



AN EXCERPT FROM A CHAPTER IN A FORTHCOMING RESEARCH PUBLICATION ON
DHRUPAD BY THE DHRUPAD EXPONENT AND SCHOLAR ASHISH SANKRITYAYAN

Dhrupad of the Dagers, Conceptual Foundations and Contemporary Questions
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Behram Khan was well versed in Sanskrit and a teacher par excellence, who studied in Varanasi or Haridwar under Kalidas Dagur, said by Fahimuddin Dagur to be a descendant of the family of the same sixteenth century musician variously known as Swami Haridas or Haridas Dagur, who had taught Tansen, and reportedly also the ancestors of Gopal Das.^[11]

After spending many years in his youth travelling in search of knowledge, Behram Khan achieved renown as a scholar-musician and teacher, and taught the two succeeding generations of his family.^[12] Apart from teaching his own sons and his grandson, he also taught the progeny of his brother Haider Khan. It is the descendants of Haider Khan, known today as the Dagers, who achieved renown in the last century as the bearers of the musical tradition of their family – the Behram Khani or Dagur tradition of dhrupad.^[13] After having learnt this music for nearly two decades from several of the descendants of Gopal Das, I would say that the knowledge that my teachers bore represents the acme of the whole process of development of Indian music that goes back to its origins in the vedic chants.

The vedic chants, which have been passed on virtually unchanged over several millennia, through an elaborate system of memorization and oral transmission, employed a complex system of variation of sound and resonance. The chants increased progressively in melodic complexity over the ages, and led to the development of music.^{[14][15]}

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From the chants of the early vedic texts employing one, two, or three notes emerged the *sāma* singing employing seven notes that is described in an early text – the *Nārādīya Śikṣā*. Subsequent works, like the *Natyāśāstra*, *Dattilaṃ*, *Bṛhaddeśī*, *Bharatabhāṣyaṃ*, *Saṅgīta Ratnākara*, *Saṅgīta Makaranda*, *Saṅgītaśiromaṇi*, *Saṅgītarāja*, *Mānakutūhala*, and others, indicate the progressive development of a music of great conceptual richness and complexity.

The forms of music that developed from the vedic chants eventually led, during the centuries at the start of the last millennium, to the development of *dhrupad*, which, however, still retained its roots in the vedic tradition through the use of the complex processes of sound and resonance that form the basis of these chants. As will be discussed later, this is evidenced by the key role played, in the singing taught by my teachers, by what are called the three vedic *svaras* – *udātta*, *anudātta*, and *svarita*.^[16]

The *sāma gāna*, or the singing of the hymns of the *sāma veda*, employing seven notes and their variants, is already a musical system, though employed purely in ritual, and the *Nārādīya Śikṣā* describes the three musical scales or *grāmas* and their derivatives, the *mūrchanās* – scales generated from the *grāmas* by the successive shifting of the starting point, or the first note. It also mentions the concepts of *rāga* and *tāna* – tonal and melodic prototypes, and melodic phrases.

The singing described in the *Nārādīya Śikṣā* is, however, a fixed ritualistic music, with precisely determined text, melody, and accompanying formalized gestures or *mudrās*. The ritualistic *sāma gāna* paves the way for the singing of poems set to melody in *rāgas*, and cycles of beats or *tālas*. The singing of such structured melodies

with several parts, called *prabandhas*, is dealt with in the eighth century work – the *Bṛhaddeśī* of sage *Mataṅga*.

The *prabandha* evolved over several centuries, and, as will be shown from descriptions in various texts, also in all probability admitted improvisation. It was still the predominant form of music at the time of the writing of the thirteenth century *Ratnākara*, and was eventually succeeded by

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dhrupad. The transition from prabandha to dhrupad involved a change in the rules for the complex interaction of text, melody, and tāla that decides the character of a song. It created greater melodic freedom, by giving up constraints of metrical patterns of text.

Although the earliest śāstra text – the Nārādīya Śikṣā, makes no such distinction, texts from the Natyaśāstra onwards mention two kinds of music – the mārḡī and the deśī, which could indicate a great growth in music and its functions, in the period between the writing of these two texts. It would appear that the mārḡī originally meant the ritualistic singing employed in the vedic chants – like that described in the Nārādīya Śikṣā, and the deśī could be employed in singing unconnected to ritual – for instance, in musical performance or drama. However, the connotations of these terms seem to have changed over time, and although the Bṛhaddeśī of Maṭaṅga considers the prabandha to be deśī, and presumably the preceding forms like the sāma gāna to be mārḡī, the Mānakutūhalacalls the previous prabandha the mārḡī, and the new dhrupad a deśī form. Thus the term deśī seems to have been used, eventually, for a new emerging music, and mārḡī for an older established form that had, more or less, gone through a full course of development.^[17]

The Mānakutūhala, written around the turn of the sixteenth century, states that dhrupad – the new music, comprising of four song parts and self-sufficient, has imbibed in it all from every song form, including the earlier mārḡī forms, and has become the darling of the populace and the elite alike. Though the work ascribes the invention of dhrupad to its author Raja Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior, it must have been in a process of development for sometime, and Raja Man is said in the book to have assembled in his court and sought the advice of the greatest musicians of his time – 'Nāyaka Bhinnu, Nāyaka Bakhshū, Nāyaka Pāṇḍavī' and besides them other nāyaks or scholar-musicians – 'Maḥmūd, Karana, and Lohaṅka,' to write it.

Today, except for the notated examples in the Ratnākara, and a few scattered examples of notated compositions in various compilations like the Saṅgīt Candrikā, instances of the previous mārḡī forms – like chanda, prabandha. or dhāru that are said to have preceded dhrupad, do not survive in living traditions.^[18]

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A clue about them, however, can be had from the Mānakutūhala/Rāgadarpaṇaitself, which says that, in rare cases, and that too in some parts, and sometimes, dhruṇpad is also composed and sung in Sanskrit, and further that the achievement of Raja Man was in synthesizing the language, text, and the song forms of the mārgī and deśī varieties, and to make them act as one. One of the distinguishing features of dhruṇpad, therefore, seems to have been that it was mainly in the regional or Desavālī dialect of what the Mānakutūhala calls Sudesa – the parts around Gwalior, while the previous mārgī forms had been mainly or exclusively in Sanskrit. This would certainly seem so from the composition examples notated in the Ratnākara, written around two and a half centuries before the Mānakutūhala.

To me, one of the main features distinguishing dhruṇpad compositions as sung now, or notated during the last hundred and fifty years or so, from the compositions notated in the Ratnākara of the previous mārgī form, is in the free melismatic possibilities created by the elongation of vowels, whereby a single syllable could carry a long and complex sequence of notes, as a result of the giving up of bindings of metrical patterns of texts of definite lengths, to be fitted to the cycles of tāla. The earlier forms use the elongation of vowels sparingly, because of the constraints of patterns of meter or chandas. On the basis of this, the transition from prabandha to dhruṇpad would seem to have created more melodic possibilities, through the flexibility offered by melismatic elaboration, and freedom in the distribution of the text over the tāla structure. The transition from Sanskrit to deśī dialects also made it comprehensible to a wider audience, since, by that time, use of Sanskrit seems to have declined to a point, where even an important śāstra text like the Mānakutūhala was written in the prevailing spoken language, and not Sanskrit.^{[19][20]}

From prabandha to dhruṇpad, however, there seems to have been no change in the fundamental concepts of the music itself, but the creation of greater complexity, and refinement in the application of the same concepts, by removing constraints imposed by metrical patterns of text. This is also evident in the śāstra works of the period, which continue to swear by the concepts and definitions of earlier texts, without introducing new ones.



The vast, complex body of knowledge that my teachers bore, both of concepts and their implementation in practice – for indeed the two cannot really be separated, is one that develops logically and inevitably from a small number of basic concepts, and, above all, contains embedded within it a history of music that gives us a glimpse of how the fundamental ideas of sound and consciousness embodied in the vedic chants, eventually, over many centuries, developed into a complex and sophisticated system of music, with the concepts of the vedic chants built into its basic premises.

As will be discussed subsequently, the developments in Indian music in the last two or three centuries, which saw the rise of khyāl, represent a very major break from this tradition, whereby the new emerging music, because of its very nature, abandoned its moorings in concepts that have their roots in the vedic tradition, since the vedic processes of sound and resonance embodied in the three vedic svaras are not consciously employed in khyāl singing by design, in the same way as in dhrupad. It is precisely because of this that khyāl and its allied styles constitute a radically different system of music, differing from the older form dhrupad in the very conception of note or svara, the mutual relations of svaras, and of rāga.

Notes

11. Article by Rahim Fahimuddin Dagar on his family tradition submitted to IGNCA as part of his 1997 fellowship report, p. 6.
12. Alladiya Khan, *Sangeet Samrat Khansab Alladiya Khan, My Life*, Translated by Amlan Dasgupta, Urmila Bhirdikar, Thema, Kolkata, 2012, p. 68 – Alladiya Khan’s mention of Behram Khan’s erudition.
13. Rahim Fahimuddin Dagar, Article on his family tradition submitted to IGNCA as part of his 1997 fellowship report, pp. 6-10.

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14. Solveig Mcintosh, *Hidden Faces of Ancient Indian Song*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2005.
15. Harmut Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India*, Brill, 2002, ch. 13, Memorizing the Veda.
16. Rhhim Fahimuddin Dagar, *Dhrupad Anjali Kala Sansthan Archives, ref. no. video 52.a.41.19* – on the the vedic svaras udātta, anudātta and svarita and their fundamental role in his music.
17. *Bṛhaddeśī of Śrī Mataṅga Muni, Kalāmūlaśāstra Series (8)*, Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, 1992, pp. 3-6, *Vol. II, Kalāmūlaśāstra Series (10)*, p. 205.
18. Gopeshwar Bandopadhyay, *Saṅgīt Candrikā, Second Edition*, 1925, pp. 21-34, 821-829 – examples of chand, dhāru and prabandha.
19. Faqīrullāh, *Tarjuma-i-Mānakutūhala & Risālai-Rāgadarpaṇa*, Edited and annotated by Shahab SarmAdee, IGNCA/Motilal Banarsidass, 1996, pp. 95-97.
20. Harinivas Dwivedi, *Man Singh's Man Kutuhala and Dhrupad*, NCPA Quarterly Journal, Vol. VI no. 2, June 1977 – Harinivas Dwivedi, who wrote a Hindi translation of Faqīrullāh's Rāgadarpaṇa (Mānsiñh Aur Mānkutūhal, Vidya Mandir Prakashan, Murar, Gwalior, samvat 2010), writes that the original text of the Mānakutūhala has not been found, after a copy which reportedly existed in the Datia State library was lost at the time of the dissolution of the State. He writes that two chapters of the book that have been found in Bikaner show that it is written in Hindi verse