

HINDUSTANI MUSIC

There's a new song

How Islamic rule shaped music.

By Priya Purushothaman

Last week, we journeyed through the origins of Hindustani music, beginning with the early forms of sound and tracing its development into more concrete structures. We followed the early chanting of the Vedas as they expanded into a full scale of notes, and how these notes were then used to create the sacred and detailed Prabandha Gan. Prabandha Gan in turn evolved into the drupad, a style that mixed the pre-composed elements of its predecessor with improvisation. We were left at a pivotal historical juncture – with the emergence of Islamic rule in India and immense cultural exchange, Hindustani music incorporates many new elements to take on a more distinct shape.

Under the rule of the Delhi Sultanate, musicians in various princely courts received patronage from rulers. Amir Khusro, the famous Sufi composer and poet, was the most influential court musician of this time. Khusro was a prolific composer proficient in many languages; he composed in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Braj Basha. During his sixty years as a court musician, he was employed in courts of different regions of India. In each place, he learned and absorbed the regional style of music that was being practised. Under the Khilji dynasty, he worked with Sufi saints to create the qawwali genre. He is also credited for introducing new raags into the Hindustani style that are derived from Persian musical modes as well new instruments, such as the sitar and tabla.

The styles created by Khusro and his contemporaries were integrated with the Hindu music traditions, as seen in the bhakti movement that flourished from the 11th to 15th centuries. Songs were now being composed in regional languages (Hindi, Avadhi, Braj Basha) to communicate the message of intense devotion to God to as large an audience as possible. Famous saint composers such as Meerabai, Kabir, and Nanak were instrumental in composing this devotional poetry. The use of vernacular languages in the Bhakti movement eventually caught on in Hindustani music. Raja Mansingh Tomar of



Gwalior, who himself was an excellent musician, composed many drupads in Braj Basha instead of the traditionally used Sanskrit. He took upon the codification of rules and parameters of Drupad singing, and documented this along with the musical practices of his period in a volume titled "Man Kutuhal." Because of Raja Mansingh's effort, Gwalior became a vibrant centre for music, and the drupad style was revived and practised heavily in Gwalior.

In response to the drupad movement, a new form was also developing that was less rigid and formal in structure and development. Known as the khayal, which literally means "imagination," it allowed the artist much more freedom and creativity to explore the composition and raag. This improvised spirit showed its early inclinations in the qawwali but finally crystallised in the khayal. Historians differ on the exact source of its origins - but its development was a result of the fused Persian musical influences of this period. The interaction between Hindu and Muslim artists during this period was a very open and fruitful exchange. Knowledge was sought and assimilated without barriers – Hindus studied from Muslims and vice versa. The first Persian book on Indian classic music was written, and it was common for Muslims to compose songs about Hindu deities. A harmonious relationship existed in the pursuit of forging a lasting musical tradition. Under the rule of the legendary Akbar, we find great tolerance for all beliefs and ardent encouragement of the arts. In his court, we will meet another great figure of Hindustani music whom we will discuss in detail next week: Miyan Tansen.

