

The Fundamental Concepts of Dhrupad

Dhrupad and *khyāl* are the two forms of classical singing that exist today in North India. *Dhrupad*, the older form, enjoyed wide popularity till the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, after which it gradually declined with the emergence of *khyāl*, a more entertaining style. The decline of *dhrupad* accelerated during the last two centuries, with many of its practitioners switching over to the new form, which progressively increased in popularity and attracted greater patronage. *Dhrupad* however remained the favoured style in a few imperial courts, mainly in Rajasthan and Bihar, where some *dhrupad* traditions continued till the late 1940's, when these states were assimilated into the Indian republic. The period after Indian independence till the present times was a difficult one for this art, for it called into question its very survival in a society in which it was not popular, but needed the patronage of a new ruling class of bureaucrats and politicians who unlike its previous aristocratic patrons, had no connection with it at all. There are at present very few practitioners of *dhrupad* left in India, and as can be expected in such a situation, there is an enormous fragmentation and erosion of knowledge about the art, even among its few remaining practitioners. The whole body of composed work of the tradition has been practically decimated. Lack of knowledge about it has reached a point where it is difficult, even in the literature

of music and in musical circles, to find a proper definition of what *dhrupad* is, and what sets it apart from its modern derivative - the *khyāl*. It is common in India now to find *dhrupad* described in terms of the language and the grammar of *khyāl*. Most descriptions list the obvious structural differences between *khyāl* and *dhrupad* and emphasize that in *dhrupad*, ornaments and melodic devices like *murkī*, *khaṭkā*, *phirat*, and particularly fast passages called *tāns*, which are characteristic of *khyāl* singing, are strictly avoided.

The decline of *dhrupad* during the last two centuries coincides in my opinion with a paradigm shift in Indian music, in which it came to be accepted that music must primarily entertain. This is a concept that reigns supreme in India today, and therefore precludes any attempts to revive or even initiate a serious study of *dhrupad*. But the sophistication of the musical concepts underlying *dhrupad*, and its objective of creating a music that uplifts, but does not necessarily entertain, and that embodies the essence of Indian spiritual thought, has found for it a growing acceptance and admiration in the West. Since the visit of the elder Dāgar brothers to the West in the 1960's and the efforts of Alain Danielou kindled interest in *dhrupad*, many singers have given performances there, and the number of concerts, workshops and seminars of *dhrupad* in the West now significantly exceed those in India. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the

interest of people in the West has made *dhrupad* singing, financially a more viable profession for its few remaining practitioners.

From the knowledge that I gained during my apprenticeship under various maestros of the Ḍāgar family, and particularly under Rahīm Fahīmuddīn Ḍāgar, the eldest surviving member of this family of musicians that has practiced *dhrupad* for many generations, I would say that the fundamental feature of *dhrupad* singing which characterizes it and sets it apart from other kinds of singing, is the use of the three *vedic* accents of *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita*, and the complex dynamics of sound and the musical possibilities that this creates. The fundamental role played by these accents in creating this music actually underlies its grammar, for these accents define the patterns in time and the internal dynamics of the melodic phrases. The dynamics of sound employed in *dhrupad* go back to the researches into sound embodied in the *vedic* recitations and Sanskrit grammar, and also lead to the origin of the concept of a *rāg*. The use of these accents is also the clearest evidence that *dhrupad* has evolved from the *vedic* chantings.

The importance of the *vedic* accents in *dhrupad* singing is evidenced by the numerous references to them in texts of traditional *dhrupad* compositions. For example a composition in *rāg Rupāvātī* from the Ḍāgar family

repertoire, attributed to the eighteenth century *dhrupad* singer Adārang and quoted by Sanyal and Widdess [1] lists the three *vedic* accents along with ten of the basic ornaments used in singing. *Udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita* are defined as follows by Paṇini, who is credited with creating the grammar of classical Sanskrit.

That which is pronounced higher at its place of articulation is termed *udātta*. That which is pronounced lower at its place of articulation is termed *anudātta*. That which is pronounced with a combination of features of *udātta* and *anudātta* is termed *svarita*. [2]

Similar definitions can be found in the various *prātiśākhyas* of the *Vedas* for example the *Śukla Yajurveda Prātiśākhya* [3]

Udātta, *anudātta* and *svarita* here refer to the dynamics of sound that accompanies Sanskrit pronunciation. Pronunciation is accompanied by movements of energy. An upward movement of position or energy in the body is *udātta*, a downward movement *anudātta* and a horizontal movement *svarita*. In *dhrupad* singing the positions used for producing sound are: the navel, heart, throat, palate, lips, tongue, teeth, head, the two nostrils and the region between the eyebrows and sound constantly moves

through these positions. There is also a major difference between the way changes of position are used in the *vedic* recitations and in *dhrupad*, which is that the processes of *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita* in *dhrupad* are made independent of the syllables themselves, but subservient to the requirements of the melody, while in the recitation of the *vedas*, the dynamics of sound embodied in *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita* are dependent on the words and syllables. This separation, in *dhrupad*, of the dynamics of sound from the pronunciation of syllables, is done for the purpose of producing a complex music, in which the melodic devices and ornaments become independent of the syllables or the text, but obey the logic of the music. Making the processes of *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita* independent of the syllables requires knowledge of the distinction between two kinds of sound or *nād*: *ādhār nād* and *nirādhār nād*. *Ādhār* and *nirādhār* literally mean with support and without support. *Ādhār nād* is a frontal throaty sound anchored to the vocal chords, while *nirādhār nād* is sound that fills the body like a fluid entity and can freely change position. It is only with *nirādhār nād* and a special kind of pronunciation (*nād kā uccāraṇ* or the pronunciation of *nād*) in which the syllables are made so soft that they don't influence the dynamics of

sound, that the processes of *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita* can be made independent of the syllables and dependent only on the logic of the melodic development.

Another important possibility that emerges from the complex dynamics of sound with the *vedic* accents is the use of a note that is completely or partly silent. It is not articulated clearly as sound, but is merely an internal change of position that prepares for the next note that is to be produced. The *vedic* accents and this concept of *gupt* and *prakat*, or concealed and revealed notes, enables a *dhrupad* singer to create hidden relations or consonances (*samvād*) between notes. It is this concept of *samvād* or the consonance of notes that is the origin of the concept of a *rāg*.

The recitation of *mantras* of the *vedas* is accompanied by formalized gestures and movements of the arm, the hand, and the fingers, corresponding to the three accents [4]. These gestures and movements have a profound effect on the sound. In the melodically more complex *dhrupad*, these formalized movements are replaced by more free and fluid movements that however, still have a direct relation to the internal dynamics of sound in the body of the singer.

The processes of *udātta*, *anudātta* and *svarita* and the use of concealed notes leads to the microtonal conception of a

note as a fluid entity, for *udātta* or *anudātta* within a note and silent changes in internal position actually create a play on the microtonal shades of the note. The dynamics of sound within a note makes it a fluid entity that is not fixed, but is a part of the infinite spectrum of notes created by overtones. Through the dynamics of sound, a note within a *rāg* constantly establishes *samvād* with other notes of the *rāg*. The background of a spectrum of overtones, to which a *dhrupad* singer sings, is provided by the drone instrument the *tānpurā*, whose curved bridge with its shifting point of contact with the strings passing over it, embodies in its design the concept of a note as a fluid entity. An important consequence of this concept of a fluid note with infinite microtonal shades is that a note within a *rāg* also captures in it the entire information of *samvād* or consonance within the *rāg*, and thus also characterizes the *rāg* itself. A *rāg* can be thus characterized or identified by the characteristic microtonal shades of its notes. The *samvād* within a *rāg* produces a microtonal shift in the tonic, and consequently also in the other notes which are related to the tonic through overtones. This concept is also reflected in the tuning of the drone instrument. A skilled *dhrupad* singer would tune the *tānpurā* to reflect the character of the *rāg* being performed. Of the four strings of the *tānpurā*, the two middle strings tuned to the tonic form the reference pitch, and the last string is tuned to the microtonally shifted tonic that characterizes the *samvād* of the *rāg* to be

performed. A *rāg* is seen as a personality or a mood or a state of being, and not as a sequence of notes sung in a certain way. The character of the *rāg* is established by the information of *samvād* contained in the microtonal shifts in its notes.

The concept of a shifted tonic for a *rāg* in relation to the reference pitch becomes more understandable when one considers the process of the generation of notes by natural overtones. The successive generation of six fifths above, and five fifths below a reference pitch yields twelve notes. If we carry this process further then the generation of eleven fifths above and ten fifths below the reference would yield twenty two pitches. These twenty two pitches are schematically represented on a logarithmic spiral in diagram1 while the second diagram shows 53 such pitches generated by perfect fifths, of which the twenty two represented in diagram1 are a subset. A repetition of this process would eventually yield an infinite continuum of notes and infinite microtonal shades of the reference pitch. From these infinite variations of the reference pitch or the *sā* and of the other notes, the *rāg* chooses the ones it needs, depending on the mutual consonances of its notes. Another way of expressing this would be to say that the consonances and relations of the notes within a *rāg* push and pull the notes into their correct places. For example although the *rāgs Puriā* and *Mār wā* use the same notes, the vastly different internal relations and

consonances within these *rāgs* results in a lowered or *komalāṅg sā* for *Puriā* and a higher or *tīvrāṅg sā* for *Mārwā*. This concept of the essence of a *rāg* being contained in its *sā* is called the *bīja rupa* or the seed form of the *rāg*.

The internal consonances within a *rāg* do not merely change the pitch of its *sā* and the other notes, but also require changes in the resonance and quality of the sound produced by the voice. For example the term *lajjit* or shy is used to characterize the quality of the notes of *Puriā*, while those of *Mārwā* are termed *tejasvī* or radiant. In *rāgs* with lowered notes, a special technique called *sakārī* which produces a soft diffused resonance in the voice, is employed to make these extremely shifted notes sound natural to the ear. If the low notes of *Ābhogī* or *Puriā* were to be sung with the same quality of the voice as the raised notes of *Mārwā*, they would sound very discordant. In an actual rendition of a *rāg*, depending on the ornaments and relations that are being explored, a singer has to constantly adjust the pitches by minute amounts and also change the resonance and quality of the voice using various internal processes described in the preceding paragraphs. An important aspect of vocal Dhrupad is the possibility of making continual changes in *sakārī* or resonance in the voice along with changes of microtone.

Among the *rāgs* in the audio samples accompanying this article *Ābhogī* and *Jaijaivanti* are examples of *komalāṅg rāgs*, with *Ābhogī* being an extreme example with drastically lowered notes, while *Mīyā Kī Malhār* is sung in the *tīvrāṅg* with raised notes. In *rāgs* like *Ābhogī* or *Puriā*, the low pitches would sound very odd and discordant if the background drone were to be suddenly made silent. This is something I have sometimes seen some of my teachers doing by abruptly placing the hand on the tanpura strings to cut off the drone to show how shifted the pitches of the *rāg* being performed are. However the presence of the drone with its overtones and the skilful use of the resonance of the voice with *sakārī*, not only makes these shifted notes sound natural, but also greatly enhances the feeling of the *rāg* by reinforcing the *samvād* or the entire internal consonance of the *rāg*.

Dhrupad is for the major part an abstract singing without a text using abstract sequences of syllables like ā, ra, ra , nā , ra, nā , noom, na that have no literal meaning. These monosyllabic sounds are traditionally said to be derived from a *mantric* text. The singing is mostly improvised, but the improvisation follows a grammar and structure. A *dhrupad* performance begins with this abstract improvised singing called the *ālāp*, with slow free flowing melodic phrases that are not initially differentiated into beats. The phrases of the *ālāp* take up the different facets or *aṅgs* of the *rāg* one by one, and

their gradual succession creates an impression of the *rāg* slowly unfolding itself. Using sequences of these abstract syllables, the singer improvises phrases within the framework of the *rāg* and the grammar of *dhrupad*. A phrase of *dhrupad ālāp* is constructed much like a sentence of speech, with a beginning, one or more intermediate parts, and a final part which brings it to a conclusion. Sometimes a phrase could have just one part. Even one note can sometimes constitute a phrase, carrying within itself the germ of a beginning, a middle, and an end, through the use of the dynamics of sound described in the preceding paragraphs. The phrases are constructed in sequence with each phrase slightly varying the musical idea presented in the preceding phrase, and anticipating and preparing the ground for the idea to be expressed in the next one. Often a whole group of phrases illustrates a particular *anṅ* of the *rāg*. A group of phrases expressing a major aspect of the *rāg* is ended by a characteristic phrase like the ending of a paragraph or a chapter in a long essay.

Typically, though not always, the regions or facets being explored start around the tonic: the *sā* of the middle octave, gradually descend into the lower octave and again rise to the tonic, expand into the middle register, progressively rise to the highest register and finally descend again to the tonic. The objective is an orderly progression through the *anṅs* of the *rāg*, though expert

singers can also produce exceptional developments in a *rāg*, where the *anḡs* being explored do not strictly follow this sequential progression. Indeed in certain *rāgs* a sequential progression is not possible because of the very nature of the *rāg*.

After this exploration of the *rāg* through free flowing patterns comes a phase where a rhythmical pulse is introduced into the *ālāp*, and the facets or *anḡs* of the *rāg* are explored within this pulse, which is quickened in stages. The introduction of the pulse and the progressively accelerating tempo leads to the introduction of new melodic elements and ornaments, that are nearly absent in the slower preceding part. This part concludes the *ālāp* and is followed by the singing of a composed melody with lyrics, set to a *tāl* or a cycle of beats accompanied by a barrel drum - the *pakhāwaj*.

Strictly speaking it is this composed melody, which has four parts, that bears the name *dhrupad*, because this composed melody actually embodies within it all the principles of the music, and is actually a model of the exposition of the *rāg*, composed and set to lyrics by a master *dhrupad* singer and taught to his students for subsequent oral transmission to succeeding generations. After singing this composed melody, the singer explores the *rāg* again with improvised phrases, using the lyrics of the composition with accompanying rhythmical

improvisations on the drum. These phrases obey the same grammar as the *alāp*, but are bound now by the cycle of beats - the *tāl*. In the audio samples accompanying this article is an excerpt from the slow part of an *ālāp* in *Ābhogī*, an excerpt of moderate tempo from an *alāp* in *rāg Mīyā Kī Malhār* and and an example of a *dhrupad* composition in *rāg Jaijaivanti* showing the first two parts of the composition followed by rhythmical improvisations.

A consequence of the fundamental role of the *vedic* accents is that phrases of *dhrupad* cannot be too fast. An overly rapid sequence of notes would make it impossible to execute the *udātta* and *anudātta* accents with the accompanying internal changes of position, and to correctly use hidden (*gupt*) notes and consonances (*samvād*) and put in the microtonal details that come from the concept of a note as a fluid entity. That is why in *khyāl* this technique of the voice is abandoned for a more frontal throaty sound or *ādhār nad* as opposed to the *nirādhār nād* of *dhrupad*, for this is conducive to the production of the very quick ornaments and fast passages and permutations of notes that are characteristic of *khyāl*.

However, though this also leads to a music that is in some sense more entertaining and exciting, it also fundamentally alters the very concept of *rāg*, for devoid of the *vedic* accents, the music cannot adequately explore

the concept of *samvād* and microtones, but must start regarding *rāgs* as sequences of notes executed in a certain way.

References

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