

Appreciating Hindustani Music
Dr.Lakshmi Sreeram
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture 56
Hindustani Music in a World of Millions of Views

In this last video of the course, I will make a few general observations about the state of Hindustani music today and the challenges that it faces. Hindustani music is practised and patronised by a small clutch of people - in sheer numbers it is not of great significance, when compared to popular music of all kinds. And, this has always been the case, by definition art music is not popular music. But, because of its undeniable heritage value and its prestige among musical traditions in India, it thrives at a certain level.

And, the community of Hindustani music both practitioners and listeners, make up in its passion, the community makes up in its passion what it does not have in its numbers. Patronage for this music that moved from royal and feudal centres to the public, now involves corporate sponsorship in a significant way with its own dynamics. Sabhas, music festivals, private contributors, private soirees, organizers among non-resident Indian communities in countries all over the globe - all these players continue to sustain this music. Music teaching continues to be oral, aural through the guru shishya relationship. Even though the Gurukulavaasa or living in your guru's household as a member of his family, while learning the many aspects of this art, that is more or less obsolete today. There is no doubt that it is a subtle art requiring many years of practice - intense practice. Practice or Riyaz or sadhana is very much seen as imperative to a musician's making and growth. Riyaz is an Urdu word and sadhana is a Sanskrit word. And both are used to refer to the hours that the musician puts in by herself to master various aspects of this music. Perhaps, with an added connotation of spiritual intensity.

We have stories of masters and their insane Riyaz ah routines. Ustad Alla Rakha tabla master for instance - he is said to have practiced only one stroke of the tabla - the na - for hours in the winter cold of the North, until his fingers started bleeding.

In an interview with Dr. Ashok Ranade, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi casually mentions a period when he would do Riyaz for 20 to 22 hours in a day. This is even humanly possible, when did he eat, when did he sleep, but that is the kind of commitment that this art has elicited from its practitioners.

Pandit Bhimsen Joshi talks of swara siddhi. Siddhi is achievement or attainment, but with yogi connotations, spiritual connotations. Musicians of many hues have spoken of this dimension in the music in one way or the other explicitly or implicitly. Mallikarjun Mansur, a musician who lived and breathed music and one of the greatest of all time said of his guru. He says this "when I heard Manji Khan, that is his guru, my life completely changed. I was wonder struck by his imagination," he uses the expression kalpana vilas and "also his swara siddhi. And, I realized that music is a daivi shakti, it is a divine power and this power envelops you and surges through you like when a serpent bites you and its poison spreads all over and possesses you."

Now, this is a very striking analogy to use, but this is the kind of frenzy with which musicians yearn for this music and have practiced to attain a level of mastery over it. One of the fundamental values of Hindustani music lies in the domain of what is called sur. sur lagaanaa that is finding the sur and rendering it, it is a fundamental challenge in performance. Masters have striven for hundreds of hours to achieve sur siddhi or mastery over sur. Now, what is sur?

Simply, it can be translated as tunefulness and it is indeed that. But in Hindustani music being tuneful is a matter of searching for the perfect sur, the pitch; a search that is as much a matter for the spirit as it is for the body. Because the pitch, the swara, the sur is not an objective frequency whose correctness or otherwise is a matter of measurement; the purity of sur is a little more intangible.

And, this Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan has said very beautifully in response to a question about sur. He quotes an Urdu Sher or couplet about mohabbat - love, and the couplet is like this.

Mohabbat woh naazuk si hakikat hai mahsoos jise karte hain samjha nahi sakte. Gaanaa jadoo hi hai.

This is what he says, that is mohabbat or love that is the original verse and in the verse it says that mohabbat or love is that delicate thing that cannot be described, but it must be felt and he says this is equally true of saccha sur, the true sur. What is sur you know it when you hear it - mahsoos ki jaati hai and he says gaanaa jadoo hi hai - music is magic.

Shrimati Kishori Amonkar too has spoken of her quest for sur saying that she seeks the darshan of sur. Darshan is a sacred thing you know, it is a glimpse of the deity in the temple for instance and for her sur was a divine thing, that might reveal itself in an act of grace. In any other culture maybe all this probably will not make sense and quite likely it will cease to make sense anywhere in the world given that this is a world of auto tune and dozens of other technological tools.

And, it is a world that does not have the patience to listen, but scopes out one music video before rushing on to the next. So, in today's world of click baits and viral videos that garner millions of views for sometimes astonishingly thin content, what is the value of the sacchaa sur that Khansaheb talks about. Like many other aspects of an earlier way of life, this music too faces challenges, the unique challenges of the 21st century.

But, optimism about its future seems justified given the passion and intelligence of its practitioners and listeners. We all know what is at stake and one believes that it will survive and thrive, even if not in the way it was practiced a generation ago. That is in any case a given that music, any living tradition is going to keep changing, going to keep evolving in one direction or another. Courses such as this might give an idea about the subtlety of this music and go some distance towards strengthening its ecosystem.

It is time, then, to sign off. I want to thank the coordinators of NPTEL Professor Andrew Thangaraj and Ms. Bharathi Balaji, who have been immensely supportive. I want to acknowledge the technical crew Mr. Kannan Krishnamurti and Karthik Bhupathi, who have been involved in recording these sessions and editing them.

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