



North Indian Classical Music and the West: The Journey from the Realm of Multicultural to Transcultural

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Abstract

In popular and scholarly discourse, the term globalization is widely used to define the way things have shaped up in the contemporary world. The general agreement of the social scientists and researchers today hinges on the concept of a hybrid global culture. While the importance of this hybrid fabric becomes inevitable, cautious attention needs to be exercised towards the fact that the elements of hybridity do not become rigid constituents of an unaccommodating discourse. The inherent nature of this discourse on the one hand runs the risk of generating the constant urge on the part of the participants to modify and fit into this new and over-arching template, while on the other, its growing contemporary relevance might indulge in casting a shadow on the long history of give and take that have existed between cultures for a very long time. This paper suggests that cross-cultural encounters and mutual appropriations have been a regular feature even though they might have come with a cost. In order to have an empirical understanding of such transcultural processes the author has chosen to explore the encounters of North Indian classical music with the West. This is not simply about how Western or Indian musicians have used each other's elements to give piquancy to their own creations; rather, it is about a wider issue how one culture perceives the cultural products of another and what grows out of it. Music, that most enigmatic form of human expression, seems a suitable subject for understanding this complex cultural process. The paper intends to investigate this by focusing on the experiences of two very eminent personalities, Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Pandit Ravi Shankar whose contributions to their craft have been remarkable as well as controversial.

Keywords

Music, classical, modern, notation, hybridity, transcultural

In popular and scholarly discourse, the term globalization is widely used to define the way things have shaped up in the contemporary world. The French Enlightenment vision of a universal civilization based on human rights, scientific rationalism, and material progress on the one hand, and the Romantic German concept of an authentic national culture, have both lost their lustre. The general agreement of the social scientists and researchers today hinges on the concept of a hybrid global culture. While the importance of this hybrid fabric becomes inevitable, cautious attention needs to be exercised towards the fact that the elements of hybridity do not become rigid constituents of an unaccommodating discourse. The inherent nature of this discourse on the one hand, runs the risk of generating the constant urge on the part of the participants, to modify and fit into this over-arching template, while on the other, its growing contemporary relevance might indulge in casting a shadow on the long history of give and take that have existed between cultures for a very long time. A renewed scrutiny of the conditions and bases of this hybridity become all the more significant in the study of transnational and transcultural enterprises. In this paper I wish to suggest that cross-cultural encounters and mutual appropriations have been a regular feature of history even though they might have come with a cost. In order to have an empirical understanding of such historical processes I have chosen to explore the encounters of North Indian classical music with the West, by focusing on the experiences of two very eminent personalities, Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Pandit Ravi Shankar, whose contributions to their craft have been remarkable as well as controversial.

Music can never function in social vacuum. Hence, the story of Indian classical music and the West is located in a historical as well as cultural matrix. Starting out as a picturesque (though puzzling) pastime of the European in the late eighteenth century, Indian classical music graduated to become the centre of debate between Indian and Western academics, a symbol for Hindu nationalism, a new market for western recording technology in the twentieth century and finally a vehicle for the avant-garde musicians to reach out to a wider audience in contemporary times. During this long journey the form and content of music has adapted itself to various circumstances so that it can continue to stay in touch with its soul, and also be constantly ‘discovered’ by its adherents. Music, that most enigmatic form of human expression, seems useful for understanding India’s involvement in this complex cultural process.

India was colonized by the British for close to two hundred years. Directly or indirectly, no aspect of Indian society was left untouched during this long association. For

the Orientalists of the eighteenth century the study of music, like language, was linked to their project of discovering and reconstructing an untarnished Hindu past, free from Muslim influences. The most important Oriental scholar William Jones in his article named ‘On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos’ considered the development of all Indian knowledge, including music to have emanated from the Vedas. And all that was left of music in India was its theory preserved in Sanskrit texts whose practice seemed to have been totally lost due to the intervention of Muslims. The other colonial writers after Jones throughout the nineteenth century augmented and reiterated the same propositions. For the Englishman “Hindoo” music was more about its theory than its performance. It was against this backdrop and the intense and intimate relations of the Indians with their colonial power that complicated responses were generated about their own self-image in contrast to the ‘masters’. The need for production of histories, written treatment of the performing tradition and the new ideas of reform, notation and preservation gained momentum and to “classify, categorize and classicize” (Bakhle 8) Indian music and to write a contemporary account of its history, many Indians became restless. Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande who had read most colonial writings till the twentieth century, picked up the idea of Jones and turned it on its head.

Bhatkhande was born on August 1860 in a Brahmin family in Bombay. He and his siblings were taught music from a very young age. On becoming fifteen years old he started learning the sitar and shortly after that embarked upon his lifelong obsession of studying Sanskrit texts on music theory. In 1884 he joined the Gayan Uttejak Mandali, a music appreciation society run by the city magnates who exposed him to performances of eminent artists and enabled him to study with musicians such as Raojibua Belbagkar and Ustad Ali Husain. In 1885 he received his B.A. from Elphinstone College, Bombay and in 1887 he became an LLB from Bombay University. After a small stint as a lawyer and upon the death of his wife in 1900 and his daughter in 1903 he left his job to give total attention to music. Vishnu was an avid listener and a collector of compositions which he eventually compared with the traditional texts, only to find that disparity existed between the instructions laid down there and the practical performances. He was worried that Hindustani music was tottering to its demise and its recovery depended on “a connected history, a systematic and orderly pedagogy, and respectability” (Bakhle 7). And for this an archive was the need of the hour. However, such a thing was unavailable as Sanskrit texts failed to give useful understanding of contemporary music. The musicians, precisely

the gharana ustads, depended on the collective family memory for their repertoires. He became eager to capture the music of the collected compositions in the form of notations just like the notated music of the West. Thus, in 1904 he embarked on a series of musical research tours throughout the country in order to collect and preserve compositions from various quarters. In the process he met likeminded eminent personalities like Subburama Diksitar, Sourindro Mohan Tagore, Kasinath Sastri, Umrao Khan, Ali Khan and Murad Khan. He interviewed not only scholars and patrons but musicians as well, and tried to expose their lack of theoretical understanding of music.

By 1909 Bhatkhande had collected enough material to concentrate on his writing project- of compiling and standardising the compositions and making them available for use in modern institutions of learning. Over the course of one year, 1910, he composed hundreds of Sanskrit couplets and put forward his theory and history of Hindustani music. The texts were named as Shrimal lakshya sangeet, Abhinava Raga Manjari and Abhinava Tala Manjari. His Hindusthani Sangeet Padhati in four volumes in his mother-tongue Marathi was published between 1910 to 1935. His enthusiasms brought him in touch with the Raja of Baroda and eventually with his help; the grand plan of the All India Music Conference was brought to fruition. He hoped,

that in a few years more there will be an easy system for the instruction of our music which will lend itself to mass education. Then will the ambition of India be fulfilled for the Indian will have music in their curricula of their universities; music instruction will be common and universal....the great Nation will sing one song. (Subramanian 20-21)

The establishment of Morris College of Hindusthani Music at Lucknow in 1926 by Bhatkhande, Umanath Bali and Nawab Ali, in a way, completed the first phase of institutionalization of music. By the second decade of twentieth century Bhatkhande had established himself as a prolific writer of historical and musicological texts, notated thousands of compositions, and was sought after by Nawabs ,leaders of the nationalist movement as well as high officials who wanted him to evaluate teaching methods of the newly established music schools. It seemed that a foundation had been laid for the protection of a national heritage. Yet, on September 19, 1936 at the age of seventy six, when Bhatkhande died in Bombay, he was a frustrated and unpopular man. In 1922 he lamented in a letter to a close friend that-

Poor music. I really do not know what sins music has committed. People will certainly have to repent one day. The next decade will kill most of the

leading artists and scholars and by the time the people wake up there will be only fifth class musicians to please them. (Bakhle 96-97)

Bhatkhande's achievements and failures were a product of the altered political atmosphere of colonial India. Performing arts, particularly music, was being incorporated by the nationalists, in the project of redefining a tradition that was worthy for the nation which was being shaped. For Bhatkhande though, nationalism in itself was not his focus. He believed that music in order to be nationalised had to be institutionalized, centralized and standardised. And this required a linked history which would explain the foundational rules. Unlike his contemporaries, he was able to accept the point of origin of this music, in a sixteenth century text instead of being compelled to trace it to the Vedas. He was trying to re-invent a classical musical tradition that he could base on a modern genealogy in order to emphasise the notion that, for music to be classical, it needed to be modern too.

This was also a period when music and religion were being merged by musicians like Pandit Paluskar for a claim of a true and pure 'Hindu' music through their 'bhakti nationalism' (Bakhle 7). The paradox was that, for Bhatkhande even though music was secular and exclusive, he was extremely critical of the 'gharana singers', who were mostly Muslim traditional performers. Their ignorance of texts and sheer neglect of historical conditions was reckoned by him, to be enough reason to dismiss them from the authorship of any musical history. This prejudice of his was inadvertently used later as an alibi by less secular Hindu nationalists.

The name of Bhatkhande is tainted with the tag of a failed visionary, but he still remains enormously relevant to Indian classical music. All that Bhatkhande achieved was out of personal passion, nationalist imagination and for the service of music. Yet he appears to be a "flawed secularist ... a failed modernist and ... an arrogant nationalist" (Bakhle 97). The only constant in all his radical exercises was his obsession with textual authority, a search for proof for the ordering of musical history. In spite of all his Indian-ness, these elements that he extracted from the contents of British writings and which intrinsically occupied his intellectual horizon were western paradigms acting as evidences of aesthetic and organisational superiority. Therefore the ideological and epistemological transformations that were occurring in the genre of Indian classical music were located in the imposing and multicultural ambience created by colonialism. This cultural transaction happened in the backdrop of the western assumption that, as in the West, "nation, notation and religion" (Bakhle 10) were the three essentials for music to become classical.

Under the limitations of the space and time, Bhatkhande was affirming this in Indian music in order to make it available for all Indians.

If Bhatkhande offers a retrospective look at the contradictions of the East West engagement during the colonial period, Pandit Ravi Shankar may be termed as the “global superstar” (Raghu Rai 15) of Indian classical music in post-independent India. Ravi Shankar was born in 1920 in a Bengali Brahmin family. His father Shyam Shankar was the Diwan of the Maharaja of Jhalawar in Rajasthan who later went to London to practice law. Being left alone in the care of his mother Hemangini Devi, he spent the first decade of his life in Benaras until he was incorporated in the troupe of his eldest brother Uday Shankar, the famous dancer and choreographer. Shankar went to Paris with the dance group and learned to dance and play various Indian instruments. Uday's group toured Europe and the United States in the early mid-1930s and Shankar learned French, discovered Western classical music, jazz, cinema and became acquainted with Western customs. It was at this juncture that Ustad Allaudin Khan, one of the greatest gurus of Indian classical music and the court musician of the princely state of Maihar in Madhya Pradesh, joined the troupe in 1934 and young Ravi became his guide and interpreter. Shankar was sporadically trained by Khan on the tour but to become a serious musician he gave up his dancing career in 1938 to go to Maihar and study as Khan's pupil, living with his family in the traditional gurukul system. The rigorous training in sitar continued till 1944 along with his guru's son Ali Akbar Khan and daughter Annapurna Devi, whom he eventually married.

Upon the end of his tutelage Ravi Shankar moved to Mumbai and joined the Indian People's Theatre Association, for whom he composed music for ballets in 1945 and 1946. He started to record music for HMV India and worked as a music director for All India Radio (AIR), New Delhi, from February 1949 to January 1956. He founded the Indian National Orchestra at AIR, created compositions for it and became internationally acclaimed by giving music to films like Satyajit Ray's ‘Apu Trilogy’. Ravi Shankar is considered one of the greatest performers of North Indian classical music. For his immense contribution he has been awarded the Padma Bhushan (1967), the Padma Vibhushan (1981) and the Bharat Ratna (1999). But what makes him unique is his pioneering work in the field of ‘World Music’ and his commitment in creating a musical dialogue with the West.

The western influence of Ravi Shankar's childhood survived in him and he began his music tours of the West in the 1950s. Collaborations with Western musicians and composers started and the most significant of these were his friendship and recordings with the violinist Yehudi Menuhin, his association with a member of the Beatles, George Harrison, and his recording sessions with the composer Philip Glass. At the Bath Festival in 1966 Ravi Shankar created what came to be known as 'fusion music' with Menuhin, where an Indian Raga was used as a base upon which grew a new pattern that merged Indian melodic pieces with western instrumentation and harmonic experiments. This was followed by the recording of three LPs starting with 'West Meets East' (1967) which topped Billboard magazine's Bestselling Classical Albums chart and won in the Best Chamber Music Performance Grammy category in 1968. The partnership of George Harrison with Shankar was more about the Beatles member learning to play the sitar from the master than make serious music. In a way, it resulted in Indian music being associated with the contemporary atmosphere - a 'hippie' culture that found expression in a "superficial infatuation with sadhus, spiritualism and trances induced more by drugs than meditation" (S.Patke 444). The Monterey Pop Music festival of 1968 and the Woodstock Festival of 1969 bear ample evidence of this in the responses of the audience to Ravi Shankar's repertoire. This hype was a passing phase but even then it resulted in some residual interests among Westerners in our indigenous musical culture. However, the more important association was with Philip Glass with whom Ravi Shankar collaborated in the album 'Passages' in 1990 and this heralded the idea of 'World Music' to the West. It was quite a new concept. From 1970 to 2012 the maestro became the chair of the department of Indian music of the California Institute of the Arts, composed a concerto for London Symphony Orchestra, for Zubin Mehta's New York Philharmonic and received innumerable honours from all over the world.

In spite of such massive success, Ravi Shankar has been a figure of much controversy for his attachments with the West. Over a period of about 60 years, Ravi Shankar invested his energies in the cross-cultural exchange that revised old paradigms and contributed to new conceptions of cultural hybridity. He altered some of the conventions and practices of his own musical tradition when interacting with the West. In doing so he also negotiated his mission with a variety of Western ideas about how it discerned India and Indian music. As the combined effect of all these measures, Shankar incurred the displeasure of many in India. They were critical of his dialogue with the West, as it seemed he had "distorted or abandoned the austerities of the orthodox

tradition, and diluted or betrayed tradition in his attempt to make it more palatable to Western tastes.”(S.Patke 441) To these traditionalists like Vilayat Khan and Nikhil Banerjee, Ravi Shankar’s answer was,

The difference between all of them and me is actually a very simple one. It is my double identity. When I play the sitar in the traditional gharana learned at the feet of Baba, I am very orthodox. On the other hand, when I compose original music, I am daring, radical. I use non-Indian instruments. I experiment. People often confuse these two identities of mine. They think because I am experimenting, I am no more pure, I am gone. (S.Patke 452)

Like many of his contemporaries Ravi Shankar introduced Indian music to the cultures outside India. And unlike them he also composed hybrids. His willingness to experiment was probably a trait he inherited from his guru Allaudin Khan, who himself could play a number of instruments, both of the East and the West. This found expression in his favourite pupil, Ravi Shankar, who practised at the feet of his master.

What then does music as an element of hybridity, speak of the scope of dialogue between cultures in a transcultural ambience? Does an interest in another culture and its music lead to actual musical hybrids with lasting impact, and what is the way to find a receptive audience in a foreign culture? Questions like these bring our attention on certain basics which manifest some essential truths. The continued popularity of fusion and World Music implies that “there are musical universals underlying cultural differences.... [and] true tradition lives on and retains its integrity and coherence by always remaining open to change and development” (S.Patke 449). Both the protagonists of this essay were negotiating their places with the one common factor -the West. For Bhatkhande it was the West that had come to India where as the impetus was on Ravi Shankar to carry this classical Indian tradition to the Occident. This was not simply about how Indians used western elements to give a new taste to their own creations; rather, it concerned a wider issue how one culture perceived the cultural products of another and what grew out of it. The journey that started under the limitations of colonialism had to deviate at times from its main course due to the pitfalls of an emerging nation where politics and power were the crucial determinants in defining and redefining culture. However, it did not stop, but meandered on its own course, until the middle of the twentieth century opened up new horizons. The diffident and ambivalent traveller was able to disembark, bounce back with

self-confidence and bring home to the West the output of the churning of the past. He was now capable enough to play a leading role in transforming this dialogue from the domain of the inter-cultural/multicultural to the realm of the transcultural.

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