

Some Thoughts on Riaz

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By all accounts, *riaz* is a charged word in the world of Hindustani art music! It enjoys a prestige next only to such other terms as *guru*, *gharana* and *rang*. It is evident that as *riaz* is being discussed here in connection with music, the destiny of the former is tied up with the career of the latter.

The notion of what music is and ought to be would naturally (and logically) be expected to determine the nature of *riaz*. Thus, in the developmental phases/antecedents of the contemporary Hindustani art music (identified, for example, as *sama-sangeet*, *gandharva sangeet*, *pathya-sangeet*, *nibaddha-* and *anibaddha gāna*), *riaz*, as we understand it today, did not have the same importance and import. Expectably, these phases enjoy overlaps, as they are part of a larger and living cultural tradition. However, they are notably distinct in matters of ultimate aims, customarily accepted methods, and presentation strategies. All investigation in music would be fruitful and truthful to the extent this is kept in mind irrespective of—I must add—one's own specialization.

The *shiksha* and *pratishakhya* literature, for example, illustrates views on the study of Sama-sangeet. In the *Naradiya Shiksha*, expectably, instructions are detailed, as the orientation of the work is that of a manual—a 'how to study' kind of book. Some are briefly noted here to give an idea of the approach and the contemporary relevance of insights obtained from this ancient source:

The disciple should sing as the guru does, by keeping his hands on his knees. The Sama-recitation proper should be preceded by *pranav* and *vyahruti*, i.e., *bhurbhuvah* and *Savitri*. By raising the palm the *swaramandala* (tonal framework) should be established, and *swara* should be intoned without joining the fingers. Measures (*matravibhaga*) should be properly indicated on the left side, with the middle fingers (*savya*). *Parva* (the finger-joint) should be in the position called *sandhyantara*, the lesser intervals being known as *antara*. In Sama-recitation, the gap between the thumb and the forefinger should equal the size of one grain of *yava*, and in *Rigveda*-recitation it should equal one grain of sesame. However, these fingers are to be joined before and after intoning a note (1.6.31). The singer should not move his body while producing a note. The portion below the waist should be relaxed and the hands should move according to the sequence (of the gestural notation). In a series of striking analogies, we are told that "fingers move in the stable body as lightning in the sky, beads in a thread, and scissors in hair" (1.6.11). One should utter a note or a *varna* with the body still as a tortoise, and with fearless and calm mind. The body should be tremorless/still and quiet as a hawk (3.6.12–15). While practising we should use a fast tempo, while performing the tempo should be medium, and while teaching it should be slow (6.7.36). A *pathak* (i.e., reciter) should keep the fire in the belly burning (i.e., he should not overeat). Having digested the

food, he should get up in the early morning and commence singing. As the nights are long from the *sharad* to the *vasant* (spring) seasons, he should get up after 25 *ghatikas* (7.2.2.2). He should brush his teeth with a *dantadhavan* of *amra*, *palash*, *bilwa*, *apamarga*, *shirish*, *kadamba*, *karvir* or *karanj*. Thorny trees with a milky sap bring success. *Karvir* brings sweetness of tone, subtlety and balance of *varnas* (8.4.2.2). *Triphala* and salt should be taken after meals or in the evening as it keeps the fire in the belly burning and makes the intellect keen. After taking a bath, one should take honey and ghee and then begin Sama-recitation (8.7.2.2). One should at least sing seven *mantras* in the *mandra* octave and then sing as one wishes. As far as the volume is concerned, we are told that "one should sing with such force as would not agitate the *prana*, as otherwise one would go out of tune, and sweetness of the *varna* would be lost" (9.9.2.2). Those who recite nasally and are tongue-tied are not fit for recitation (7.12.2.2). How should a *sadhak* be? "One who can concentrate, one without pride, one who avoids very slow music-making" (7.13.2.2). We are also told that those who are proud, lazy, fickle, disease-ridden, and unable to comprehend what is taught (*stabdha*) are unfit to learn.

It is obvious that reference to various authorities for the other developmental phases identified earlier would prove instructive.

Terminology and Language

It is also necessary to examine terminological clusters to map the semantic fields of various musical phenomena in scholastic as well as performing traditions. This is in addition to paying attention to different phases and modes of music-making in India which are not always successive. I suggest that if language and terminology are examined to identify, describe, and evaluate *riaz* and related practices, they would invariably reflect the major considerations and concerns of those engaged in making, preserving and receiving music. For example, the term *riaz* does not suggest the same process as the term *sadhana*, or the term *alankara* the same treatment of material as the term *palta*. Normally, performance and conceptualization are near-simultaneous, while formulation of terms and codification follow. As I have argued elsewhere, music-imaging and conceptualization may precede verbalization and codification. In a comprehensive, well-evolved and sophisticated oral tradition such as the Indian, written documentation of these processes may follow much later; and when it does take place, it might only be in skeletal form! However, this does not mean that we can afford to be deaf to the existing and effective musical realities—performing as well as scholastic.

Unless there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the terms formed, employed and circulated indicate the users'/informants' view of the matter. In the absence of dictionaries compiled on historical principles, and on account of my very limited competence to explore the multiple language and literary traditions of the land, it will be foolhardy of me to attempt an exhaustive examination of conceptual insights obtained through terminological evidence. Finally, one should recognize the possibility that during some periods of history musical changes are better registered in non-Sanskrit terminology related to Hindustani music.

It is of course not suggested that scholastic and performing traditions run parallel — that being a dream-situation in any living culture. However, in spite of the inbuilt time-lag between performance and related theory, the relationship offers valuable cultural insights.

The Categorical Pentad

Of equal importance is the fact that not all music in India can be equated with art music, which is usually (and rather unfortunately in my opinion) described as classical music. Primitive, folk, devotional, art and popular music are the five categories of music which India possesses. Any comprehensive treatment of Indian music will be obliged to refer to this pentad to make a statement on the subject. Alternatively, one should specify the category/categories under discussion and accordingly qualify statements made. Failure to do either will amount to the folly of building castles of theories on the quicksand of an insufficient sample!

Riaz: A Reported Definition and Some Explanations

What does the term riaz signify — and not just mean — for us today? I will note here a definition based on contemporary practice: 'To do riaz is to honestly follow a systematized and impersonalized body of psycho-physical procedures of self-study intended to help performers acquire skills adequate for giving acceptable and effective presentations for a notional audience.'

Some explanations are in order:

1. 'To do riaz': Obviously, riaz is something dependent on the doer and not on genealogy/family background, chronology, contacts, research grants, degrees held, honours received, etc. Any aspirant to musicianship is eligible to undertake it. In other words, the message is very optimistic. Riaz is for those who do it. As musicians are wont to say, 'करने वाले का काम है और मरने वाले का नाम है' An aspirant say with Karna, may, 'देवदत्तं कुले जन्मः मदायत्तं तु पौरुषम्'.

2. 'Honestly': Riaz, being a self-directed procedure, cannot be done deceitfully, As is rightly said, you cannot cheat yourself. Riaz is either done or not done—no in-between sophistic position is possible! रियाज, प्रेम और पैसे के बारे में झूठ नहीं चलता.

3. 'Follow': There is a definite suggestion of some unthinking, blind adherence to routine in riaz. Till a certain stage is reached, no freedom is given to question the legitimacy/validity/efficacy of the authoritative process set up. What is hinted at is not easily palatable! The assumption is that in order to raise questions, express doubts, or suggest alternatives one has to earn the right to do so and that right can be earned only by doing a minimum accepted but unprescribed amount of riaz! Riaz, in other words, involves faith and not belief! As musicians put it, 'हाथ धोने को कहा, तो पूछो मत क्यों'.

4. 'Systematized and impersonalized': In simple words, to systematize means to arrange facts, rules, and procedures together to fit into a logical plan leading from the parts to a unified whole. The other term, 'impersonalized', suggests that core of practice which is

held as common to all present and probable entrants to the field. What is accentuated is the non-variable part of the process aiming at a certain standardization of competence acquired through riaz. As somebody put it, 'आरोह और अवरोह सभी के लिये वैसे ही होते हैं'.

5. 'Body of psycho-physical procedures': Riaz is ideally aimed at gaining a broad competence in performance and is not concerned with mastery over isolated items. This is the reason it consists of a body of procedures. Further, both physical and psychological aspects are involved in the improvement activity planned. 'साथ हो तन की, संगत हो मन की (और बात हो धन की!)'.

6. 'Self-study': Riaz is essentially a matter of self-reliance. Supervised riaz is learning. Riaz has to have an element of risk-taking, so necessary for the learner to graduate from tentativeness to confidence. Self-study is in fact a term with two faces: on the one hand it means study on one's own, on the other hand it means study of the self! It is only in the solitude of riaz that one becomes aware of one's own limitations and is also ready to admit them! Riaz is meant to provide an opportunity for intensive self-examination and self-evaluation. It is not designed for showing off! It is a really self-engaging activity and often a self-disenchantment! 'रियाज खुद के लिये और खुदा के सामने'; 'भजन और भोजन किसी के सामने नहीं किया जाता'.

7. 'Acquire skills': It is instructive to note that the basic sense of the term 'skill' is the ability to separate. It also refers to special abilities acquired through training and practice in crafts involving body movements and hands. Equally important is the emphasis that these skills are not given by God or gharana—they are won as a result of hard work put in by the aspirant himself/herself! An ironical remark points this out in an oblique manner: 'क्या राजब का रियाज किया है! ग़लत को सही बता रहे हैं'.

8. 'To ensure acceptable and effective presentations': The acquisition of skills is an objectively oriented activity, i.e., not merely a self-fulfilling one. The skills acquired equip performers to give presentations that meet standards evolved by a performing culture to determine the success or otherwise of a performance venture. This point is aptly illustrated by the saying, 'अंदर रियाज, बाहर रंग'.

9. 'For a notional audience': The presentation activity is meant to reach the external agency identified as 'audience'. To that extent no music-making in the art category is a self-addressed communication (whatever one might say, normally it is not स्वान्तः सुखाय). This audience is to be won over and tamed into submission—this is the primary goal of the musician. Though strategies may differ, the ultimate goal hardly varies in art music: 'बाल दो या सर दो, मगर सिर पे सवार हो'!

Some Deductions

1. In my view, two comparatively recent approaches to music, musicians and musical material should be followed to consider all music-related issues today: ethnomusicology and biomusicology. The former studies music and culture together and treats them as mutually causative phenomena. The second approach establishes the intrinsic

relationships between human biology and music. It is increasingly realized that human beings are similar as well as different in unimaginable ways. Biomusicology brings to bear on the origins and purposes of music neurophysiological, neuropsychological, as well as evolutionary perspectives. For example, it deals with how people in diverse cultures may differ in advantages enjoyed by the left and right hemispheres of the human brain, leading to varied perceptions of vowel and consonant sounds! It also points to the purposive evolution of the human auditory system. Such considerations and features naturally have repercussions on matters musical.

2. A study of history brings one fact to our notice. Whatever might be the general atmosphere of the times, whatever might be the zeitgeist (युगधर्म) as they say, the performing arts tend to chart their own course of action, which may or may not correspond with what is happening in other walks of life. Among the performing trinity of dance, drama and music, the third adds to our complications, because a considerable part of musical activity in a complex culture may be largely/entirely non-representational. Thus it might get more freedom to move away from the spirit of the times. To put it differently, the relationship between cultural dynamics and musical dynamics is likely to pose problems of comprehension, interpretation and evaluation. Ethnomusicology as a discipline is expected to bravely face these problems!

3. Among the five categories of music, none is entirely lacking in being 'effective' in one way or the other. But primitive, folk and devotional musics are more self-sufficient, self-satisfying and internally directed. Art and popular musics are more outwardly oriented. Music-making in these categories depends upon successfully meeting the expectations of audiences, patrons, and finally of that amorphous entity — the 'public' at large. To that extent musicians in the art and popular categories are not free to make music according to their own convictions. In spite of their protestations, they 'compromise' a great deal! They do riaz to evolve foolproof, guaranteed formulae of acceptable compromises. (Actually, 'compromise' does not appear to be such a bad word or idea! To compromise is to undertake to fulfil mutual promises. It points to adjustment of opposing principles, systems, etc., in which both sides make some concessions.)

4. As the centuries rolled on, the categories evolved in Indian music became more and more segregated, and though the final aim of 'effectiveness of presentation' continued to be held up as the ideal, the connotation of effectiveness changed. Music changed, and so did the related aspects of musical behaviour.

In the phase with which we are concerned, effectiveness means impressing an essentially heterogeneous audience which may or may not consist of knowledgeable persons. Inevitably, this means that the music-maker has to ensure making at least the commonest, i.e., sensory, impact on his listeners. Therefore, in singing, efficacy in achieving impact through manipulation of pitch and volume assumes importance. In instrumental music, stroke and speed become the main parameters. Are not the majority

of riaz procedures focused on gaining mastery on these aspects?

5. The question is—as music-making is now taking place in radically changed surroundings and altered cultural environments, is it not necessary to change the nature and method of riaz? For example, is it not necessary to pay attention to the growing importance of timbre? Will this not also entail an emphasis on making finely nuanced music rather than music based on broad effects?

6. It must be noted that on most occasions music (even of non-art categories) is now being made in acoustic surroundings not inherently or naturally associated with the music concerned. Do our riaz procedures reflect this consideration? Music-making spaces have changed and are changing further. Some changes need to be specifically noted. Firstly, music-making spaces are now deliberately created for exclusive use. Secondly, they are purposefully exploited to create 'atmosphere'. Finally, they are designed to successfully sever pre-existing connections with time — the dimension which has always conditioned Indian music and Indian responses to music.

7. In fact, I would like to suggest that our perceptions of time, space and causality have been altered, and in the coming decade more radical and dramatic dimensional changes can be foreseen. Let me venture some explication.

For instance, the contemporary temporal division and therefore exploration of musical time has reached levels of extreme subtlety. This subtle temporal exploration is accompanied by consciously created and accepted conditions of discontinuity in musical experiencing — basically in creating and receiving music. Finally, the entire process of music-making is likely to allow more and more scope to the listener to influence and process the music he is listening to. Participatory music-making has raised a big question mark about the basic issue: Who, in actuality, creates music? How are we to respond to this situation in the matter of riaz, which may now have to be redefined!

I now venture to put forward a definition of riaz more relevant in the context of the changing backdrop I have talked about: Pre-presentation preparation for enhancing abilities connected with performing dimensions — including the physical, physiological and psychological — to create musical frameworks with an inbuilt provision for fuller expression of composite, participatory and basically non-representational sensibilities.