

BOOK REVIEW

Tabla Purāṇa

Vijay Shankar Mishra

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The cry for *pure* art that often rings so audibly and clear in the West today is perhaps better answered by our systems of rhythm (both Carnatic and Hindustani) than by any other art-form. Besides, if it be accepted (following Schopenhauer and Herbert Read) that the creative potential of an art is to be judged by its ability to rear its fabric of beauty on such material as is *not* used for any utilitarian end, our rhythm will have to be given a place of pre-eminence. The svaras of music are often used, pretty tunelessly, by the muezzin as a purposive call to the devout for prayer, and by quite few of our hawkers to attract customers; but nobody uses *bols* like बिड़क and तकिटका in the daily doings of life. Above all, the ways we *talk* about our rhythm (generally, that is, apart from its basic concepts) and how exactly it *appears* (as played) to a *rasika* have not yet been given the attention they deserve. In other words, we are yet to look at the art of rhythm from the linguistic-analytic and phenomenological points of view which dominate the field of contemporary aesthetics. So, any serious work on our rhythm should be welcome to lovers of this art.

This applies specially to the book under review. It is all along interesting, packed with relevant material, written in elegant Hindi which has added to my vocabulary of this language; and is, at places, quite instructive as well because of its sensible, incidental remarks. I have been struck, very agreeably, by the terms that have been used to distinguish the three types of *sangati*—namely, अनुसंगति, सहसंगति and भराव की संगति (a linguistic gift

from the venerable गाना महाराज, pp.161-162)—as also by the word that he uses (probably) for (the accompanist's) replicatory creative ability, that is, प्रत्युत्पन्नमत्तित्व (p.161). As for the author, Pandit Vijay Shankar Mishra, he is eminently eligible to do what he has done,—I must say, admirably, on the whole. Here, I attach at least as much value to his own assiduousness, intimacy with *sangeet*, eye for detail and interest in the *history of tabla* and *tablā*-players, as to his cultural ancestry which is of course quite impressive.

Here, at once, I may say something by way of justifying the very title of the work, that is, *Tabla Purāṇa*. Taken quite generally, the word *purāṇa* means a thing or event of the past, or old traditional history. Now, this epithet befits the work under review to a nicety, for it contains more material about the *history* of tabla and its different *gharanas* (p.4-55) than other similar books that have come to my notice, though, in a typical vilen of modesty, the author himself disowns all claim to the books uniqueness or superiority to other works on the subject (p.xiii). It would here be relevant to add that this eminent devotee of *sangeet* has already produced for A.I.R. a fascinating serial of thirteen instalments on the origin and evolution of the art of *tablā* (p.XII). I gather this information from the author's own preface which has impressed me also because of its anguished and perfectly legitimate complaint that though they surely welcome the mention of their art and names in print, the maestros of tabla (and their relatives) generally tend to shuffle off the prospect of having to buy the very book (or the issue of journal) that projects them (p.XIII). This, incidentally was a recurring complaint also of my friend, the late N. Pattabhi Raman, the founder-editor of *Sruti* (Chennai), today India's leading (English) magazine of music and dance, with this one difference that *his* complaint related to musicians and dancers in general.

However, I do not wish to suggest that the book discusses or even envisages all the questions that may be put about the very intricate art of rhythm; and it would go ill with the author's own earnest commitment to the art if I did not point out the directions in which the book could improve, so as to look more satisfying in its second edition which it certainly deserves. Even some basic distinctions and questions have not been envisaged, and I can easily list quite a few of these lacunae:

Is the *sama* merely the first *or* (also) the focal beat of a rhythm-cycle? If it is the focal (or the central) beat of an *āvrti*, what kind of a focus or centre is it? Merely geometrical *or* aesthetic? If it is the latter, and we *have to* opt for this alternative, should not a distinction be made between a pattern that just ends correctly (yet tamely) and the one that appears (also) to culminate or flower at the *sama*? Ideally, is the *sama* merely the terminus or (also) the seeming destiny of a well-played pattern? Further, should not a distinction be made between the disposition of *bols* at a particular *laya* and the *laya* that may be *intrinsic* to some *bols*? Surely, a *bol* like बड़न cannot be made to look leisurely, just as a *bol* like चिन्न cannot be played at a very quick pace without making it look cramped and so ungainly. And is not this *intrinsic laya* of *bols* always kept in mind by our authentic composers when they weave the mnemonics into patterns and specify the order in which—and the *laya* at which—they are to be played winsomely? Finally, if (as is well-known) the pace at which the first few *bols* of a pattern are played (or recited) determines the pace of its entire remaining run, should we not regard this as a *clearer* instance of part-whole determination than what is provided by disposition of parts or segments, say, in the literary arts? And does not this single fact contribute to the preeminence of rhythm among the arts which all alike strive after ever better integration of details?

However, all such thinking relates to the

philosophical aesthetics of rhythm; and in so far as the work under review does not profess to deal with rhythm from this specific point of view, it would be clearly unfair to regard the lacunae I have pointed out as positive defects of the book. No book can leave nothing to be desired; and, in any case, I am sure the learned author will be able to make up for all the such shortcomings in the next edition which, I repeat, the book surely deserves.

As I speak thus, my confidence stems also from the sense that the author appears thoroughly steeped in the very spirit of *sangeet*. This is, in fact, borne out by the very way he titles the seven chapters as *shadj*, *rishabh*, and so on. I am impressed also by his freedom from undue bias in favour of any particular *gharanā* of *tabla*. It is true that he does not shy away from admiring the rich cultural traditions of Benares (p.39). What is more, the following two questions (translated by me) that he poses on p.50,

Why is it that, whereas in the past a new *gharanā* would make its appearance after every 35/40 years, no fresh *gharanā* has come into being even after a lapse of 185 years since the dawn of the Benares *gharanā*? Could the answer be that in this particular *gharanā* the creative potential of the art of *tablā* has attained to perfection?

may will appear (to a casual reader) a kind of slyly hyperbolic encomium of the Benares *gharanā*, if they are taken in themselves. But if they are interpreted with due regard for the generally impartial attitude of the author which is visible throughout the book, they can also be regarded as simply an honest expression of (a more or less theoretic) wonderment in respect of the life of an art-form. In this context, I may add, it is noteworthy that on pp. 16-17 the author openly praises the Delhi *baaj* with due reason; and that on pp.26-27 he defends, again quite sensibly, the Lucknow idiom of *tabla*-playing

against its (more or less) derogatory labelling as a purely नाचकरन बाज.

I hasten to add, however, that the author has not found it possible to pay as much attention to thinking *all along* as to narration and description. Consider, in this context, the following details:

a. On p.60 the author simply cites (of course, truthfully) the view of Bharata and Sharangdeva that the word *Sangeet* stands for the triad: *gāyan-vādyā-nritya*. But do these venerable pioneers of our aesthetic thinking simply lump the three art-forms together under one inclusive word *sangeet* indiscriminately? Is there no theoretical warrant for their interpreting the word as they do? There is; and it is simply this: the three all share a common element, that is, *laya*. How the author has failed to mention this surprises me, for he does speak of *laya* on pp.106-107. Here, however, the way he seeks to define *laya*—that is, as the pace of the time that just elapses (mark the words, व्यतीत हो रहा समय) in *gāyan*, *vādan*, and *nritya*—is not quite to the point (p.106). In the run of each one of these arts, time does merely pass or elapse, by itself (so to say), but is *actively regulated* by the performing artist with an eye to some aesthetic effect, may be one of alacrity or of sheer steadfastness.

b. It is this inability to seize the essence of *laya* which accounts for the following startling, because too categorical, remark:

The main aim of *sangeet* is (to provide) *ānanda* (or delight) and the evocation of this delight is impossible without *tāla*, because it is only through its rhythmic measure (ताल प्रमाण) that music becomes winsome to the ear (64).

True, by way of vindicating this view, the author also cites (on the same page) two lines from *Bhakti Ratnakar*. But no scholarly references can cancel the evidence of present and traditional practice. *Ālāpa* of the *dhrupada* singer is an undeniable genre of Hindustani vocal music; and,

as we know, it weaves its fabric of melody quite without the aid of any *tāla*.

Consider, further, the ways in which our traditional musicology has defined *svara* and *rāga*. *Svara* has been defined as the beautiful-in-itself (*swameva rājate*); and *rāga* has been defined as that special *dhvani* which is 'bedecked with *svara* and *varṇa*, and which suffuses the minds of 'the good' (that is, the knowledgeable) with delight. (*Brihaddesi*, edited by Premilata Sharma with A. Beohar, IGNCA, 1994, pp.77-79). In neither case there is any reference to *tāla*; and, what is more, it is the evidence of actual listening experience that no other genre of our music can match a good *ālāpa* recital in projecting the *rūpa* of a *rāga* as a *seamless and intense melodic ambience*. The author's indifference to this patent fact surprises me.

Incidentally, I would also like him to note that just as *mātrās* and *vibhāgs* are required to articulate and measure the flow of *laya* in rhythm, so is accuracy of punctuation necessary for regulating the run of thought in writing. Therefore, he would do well to remedy the following blunders of punctuation in the work's future appearances: p.46, full stop (पूर्ण विराम) before क्योंकि; the same mark before अतः in the second line of p.53; again, the same outrage before the word उसने, in the middle of p.54; a comma before यह विशेष almost at the close of the first para on p.59; on p.61 (4th para) a full stop after होता है which leaves the sentence dangling in the air, so to say; and, finally on p.169; another unwanted (first) पूर्ण विराम in the last line of the second para.

In respect of the use of words, on the other hand, the author is generally very careful. Here, only the word डगमगाती on p.48 (3rd line before the end of the second para) has disturbed me. Would not लहलहाती have been a better word here, for डगमगाती suggests unsteadiness? (or the words हेलो है should be replaced with लगती है). Finally, on p.158, *Haydn*, I think, should be Haydn (Franz Joseph Haydn, 1732-1809, the Austrian composer who

played a major part is establishing the classical forms of the symphony and the string quartet); and *gang* (p.153) should obviously be *gong*.

From matters of mere writing I may now turn to some directions of thought. Here, at the outset, I feel like congratulating the author on his courage in referring, *incidentally*, to a possible objection to Ustad Amir Khan's *vilambit sthāyi*-singing (117). But the point of the protest (which may not be quite *unanswerable*) could even be *projected* as follows. The vocalist's finally arriving at the *sama* after singing the *sthāyi* haltingly, though of course without losing the requisite grip on *rāga*, is one thing; the *sthāyi* as itself appearing to tend towards the *sama* as an oriented flow of literal or seeming continuity is quite another; and if the latter semblance is not duly evoked, how can the *sthāyi* appear as a single cohesive structure which it should, if it is to serve as the anchor of the whole recital? A *bandish* is so called precisely because it 'binds'—or rather incarnates—a *rāga* and a *tāla* visibly, so to say; but if it just manages to reach only the *sama*—and quite without its inner flow having to do anything with the run of *laya* as it underruns the *theke*—how can it be said to concur with the *tāla* as a confluence? How, then, can it be called a *bandish* as embodying both a *raga* and a *tala*? As actually followed, a *tāla* is no mere series of beats; rather, they appear here as not just diversifying but as measuring the underrunning *laya* which itself is all along kept in mind; for otherwise the *matrās* would not be kept evenly apart, and the whole fabric will begin to totter forthwith. Similarly, a *vilambit sthāyi* is no mere sedateness of singing different *svaras* or tonal phrases, but such a melodic line as is partly seen literally,—and where it is not so, is yet amenable to apprehension—as an undivided flow without undue effort. The fact that the author yet acknowledges the power of the impact of the *maestro's vilambit* singing is an index of his open-mindedness.

However, the norm of inner cohesiveness, literal or virtual, leads me to look askance at what the author says about a *tarānā* on p.63. There he cites a *poetic* (and so *ब्रह्मनी*) composition which has been superadded to the (mnemonic or *ब्रह्मनी*) *bols* of a *tarānā* by a friend of his. But here a question must be posed and addressed. Is the poetic part simply an overlay on the *tarānā* or integral to it? If it is the former, the two cannot be said to make a single, organic composition. If it is said to be the latter, how (one must ask) is the patently devotional temper of the poetic words made to square with the meaningless and purely phonetic character of the *tarānā*? It is possible within limits, to make the two—*ब्रह्मनी* and *ब्रह्मनी*—cohere; some Kathak dance maestros *have* done it; but the author does not even envisage the possibility.

What is, however, much easier to see is the fact that the author's emphasis on solo *tabla vādan* as an art in itself can be amply buttressed with an appeal to aesthetic *theory*. He only emphasizes the *facts*:

- a. that the range of solo playing is so big and expansive that one can play in its idiom for hours at a stretch;
- b. that, today, almost all good *kalākārs* have begun giving value to solo playing along with *tabla*-playing as accompaniment; and
- c. that cassettes and discs of एकल तबला वादन are today very popular (p.156).

But there is a much more convincing way to argue that rhythm (as a whole) deserves to be regarded as an *independent* art. Any art which claims to be so must meet at least three following conditions:

1. The material it builds on has to be unique
2. It must have its own creative devices; and
3. There must be some criteria of evaluation that are *uniquely* relevant to it.

Now, the art of rhythm meets all these requirements admirably. Its material is *meaningless* letters or their collocations (alike non-semantic) which no other art avails of. Further, no other art bewitches us by dividing its content into three equal (meaningless and colourless) segments. And, finally, is any criterion of artistic value *so unmistakably usable* as that of attaining to a mere moment (of the *sama*-beat) with split second accuracy?

All this, however, is simply to indicate how the author can add to the value of the work. It does not in any way underrate what the work has already achieved; and it is with great pleasure that I now turn to list its many positive features, if a little patchily:

fairly detailed and interesting account of every (major) *gharānā* of *tablā*, dominated (justifiably) by a specially winsome account of the founding of Benares *gharānā* (by Pdt. Ram Sahaya, p.46), which is admittedly distinguished by its ability to provide the right kind of 'accompaniment' also to the light classical forms of our vocal music (49); a quite fair explanation of why the Punjab *gharānā* took time to make its presence felt (52); an instructive account of the details of how the various *bols* are executed (47), as also of kinds of parans (48), including *stuti* paran (49), and of kinds of *chakradar* patterns, of which the *kanāli* one has certainly added to my knowledge (73-74); proper distinguishing of different kinds of *tihāi* (79-80); a fairly detailed note on the curative powers of different *ragas* (200-201); deserved reference to Salari Khan's *jawābi gat*-s; careful

mention even of the life spans of quite a few maestros; a quite warranted mention of Modu Khan's distinctive contribution, as also of why Habebuddin Khan had to learn also under Munir Khan (Farrukhabad) and Ali Raza Khan (Lucknow); very sensible remarks on the right kind of artist-audience interaction (204-208), and of the relation of *sangeet* to society generally (208-212); and brief but accurate verbal pictures of as many as 51 artistes.

However, the most interesting of all these details occur on pp.40,42. The first of these recounts (once again on p.45) that in a big music festival organized in 1819 by way of celebrating the coronation of Nawab Gaziuddin Hyder, Pandit Ram Sahay so overshadowed other *tablā*-players with his own recital that, when it ended, his arm was worshipped by the other *tāblik*s who also presented to him some of the choicest compositions of their *gharānās* (p.40); and the second one records how Birtu Mishra was so fascinated by one specific *gat* played by Ustad Abid Hussain, the then Khalifa of Lucknow *gharānā* that he forthwith volunteered to become a pupil of the Lucknow maestro. I look at this gesture of humility as an index of true greatness; and I can reason why I say so. Birū ji passed away in 1934; but the two years that I spent in Allahabad (1935-1937) as an Intermediate class student at Ewing Christian College were still ringing with the name of Biru Mishra as himself a *tāblik* of matchless quality'.

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