CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MODERNISM IN SOUTH ASIAN ART MUSIC

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This essay traces modernism in South Asian art music (raga-sangit) from its eighteenth century roots to the twenty-first century. The examples, drawn from Pakistan, North India, and Bangladesh, represent parallel developments throughout South Asia.

We must distinguish between modernization and modernism. *Modernization* – the effort to keep up with contemporary developments – is imitative, and in India is linked with westernization. *Modernism* calls for originality. Musical modernism, as a motivating aesthetic philosophy that regards change and innovation as core virtues, did not dominate South Asian art music as it did Western music near the turn of the twentieth century, for several reasons. The subject of popular (film) music is beyond the scope of this brief essay.

The first obstacle was the emphasis on improvisation in South Asian art music. Why modernize, the musician might ask, when every concert presents 'new music'? A second obstacle was the difficulty of integrating Western influences into Indian classical practice. Western modernists drew on Eastern melodies, rhythms, and timbres to enrich their musical palette, but the harmonic structure of Western music made it difficult for Indian musicians to respond in kind. Indian classical melodies are not harmonically constructed, but emphasize microtonal variation, melodic ornaments, tonal hierarchies, and compositional forms that frequently conflict with the logic of Western harmonic practice. The application of harmony to Indian ragas would alter their melodic logic, thereby destroying their identity as ragas (melodic formulae).

A third obstacle was the link between melody and ethos in Indian music. Every raga must evoke aesthetic moods recognized by tradition. Western audiences sometimes reject music that defies conventional expectations, but in India such expectations are reinforced by the aesthetic sensibilities of the music's creators. Western composers' mission includes persuading performers to play in new idioms. Indian art music, in contrast, does not include a class of composers distinct from the performers themselves. Who then will lobby for the performance of new music that creates a space for ambivalence of meaning and emotion, or sets out to shock the audience?

In Western music, modernism seeks to transform the nature of works – objects of art that exist independently of their composers. In South Asian classical music, works are not separate from their creators, because each new performance bears the stamp of the improviser. Modernism in South Asia is therefore about creating new kinds of artists rather than new kinds of works. Indian musical modernism began with the appearance of new categories of musicians: Hindu disciples of Muslim ustads, amateur students of hereditary professionals, and middle-class women performing on a stage previously reserved for courtesans and temple dancers.

THE COLONIAL IMPRINT

The seeds of Indian modernism were sown in eighteenth-century Calcutta, with the emergence of the South Asian intelligentsia, consisting largely of Bengali Hindus, who served the British colonial establishment as cultural intermediaries. The Bengalis learned English and English ways, and the British learned Bengali, Hindi, Persian, and Sanskrit. British scholars found in Sanskrit a parallel to Latin: dead except as a liturgical language, but the key to unlocking a storehouse of ancient literature. The study of that literature gave birth to British orientalism and the discovery of India's 'golden age' (Kopf 1969: 2–5).

Orientalism gave India's nationalist movement an inspirational narrative that contrasted significantly with those of Europe's emerging republics. In Europe, nationalism and modernism were allies. The creation of democratic republics inspired European composers to incorporate elements from indigenous styles in an emerging musical language. In contrast, Indian nationalism celebrated the ancient, rather than the modern. The trope of the golden age allowed Hindu nationalists to find inspiration in an India that pre-dated both European colonization and Islamic rule. North Indian music, in particular, served sometimes as an icon of national identity, sometimes of revived Hindu hegemony, and sometimes of an Indo-Islamic synthesis.

Orientalism remained a cross-cultural collaboration as long as the British administration supported it. While Indian reformers sought to find common ground with the West and modernize indigenous society, British orientalists created Indian printing presses, published translations of European and Indian works, and promoted the study of Indian languages alongside English. This collaboration crumbled with the publication of James Mill's 1818 indictment of oriental civilizations in his *History of British India* (Kopf 1969: 236–7), the accession of the anti-orientalist Governor-General William Bentinck (1828), and the efforts of Thomas Babington Macaulay (Indian Supreme Council, 1834–8) to abolish the teaching of Indian languages in English institutions in India (241–52).

By the mid nineteenth century, British orientalism had been replaced by heavy-handed, top-down cultural reform. The Bengali intelligentsia became increasingly nationalistic; their knowledge of English, paired with the rehabilitation of India's identity as a great civilization with a classical age to rival those of the Greeks and Romans, provided them with the tools and motivation to begin the march towards independence.

In the arts, British efforts to reform indigenous society were most vigorous in the visual realm. The notions of 'high art' and the 'artist', which would have a telling influence on modern South Asian music, were introduced to India in the 1770s, with

the arrival of European artists who produced expensive works for the colonial elite. The 1850s saw the establishment of a nationwide system of government art schools, where Indians were instructed in Western visual techniques and groomed for a standard of respectability and income above that of the traditional artisan. Hereditary artisans were employed as 'Company' painters to produce picturesque representations of colonial Indian life (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 11–14).

In the early twentieth century, Indian visual artists would re-indigenize South Asian art by integrating Indian themes and aesthetic approaches into a Westernized medium. Indian musicians were spared the problem of 're-Indianizing' their art, which had not been westernized. Colonial interest in South Asian music remained academic, perhaps because the English did not consume Indian music as they did Indian art (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 52).

The immunity of South Asian music from colonial meddling had its parallel in the division of Bengali households into public and private domains. Western art and objects belonged in the public rooms where men were entertained. Religious icons, produced by traditional artisans, belonged to the domain of ritual, inhabited by women and children, who did not frequent the public rooms (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 230). Although Indian music was performed in the outer sphere, it did not share the Western character of the art hanging on the walls; music lingered near the curtain that separated public and masculine from private and feminine.

SHIFTS IN PATRONAGE AND TRANSMISSION

Courtly musical patronage received a severe blow in 1856, when the British seized the throne of Lucknow from Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Wajid Ali had presided over the largest centre of musical patronage in North India, enticing many musicians away from the moribund Mughal court in Delhi (Kippen 1988: 6). A year later, the Mughal court was disbanded and the emperor exiled. Delhi's musicians followed those of Lucknow to cities where employment might be found.

With the collapse of the courts, India's middle class took up the mission of musical patronage. Music appreciation societies were formed, public concerts replaced aristocratic audiences, and amateur musicians became the students of Hindu pandits and Muslim ustads, who had formerly instructed only their intimate disciples, in stylistic lineages known as gharanas.

The gharana system provided significant advantages in transmitting a virtuosic oral tradition, but was 'considered by both Western and Indian educationalists to be a milieu of music making that was the province of a degenerate, immoral, and illiterate class' (Farrell 1997: 59). Reformers looked askance at the virtuoso singers and dancers known as courtesans, regarding them as prostitutes.

Internalizing the colonial critique, the Indian intelligentsia created new models of music education, focusing on a few core issues: the creation of a system of musical notation, the canonization of a 'classical' repertoire, the publication of that repertoire, the codification of a system of music theory, and the initiation of music schools – with an emphasis on transforming the role of women in music.

Early reformers included Bombay's Students Scientific and Literary Society (SSLS), founded in 1848, and Bengal's Ksetro Mohun Goswami and Sourindro Mohun Tagore (1840–1914). The SSLS published books of Indian music using staff notation,

and included music in the curriculum of its girls' schools (Bakhle 2005: 62–5). Goswami's 1869 publication *Sangitasara* featured his system of Bengali music notation. S.M. Tagore published widely on Indian music, and established music schools based on European models (Capwell 1991: 236–7).

Middle-class patronage accelerated in the 1870s, with the founding of music appreciation societies, notably Bombay's Parsi Gayan Uttejak Mandali and the Poona Gayan Samaj. These societies created music schools, held public concerts, and aimed to make music a respectable pursuit for women (Bakhle 2005: 75).

Many reformers held that 'Hindu music' had been divorced from its theoretical roots in the hands of Muslim musicians (Capwell 1991: 238). Although Muslims taught and performed for these societies, they were largely excluded as students and organizers (Bakhle 2005: 81). This was not the case, however, with Maula Baksh (1833–96), who founded his School of Indian Music under the auspices of the princely state of Baroda in 1886. Himself a Muslim and an enthusiastic syncretist, he incorporated North Indian, South Indian, and Western music into his curriculum. Embracing the use of musical notation, he brought music education into Baroda's girls' schools in 1887. Hundreds of boys and girls learned music in his schools in Baroda and Bombay (21–44).

Maula Baksh transformed musical life within the courtly tradition, imparting musical knowledge to many students from outside his family. But this effort at modernizing Indian music education from within the courts was among the last. Maula Baksh's effort to teach music to large numbers of children spoke of his determination to save Indian music from the extinction looming over the courts that patronized it. Muslim ustads, and singers from the courtesan tradition, would hold their own as performing artists on stage and in the recording and broadcast media, but in the realms of notation, canonization, publication, theoretical codification, and institutionalization, the Hindu gentry would dominate.

The project of modernizing North Indian music education reached its apex in the efforts of Pandits Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936) and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872–1931). Primarily a theorist, Bhatkhande's approach was grounded in his knowledge of practical performance. He began from the premise that the practice of India's art music should be traceable to Sanksrit treatises dating at least to the thirteenth century CE. His close reading of ancient texts, however, revealed that only more recent treatises, dating from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, seemed relevant to the living performance tradition (Powers 1992: 11).

He combined his literary research with fieldwork, travelling throughout India in search of manuscripts and knowledgeable musicians. Bhatkhande's dismissal of the antiquity of 'Hindu music' was linked to his secularism. In his view, music did not need to be Hindu, or ancient, to be classical (Bakhle 2005: 108). It was a modern form, presently undergoing the process of classicization. His contributions to this process included his publication of *Kramik Pustak Malika* (KPM), a six-volume collection of 1,800 compositions, collected from many hereditary musicians. KPM transformed the musical property of gharana musicians into a universal canon (126). Bhatkhande also drew the disparate strands of raga grammar into a unified music theory, organized six national music conferences, and established several music schools.

Bhatkhande remains a paradoxical figure. Although gharana musicians were his sources for repertoire, he publicly decried them as 'illiterate, ignorant, and narrow-

minded professionals' (Bhatkhande 1974: 34). His use of interviews, and interest in recording technology, evokes comparison with early ethnomusicologists, but his documented interview technique reveals a condescending manner that would make today's researchers cringe (Bakhle 2005: 111).

Vishnu Digambar Paluskar's modernism shared features with that of Bhatkhande: the publishing of traditional compositions, and the establishment of music schools. They also shared the view that Muslim musicians had severed the connection between music theory and performance, and both men sought to rehabilitate music by reuniting theory and practice.

The two reformers differed, however, in profound ways. Paluskar was a performer rather than a scholar, and had trained in the traditional manner, spending nine years as a residential disciple (Wade 1984: 40–3). Rejecting the life of a court musician, Paluskar gave some of India's earliest ticketed public concerts in 1897. He established his first music school, the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, in Lahore in 1901 (Bakhle 2005: 141–6).

Opening a larger Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in Bombay in 1908, Paluskar trained his disciples to perform and teach, and they established schools throughout the subcontinent. Unlike Bhatkhande, Paluskar made no pretense of secularism, unapologetically forging connections between music and worship. He endorsed the claim of an ancient root for contemporary music, which Bhatkhande had dismissed (Bakhle 2005: 155–6).

But although Bhatkhande's secularism and reliance on empirical evidence made him the more modern of these two educators, Paluskar's alliance with the nationalist movement, and his focus on training performers (rather than scholars), significantly amplified his influence. The establishment of India's recording and broadcast industries brought the voices of Paluskar's disciples into millions of Indian households.

Maula Baksh, Bhatkhande, and Paluskar were modernists in the realms of notation, publication, education, and patronage. To find a composer whose musical creations challenged both the limits of musical form and the definition of a musician, we will travel east, from Bombay to Bengal.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE (1861–1941)

Rabindranath Tagore's international celebrity rests on his stature as the first Asian winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, but he is equally famous in South Asia for creating a massive oeuvre of more than 2,000 songs.

In Tagore, we find the emergence of Western notions of art and artist that were new to India. He was raised in a milieu that had steeped, for two generations, in an admixture of indigenous and Western cultural patterns. His grandfather Dwarkanath (1794–1846) was the first Indian member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, supported reform and modernization across a broad range of fields, and travelled widely. In France, Dwarkanath sang Italian and French songs to the piano accompaniment of the young Sanskritist Max Müller (Kripalani 1980: 17–21).

The tensions between nationalism and westernization emerge clearly in Rabindranath's relationship with keyboard instruments. He composed his earliest lyrics to melodies created by his elder brother at the piano in their Calcutta home (Kripalani 1980: 63), but Rabindranath later rejected the harmonium, citing its

inability to render the glides, ornaments, and microtonal pitch variations of Indian melodies (Rahaim 2011: 668). Indian modernism, to Tagore's mind, must not amount to a wholesale adoption of all things Western.

Rabindranath's music reveals its modernity in many departures from the conventions of Indian art music:

1. Primacy of lyrics over melody. Indian classical musicians regard the rules of raga as sacrosanct. Rabindranath allowed the poetic text to determine his use of pitch, observing or breaking raga conventions in order to serve the meaning of his lyrics.
2. Set compositions, in which the pitch and rhythm are fixed, with no scope for elaboration. This is a significant departure from Indian classical traditions, in which the singer takes the composition as a springboard for extended rounds of improvisation (Wade 1973: 448).
3. Loosely prescribed orchestration. Tagore did not compose for fixed ensembles, but he imposed restrictions. His dismissal of the harmonium, and embrace of the Bengali esraj, revealed Rabindranath's emphasis on Indian, and especially Bengali, musical timbres.
4. Musical eclecticism. Tagore drew inspiration from a wide variety of Indian musical forms. Indian classical musicians, in contrast, typically confine themselves to one or two genres. In Tagore's music, virtuosity resides in the composer's wedding of text with melody; the singer acts as an interpreter, rather than an improvising virtuoso.
5. Modern Bengali lyrics, rather than the archaic Hindustani of courtly music. Rabindranath refused to confine his literary imagination to a repertoire of conventional clichés. His choice of language also reflected the end of imperial hegemony. He wrote for an emerging milieu of middle-class literati, which no longer looked to North India to set the standard for 'classical' arts. Rabindranath's vernacular became its own centre, moving Hindi-Urdu to the periphery.
6. A wide variety of poetic themes, emphasizing nature, the adoration of an unseen and unnamed beloved, and the longing for that beloved. Tagore inherited these themes from Hindustani, Bengali, Hindu, Sufi, and theatre music, but he applied them with an unprecedented variety of expression, drawing on his cultural inheritance to present a new, humanistic, and individualistic message.
7. Artistic ownership and control. Most North Indian classical compositions are anonymous, the property, not of an individual, but of a stylistic lineage. Tagore 'owned' all that he composed.

In the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, we find the culmination of a process of syncretic modernism sparked by Bengal's early orientalists. Informed by generations of cultural interaction with the West, Rabindranath produced music that was truly modern, resulting from the mature impulse of a self-aware artist.

GRAMOPHONE AND BROADCAST MEDIA

The loss of courtly patronage drove traditional ustads and courtesans into new workplaces: theatres, recording studios, concert halls, music schools, and the salons

of urban red-light districts (Farrell 1997: 112). When it seemed that traditional musicians were playing a losing hand in their struggle for survival, India's nascent recording industry dealt them a series of strong cards. In 1902, Gauhar Jan became the first major recording artist of British Gramophone and Typewriter Limited. Other courtesans followed her into successful recording careers (117–18). Ownership of a gramophone player was a powerful status symbol. That status, and the physical relocation of the singer's voice from the salon to the home, purified these early classical recordings of social stigma. Records brought the courtly repertoire to a huge new audience, which had never heard such music (114).

The format of 78 rpm records, limited to three minutes and fifteen seconds per side, made it impossible to render full classical expositions. Singers became adept at fitting performances into the miniature format. Narayan Rao Vyas recorded with two disciples playing tanpuras behind him in the studio. One kept an eye on the clock, and tapped Pandit Vyas on the shoulder after one minute as a signal to move from the composition into slow elaborations, after two minutes to proceed to rhythmic play and fast running passages, and again at three minutes to begin the thrice-repeated rhythmic formula that would end the performance (Vyas 1992).

India's first radio stations opened in 1927, and All India Radio was christened in 1936 (Kippen 1988: 27). Radio broadcasts forced musicians to fit their performances into fixed time slots. Modernization took on a mechanical character. It was not the modernism of artists inspired to create something new, but rather the taming of creative impulses to make them conform to the limitations of the media.

Long playing records came to India in 1960. One of the earliest featured a posthumous release of the vocalist Dattatreya Vishnu Paluskar, in a 20-minute rendition of Rag Shri (Joshi 1984: 89–91). His approach, purely classical, showed a full range of stylistic devices within the khyal genre. Musicians in the 1960s luxuriated in the expansive format of LP recordings. Vocalists redefined the meaning of *vilambit* (slow); while the pace of urban life was accelerating, classical vocalists decelerated their performance style.

As LPs allowed artists to present recordings of slower raga performances, the international tours of classical instrumentalists Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, and Alla Rakha in the 1960s accelerated performance tempos. Western audiences, uninitiated in the subtleties of slow, methodical raga elaboration,

> loved the virtuoso question-and-answer interplay between sitar and tabla, and, therefore, Indian performers began performing in that way to please them. This method of playing created a new style of performance and gave the tabla player elevated status.
>
> (Hast 1988: 16)

This new emphasis on virtuosity and rhythmic displays, developed by Indian performers abroad, found a ready audience in India.

Alongside the modern emphasis on rhythmic extremes, some artists explored melodic frontiers either by combining features of two traditional ragas in a new 'compound' raga, or by performing several ragas serially as a single concert item (Raja 2005: 138–48). Vocalist Veena Sahasrabuddhe sometimes combines as many as 15 different ragas in a single song. These raga-garlands differ from the earlier

experiments of Rabindranath Tagore, in that Tagore's departures from raga emerged from the primacy of the poetic text in his music. Raga medleys sometimes reinforce lyrical meaning, but the cleverness and novelty of melodic transitions is their main focus.

CONCLUSION

This essay began by distinguishing between creative modernism and imitative modernization. In the Western sphere, musical modernism may have begun with Gustav Mahler's stretching and bending of harmonic conventions. It proceeded to explode and discard those conventions, moving into the realms of chromaticism, atonality, serialism, polytonality, and chance procedure.

Rabindranath Tagore may have been South Asia's Mahler, but we have yet to hear from her Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, or John Cage. The classicization of Indian art music, as it transitioned from a protected courtly tradition to a modern national one, created new institutions and new classes of performers, teachers, and consumers, but it did not bring a modernist explosion of style comparable to that of modern art music in the West.

The reasons for this are formal and cultural. Paradoxically, the improvisational nature of Indian music works against radical innovation. Indian classical musicians perform improvisational miracles because their training operates at the level of learned reflex. Overriding these reflexes would be as difficult as deliberately violating the grammar of one's mother tongue. This difficulty is compounded by the sacralization of raga conventions, and by the interactive nature of performance, in which audience responses are essential to inspire the performer.

Culturally, Western musical modernism corresponded to contemporary movements in philosophy, art, and literature. The explosion and dismissal of musical conventions mirrored existentialism, impressionism, expressionism, and the polyvocal abstractions of James Joyce. All of these 'isms' were related to a broad cultural shift towards secularism, which gave artists permission to violate conventional ideological and aesthetic principles.

At the turn of the twentieth century, South Asia's shift towards secularism had not progressed so far as that in the West. India's social groups had to arrive at both internal and external agreements as to the extent and pace of change. Music often provided such groups with a sense of cultural continuity, as they struggled to stay afloat amid a turbulent sea of unpredictable political, economic, and technological developments.

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