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# Performance as Protest: *Thumri* and Tawaif's Quest for Artistic Autonomy

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## Abstract

Indian cultural history testifies to the intimate bond the tawaifs had for centuries with the performing arts. Be it the pre-Mughal folk culture of rural India or the highly sophisticated culture of classical music in the Mughal courts, the tawaifs had always remained at the focal point of it. However conservative social paradigm never allowed them to belong to the mainstream Indian society. Concepts of honour, chastity and occupational propriety, with which patriarchy regulates a woman's individual choices, constrained the tawaif to inhabit a limited space, isolated and solitary, alluring, yet infamous. In the present paper, I propose to explore how *thumri* reflects the tawaif's own consciousness of her contradictory status as an outcast as well as an artist, indispensable to India's musical heritage. Through a detailed structural analysis of the genre, I would discuss how the textual world of *thumri* with its distinctive formal and performative peculiarities supplies the tawaif with a potentially subversive "action repertoire", enabling the nautch-girl to voice her desperate demand for autonomy.

[**Keywords:** tawaif, liminality, performing arts, *thumri*, "action repertoire", artistic autonomy]

Indian cultural history testifies to the intimate bond the tawaifs had, for centuries, with the performing arts. Be it the pre-Mughal folk culture of rural India or the highly sophisticated culture of classical music in the Mughal courts, the tawaifs had always remained at the focal point of it. However the patriarchal social structure of India has ordained them to perennially inhabit a limited space. In the present paper, I propose to explore how *thumri* reflects the tawaif's own consciousness of her contradictory status as an outcast as well as an artist, indispensable to India's musical heritage. Within the textual world of *thumri*, the social reality of the courtesan's life and her repressed resentment against it seem to find artistic expression in the formal as well as performative peculiarities of the genre.

Socio-cultural anthropologists have traced the origin of the tawaif-class back to a north Indian group of folk-artists whose primary occupation was to entertain people with their songs and dances. Social anthropologist Somnath Chakrabarty has made a classification of different regional communities of nautch-girls. The women, belonging to the 'Beria' community of Uttar Pradesh, had, at one point of time, taken up the profession of public-dancers. This section of baijis is called 'Berin'. To another group belongs the 'Deogarni', hailing from the 'Gand' or

'Gondh' community of central India. The southern parts of India, the Telengana region, to be more specific, had their own community of nautch-girls known as the 'Bogams'. The term 'tawaif', however, was ascribed to the Muslim nautch-performers, whereas, the communities mentioned above were all Hindus by religion. (Chakrabarty, 140-144)

While in the Hindu tradition, nautch-performance was invested with prominent religious overtones, the flamboyant Mughal durbars accorded to the baijis a rather 'secular' position of court-performers patronized by the emperor and appointed for his entertainment. Bernier, in his 1660 account of the Mughal India, had demarcated between two classes of baijis—the ordinary, less sophisticated group of public women, and the more refined tawaifs whose adept mastery over music was appreciated by the elites. The latter were frequently appointed by the *amirs* and *mansabdars*—the feudal lords of the Mughal era—as their personal entertainers and, even, sometimes, allowed to enter into a marital relationship with them. (Chakrabarty, 154)

If the above discussion points towards the prominence the courtesans enjoyed in the rich heritage of Indian classical music, the fact, however, remains that these tawaifs were nonetheless marginalized in India's patriarchal society. Concepts of honour, chastity and occupational propriety, with which patriarchy regulated a woman's individual choices, constrained the tawaif to inhabit a limited space—isolated and solitary, alluring, yet infamous. The frequent marriages between Muslim elites and tawaifs notwithstanding, the predominant social structure of India, formulated according to Puritanical Brahmanic principles, never sanctioned such alliances. Chakrabarty notes, "...according to the strictures of the Smriti-shastras, such liaison with these fallen women was pronounced improper for the householder." (152, my translation)

However, the social attitude, towards both performing arts and their artists, has throughout been one of ambivalence. One may refer, in this connection, to an anecdote about Aurangzeb, an inveterate enemy of music, who outlawed the tawaifs. One day, on his way to the mosque, he ran into a procession of mourners. When asked whose coffin they were bearing to the cemetery, they replied "Music is like our mother; your laws have killed her. We are carrying her corpse for burial". The story, though perhaps, apocryphal, points to the fact that Indian civilization had always acknowledged the tawaifs as the sole custodians of music, whose disappearance would spell the extinction of Indian classical music itself.

The contradiction with which Indian society regarded nautch-performance was conspicuous even in the Anti-Nautch Movement of the late nineteenth century. The marginalization of tawaifs that took place in this period was related to the larger and more complex political matrix of the pre-independence India. The Social Purity Movement that erupted in Britain by the mid-nineteenth century had direct impact on the colonial India. The British government, in the post-Mutiny era, came to proscribe any interaction between British officials and Indian

nautch-girls. This policy however was motivated less by any missionary zeal for moral purification, than by the shrewdly political strategy of curbing the tawaif class whose complicity with feudal elites during the 1857 Mutiny had posed a threat to the colonial rule. However the ultimate death knoll for the tawaifs was struck around 1892-93. The British Government came up with an official declaration by which all nautch-girls, irrespective of their class or profession, were banned. The *baijis'* refined arts were overlooked and they were all indiscriminately branded as mere prostitutes, indulging in immoral flesh-trade.

The aversion against tawaifs, again, was further accentuated by the emergent nationalism's indictment of them as agents of India's moral decadence. The anticolonial exigencies of creating a militant Hindu identity for the nation, subverting the coloniser's derogatory construction of the colonized as weak and effeminate, resulted in a denigration of the tawaifs. Vikram Sampath quotes the nineteenth century reformer Keshab Chandra Sen's virulent attack on nautch-girls:

“Hell is in her eyes. In her breast is a vast ocean of poison. Round her comely waist dwell the furies of hell. Her hands are brandishing unseen daggers ever ready to strike unwary or willful victims that fall in her way. Her blandishments are India's ruin. Alas! Her smile is India's death”. (qtd. Sampath, 186)

However, the tawaifs' inseparable relationship with Indian performing arts complicates the nationalists' perception of them. Rejuvenation of indigenous artistic forms was an essential part of the anticolonial project of asserting India's cultural alterity. Yet, Indian musical tradition would become crippled if it be dissociated from its custodians, the tawaifs. The problematic connection the tawaifs had with the cultural heritage of India is emphasized in a comment by Lala Harkrishan Lall:

“According to our ancient beliefs and ideas, music and dancing are heavenly, while prostitution is hellish... the question ought to be how to divorce blessing from curse and separate one from the other”. (qtd. Sampath, 188)

While their annihilation was deemed necessary for India's moral regeneration, the nationalist agenda of cultural revival required that classical music be “redeemed” from the stigma of being associated with the tawaifs. Hence, the likes of Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860-1936) and Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872-1931) endeavored to bring classical music out of the “kothas” of disrepute.

The ambivalence is not merely reflected in society's attitude towards the tawaifs, but it is, more often than not, deeply embedded in the latter's own self-perception. Interpellation to the patriarchal, conservative ideology has been so complete for some of the tawaifs, that they themselves regard the profession of nautch-performers to be degrading. Chakrabarty in his extensive research on the

tawaifs of Kolkata, notes that in 1982-83, a survey was conducted on them which revealed their own response to this dichotomy:

“Twenty-one baijis (24.14%) consider themselves to be *kalakaars* or artists and think that they should get equal respect in society. Yet they are looked down upon. This is social injustice. 14.14% think themselves to be inferior to respectable women....” (151, my translation)

In the light of the above discussion, the present paper seeks to examine the extent to which the musical genre of *thumri* encodes the courtesan’s sense of pride in her artistic autonomy, notwithstanding her consciousness of her ignominious social identity.

Discoursing on the interrelatedness between art and protest movements, theorists of social movement studies have conceded that art is not peripheral or a mere functional element in the framing of protest. Rather it forms a central part of the “action repertoire”. (Teune, 1) The term, coined by Charles Tilly (1977), refers to the collective means political actors adopt to voice their remonstrance against the existing paradigms. The action repertoire, however, is not restrictive in its scope. Tilly acknowledges the possibility of the incorporation of newer methods and strategies of protest, depending on the political exigencies of a specific time and place. (Tilly, 1995: 28) “Repertoires evolve as a result of improvisation and struggle”. (McAdam et al, 49)

In this connection, it is to be noted that the domain of art and artistic performances does not fall outside the sphere of “action repertoire”. On the contrary, where authoritarian interference comes to stifle all signs of dissent, art supplies a potent, yet shrewdly disguised, voice of recalcitrance. “[A]rtists should be understood as critical communities... Artists provide methods of self-expression beyond the rationality of arguments. Social movements pick up such dissident cultural forms and integrate them into their practices. Thus, new forms of protest are staged and become part of a shared repertoire of contention... Art has particularly attracted attention of movement scholars in many cases where the use of arguments is restricted, for instance because of limits to freedom of speech...” (Teune, 4)

Although *thumri* never evolved into any political protest movement, we may attempt a politicization of the musical genre in the light of the above discussion. The tawaifs’ lack of autonomy renders any overt demonstration of dissidence an impossible dream. However repressive and censorious the orthodox Indian society might have been, the tawaifs, at all times, are dependent on it for their livelihood. Their remonstrance, hence, must resort to a strategic camouflage, if it is ever to be effective. *Thumri*, with its distinctive formal structure and performative tactics, furnishes the nautch-girls with a useful means of asserting their artistic autonomy, even while outwardly conforming to society’s derogatory definition of themselves.

Musicologists like Thakur Jaideva Singh have traced the earliest forms of *thumri* called the 'Chalitham Nrityasahitam' to the *Harivansh Purana* (c.200 A.D.). Some have considered *thumri* to be an art form older even than the *dhrupad* or the *khayal*. Some scholars have considered Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to be the originator of the genre. Yet the claim made by Captain Augustus Willard, a band-master in the state of Banda in the United Provinces, to have been fascinated by the erotic charm of *thumri* in the early nineteenth century, negates the possibility of Wajid Ali Shah being the initiator of *thumri*, as he was, at that time, only a boy of 9-10 years (Sampath, 101-102). Gauhar Jaan, the most celebrated exponent of *thumri*, on the other hand, attributes the creation of *thumri* to Tumburu, a legendary divine singer or 'Gandharba', whose singing renditions abounding in dance-like movements and facial expressions were called 'Kauthumari Pada'. Gauhar Jaan opines "It is likely that the word '*thumri*' is a corrupted version of 'Kauthumari Pada' of Tumburu" (qtd Sampath, 195)

Whatever be the originary point of *thumri*, the genre characteristically uses the regional dialects of northern India. The lyrics were conventionally composed in Braj Bhasha, a dialect spoken in and around Mathura in Uttar Pradesh. Khadi Boli or spoken Hindi, Urdu and other regional variations of Hindi like Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Mirzapuri etcetera are frequently found to be the language in which the text of *thumri* is couched.

The customary performance of *thumri* involves an elaborate use of facial and bodily expressions. Such physical gestures, however, contribute to the heightened eroticism of *thumri* and, therefore, the genre is particularly suited for the seductive performances of the tawaifs. Sampath observes "The word '*thumri*' is said to be derived from the Hindusthani word '*thumakna*', meaning an attractive gait. So literally it means a song that has an attractive, rather sensuous, gait in both melody and rhythm." (102) History too vindicates the fact that, until recently, *thumri*, along with "interpretative dance", formed the typical content of a courtesan's performance at intimate *mehfils*. (Manuel, 1986: 470)

The association of the word '*thumri*' with '*thumakna*' has been insisted on by Gauhar Jaan too. She says that *thumri* may have originated in the devotional songs that commemorated the "... *leelas* or dalliances of Krishna and Radha (*thumak thumak ke* as they say in Hindi). Perhaps these songs of the *raas leela* were set to the lilting rhyme ('*thumak*') and became known as '*thumris*'". (qtd Sampath, 196)

However, although the stylistic conventions of *thumri* facilitate the courtesan's supremacy in its performance, the names of the known female *thumri* singers are few in comparison with those of the male exponents of the genre—like Sadiq Ali Khan or Bhaiya Ganpatrao—who are celebrated in history. This points to the marginalization that the tawaifs were subjected to even within the cultural space of music. Not only the patriarchal society, but even the gendered fabric of Indian classical music pushed the tawaifs into a limited space and robbed them of

the opportunity of earning recognition for themselves. They were neither allowed to play musical instruments, nor to train students. This apart, being groomed by a *gharanedar ustad* was a prerequisite for a professional courtesan. Since they had no disciples, the tawaifs were bereft of any means to transmit their art to the next generation and their names were eventually lost in oblivion.

On another level, the genre of *thumri* itself, like the tawaifs, inhabited a marginal space within the domain of Indian classical music. It was considered light and flippant, compared to the more exalted forms like *dhrupad* or *khayal*. While *dhrupad* presents a well-constructed framework of *swara* (musical notes) and *laya* (rhythm), the *khayal*—both *bilambit* and *drut*, the slow and fast variants respectively—unfolds the majestic beauty of the *raga* through a logical and progressive development of notes. Contrary to this, *thumri* follows no well-defined pattern of elaboration and frequently fuses multiple *ragas*, thus corrupting the distinct identity of each of them.

Vidya Rao notes that the defenders of *thumri* have tried to vindicate the prestige of the genre, on the ground that it too, like *khayal* or *dhrupad*, demands years of diligent practice to acquire mastery over the *taiyari* (technical virtuosity) and the *mizaz* (the appropriate attitude of presentation). Like *khayal* and *dhrupad*, *thumri* follows the grammar of *raga*, *tala* and exploits various complex styles like *murki*, *khatka*, *meend*, *zamzama*, *taan* etcetera.

Yet, this struggle to find points of similarity between *thumri* and *khayal* only evidences a desperate attempt to “elevate” *thumri* to the equal status of *khayal*, and is thus a covert admission of its inferiority. *Thumri* does not need to conform to the normative requirements of *khayal*. It possesses its own generic peculiarities. The standards of evaluation applicable to *khayal* must not, and indeed cannot, be applied for an understanding or appreciation of *thumri*. In being “different” from *khayal*, does *thumri* present the recalcitrant voice of a tawaif, undaunted by the restrictive norms of both a patriarchal society and a male-dominated musical tradition.

However, a *thumri* mirrors, in its structure, the tawaif’s own constriction within a limited space. It uses the “limited” range of only a few specific ragas, customarily considered “light”, such as *Kafi*, *Piloo*, *Ghara*, *Khamaj*, *Sindhura*, *Dhani*, *Manj-Khamaj*, *Des*, *Tilang*, *Jhinhoti* etcetera. Frequently, the musical space within which the *thumri* unfolds itself too turns out to be rather “limited”. “Many *thumris*... take *madhyam* as the tonic—a note half-way up the normal scale, effectively giving the singer only five notes (from *madhyam* to upper *shadja* on her normal scale) to work with.” (Rao, 32) In respect to *talas* too, *thumri* uses short, less complicated *talas* like *Dadra*, *Kaharwa*, *Deepchandi*, *Addha*, *Sitarkhani* and so on.

The subject-matter of *thumri* centres round the tawaif’s awareness of her status as a sexual commodity to her patron. *Thumris* depict the emotions of the

'*nayika*', yearning for her lover. "The pangs of unrequited love, agony of separation, the ecstasy of union and the anger coupled with sorrow at being deceived, form the thematic content of *thumris*." (Sampath, 104). The centrality of the female speaker and of feminine emotions notwithstanding, the literary text of *thumri*, therefore, cannot be regarded feminist, for, as Rao argues, it projects the image of the heroine in perfect consonance with the traditional patriarchal construction of femininity as weak and given to sentimental pinings for the nonchalant male. The *thumri* rarely presents "woman [who] is in control and has subjugated her beloved." (Sampath, 104)

Yet, despite the "limited" melodic-rhythmical space and the projection of femininity as constructed by the male-gaze, *thumri* does represent the tawaif's conviction of her artistic autonomy. In its fluidity of structure and deviation from the formal rigidity of classical music, *thumri* (more specifically, its *bol-banao* variant) proclaims the subjective authority of the singer. The multiple layers of ambiguity that the singer explores in the literary text and the freedom with which she coalesces diverse ragas to suit the mood of her rendition seem to be a proud declaration of an autonomous artistic self slighted in a male-dominated society.

To begin with, in the *khayal*, the '*jagah*' or the musical space for artistic improvisation is strictly defined according to the grammatical conventions of the raga it is set on—its particular *nyas-swara*, *bakra*, *badi* and *sambadi swara* and so on. The poetry of the *bandish*, however, receives scant attention. *Thumri*, on the other hand, elaborates itself on the *swara*-structure of its particular raga, and, also, on the '*jagah*' of the lyric, exploring its diverse meanings and implicit ambiguities. In addition, a *thumri*-singer improvises on the facial or physical expression. *Thumri*, thus, deviating from the confining constraints of classical music, creates for itself a multi-dimensional musical space. "To the *jagah* of rhythm and *swara*, *thumri* adds...the *jagah* of the poetry...and the *jagah* of body-movement and the *jagah* of *bhav* (the *jagah* of dance)". (Rao, 33)

*Thumri*, then, allows the tawaif to take artistic flights beyond her limited space. While improvising on the literary text of *thumri*, she, more often than not, performs a kind of dramatic enactment. Vidya Rao notes how, while presenting the *thumri* '*Kaun gali gayo Shyam*' ('Which road has Shyam taken?'), the singer would emphasize and explore the multilayered meaning of the phrase '*Kaun gali*'. Rao further notes that one of the means of bringing variation into the textual content of *thumri* is the '*kaku prayog*', whereby a singer sings the same line with same *swara*-structure, but in different voices, sometimes loud, sometimes soft. The emphasis on particular words or pauses may undergo frequent shifts everytime the singer sings the line. '*Kaku prayog*' seems to create a multifaceted persona of the singer, whose one interpretation of the text delivered in a particular tune, contrasts sharply with another, conveyed in an altogether different tune; this builds up, as it were, a heightened dramatic tension amongst the many internal voices of the same speaker.(33)



Incidentally, the indispensability of drama in a *thumri* rendition is stressed by Gauhar Jaan too, when she speaks of the necessity for a tawaif to be trained, not only in the ‘techne’ of classical music, but also in ‘*abhinaya*’ or the art of enactment. The tawaif, in order to effectually bring out the rich play of ambiguities, must internalize the meaning of the text, “...its context and the ‘cultural setting’ of the song as a whole.”(qtd Sampath, 197) The tawaif, thus, takes up an autonomous role in creating the polyvalence of *thumri*.

On another level, Rao’s elaborate discussion on the complex ways in which *thumri* formulates its *sthayi* and *sanchari* serves to illustrate how *thumri* complicates the identities of the addresser and the addressee. In the *sthayi* or the initial lines, the *bandish* rather unambiguously presents the dominant emotion and the identity of the *nayika*. The singer, then, in the *sanchari*, improvises on the melodic-rhythmic structure, playing also with the text and thus disrupting simplistic meaning. Rao cites the example of the *Dadra* in *Piloo* ‘*Gori baanke naino se chhalave jaduva*’ (‘The fair girl spells magic with her eyes’), where there is no way of arriving at a definite conclusion regarding the identity of the speaker or of the addressee. It can be a dialogue between two women about a third person, or it may be a compliment paid by a companion to the *nayika*, or it may even be the narcissistic voice of the *nayika* herself. This verbal ambiguity is complemented by the shifting melodic structure—in the present instance, *Piloo* is seamlessly mixed with *Shivranjani*. (34)

This brings us to the allegation leveled against *thumri* on ground of its violation of the purity of ragas. Indian classical music has attributed distinct and strictly defined *swara*-structure to each raga. The “correctness” of a singer’s presentation of a raga implies his/her impeccable conformity to these formal conventions. A *khayal*-singer then, pays wary attention to his/her presentation of correct notes, so that the raga he/she is performing does not get confused with another.

*Thumri*, on the other hand, however, plays with such dangerous boundaries (where one raga seems to resemble another, excepting a slight difference in the application of notes) to introduce variety within its musical text. It subtly interchanges the position of the notes or drops one/two *swara* so that one raga may, almost imperceptibly, get fused with another.

Such fusion, however, often complements the textual meaning. An example, cited by Rao, is ‘*Ab kaise dharoon dheer, Nis din nainon se neer bahat hai*’ (‘How can I have patience/ The eyes shed tears night and day’) in *Tilak-Kamod*. The singer may cleverly change the ‘*ma-ga-re-sa-sa-re-sa-ni*’ of ‘*neer bahat hai*’ into ‘*ma-ga-re-ga-ni-sa*’, thus replacing *Tilak-Kamod* with *Des*. Such slight alteration on the *swara*-pattern, which according to Rao is akin almost to “punning” (35), is, again, in perfect congruity with the theme of the *thumri*. *Des* is a raga traditionally associated with monsoon. The inclusion of *Des* seems to turn the rain into a metaphor for the tears of the lovelorn *nayika*. (35)

Peter Manuel observes: "A good *thumri* text is 'incomplete'; in that its expression of emotion is sufficiently broad, simple and general, so that the singer can interpret it in innumerable ways." (qtd Sampath, 103) It is through her intelligent evocation of "innumerable" interpretations and her exploration of multifarious emotions, that the marginalized tawaif claims her due respect as an autonomous artist, at least within the cultural space of *thumri*, a genre itself trivialized by the arbiters of Indian classical music.

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