

The Khayal in Hindustani Music

KESHAVRAM N. IENGAR

The fine arts (*lalit kalā*) cultivated by the Hindus have had as their ideal the depiction of a form of a divinity or a portraiture in words or images of the career (*līlās*) of that divinity. The artist or performer as a devotee (*bhakta*) offers his art or skill in dedication to that divinity.

The key word in the communication of the meaning or passion (*bhava*) in any of these arts is rhetoric, which implies an effective communication of truth, by the perfect marriage of sound and sense or of the form of an art and its content.

“Music is the rhetoric of singing.” A song has words set to a tune, with musical notes, and is ‘measured’ by its rhythm. Vocal music has its constituents of *pada* (words), *svara* (musical notes) and *laya* (rhythm). The *laya* may be simple or intricate. The tune may be a simple sing-song or as rich in *bandishes* (musical patterns) as in Sadarang’s Khayals. The words may be of a rustic folk-song or as profound as in Jayadeva’s *Gita-Govinda*. Every musical mode may have its highest degree of perfection when one measures its content with respect to its form. The intensity of the passion conveyed by a song depends on the endowments of the singer and the listener.

Consider the following means of communication with words in an ascending order of receptivity: prose (*gadya*), poetry (*padya*), chant (*gītam*), sing-song, melody with random notes, and next, melody with concordant notes forming a *rāga*. The words of a song set to a distinct *rāga* have a more powerful communicative effect than if the melody was composed of random notes.

Among musical compositions themselves, we may have an elementary composition, that is, with a one-syllable-one-note progression. If several notes as *alankārs* are introduced between the syllables of the text, we have a more elaborate *musical* composition. If the words are omitted altogether and substituted by notes, we often have what we call classical cacophony.

The infallible test of a musical composition is to see if its musical form is appropriate to its theme or meaning. If there is no theme in the singing, it is equivalent to instrumental music practised with the *aesthetic elements* alone of that particular music.

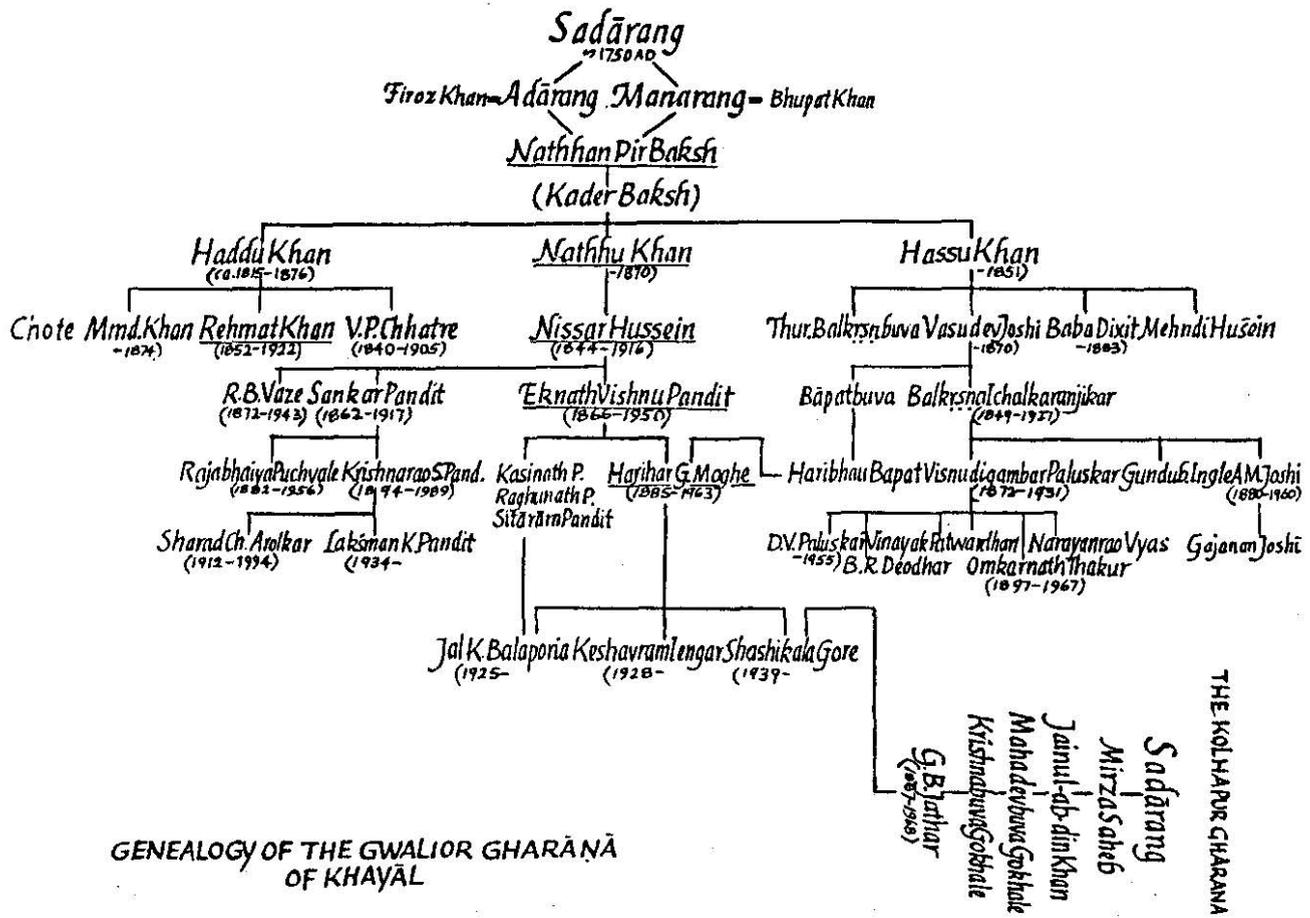
The Khayal was the style of the classical vocal music that emerged in North India in the mid-18th century. Leaving out mythical tales, such as about Amir Khusro being the innovator of all the musical forms of North India, we have a living record of the heritage of the Khayal from the reign of Muhammad Shah (1719-1748) till today. Already in the mid-18th century, the Dhrupad had declined from a stately, simple form of devotional music to a *tour de force* of *svaras* and jugglery of *tālas*. This de-communicative stage of the Dhrupad was possibly reached when the later descendants of the Hindu singers who had converted to Islam had lost their bhaktic affiliation to the Hindu deities.

The Khayal was structured on the foundation of the Dhrupad minus its *ālāp* and *nom-tom*. It had a fluency in its mode derived from the Bīn and the tonal structure of Hindi and Persian. The composition (*cheez*) was enriched with *alankārs* which were absent in the Dhrupad, but above all it was the genius of the *bīnkār* Niyamat Khan, alias Sadarang, that made the Khayal at once meaningful and beautiful. It registered at first reception by Muhammad Shah who at once promoted the Khayal as the music of the court (*darbār gāyaki*). Dhrupad suffered a decline first from its own inanities and secondly from diminishing patronage.

The genius of Sadarang could not be multiplied at every royal court of North India. His compositions of Khayals were transmitted mainly in his family line up to the fifth generation from himself. Consequently Nissar Hussein of Gwalior and his famous cousin Rehmat Khan were the last Muslim exponents of the genuine Khayal.

The Khayal as a style of North Indian vocal music is nobody's monopoly. But a *gharānā* of Khayal presupposes an original composer of Khayals, who must be something of a poet and have something to say in his literary compositions. (The themes of the Khayal were the same as in the Hindi poetry of that time, prominently—love in absence). He must be a master of the rules of classical North Indian music and not a mere grammarian of *rāgas*. You cannot have a Khayal with only a *mukhdā* (refrain of a Khayal) and an apology for textual words smothered by a battery of *tāns*. The Khayal is already a distinguished style of North Indian music, among other styles like Dhrupad, Dadra, Thumri, Tappa, etc. And you may have an elementary Khayal composition or an elaborate composition. But the Khayal is too narrow a mode of music to admit various legitimate styles within its mode, unless we are prepared to recognize the non-musical styles like stretching the *svaras* alone (Kirana), or juggling with *laya* alone (Agra), or mumbling all the way (Indore), and so on.

Deceptively simple to a listener, composing a Khayal needs a highly cultivated musical faculty. Equally demanding is the improvisation of the Khayal, which must seem as if the singer is also an endowed composer, and not just a vocal gym-



GENEALOGY OF THE GWALIOR GHARANA OF KHAYAL

nast. This requires first a foundation of genuinely structured Khayals meticulously learnt from an authentic source and practised for years, as with the Zen archers. Lacking these, most Khayal singers today are mere ragologists in Hindustani music.

The authentic rendering of the Khayal is by clear delineation of the *sthāyi* and the *antarā*, with their words clearly pronounced, set in a whole number of *āvar-tanas* (cycles) of the *tāla* from *sam* to *sam*, in such a way that the meaning of the text (*cheez*) is communicated clearly.

The improvisation (*vistāra*) of the Khayal has to be all through with the *svaras* of the *rāga*, and the words of the *cheez*, as in the Thumri. The singer will be making, in effect, whole new *bandishes* of the *cheez* all through his rendering, set to the *bols* of the *tāla* for the whole duration of the *vistāra* and not merely accountable at the *sam*. This ability often requires some twenty years of practice to cultivate. There is no place for *tānbāzi* either in the *vilambit* or the *drut* Khayal, but only, to a limited extent, with the *jalad tarānā*.

With these criteria, anyone may examine and distinguish the genuine exponents of the Khayal from those who are mere *rāga*-singers with their cacophony of *tāns* and *svaras*. We recognize different styles of North Indian vocal music, such as the Thumri, Tappa, Dadra, Ghazal, Dhrupad, Khayal, etc., but we *do not* recognize different styles within the Khayal itself, unless they be different caricatures of the Khayal.

The Khayal is as much of a communicative mode of vocal music as any other genuine type or style of vocal music, and should also be danceable, if attempted, as in the case of the Thumri with Kathak dancing.

From the *Rāgamālā* paintings we may deduce that the Khayal singer could be a painter of pictures with words and *svaras* rather than a mere exhibitionist of the colour-schemes of *rāgas*. No Indian art did hang on its aesthetic elements alone, as North Indian classical vocal music has been doing these last eighty years or so.

Few people are aware of the sorry state of the Khayal even within the Gwalior school. The brothers Haddu-Hassu Khan are said to have introduced *tāns* into their Khayal-singing rather disproportionately. The line of Khayal singers of Vishnu Digambar's ancestry derives from Hassu Khan. Hassu Khan's Hindu pupils were primarily Kirtan singers who added the Khayal to their repertoire, and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, of the third generation from Hassu Khan, had sufficiently stereotyped the Khayal to make it a popular form of classical *rāga*-singing. The students of Paluskar could not be expected to reproduce the compositions of Sadarang with any fidelity. A comparison of their renderings with those of the line of Natthu Khan will reveal the difference between mere *rāga*-singing and the presentation of a Khayal.

A historical account of the Khayal from Sadarang's time to the present state of the pseudo-Khayal would be a story of ignominious decline. True art needs no history, and a history of art, if it does not help to restore the forgotten ideals of the arts, is an exercise in futility.

We would mention the book *Indian Musical Traditions* by Vamanrao Deshpande (2nd edn. 1987), with the subtitle *An Aesthetic Study of the Gharanas in Hindustani Music*. The book may be reviewed in a single phrase: *vandhyāputrasya upanayanam*. Two hundred and twenty-two pages of gossip without once stating the essentials of the Khayal, or defining a *gharānā* that he is writing about. The book purports to be a kind of historical account of Hindustani music, but is more nearly a work of musical fiction.

The classical music of North India survives now on its aesthetic elements alone—*svara* and pseudo-*laya*. Soon only North Indian instrumentalists will flourish; they too have taken to *rāga*-juggleries being deprived of sensible vocal association.

If we have an authentic account of the history of North Indian music, it would be welcome. But hyperbole cannot substitute for the *rhetoric* (effective communication) of any music. Of far greater importance is the recognition, preservation and transmission of every genuine type of Indian music, after spelling out its structural form with respect to its content and its manner of presentation.

North Indian classical music can be put at best in an approximate system of notation, for use of singers as an aid to memory, in case they forget any of the music they have learnt by *tālim* (tuition). And such notation is of recent origin. Today we have extremely sophisticated techniques of recording and reproduction, when the genuine vocal traditions are all but extinct. These are facts to be examined and verified, and not to be brushed away as rantings of old fogeys who are against all innovations.

The faculty of musical comparison is extremely rare even among musicians, because an acute memory and audile sensitivity are required in an aspirant. The public has an ear only for publicity generated by those who control it. The official music critics are a peculiarly endowed species of humans with a well-stocked vocabulary but no musical sensitivity whatsoever. They could write reviews of music concerts without attending the concerts. It would make no difference.

Our media have relentlessly churned out the *fiction* of Hindustani Classical Music these last fifty years and more. The A.I.R., Doordarshan, the Sangeet Natak Akademis and the Shastriya Sangeet Sabhas have been the refuge and breeding grounds of musical paralytics, all because no one dared to call the bluff of the Panditjis and Khansahebs of the *gharānās*. This is the *fact* of Hindustani classical music. Will a historical account of this music bring it to light? □