

BOOK REVIEW

Tabla Vadan-kala Aur Shastra

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Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva
Mahavidyalaya Mandal, Miraj, 2000
332 pages; Rs 250

This is unquestionably a very good book. It is admirably comprehensive, very well planned, all along thoughtful, analytical and lucid in writing, and free from bias in favour of or against any particular *gharana* of tabla, though the author's own training in the art is the gift essentially of some maestros of Delhi and Ajarha *gharanas* (p.XV). The work is perfectly suited to the needs of our students of tabla; and is, so far as I know, superior to other similar works in Hindi. As required by its very title the book pays equal attention to the grammar, technique, and general aesthetics of the art; and all lovers of rhythm should be beholden to Sri Mainkar and the publishers for producing such a helpful work in Hindi. I may also here express my approval of the author's insistence (p.XIV) that the *understanding* which a book on an art-form seeks to provide is under no inherent compulsion to eschew *details of actual practice*.

What has struck me most and happily is, however, (a) the author's ability to be self-critical, as also (b) to make subtle (but nowhere overnice) distinctions; and (c) the pains he has taken to highlight some such details of the art of rhythm as are likely to be missed by the average *rasika* but are surely known and significant to one who is a tabla player himself.

Let me now illustrate the points that I have just made by referring to what is actually there in the work.

a. Turn, first, to p.15. Here, when he defines *theka* as '...single-cycle pure composition', he takes care to prefix the word '*composition*' with मूल (or basic), realizing that compositions quite other than the *theka* can also be there within the same rhythmic extent. A *theka* is indeed the *anchor* of all our rhythmic work even where such work is intentionally deviant for a while.

Consider, again, the first sentence of the penultimate para, and the way the closing para ends, both on p.17. Here, the author begins by voicing the popular view that *sama* is the first beat of a tala and then ends by adding that it is *also* the focal point (*kendra bindu*) of a tala. Such prompt self-correction brings one closer to the truth of the matter. Our rhythm (tala) is essentially cyclic in character. Here we not begin from the first beat, but come back to it, completing a round, whereupon the (so-called) first beat truly becomes the centre of focal point of the tala. (Hence the propriety of point no. 65 on p. 79 of the book). How this centre differs from its geometrical parallel is, of course, a matter for further reflection.

Finally, for illustrating the selfsame point we are presently talking about, let us look at a detail of point 5 in the right hand column on p. 6 and another in the delightfully analytical and comprehensive table on p. 9. On p. 6 the author speaks of *what is generated in the form of a presentation* as it occurs in a (practical) art as its *matter*, which word is here improper; but, as in index of remarkable theoretical resilience, on p. 9 *matter* is duly replaced with *contents*. (2nd sub-heading in the 4th descending segment of the table). What *appears as formed* (or organised) in an artistic presentation is

indeed called the content, not the matter (or material) of the art-work.

- b. As for the author's ability to make due distinctions, we are so essential for clarity in thought, the following (as translated by me into English) may be taken as ample evidence.

1. A written (notated, rhythmic) composition is of the nature of a mere outline. Here its beauty is seen but minimally (because, I add, the *sonant* characters of *bols* is missing and only implicit speech may be there). Recitation lends a measure of adequacy to our sensing, (because, I add again, the *bols* are *heard* in all their sounding variety, and as accented or quickly run over). But the full beauty of a rhythmic collocation appears only when it is (presented as) drummed by the competent hands of a player (p. 57)—because, as we all know, in addition to what recitation (*parhant*) provides, a measure of *resonance* (provided by the left drum) is also sensed here.

2. *Udan* signifies attainment of *sama* in an *unexpected* way by means of a small *tukra* which takes off from any (unforeseen) *matra*, (or even from a point between two adjacent *matras*!) *Upaj*, on the other hand, stands for *improvisatory* playing in response to the timely and discriminating activation of the creative impulse (p.63).

3. Talas comprising many *matras* are suited to the evocation (of a semblance) of seriousness and *shanta* rasa. The evocation of *Sringara* rasa, on the other hand, calls for cycles with a similar number of beats (p.16).

(At this point, however, I feel like providing a supplement. Not merely the rhythmic *stretch* of tala, but even the *pace* (or tempo) at which it is played accounts for

varying emotive semblances. Take *tritāla*, for instance. Played at *vilambit laya*, this rhythm is quite able to go with a semblance of [high seriousness]; but, when played at *drut laya*, it may well add to the charm of a *chhota khayal* the text of which may aim at evoking *sringara rasa* of the *samyoga* variety).

- c. Attention may now be focussed on the point I have distinguished as c, that is, on some noteworthy—but not commonly realized or noticed—details of the art of rhythm. Here are some instances from the book under review, again as translated by me, and with some elucidatory remarks at places:

1. Playing *theka* effectively—that is, in a resonant and duly articulate way—is also (a work of) art (p.8) because (I may add) it is something properly structured *and winsome in itself*.
2. Even in the presentation of music, tala (*theka*) serves to provide a special kind of frame to melodic forms (be they *sthai-antara* or *taans*) and to organize the entire (process of) presentation (p.20).

This is, I believe, a very significant remark the wider implications of which I feel impelled to bring out, essentially in the light of what Harold Osborne says in his book, *The Art of Appreciation* (Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 27-28).

"Some of the arts employ deliberate devices to favour...concentration of attention and to facilitate the isolation of the object from its environment. [Thus] pictures are enclosed in frames, which isolate them from the surrounding walls, contract the field of vision, and help us to fix attention within the area marked out by the frame... Music is a structure built up of artificial sounds which do not occur in nature, and concentration within the world

of structure they create is ordinarily so intense...[that even a slightly alien and obtrusive sound is felt as far more unpleasant than it really is]"

Now, to this structured character of music, a little sharper outline is provided by the accompanying *theka*. Attention is more effortlessly and readily elicited and held by the rhythmically organized (or *theka*-supported) *sthayi* or *khayal*-singer than, say, by the opening of *alapa* in the *dhrupada* manner. *The aesthetic necessity of a theka should now be clear.* It facilitates attention by lending an extra measure of cohesiveness to the aesthetic object. Our rhythm, indeed, is far more relevant to aesthetic theory than is commonly realized.

3. As far as the precise point where an *anagat* pattern ends, the closer it is to the *sama*, the heavier is the demand it makes on the drummer's ability (p.62)

This may well be true; anyway, only the drummer himself can vouch for it. But at the same time, the minimality here referred to is also desirable—and not merely difficult to secure—because it makes it very convenient for the listener to close the tiny time-gap between the end of the pattern as played and the actual *sama*-instant. Incidentally, this also provides an instance of how the focal beat may just be *contemplated, not actually heard*.

All this far outweighs the little errors, contradictions, or ambiguity that occur here and there in the book. But I must help the author in noticing them, so that subsequent editions of the work may be quite error-free:

1. Unfoldment of *raga-shakti* (that is, the aesthetic potential of a *raga*) depends on *tala* and *laya* (p.19).

This, I hope, is meant to cover *alapa* of the

dhrupada-singer too, for he relies on *laya* alone. But, if I am right in thinking so, how is one to justify the author's categorical remark on p. 52 (3rd point):

'The presentation of the *alapaya* is quite without *laya*'.

If *this* statement (just cited) is true, *how* and *laya* be said to have an independent existence of its own, as the author says it can? (p.53). The author would indeed do well to reflect a little harder on what *laya* really is, taking into account both *alapa* of the *dhrupada* genre and rhythmically organized singing; and, what is more, also the time taken not merely in traversing different *swaras* or *matras*, but in *sustaining* individual *swaras*.

2. The self-confidence of a vocalist grows if he secures command over *sur*, *laya* and *tala* (p.21).

Why has *raga* been left out here?

3. That time which is utilized in the presentation of music—that time is *kala* (p. 27)

This is ambiguous. *Time utilized* may either be taken to mean the time that a music presentation takes to complete itself (say, an hour by our watches). But the italicized words may also be taken to signify time as it is utilized *within*, and appears *in* music-making itself. Is the time that we (seem to) see in music identical with the time of real life? Let the author decide.

4. Further, though I certainly attach great value to Chapter VI of the book where the author tries to determine the meanings of the basic terms that occur in our talk about the art of *tabla*-rhythm—which is, incidentally, a good example of how aesthetics of the linguistic-analytic variety is done today—the requisite interpretation is not everywhere pointed out enough. Take for instance, what is said about *quayeda* on p. 63 (No.10). A more detailed attempt in the same direction has been made on pp. 118-124. In the latter case the author

is of course justified in pointing out that the three definitions provided by other authors (and cited on p. 118) are not *uniquely* relevant to what is called *quayeda*. But, at the same time, in neither case are the following important points duly projected, instead of being merely hinted:

First, a *quayeda* is named after the main *bol* (or syllable) which occurs freely and prominently in its individual structure. Second, though every *quayeda* admits of a fair number of variations—which is why the legendary Ustad Natthu Khan of Delhi could develop a single such pattern into an hour-long recital—such freedom is by no means absolute. No *palta* (or improvisation) can include a syllable (*bol*) which does not figure in the basic composition. Thirdly, the variations must follow a particular sequence. The first variant has to build upon the opening *bol* of the composition; the next one, upon the second *bol*; and so on. What is more, the terminal syllables of the two segments (of the basic composition) have to rhyme, without being identical. Thus, if the last *bol* of the first segment is *tinakina*, the *bol* which closes the second segment has to be *dhinagina*. This technical device is called *quafiya radeef*, and is roughly comparable to end-rhymes in poetry. If it be objected, here, that if everything is so prefixed in the playing of a *quayeda*, it cannot really provide

for creativity, the answer would be, first, that though every variation has to open with the specific *bol*, what exactly the alteration is going to be in respect of pace and order of syllables—without incorporating any such *bol* as is alien to the basic structure of the *quayeda*—surely calls for some independent, if disciplined thinking on the drummer's part; and, second, that in the art of solo drumming improvisation cannot be rated higher than design and clarity in the actual playing of syllables.

But some defects can be delightful too. In the 30th entry in the bibliography (p. 325) which lists two of my published essays, *Aesthetic Theory and Hindustani Rhythm* and *Sama in . . . Hindustani Music*, my name appears as Prof. Sudhir Kumar Saxena. The error is perhaps in an index of how much he remembers by brother, *Sudhir*, to whom, as he himself admits, he owes his knowledge of *ajrarha baaj* (p. XII).

However, even generally I have really enjoyed reading the book. So I commend it to *all* those who are interested in tabla-rhythm. It is neatly printed, reasonably priced and full of sensible, well thought out material on almost every aspect of the art, and from the viewpoints of both theory and practice. Our rhythm is pre-eminent among the arts, because perhaps closest to the ideal of pure art; and I therefore welcome such enquiries into its nature and significance.

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