

SOCIOLOGY OF THUMRI

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Dedicated to
Bade Gulam Ali Khan and Girija Devi ,
who alone amongst the innumerable
THUMRI singers ,
ever appealed to me ,
possibly because both were principally
classical rather than light - classical
vocalists of great power .

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SOCIOLOGY OF THUMRI

I

FUNDAMENTAL DICHOTOMY

There is a fundamental dichotomy that afflicts our arts. On the one hand, the visual and the literary arts have been more or less modernised, i.e., bourgeoisified. On the other hand, the performing arts, especially music and dance, have retained their medievelity, i.e. their feudal character¹. The reasons for this strange phenomenon are sociological and historical.

Whilst British imperialism imposed a capitalist path of development upon India, only an elite minority was permitted to modernise itself by sharing the imperial loot and by raising effective demand for the output of the visual and literary arts.

Only the upper stratum could build new style homes, decorate them with the latest fashionable statuary, paintings and **bric-a-brac**. Education remained a monopoly of the middle classes and books and periodicals could be consumed exclusively by them.

The mass of the people were the victims of forced underdevelopment. The country as a whole was deindustrialised, ruralised and pauperised. Between 1911 and 1921, the average expectation of life at birth hovered around 20.

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1. For detailed analysis and discussion, see Vinayak Purohit, **Arts of Transitional India: 20th Century**, 1986, and 1988 (Two Vols.) in particular Ch.4 "What is Modern Indian Art?" and Ch.6 "The Medieval Modernity of Indian Music."

The rate of illiteracy was over 86 per cent when the British left India in 1947². The poor in India could not commission architects to build their huts, nor could they decorate them with expensive sculptures and exquisite paintings, nor could they read or buy literary masterpieces.

At the same time, the ruling classes of both whites and browns, had to exercise ideological sway over the people at large, hypnotise, cajole, browbeat, entice, entertain, overawe, titillate and in every conceivable manner, influence the mass mind, so that the oppressed and the exploited did not revolt and were brainwashed into an acceptance of the **status quo**. Therefore, the new masters of the Indian people had to leave the well-established long-functioning communication channels of the performing arts open. Thus was born the medieval modernity of Indian Music.

II

SPECULATIVE SPIRITUALITY

We have an inveterate proclivity for archaising, irrationalising and spiritualising.³

Not so long ago, in the prestigious mouthpiece of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, a scholar claimed simultaneously:⁴

1. that styles resembling the **thumri** must have been in vogue **from times immemorial**;
2. that the **thumri** is an example of the **perpetual** musical urge in human nature.

2. **The Gazetteer of India**, Vol.4, 1978, P.471 and **India 1985**, A Reference Annual, 1986, P.17.

3. A classical example is provided by Dr. Premlata Sharma's contribution to the special number of thumri, **Sangeet Natak** organ of the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

4. Dr. Sharma, op.cit., pp.1, 2, 6, 8, etc.

3. that though the most widely current theory attributed the origin of the **thumri** to Wajid Ali Shah's Avadh court of mid-nineteenth century, all causal theories of historical problems are partial and superficial and fail to take cognisance of the inner homogeneous continuity of human affairs;
4. that unlike other societies, Indian society has had such a strong spiritual base that it has rejected influences of a political or exotic kind and that fundamental concepts of Indian art are derived from the very soul of the Indian people;
5. that the fundamental theory of Indian classical music, including **thumri**, as indeed of all Indian art and poetry, is rooted in the theory of **nadabrahman** or **shabdabrahman** and is linked with the **Vedic religion**;
6. that Bharata's **Natyashastra** is based on Vedic concepts and is the Bible of all branches of Indian art and poetics; and
7. that **thumri** is an **ephemeral** evolute or a variant out of a **long series of forms** beginning with the **Dhruva** of Bharata's **Natyashastra**.

It is necessary to refute such speculative theology which makes the **thumri** hark back to times immemorial, and which denies causality itself to history. No one has as yet discovered the special Indian organ for reception of **nada** or **shabdabramha**. And Indian soul, Indian spirituality, etc., being presumably stable formations, have nevertheless operated rather spasmodically, since a long series of forms evolved out of the **dhruva** of **Natyashastra**, of which series the **thumri** is the latest ephemeral evolute. If the very soul of the Indian people had been hankering after **thumri** from times immemorial and had already gestated analogues from the days of Manu, then how did **thumri** become the ephemeral evolved end-product emergent out of Bharata's **dhruva**?

I suggest that we abandon such nonsensical mythologising

of **thumri** and straight away accept the reasonable and rational evidence of history.

III

FEUDAL COLLAPSE

Let us take a quick conspectus. During the reign of Muhammad Shah (1719-48), the Mughal empire began to crumble and the last severe crisis of the Indian feudal system was upon it. This was the phase of bandit feudalism in India. Rival armies of mercenaries and irregulars owing allegiance to various subeders and vassals were at each other's throats, egged on by the local agents of the French and the English East India Companies. Dupleix and Clive were able to hire local forces and pit them against each other. The Seven Years War (1756-63) settled the issue in favour of the English, but the Marathas, operating severally (the Sindhias, the Holkars, the Gaikwads, the Nagpur Bhonsales, the Satara Bhonsales and the Peshwas) and jointly, the Sikhs, the Nepalese, the Hyderabad Nizamshahis, the Hyder-Tipu forces and several more, nevertheless remained in contention till the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Such convulsive happenings were bound to have their impact on the arts. In our opinion, it is entirely reasonable to suppose that the beginning of this disintegrative process, from the last days of Aurangzeb's long reign (d.1707), was marked by the powerful propagation of the **Khayal gayaki**, by Sadarang-Adarang in and around Muhammed Shah's court. The end of the same process of breakdown was marked by the defeat of the Indians in the Third Maratha War (1818) and the annexation of Avadh (1856), as well as by the forceful rise of **thumri gayaki**.

VI

SEX AND SOCIETY

Each social formation has its own mode of prostitution. The Greeks had the cheap **dikteriades** and the expensive

hetairae, the Japanese the various grades of geishas, and the Indians the **ganikas**, the **vaishyas** and other sorts of **roopjivinis**.

During the process of feudal disintegration, a vast social transformation occurred and prostitutes felt the impact just as much as other sections of society. The **Kothewalis** became, first **deredars**, and still later, denizens of the red light quarters of the new port-towns and cantonments.

The old **Kothewalis**, or holders of estates with houses (**kothis**), had been settled on them by their princely patrons. The **Kothewalis** lived in style and boasted of their talents and pedigrees just as much as any other feudalist. With diminution of the princely purses, they became unsettled and ran helter skelter for succour. In fact, they became **deredars**, or holders of tents, which they pitched at likely places of troop concentrations. In the meantime, the new port-towns of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were growing up, and offered opportunities that no longer sufficed around the crumbling old places and temples, **mandis** and **karkhanans**. The port-towns and British cantonments were teeming with foreign sailors and soldiers, as well as with the riff-raff and lumpens gathered from all over the country. Prices had fallen and the ugliness of the flesh trade could no longer be hidden in subtleties, courtesies and proprieties. But a buck could be made even though crudely. Naturally, the madams owning the bazar sex-shops exploited the poor girls mercilessly, but no more than the kulak, the landless labourer, or the millowner, the child wage-earner.

There were other sexual aberrations too. The **Vaishnav mahantas** exercised the right of **jus primae noctis** or **droit du seigneur** over the newly wedded wives of their followers. A militarist culture had prevailed since the rise of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century. The enforced prolonged stay in encampments far away from home had its inevitable consequences of promotion of homosexuality and bestiality. Portly **Wajid Ali Shah** is authentically reported to have dressed as **gopi** and danced in the manner of the hermaphrodite. This should

not appear absurd or offensive to the intellectual admirers of ancient Graeco-Roman civilization or of modern Gay Rights Movements.

The days of the staid, slow-moving, ponderous, obsequious and devotional **dhrupad dhamar gayaki** were long past. This **gayaki** may have had its heyday from the time of Mansingh Tomar (1486-1577) to the end years of Aurangzeb (1658-1707) and Muhammed Shah (1719-48).

Even the ebullient, fast-moving, scintillating, idiosyncratic and multi-faceted **khayal gayaki** was not suited to the new environment of the **deredar** singer and the sex shop **mujrawali**. What was needed was a frenetic, shocking, highly erotic, completely eclectic, quick-fire, explosive, enticing potpourri, which would swiftly captivate the client. **Kathak** dancing, **thumri** singing and Gujarati-Urdu-Parsi drama were all three devised to meet the needs of these times.

The **thumri** itself was :

"....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.

"....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...."⁵

The **thumri** assumed two structural forms and was classified as **khadi** or **baithi**, depending on whether the signing accompanied a dance by a younger nautch girl who performed standing up and whirling about, or by a middle aged and faded **prima donna** who remained seated and merely moved her hands, torso and facial features to express and punctuate the erotic show put up to captivate her aged clientele.

Parallel with the feudal system of **thikanas** of miniature

5. Premlata Sharma op.cit., p.8.

paintings, the banis of **dhrupad-dhamar gayaki** and the **gharanas** of **khayal gayaki**, **thumri** also had its own **gharanas**, like Jaipur and Lucknow, corresponding to **gharanas** of **kathak** dancing. Gradually, many more such **thumri gharanas** sprang up, e.g., at Varanasi, Delhi, Calcutta-Bengal, Bhopal, Hyderabad-Andhra, Bombay-Bhendibazar (also known as Moradabadi **gharana**) and other similar centres.

Two clarifications may be briefly stated at this stage of our sociological analysis.

1. It is obviously not contended that there was no light music preceding the disintegration of the feudal system in the late seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century. **chaitis**, **kajris**, **horis**, **pahadi dhuns**, **kafis**, **ghazals**, **qawwalis** and **tappas** had prevailed in different localities of North India and were absorbed and transformed by the new genre of **thumri gayaki**.
2. It is certainly not our contention that **thumri gayaki** is to be condemned merely because of its associations with the flesh trade. Vatsyayana's **Kamasutra** is a literary classic despite its professed aim of guiding the **rasika** in his amorous pursuits with **ganikas**. The Japanese masters of the **Ukiyo-e**, i.e. the woodcut specialists of the floating world of **geishas**, revolutionised not only Japanese art, but also world art through the impressionists of the late nineteenth century. In the same way, a homosexual could be **khayal** singer and a lesbian a **Bharata Natyam** dancer. Social history does not condemn or extol art movements. It merely seeks to interpret and understand them.

V

STRUCTURE OF THUMRI

Thumri is a transitional form, a form that is precariously poised at the limit of its formal disintegration. Its nearness to the breakdown point is visible in multiple directions.

1. Verbal-tonal Limit :

The **thumri** emphasises verbal embellishments and poetic conceits in preference to pure tonal patterns. Most of the poetic texts, forming the repertoire of the **thumri** singer, consist of cheap, vulgar and inferior versification. **Not all, but most.** This creates an internal and unbearable tension within the genre. The **khayal** singer is not concerned with the text and his **alap**, the numerous varieties of his **taans**, his **gamakas**, his **swar uchcharan** or intonation, his **taranas**, etc., liberate him and render the chosen **cheeja** merely a mnemonic device to recollect his **gharana parampara**. Not so with the **thumri** singer. She is forced into the verbal **cul-de-sac**. This indicates that the **thumri** musical form is on the verge of collapse in the verbal direction.

2. Abhinaya-tonal Limit :

The **thumri** permits and provokes gestures, movements and expressions which link it with the terpsichorean art. Here again, the recourse to principally erotic undulations and movements of the body, hands and face, are invariably repetitious, cliché-ridden, boring, and even repulsive. They have all been done before in exactly the same way. The same situation prevails in old-fashioned stereotyped rhetorical costumedramas of the Gujarati-Parsi-Urdu stage. One wearies of the **prima-donna** forever waiting and pining for her lover, endlessly touching her left breast to indicate her panting heart, raising her eyebrows in questions or wonderment, and so on. The **nakhras** have become either ludicrous or disgusting. **Thumris** can no doubt be rendered totally expressionlessly with a deadpan face. But it would hardly be acceptable.

In so far as **khadi thumri** is concerned, the movements are capable of endless variation, but here too, for the sake of clarity of presentation, it is necessary to restrict and restrain. In other words, as musical form, **thumri** has reached its limits in this direction too.

3. Tonal-musical Limit :

All the above-mentioned folk and light classical forms as well as soldiers ditties and marching songs (I have

personally heard Gohar Jan's recorded song that included "It's a long, long way to Tipperary" as part of thumri presentation), anything and everything, is grist to the thumrī mill. This very catholic comprehensiveness sets in compulsions that necessitate liberties with the ragatonal structure. Unorthodox tonal embellishments, the injection of frequent vivadi swaras, the glide from raga to raga in the ragamalika section, and so on, clearly evidence to the fact that thumri is breaking down even in the purely musical sense. Ustad Vilayat Khan's attempts to translate the thumri ang into a thumri baaj, also demonstrate how near thumri as a musical form is to the end of the road. Musically, it seems to be in a blind alley and its creative potentialities seem to be near exhaustion.

During the last decade, light musical forms have experienced explosive growth. Lata Mangeshkar has broken all records in film music and her troupe, as well as several more led by Kishore Kumar, Kalyanji Anandji, Amitabh Bachchan, etc., have been touring the world drawing and earning millions. In just two or three years, Anup Jalota has sky-rocketed to fame and fortune, and the successful ghazal and bhajan singers of today are a legion (Pankaj Udhas), Chitra & Jagjit Singh, Nina and Rajendra Mehta, Peenaz Masani, Talat Aziz, etc.). Disco-dandia and disco-garba are the craze of the day. Thumri singers are also drawing huge crowds in the wake of the triumphant contemporary march of light and pop musicians the world over. But relatively speaking the thumri genre is losing ground to its even more raucous and frenetic light music colleageaes. Perhaps what was inevitable, is now happening.

Thus it is time that we looked at thumri not merely musicologically but also museologically. The organism is near extinction. Therefore, we must study it and preserve it. It should not be allowed to disappear, even though the lessons to be learnt from its rather short existence may be largely negative. But birds that cannot fly need the care of the conservationist and the environmentalist, even more than the birds that can. The exotic is indeed rare and fascinating.

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b. 1927; freedom fighter 1942 Movement (compound fracture of the skull due to imperialist police atrocity; twice arrested, once on charge of trying to burn a policeman alive, followed third time by preventive detention without trial) graduation B.A.(Hons.) with History, Economics and Politics, Bombay University, 1948; trade unionist 1948-52 (Gen. Secy., Bombay Press Employees Union); art, architectural, music, dance, drama, film and literary critic from mid-fifties; art advisor to a major industrial group from late fifties to seventies; playwright (*Byalis* and *Steel Frame*) from late sixties; designed monumental *Gitai Mandir*, Wardha, seventies; Ph.D. 1976 for "*Arts of Transitional India:1905-75*", 2 Vols; Senior Fellow, ICSSR and UGC, 1976-82; Visiting Professor, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1980-82; Visitor, Arts Council of Great Britain, sponsored by ICCR, 1982; Visiting Professor, Chalmers Institute, Gothenberg, and Royal Technical Institute, Stockholm, 1982; Visiting Scientist, CSIR, 1980-82; Visiting Professor, University of Philippines, Manila, 1984; Consultant, ILO Project, Maharashtra, 1984-85; at present writing a novel "*Parodh Pahelano Andhkar*" (Gujarati, *The Darkness Before the Dawn*). At the same time he is also writing "A New History of Indian Art: a Marxist Reappraisal", in two volumes.

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By the Same Author :

The Arts of Transitional India : 20th Century,
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