily Lucknow-based composers who all used the pen name "Piya" (e.g. Lallan Piya, Sanad Piya, and so on) set it apart from that genre.

If both *thumri* and *ghazal* in some form predate the court of Wajid Ali Shah, there is no doubt that they achieved unprecedented prominence in the *nawabi* era, and further that their efflorescence in that milieu is much better documented than that of previous epochs. The precondition for these developments was the decline of Delhi in the eighteenth century and the subsequent rise of Lucknow as the pre-eminent centre for fine arts patronage in north India. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 the Mughal Empire had all but collapsed, with the effective authority of subsequent emperors barely extending beyond the borders of Delhi, which was itself repeatedly sacked by marauding invaders. If Dargah Quli Khan's *Muraqqa'-I-Dehfi* portrays a surprisingly lively musical ambiance in the immediate aftermath of Nadir Shah's 1739 pillage of Delhi, there is no doubt that the city's ability to sustain musical patronage suffered dramatically thereafter. By the late 1700s, *Pax Britannica* had imposed a certain sort of political stability over north India, but Lucknow was by this time replacing Delhi as the region's cultural lodestar. From 1775 to 1856 the Lucknow court received formal recognition and military protection from the British in exchange for paying a heavy annual tribute. Thus

denied (or relieved of) fiscal and administrative responsibilities, the most celebrated Lucknow *nawabs* especially, Wajid Ali Shah--concentrated their energies on cultural patronage^x. As Lucknow's courts and noblemen avidly supported literature and the fine arts, many of Delhi's performers, poets, and artists flocked to Awad's thriving capital.

Although Mughal arts and fashions retained a certain prestige, Lucknow's cultural ambiance was in many respects lighter and less rigorous than Delhi's, if nevertheless displaying its sort of rococo, mannerist refinement, whether in architecture, poetry, or music and dance.^{xi} The causes for this cultural reorientation were numerous, complex, and in some cases rather intangible. Perhaps ultimately most important was the gradual decline of the Mughal feudal *zamindar* nobility and its increasing replacement, from around 1800, by a new class of proto capitalist, *nouveau riche* entrepreneurs, speculators, and landlords (*tiiludqar*)^{xii}. These new elites, although often avid patrons of the fine arts, generally lacked interest in and exposure to Mughal-era genres like dhrupad, which they came to perceive as dull and archaic. Accordingly, contemporary accounts--especially Muhammad Karam Imam's *Madan al Musiqi* of 1856-57--indicate that *thumri* was the most popular and vital urban music genre of the *nawabi* era. Although performed most extensively by courtesans (*tawaif*), the genre also profited from the increasing attention of male professional musicians like Sadiq Ali Khan and Vazir Mirza (Kadar Piya). Their popularity spread accordingly to other cities and appears to have extended even beyond the milieus of the court, the courtesan salon, and the homes of the gentry. Meanwhile, Abdul Halim Sharar's colorful account of *nawabs* Lucknow speaks of "bazaar boys" expertly singing Bhairavi and Sahni (*thumri*-alig ragas) and The British annexation of Awadh in 1856 and the disruptions resulting from the "Mutiny" of 1857-58 truncated Lucknow's prominence as a cultural center^{xiii}.

The first few decades of the twentieth century were transitional ones for *thumri* in terms of style as well as performance milieus. The stylistic evolution was most dramatic in the replacement of the *bau lish thumri* by the *bol baniio thumri*, which emerged in Benares (Varanasi) and soon spread throughout Hindustani music circles. By Benares' more provincial character and the greater presence of folk (especially Bhojpuri) culture therein. The Benares *thumri*, as popularized by Bhaiya Saheb Ganpat Rao (d. 1920), Mauzuddin Khan (1878-1926), and others, increasingly forsook the classical *tintil* for the more folk-oriented *sitiir khiini*, *jat*, and *dipcandi talas*. and abandoned *khayal*-atig ragas in favor of the traditional light ragas similar to regional folk modes, and to the aforementioned modes used in pre-Lucknow- era *thumri* and related genres. At the same time, the modern *thumri* acquired a more classical character in its increasing dissociation from *kathak* dance, in the dramatic deceleration paralleling that of *badaa khayal*, and in the performance of affective textual-melodic elaboration (*bol banao*). While the latter process is unique to *shabd-pradhan* semi-classical music, the systematic, thorough, and leisurely manner in which it came to be unfolded reflected the clear influence of *badaa khayal*, and of *khayal* singers like Abdul Kmim Khan (1872-1937) and Faiyaz Khan (1886-1950) who took an increasing interest in the genre. Many *ghazal* recordings from the early twentieth century (such as those of Zahra Bai and Mauzuddin Khan) reflect a similar sort of classicism in their incorporation of virtuoso fast *tiin* and serious, *khayal*-a, *ig* ragas. By the 1930s, however, such virtuoso displays went out of fashion, as *ghazal* singers concentrated solely on *bol baniio*. Classicisms notwithstanding, courtesans specializing in semi-classical music and dance continued to be foremost exponents of both *thumri* and *ghazal*; similarly, most of the prominent male *khayiiifiya* who sang the genres (like Abdul Karim Khan and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan) were themselves *Mirasis* or former *sarangi* players musically reared in the same social milieu. That is the *kof ha*. For its part, the *bandish thumri* can be regarded as either disappearing or, as rendered by mid-century singers like Lakshman Prasad Jaipurwale, effectively merging with *chota khayal*. The evolution of modern *bol banao thumri* styles is documented, however incompletely, by the numerous commercial recordings marketed from 1903 on by the Gramophone Company of India and its lesser rivals. Such recordings, together with the recollections of elders and other sources, indicate that the *bol banao thumri* art song enjoyed a zenith of sophistication and vitality in the period roughly 1920-60. This was the heyday of the great courtesan-background singers like Siddheswari Devi (1908-77) and Begum Akhtar (1914-74), and of male exponents like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan (1902-68) and Barkat Ali Khan (1910-63).

The *Kathak* dance style was a good fit for *thumri* singing. Idioms were complimentary and complemented one another. With the nickname "First Dancing Girl," Gauhar Jaan of Kolkata gained immense popularity. She was born in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, as Angelina to an Anglo-Indian woman named Victoria and an Armenian father who eventually rejected them both. Her name was changed to Badi Malka Jaan, who was a skilled Hindustani musician and dancer and a prostitute of Banaras State, after her mother, Victoria, later married Khursheed, a Muslim prince who relocated to Banaras. In the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, she later returned to Calcutta and began singing. With the mother's help, young Gauhar Jaan began studying under several of the greatest teachers of the day and developed his singing and *Kathak* dancing

skills. She is said to have performed at the Maharaj of Darbhanga's (Bihar) court when she was just 14 years old. When she initially recorded a Khayal in Raag Jogia, her fame quickly grew, and she became regarded as the "Recording Star" of India. She had grown wealthy and well-known, to the extent that her extravagant lifestyle and ostentatious demeanor had come to define her. In almost ten languages, she recorded about 600 disks. With her Kajaris, Chaitis, Horis, Dadaras, and Bhajans, she popularized light Hindustani classical music. She also perfected the art of reducing her performances of otherwise complex Hindustani classical music to three and a half minutes for record purposes. She was famously invited to perform at the coronation of King George the Vth at Delhi Durbar in December 1911. There, she sang a duet with Janki bai of Allahabad, "Ye Hai Tajposhi Ka Jalsa, Mubarak Ho Mubarak Ho." It is said that Gauhar Jaan was genuinely amazed by Janaki bai's vocal quality.

During this period *thumri* and *ghazal* became increasingly independent from dance and acquired much of the sophistication of khayal while retaining their distinctive intimacy of expression and style. If many aficionados regard modern *thumri* as a diluted facsimile of its former self, elder enthusiasts of the light-classical *ghazal*, as rendered by Begum Akhtar, Barkat Ali Khan, and their contemporaries, are even more negative about the modern state of that art. In *mehfil* by trained specialists (especially tawaif), has long since ceased to thrive. For if many *khayal* singers perform *thumri* (whether sensitively or not), few if any will publicly sing *ghazal*, which they would regard as too light, too limited in its scope for improvisation and-in recent decades- too tainted by its reincarnation as a pop style. Nevertheless, *ghazal* per se, far from declining in popularity, has instead enjoyed a prodigious vogue, but as a trendy commercial idiom rather than a hoary light-classical one.^{xiv}

In the century before independence, *Thumri* was a prime example of the middle class of fine arts culture. There is some exaggeration in the nineteenth-century stories of Zauq's poems echoing through Delhi's streets and "bazaar boys" singing *thumri ragas*. In hindsight, their actual peak seems especially short, since the *bol baniio* style seems to have developed only in the early 1900s and, in the opinion of many, has deteriorated in the last few decades. However, it is undeniable that the histories of South Asia, notably the unique shape that modernity has taken in that region, have influenced the trajectories of *thumri*. It hardly needs to be said that several types of pre-modernity coexist with modernity in South Asia, whether it be socio-economic, technological, ideological, or artistic. It might be argued that this circumstance has contributed to the on-going vitality of Hindustani music, regardless of its overall positive or negative impacts. In fact, there is no comparable to the smooth continuation of Indian classical music history in the West, where art music has endured for a century due to an uncomfortable and sometimes debilitating disconnect between popular tastes and modern compositional approaches. In contrast with Adamo's portrayal of Western music, Indian classical music has been able to remain contemporary without having to choose between extremes of esotericism or commercialism. Moreover, the very changes in Hindustani music-including the decline of *thumri* can be taken to reflect its flexibility and adaptability, such that it flourishes not as a museum piece, but as a distinctly modern entity.^{xv} The modernization of Hindustani music, although evident in stylistic parameters, is perhaps most overt in the realm of institutions and social practices, including the entire infrastructure of public concerts, music schools, and mass-mediated forms of dissemination. Further studies and speculations are needed to understand the factors conditioning twentieth-century Hindustani music and the ways that they reflect and embody a distinctively South Asian form of modernity. A webseries 'Heeramandi' by Sanjay Leela Bansali's and other popular composition has once again made *thumri* famous among the people.

ⁱ Prem lata Sharam, *The Origin of Thumri: Aspects of Indian Music*, Ministry of Information of Broadcasting, New Delhi, 1970. Pp. 15-18

ⁱⁱ Gangadhar Rao Telang, *Thumari Sangreh*, Uttar Pardesh Sangit Natak Academy, Lucknow, 1977. p. 89; Joep Bor, *The Raga Guide: A Survey of 74 Hindustani Ragas*. Nimbus Records, 1999. pp. 45-47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bharata Muni, *The Natyasastra*, Manmohan Ghosh(translated), Asiatic society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951.

1. ^{iv} Faqirullah, *Tarjuma-I-Manakutuhala and Risal-i-Raga Darpana*, Motilal Banarsi Das, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 226-227.

^v Peter Manuel, *Thumri in Historical and stylistic Perspective*, Motilal Banarsi Das, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 36-49.

2. ^{vi} Sawai Pratap Singh, *Sangeet Sar*, vol. vii, 1912, pp. 285-286; Daniel M. Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. pp. 150-153.

^{vii} Lal mukand, *A Study of Dattilem: A Treatise on the Sacred Music of Ancient India*, Impex India, New Delhi, 1978, p. 58;

3. ^{viii} The *Catuspadi* song in the second act of Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra* is one such item.
- ^{ix} David Clarke, *Ragas Around the Clock: A Handbook for North Indian Classical Music, with online Recordings in the Khyal Style*, Open Book Publishers, UK, 2023, p. 177; Reginald Massey and Jamila Massey. *The Music of India*, Abacus Press, London, 1996, pp. 94-96.
4. ^x Such policies were not atypical of local courts elsewhere in the colonial period; for example, the cultural rivalry between the Jogjakarta and Surakarta courts under Dutch rule in Indonesia.
- ^{xi} Sayyid Safdar Hussein, *Lucknow Ki Tehzibi Miras*, Urdu Publishers, Lucknow, 1978; Allyn Miner, *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries*. Motilal Banarsidass, 2004. pp. 102-104.
5. ^{xii} See Vidyarthi's translation of relevant portions of Imam Khan; Muhammad Karam Imam Khan 1959; See also
6. Mirza's 1899 novel, *Umrao Jan Ada (1961)*, which dramatizes the life of a contemporary courtesan.
- ^{xiii} Peter Manuel, *Thumri in Historical and Stylistic Perspective*, pp. 56-59.
- ^{xiv} Peter Manuel, *Thumri in Historical and Stylistic Perspective*, p. 67.
- ^{xv} Wim van der, *Hindustani Music in the Twentieth Century*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1980, pp. 123-147.