

Themes in Politics Series

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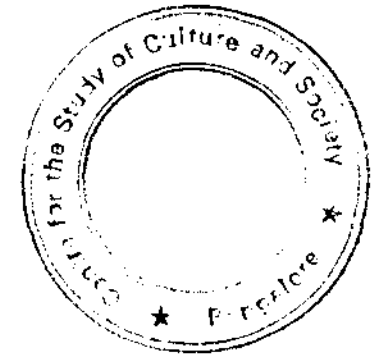
Rajeev Bhargava
Partha Chatterjee

The Themes in Politics series aims to bring together essays on important issues in Indian political science and politics—contemporary political theory, Indian social and political thought, and foreign policy, among others. Each volume in the series will bring together the most significant articles and debates on each issue, and will contain a substantive introduction and an annotated bibliography.

Gender and Politics in India

Edited by

Nivedita Menon



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Note from the General Editors

Teaching of politics in India has long suffered because of the systematic unavailability of readers with the best contemporary work on the subject. The most significant writing in Indian politics and Indian political thought is scattered in periodicals; much of the recent work in contemporary political theory is to be found in inaccessible international journals or in collections that reflect more the current temper of Western universities than the need of Indian politics and society.

The main objective of this series is to remove this lacuna. The series also attempts to cover as comprehensively and usefully as possible the main themes of contemporary research and public debate on politics, to include selections from the writings of leading specialists in each field, and to reflect the diversity of research methods, ideological concerns and intellectual styles that characterize the discipline of political science today.

We plan to begin with three general volumes, one each in contemporary political theory, Indian politics and Indian political thought. A general volume on international politics and specific volumes of readings on particular areas within each of these fields will follow.

RAJEEV BHARGAVA
PARTHA CHATTERJEE

Thumri as Feminine Voice*

Vidya Rao

As women in patriarchal societies we are familiar with limitations, constraints, and small, confining spaces. We live in confining spaces—both physical ones—the *char divari*—and ideological ones—appropriate jobs, notions of family honour, chastity.

Women have dealt with these limiting and confining spaces in many ways—by enduring them, by claiming them to be meaningful and powerful, by acquiring some power through manipulation of what is available, by breaking out of and rejecting them and moving into the wider space of the world. Sometimes, however, these interactions arise out of an understanding of woman as victim of the patriarchal order; such an understanding, in turn, can only be dealt with by surrender, or rescue operations through reform or confrontation.

I believe that women can and have extended their limited spaces in dignified, creative encounters, and in ways that I think are qualitatively different from surrender, manipulation or destructive confrontation. I think one way of doing this has been to extend this space without rejecting or vacating it but by exploring and working with what is available within it, by re-interpreting its constraints to discover unexpected richness. This paper focuses on one such encounter—*thumri* singing. I attempt here to explore and understand the structure of the form *thumri* which I see as the feminine voice in Indian music.

Parita Mukta speaking of the *padavali* of Meerabai, tells us that through singing and hearing these *pads*, the world now becomes

* This is the revised version of an article, 'Thumri as Feminine Voice' which appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 April, 1990.

streemay—feminine (Mukra, 1994). I understand her to be saying that dominant values, dominant ways of seeing, dissolve before the loving gaze of this poetry. I believe that this is a quality of thumri too. It, too, is *streemay*, feminine; it makes the world *streemay*. I hear it therefore as a feminine voice. Moreover, I see this feminine voice as being deeply subversive, though not confrontative.

Thumri is the small space traditionally given to women in the world of Indian classical/*margi* music. This is a fine cameo form which uses specific poetic themes, musical embellishments, ragas and talas. It is considered light and attractive but lacking the majesty and range of forms like khayal and dhrupad and is best heard or appreciated in small intimate *mehfils*. Though there have been many very fine male thumri singers, this form is primarily associated with the female voice—with the *bais* and *tawaifs* of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I consider thumri to be the feminine voice in music not because of its evident identification with women singers, nor with the fact that the poetic text articulates female desire (albeit constructed in the male gaze) but because of its interrogative/subversive quality. I understand this quality to be inherent in its structure and to manifest in the ways in which it extends its space by playing with ambiguities, layers of meaning, and in its use of humour. I understand it also to inhere in thumri precisely because of the way this form, focusing squarely on love, speaking in the voice of the yearning, pining nayika, articulating this love in apparent consonance with its representation in patriarchal feudal society, yet presents us with another vision of love, of ourselves and the world.

Thumri is one stylistic form of traditional Indian music. While it seems to have very old roots—its origins lie in the *desi* (or folk) music of the region known as *purab* (eastern U.P. and Bihar)—it was only in the nineteenth century that it was elevated to *margi* (roughly classical) status, though it never really lost its strong *desi* flavour. Wajid Ali Shah's is a name that is linked in musical lore with this transition. Nawab of Avadh, poet, singer and dancer, 'Akhtar Piya', as he signed the many thumris he composed, like all rulers before and after him, maintained a coterie of singers and dancers for his amusement and indeed for the enhancement of his prestige. A specific style, a gharana, might be said to develop through the interaction of *desi* voices singing *margi sangeet*

interpreting it in their own way (Erdman, 1978). The singers at Wajid Ali Shah's court sang their *desi kajris*, *horis*, *chancharis* and *dadras* but 'elevated' them to *margi* status by a self-conscious use of raga—naming of ragas and employing some degree of *ragadari*. But more importantly the new *sangeet* came to be 'heard' differently—as *margi* and courtly, rather than as the *desi* music of household and village, of life cycle and calendrical rites. With Wajid Ali Shah's exile in 1856 to Matia Burj, there ensued a diaspora of musicians—to princely states in other parts of India, apart from those who followed the nawab, into exile, making Calcutta an important centre of thumri singing. Thumri spread to places as far away as Hyderabad (At the turn of this century there were still *tawaifs* in Hyderabad singing thumri—remembered now nostalgically by today's *ghazal* singers and patrons). Both Shukla (1983) and Manuel (1989) have described in detail the evolution of thumri as a form. Here I will only focus on and understand thumri as it heard today, how singers and listeners together construct its meaning, and how also regardless of this contextualized meaning, *in itself*, thumri seems to me to be, in performance, presenting us with another voice, another vision.

Notions regarding thumri echo our ambivalence regarding the erotic and those aspects of our history and culture that have been seen as problematic. Wajid Ali Shah himself poses a problem. Both lay opinion and historical research are confused as to how to 'read' this monarch who has been variously seen to be somewhat pleasure-loving and effete, a careless administrator, a debauchee, and equally, a monarch sensitive to his subjects' needs, non-communal (though this is itself a later construct imposed on nineteenth century behaviour patterns) a fine poet, and a great patron of the arts. Thumri's main performers, and the contexts of their performance, the *kotha*, or the *darbar* are difficult for us to swallow. What sense is one to make of a form sung by women who entertained a group of elite men with songs of romantic love—some of the lyrics explicitly sexual. There is little escape from the fact that thumri is a form constructed squarely in the male gaze. Women sing, articulating female desire, but desire as patriarchally-constructed. Their audience consists entirely of men, and the singers will later, entertain these men not only musically but sexually as well. This situation has been deeply embarrassing to the 'modern' notion of Indian 'culture' that has attempted to construct music in an

otherworldly, spiritual mode; much of the early twentieth century 'reform' in music had been aimed at 'rescuing music from the disrepute into which it had fallen as a result of its association with the professional class of singing girls' (Deshpande, 1972). But apart from the embarrassing erotic poetry of thumri, there is its musical structure which defies classification—not quite *desi* any more, nor clearly *margi*, using raga but in very different ways from *khayal*—the exemplar form today.

When musicologists, listeners and singers—even thumri singers themselves—speak today of thumri, this ambivalence is the overpowering emotion one encounters. There is often total rejection (several singers will not sing thumri—though some are not averse to introducing elements of thumri singing into *khayal* itself), condescension and grudging acceptance of it as a pretty and charming form, but lacking depth, as a form that is easy to sing, requiring no special teaching or learning.

Thumri's aficionados will equally vociferously defend this form asserting its 'difficulty', the years of training required before the voice is even ready to begin attempting the fluid *ang* of thumri, the long years of *riaz* taken to arrive at not just *taiyari* (technical perfection) but *mizaj* (a state of mind, an attitude); the assertion that thumri too has its own *taleem*, that it too draws on *margi* music's grammar and vocabulary. They will point to the most technically complex forms of the repertoire—*tappa*, and *bandish ki thumri* and ask if the virtuosity required in these forms is not equal or greater than that required in *khayal* singing. They will stress that without emotion, thumri is dead. And finally, tackling thumri's poetic text and traditional performing context, they will tell you that the earthly love described in these songs is but a metaphor of the yearning of the *atma* for the *parmatma*. It is, after all, deeply religious.

It is generally acknowledged that difficult or easy to sing, classical or not, the canvas of thumri is a small one. Thumris are usually set in only a few ragas of the traditional repertoire; they range therefore over only a small number of ragas. These ragas are considered 'light' and 'sweet', characterized by *madhurya guna*. They are recognized and distinguished from other ragas primarily by their *chalan* (movement) and *ang* (phrases with their specific weightage, pauses and tensions) rather than by clearly articulated *aroha-avaroha* (ascending and descending note structure). Thumri's origins in

desi dhuns (melodies) are evident in the very similar movements of several thumris set in the same raga. Not having a clear structure but rather *chalan* or *ang* as the identifying feature rules out logical or linear development of the raga in thumri.

Many thumris, moreover, 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. In the realm of *tala* too, thumri works with small, light talas—*dadra*, *kaharwa*. The slow 14 beat (sometimes 16 beat) *deepchandi*, while having the expanse and dignity of *khayal's vilambit laya*, does not possess the complexity or weight of talas like *jhoomra* or *dhamar* (also of 14 matras). And thumri is restricted to *shringara rasa*—its lyrics are invariably romantic.

As a student of music and supposedly a 'modern' woman, I often found myself embarrassed at thumri's excessively romantic lyrics, and its heavy orientation to the male gaze. I found too that was no escaping the fact that this was a form that directly addressed itself to its audience—traditionally all elite men—and could not, therefore, be easily redeemed by such ideas as the inherent spirituality of music, the protestation that a singer sings only for herself/himself or for 'god', and that the audience is irrelevant. It was when I began to learn thumri and experience it for myself in my own voice that I began to discover some rather interesting things about its composition and elaboration, and what it seemed to be articulating. Thumri seemed to be always extending the space available to it—but doing this not lineally or in the normal, logical way that *khayal* employs, but in a kind of lateral way—extending itself inwards perhaps, rather than outwards and upwards. There were also many planes along which thumri moved to extend its space. And finally, both because of what it was doing and the ways in which it was doing this, thumri appeared to be relentlessly questioning the established and accepted structures of music and indeed of our ways of understanding the world.

Because it so relentlessly questions the established order, I see thumri as deeply subversive, while yet being an integral part of the corpus of traditional music and sharing in the consensus of ideas about what is musical and what is not. So that it is both part of and outside of this order. Indeed this is apparent even at a very mundane level; thumri is often devalued as a form of little significance relegated to the last few minutes of a concert of 'serious'

music. Yet few musicians will disregard it completely, many will include at least a few thumris in their repertoire, and most will praise it for its lyrical, evocative charm.

Singers and musicologists often consider thumri to be a feminine form because it has traditionally been heard in women's voices, because its lyrics articulate a woman's emotions (the narrator is always a woman—even if the composer is a man), and also because thumri's lightness and sweetness are considered to be suited to the female voice. But most composers of thumris were men (even the teachers were often men), female emotions are expressed, but squarely in the male gaze, and women have, of course, no monopoly over lightness and sweetness. And finally, speaking to any singer today you will hear a string of male names as well—from Bhaiya Ganpat Rao to Bade Ghulam Ali Khan.

It is not, therefore, the sex of the narrator, composer or singer that makes thumri a feminine form, but rather some other quality that inheres within the form. It is this other quality that I will attempt to try and understand.

Extending Space: Moving Out

In the early years of this century women—those from families of professional women singers, as well as the new aspiring recruits to the field of professional music—sought to extend their limited space by moving out of the confines of thumri into the wider world of khayal, even *dhrupad*. Music had begun moving out of the *kotha*, the *mehfil* and the elite private soiree to the wider, more ambiguous space of the concert platform, and the even more public 78 rpm record. Music and its function, and both thumri and the female singer began to be consciously—and unconsciously—redefined, and re-interpreted.

The traditional singers of thumri faced a precarious future. With the loss of the old sources of patronage, thumri's performing space and context were changing. A thumri's singer could no more be sure of an educated listener who would understand the subtle nuances of her art. While all music has been similarly affected, a form like khayal has managed to negotiate this shift better, perhaps because of its more clearly articulated rules and structures, the possibilities it provides a singer for a display of virtuosity, and—at one level—its clearer, more accessible use of music's vocabulary

and grammar. Thumri's most fragile, more intimate ambience can barely survive in the impersonal vastness of some of our auditoria or the metallic absences of the pre-recorded cassette. In thumri more than in any other form perhaps the singer and the listener must see each other—even the actual physical space in which it is performed must be small, intimate. The form was at a disadvantage in the new milieu.

But this apart, it was also deliberately pushed out. Much of our current sense of what is music, what is appropriate music, and how to listen to it has been shaped by what happened in the turbulent, early years of this century when social reform, a revivalist vision, a wish to reclaim India's spiritual and cultural traditions, and also a recasting of women's roles resulted in an attempt to 'purify' music and rescue it from its earlier associations.

Given this notion of what music ought to be, thumri, already affected by the change in performing context, suffered badly. Its erotic poetry and 'unorthodox' musical structure might be redeemed somewhat by highlighting its possible spiritual, 'real' meaning—but this did not help very much. Women who might have been singing thumri began to do other things. Many became actresses, in Parsi and Marathi theatre and in films. Some became known as classical artists. This was not always easy. Musicians will repeatedly tell how, in the early years after independence, few traditional thumri singers were heard on All India Radio since 'no one whose private life was a public scandal' was patronised by this body. Women tell of how they had to produce marriage certificates or give an undertaking that they had given up their *pesha* before they were allowed to sing. Women moved out or were pushed out of thumri's miniature canvas into the expanses of khayal or into the world outside music.

Thumri and tawaifs may not be uppermost in the minds of most feminists. But thumri, what it is, its history, and the stories of its singers do encourage us to ask questions that, to me, are pertinent to understand how we are to be—modern women, who yet are not totally cut off from our histories.

For me, thumri, how to sing it, what sense to make of it, how to understand it in relation to the world I live in, how to reconcile my singing self and my ordinary, somewhat beleaguered-in-the-modern-world self—these questions were not just academic ones. As a woman, I had to make sense of all of this. I had to ask how I,

and women like me (and men) could try to understand a form like thumri. Was I to abandon a form if it seemed small and constraining, if it appeared to be light, pleasing and romantic, if it did not fit current notions of what was serious music? Was I to abandon it because the image of woman it presents is ostensibly the negative one of the coy nayika, because it seems not to meet current expectations and constructions of woman's image and role, of what is 'progressive'? Could I erase totally the cultural forms I have inherited? What sense was I to make of them?

Jagah—Musical Spaces

When learning to sing, a student learns many things—raga and tala structure, laya, correct swar and shruti (perfect pitch), the many alankars (or ornamentations), how to combine these alankars aesthetically and appropriately. But a student also learns how to recognize and use jagah in the musical composition to create improvised patterns that are both pleasing and correct—that make musical sense. A student learns to recognize and use the appropriate points of departure in the composition—places in the composition's structure from where improvised flights into other spaces are possible, and, moreover aesthetic. Primarily these spaces are yielded by the musical and rhythmic pattern. In khayal, for instance, the badhat or development of the raga takes place basically according to the swar structure and patterns ascribed to it by musical convention. In doing so, no doubt, the singer is influenced by the poetic content of the composition, but the poetry itself never acquires a separate importance. To the jagah of swar and rhythm, thumri adds others—the jagah of the poetry, the bol, and the jagah of body movement and bhav (the jagah of dance). Consider then the levels on which thumri plays, unfolding itself simultaneously, and explicitly so, along musical, rhythmic, poetic, physical and expressive planes. To the jagah of swar and laya, thumri adds the jagah of the infinite possibilities and meanings yielded by the poetry. And traditionally (though rarely now) thumri singers used body movements, hands and mudras, eyes and gestures, to create new jagah and extend these musical and poetic meanings still further. So a thumri singer singing the beautiful Khamaj thumri '*Kaun gali gayo Shyam, bata de sakhi*' (Tell me my friend, which road did Shyam take? Where has he gone?) would develop the composition

along the appropriate (paths) rastas available to it in Khamaj's swar structure, in accordance, too, with the special modes possible in the form of thumri. The singer would also spin out the words '*kaun gali*' using not just words and swar, but also eyes and hands to show the many possible (and impossible?) galis, real and metaphorical; then focus on '*bata de*'—tell me—a question to which, of course, there is no answer. In performance, then what was just a simple line of poetry set in a 'simple' raga like Khamaj grows beyond our wildest imaginings. The bandish almost explodes with meaning.

Should this begin to sound as if thumri is merely a tune pegged onto poetry, it is not so. Shabda-pradhanta, the importance of shabda, here does not reduce it as music. I think, in fact it adds to it. There is a fusion of word and swar—Manuel says 'poetry gives up its literary status and becomes a purely musical element' and that the aesthetic meaning of the text (i.e. the poetry) in thumri itself becomes musical, not, literary ... (Manuel, 1989). To my mind it is not without reason that traditionally the phrase 'shabda-pradhanta' was not used to describe thumri: the phrase used was '*bol banao*'—to *make* 'bol', but also to make '*bol*'. Bol, I think, are different from shabda. I hear the word 'bol' as more dynamic—'bol' means both word, sound or syllable, but is also an entreaty to speak (it is both noun and verb). This dynamism is compounded by the word *banao* or *banana*—to do, to make. Both the music and the singer are active.

Musical Textures

It is not inappropriate to speak of the textures of the voice or of the musical text as all forms and styles of singing use texturing. In thumri this texturing acquires an importance and significance that is quite unique. Texturing of the voice brings into play many voices. This is most clearly, most literally heard in the *dohre daane taans* of *tappa* (one of the forms—included in the thumri repertoire) and in *kaku prayog*. Dohre daane taans are intricately worked double—'dohre'—taans. The voice very swiftly shifts from a tight, 'held' one to a soft, loose one. The effect is one of the swiftness of taan, but there is a curious swinging sound to it. The taans themselves do not cover a large area but move in and out of a small note space. Dohre daane taans sound sensuous and full, even soft and sweet,

at the same time as being intricate; there is a strange harsh-sweet quality to them, a sense of loosening the voice's reigns and pulling them in again. In *kaku*, the singer 'shifts' the physical voice. The same line may be repeated (and with the same swar notation) but in different 'voices'—now loud, now soft, now almost crooning—the voice from the pit of the stomach, from the chest, the throat or the head. The same swar notation may also be sung with different stress, emphases and pauses—and of course these two (i.e. the different voices and the differently stressed passages) may be combined to further increase space and meaning. I hear this as not merely an exercise in voice control or *laya* patterns, but the creation of drama. By shifting the voice, by introducing many voices we move from simple first-person narrative to dramatic narrative; a hundred voices and perspectives on the same idea, note, pause, silence. Thumri uses this drama very effectively, in many ways—with the voice (the physical voice), with the body (eyes, hand, movements of the torso)—but also in more subtle ways as the shifting of the voice in the use of *sanchari* and *sambodhan*. An intertextuality is also introduced by an entire shifting of the gaze of the another text, placed here as a quotation. Frequently singers interweave verses—*dohas* in Brijbhasha or *sher* in Urdu—in *dadra*. This is not merely the addition of some more poetry, but juxtaposes very different structures, textures, sounds and moods to the original text. The *dadra*'s rhythmic movement is cut by the *doha*'s arrhythmic flow. Should the chosen couplet be in Urdu there is then the knitting together of the very different sounds of ornate Urdu and earthy Brijbhasha. The couplet allows the singer to simultaneously refer to, play with, subvert the meaning(s) of the *doha* and the original *dadra*, play on emphases, fix perhaps on one meaning implicit in the text, then move onto the ambiguity of the main text, or the way around—a play then with ambiguities and certitudes.

Texturing—*Sanchari*

All art forms in India use *sanchari*. The theories of aesthetics as put down in *Natya Shastra* still inform the performance of dance, music and drama. Very briefly (and simplistically), *rasa* (sentiment/emotion) is that which leads the artist and the audience to *ananda* (supreme bliss). *Rasa* is created by the interaction of *sthayi bhavas*, and *sanchari bhavas* (also called *satvika bhavas*). *Sthayi bhavas* are dominant states of mind such as desire, anger, fear, amusement, sorrow, etc. These are expressed, made manifest, made concrete

through *sanchari bhavas* (transitory states). *Sanchari* is the movement of the *bhava*, in a sense its articulation. In dance, for instance (where *sanchari* is more clearly 'seen') a dancer moves from a literal interpretation of a line of song to associative interpretations of each word, and of the entire line, and text, even introducing an intertextuality by referring to other song or dance texts.

An old thumri (in the raga variously known as *Misra Tilak Kamod*, *Manjh Khamaj* or *Bihari*) goes thus:

Aangan ma mat so *sundarva*
Aaj ki ratt chaand gahe bahiya....

Through singing and through *bhav* the singer might play on the word *sundarva* (who is this *sundarva*, *sundarva*'s many qualities, the many moods in which I speak these lines to *sundarva*), but also on 'chaand gahe bahiya'—and the many possible interpretations of an ambiguous line: 'the moon enfolds/is enfolded'.

Through *sanchari* the singer achieves another less literal shifting of the voice, and also a shifting of the identity of the narrator and of the one being addressed (*sambodhan*). Who is the listener? Is it at all the listener who is being addressed—or is this a case, as in the popular thumri, of '*tirchhi najariya ke baan*'? If it is not the listener who is being addressed, then who is?

In the *dadra* '*Hamse no bolo*', the world '*na bolo*', and '*bolo*' can be sung in ways that imply an entreaty to speak, rather than the anger of the *nayika*. Similarly in the *dadra* in *Pilu* '*Gori baanke naimon se chalave jaduwa*' we see this ambiguity—who is speaking and to whom?

This verbal ambiguity is echoed in the melodic structures—*Pilu* will slip into *Shivranjani*—and what the voice does with swar and words, the eyes, hands and body extend further. And suddenly this tiny *dadra*—three lines of poetic text and a brief scale from *madhyam* to upper *shadja*—set in the 'light', 'small' raga *Pilu* takes three small steps and encompasses the universe.

This is only at the level of poetry and movement. The most important aspect of thumri singing is its very interesting and unique use of raga-space and the ways in which it extends this.

Sanchari and *Bhav*

In its use of, and articulation of *bhav*, thumri seems to disorder the usual ways of performance. Thumri's explication creates an almost unbearable dramatic tension—a disordering of accepted motions

of time, space, identity of raga, tala, bhava, nayak-nayika. Consider the thumri *Nindiya no jagaao raja gaari doongi*. As composed, in this bandish, the word 'gaari' falls on the *sam* (the first, and therefore stressed beat), but the phrase 'gaari doongi' circles around a sweet movement of *ni-sa-dha-ni*.

Although the bandish appears to be in the voice of an angry nayika, the musical composition belies this—'gaari doongi' is expressed in the tender phrase *ni sa dha ni*. The thumri is primarily playful and there is a self confidence here, despite the reproach. However, elaborating the bandish, the singer goes through many emotions. The identity of the nayika shifts from the self assured woman to the inexperienced *mugdha*, to the angry *khandita* to the sorrowing *vipralabdha*.

In one version of this bandish, the voice shifts in the *antara* (the second part) from being that of the playful nayika to one of genuine reproach at a genuine betrayals. This shift, this play of different voices does more than enunciate the nayika's confusion, torment and ambivalence. It sets up a time-frame as well. The bandish becomes not only the voice of the nayika in the here and now, but also as recounting the agony of the past, of the long night of betrayal and separation. Temporality is created, experiences are recounted one by one, so that what one thinks is 'happening' now, has really already happened a long time ago, and is being relived in the telling. Nor has any of this happened at all—this is what the nayika will say when in some never-to-be-reached future, when the eternity of 'viraha' will by convention (though not now, not in this life, not in this *yug*) end in lovers' meeting. These eternal presents and continuous pasts, and futures that have already happened, create more times, more ambiguity. All these times co-exist simultaneously; this drama takes place in a magical time which is not past, present or future.

Raga and Musical Spaces

Thumri finds musical spaces in many ways. There are, as with *khayal*, the *jagah* yielded by the *swara* pattern of the particular bandish—these explore, in keeping with the spirit and 'feel' of the bandish, the raga's special quality, its *angs*, its magical moments, pauses, stresses and silences. In addition to this raga-based exploration, thumri finds other musical *jagah* to unfold itself. If

thumri plays with ambiguities though its poetic text, this play is even greater in the musical 'text'.

The *swar* structure of a raga is given. There may be variations according to *gharana* as to how this structure is set up at all, but there is a common consensus that a raga has a specific structure and pattern; much of musical 'correctness' lies in understanding and presenting this structure as accepted by convention. Thumris are however often (though not always) set in ragas which do not have such a clear structure, nor a very clearly articulated *aroha-avaroha*. Thumri's elaboration is based not just on exploring the ragas 'structure', but equally of exploring the ambiguities and many meanings available in this structure. To this extent *khayal* is a more 'closed' form. A *khayal* singer singing *Jajjaiwanti* would take great care not to allow shades of a similar raga like *Gara* or *Hameer* to creep in and 'pollute' the purity of the raga. A thumri singer singing *Gara* would, on the other hand, revel in these points of danger and explore just how far and how much otherness can be introduced into the body of the raga. A *swar* in the raga becomes the door that leads to other ragas; a *swar* as it is heard in one raga is deliberately punned upon to give it the meaning and *jagah* of that *swar* in another raga. *Gara*'s two *gandhars* yield spaces for *Jajjaiwanti*, *Bhairavi*'s *komal rishabh* and *gandhar* just slightly lowered are made to mean *Todi*.

This punning on the meaning of the *swar* phrase and the *raga-ang* is what is called thumri's tendency to mix ragas. Classical music defines two ways of mixing ragas. In *raga-sankar*, two (or more) ragas are mixed so that a third, separate identity is created—ragas such as *Madhukauns*. Another kind of mixing of ragas, *sansrishti*, is where the two or more ragas do not dissolve to create a new one. Here the identities of the original ragas remain impermeable and distinct. But thumri uses neither of these methods. It is not so much that ragas are mixed to create a third new raga with its own new identity and personality. Instead the points of weakness, the margins and boundaries, in the raga's structure are used as points at which other ragas are allowed to enter into the body of the main raga. To me this seems to be playing with notions of mixing, and pollution, of transgressing boundaries, of dealing with dangerous thresholds. But also, there is a kind of humour here—a play on, and an exploiting of the different meanings that a single *swar* or *swar* pattern (for instance *re-pa* or *ni-dha-ni*) can have.

Talking of the body's boundaries and rules governing purity and pollution, Mary Douglas observes that the structure of its (pollution's) symbolism uses comparison and double meaning like the structure of a joke; she talks of the 'sad wit', the 'unfunny wit' of pollution symbolism (Douglas, 1984). It is this 'sad wit' of pollution that I think is involved in the 'mixing' of ragas in thumri.

Thumri seems to equally make use of *moorchhana*. In *moorchhana*, a new raga is created by shifting the tonic to another note. Thus Bhoopali's *moorchhana* on *gandhar* gives us Malkauns; Craras *moorchhana* on *pancham* becomes *Khamaj*. By using the technique of *moorchhana*, the thumri singer deliberately awakens the unconscious scales in any given raga. What happens here is that unless one is very aware of these musical nuances, one may miss the point completely, lose one's bearings in the ocean of swars and in fact find no clear *shadja* (tonic) to anchor one's hearing of the raga, and make musical sense of it. Several 'scales' seem to co-exist at the same time.

I am practising the *chaiti* 'Sej chadhat dar laage'. I have been told by my guru that this is in the raga *Jogiya*. Though this *chaiti* uses *shadja* as the tonic, my *tanpura* is tuned not to *sa-pa* but to *sa-ma* and deliberately so, to play up the *moorchhana* *bhed* possibilities in this *chaiti*, and the ambiguities of *madhyam* as *vadi*/ *madhyam* as tonic. Because of this *bandish*'s emphasis on *madhyam*, and the *tanpura* tuned to *madhyam*, this *swar* seems to dominate; it vies for place with *shadja*. A sense of *madhyam* as the tonic is created. If this feeling is given expression, the perspective of the raga shifts; the raga 'becomes' *Pilu*. Or was it always also *Pilu*? This shift in perception is simultaneous with the primary recognition of the raga as *Jogiya*. The scale is no more a clear identity, but a riddle, a permanent question mark. It seems to me that this, rather than any other reason, is why many singers and teachers do not allow notation of thumri even today—there is no fixed notation, only possible meanings and perspectives—and why *sargam* singing is considered highly inappropriate in thumri.

I see all this as an example of musical humour, *hasya*, the *rasa* that is closest to *shringar*. Simultaneously I see it as standing outside and laughing ironically at the differences set up between one raga and another, at rules and methods, and indeed at the lines drawn between one *rasa* and another.

No singer has ever spoken to me explicitly about puns or

humour in thumri. However I find that their approach to the singing very often supports this view. Any one who has watched Birju Maharaj dancing a thumri would have noticed and enjoyed the humour which he cuts his own *sancharis* of *viraha* with irony and humour. And I once had the opportunity of watching Shobha Gurtu in an informal session with her students singing the *dadra* 'Thade rahiyo'—pleading with a moustachio twirling 'yaar', or threatening an imaginary cowering 'banke Shyam' with dire consequences if he should dare to leave—all to some exquisite examples of *bol banao* singing.

And as an example of deliberate play on mistaken identities—of ragas, talas or people, there is this story, told to me by one singer, eyes twinkling mischievously. There was once a *nawab* who prided himself on the number of *nath utarwais* he had sponsored, and, therefore, also, on the number of young *tawaifs* he had 'launched' on their careers. (The first sponsor and patron of a young *tawaif* has the right to remove and keep her *nath*, nose-ring. In return he had to give her the smaller *laung*, or nose stud, and this ceremony was known as *nath utarwai*.) The *tawaifs* of one *kotha* he frequented, however, had an answer to this. Not protest, not suicide. They merely got the *nawab* very, very drunk, and then sent to him each time the same *tawaif* with, of course, a brand new nose ring for his collection.

Thumri and the Female Body

It seems to me that there are resonances between these qualities of thumri and its articulation, and the Hindu discourse on the body.

The body as metaphor for society is not a new idea. It is central to much traditional imagery and iconography and has been recognized and studied by social scientists. The body itself also has multiple meanings and references—it is not merely the corporeal body, or the body of 'scientific' medical discourse. 'Just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolizes everything else' (Das, 1988). To see the body as a metaphor for music is therefore not so far-fetched. Even music's vocabulary of *ang*, *mukhra*, *shakl*, *chalan*, etc. indicate different aspects of a raga, *bandish* or *tala*, in terms of parts of the body. Parts of an instrument are named as parts of the body. Conversely, *bandishes* which liken

the body to an instrument deepen and further this body/music metaphor.

One can also ask, *which* body is this? There is the body that is beyond gender or age, beyond attributes—and that *is* music. But there is also the specific body—male or female, young or old, pre-pubertal, pregnant or whatever. It appears to me that thumri shares with all music a sense of the *nirgun* undifferentiated body, while also being simultaneously analogous to the female body.

Hindu discourse on the body treats it as a space that must be protected from pollution that may enter through the liminal extremities, and as a space requiring periodic purification when transgression of its boundaries does take place. Commenting on Srinivas' data on the Coorgs, Douglas (1984) says,

The ritual life of the Coorgs ... give us the impression of a people obsessed by the fear of dangerous impurities entering their system. They treat the body as if it were a beleaguered town, every ingress and exit guarded for spies and traitors.

The margins of the body are liminal and dangerous. They are the doors through which pollution can enter, or through which, matter issuing forth, can transgress the body's boundaries. The body is therefore bounded, the extremities marked, and closely guarded.

The female body on the other hand, is almost incapable of total closure. It is the open body, the body that is irreversibly polluted every day (through sexual intercourse) and periodically polluting and dangerous, with every menstrual period, or with birth pollution. Yet it is precisely this polluting and pollutable quality that reflects the *rita* of the universe, and also ensures its continuity and that of the patrilineage (Das, 1988).

There is of course, no *one* Hindu discourse on the female body. Even Manu's is a highly ambiguous text—speaking of menstrual pollution in one breath and of a return to purity through menstruation in the other. Das sees

two major concerns in these rules, both of which are expressed through the metaphor of impurity. The first set of rules relates to the periods of purity and impurity which regulate sexual access to a woman. The second is with rituals of purification, including purification and expiation for a woman who has engaged in adulterous sexual relationships.

According to Das, 'the law texts which present the place of woman

in a patriarchal universe, emphasize the woman's accessibility to the male, her return to purity, and her obligation to increase the lineage' (1988). So the 'different' discourses are not so much contradictory, as expressing a practical concern for continuance of the patrilineage, and thus the social order, while articulating codes regarding women's sexuality simultaneously stress also the *transformative* (rather than simply polluting or purifying) power of menstruation and sexual intercourse.

Das sees this internalization of the obligation to be sexually active and procreate as 'a third person perspective' on the body. Underlying this is 'a first-person discourse' which articulates the irreversibility of the pollution that a woman is obliged to incur through the process of sexual relations. 'A woman's body, they say, is made *jhuti* every day, and such pollution cannot be terminated—that which has been made *jhuta* ... can never attain purity again' (Das, 1988). Such a view of the female body leads to its perception as the body (the persons) that can absorb pollution, sin and danger:

We can now see how polyvalent is the symbol of pollution. On the one hand, the engagement with sex leads to the perspective on the female body as being constantly transformed by use, as being progressively polluted. On the other hand, it is the very capacity of the woman to absorb the negative forces of the cosmic and social world that allows men to be regenerated' (Das, 1988).

In the light of this I find it not the least surprising that tawaifs, whose music seems to me an analogue of the female body should be not only singers, but also should at one time, have had a sexual role to play—voice and body articulate the same truth, and the sexuality of the tawaif is only symbolic of the open-ended quality of her music.

In a beautiful and evocative paper on Bankim Chandra's novels, Sudipta Kaviraj (1987) speaks of the interplay of desire and denial: '... desire seen as man's (or mostly woman's) elemental inclinations, and denial as the system of prohibitions constructed by society to bind and channel them and render them safe.' It is in this interplay of, and conflict between, desire and denial that thumri stands. It is here that it articulates female desire, not in the overt articulation of such desire as evinced in its poetry. This latter is female desire constructed through the male gaze—male desire reflected back to the listener (but an active, not passive listener) in the guise of female

desire. Thumri's play with this construction masks a deeper, more fundamental, desire, a desire moreover that seems to have no object. Nothing is known any more; all certainties, all order is questioned, is disordered. And as with Bankim's *Indira*, it appears that what is being questioned is not just the identity of an individual—a raga, bhava, rasa, the singer or the listener—but more radically, the nature of such identity itself. Such questioning 'ties the immaculate definitions of the Hindu moral system into knots,' says Kaviraj—he could well be speaking of thumri, where, too, 'the luminously clear, unfringeable relationships are bent out of shape, sent into a mysterious abeyance'.

The endeavour of khayal is to guard its thresholds and gates, watch all points of danger, allow for no transgression of the purity of the raga. Thumri on the other hand—like the female body—is entirely open. The style of singing is based on this openness of the form. It is a small form with small scales, small, light ragas, small talas. But it leaves itself, wide open and vulnerable. As a result it is able, constantly, to expand the space available to it in quite unique and unexpected ways.

Thumri cannot be 'closed'. Were this to happen it would cease to be thumri; it would, in a sense, die. The margins, dangerous, liminal points, the extremities of the human/musical body from where pollution can enter, where one raga can enter another, where meanings can be collided and blurred, these are welcome in thumri. This however does not mean that other musical forms are not interrogative, subtle or polyvalent—they are. It is only that forms like khayal embody an accepted musical discourse more clearly. Thumri stands outside of this, gently interrogating it. Nor is thumri's an anarchic, unstructured voice. Here too, there are subtle 'rules' for negotiating these transgressions across the boundaries of raga, sahitya, tala and bhava.

As female body, thumri is open, dangerous—yet fecund and regenerative. As the feminine voice it is the liminal voice, the voice that relentlessly interrogates the order, asking over and over again, the question that has no answer. While I see this quality as subversive, I do not see it as destructive. It is in seeing (or hearing) the otherness of thumri that we come to know our ordinary selves. 'Nothing', says Kaviraj (1987) 'could be more important to someone wishing to know the structure of the universe than to know these limits ..., to come to the edge of the world and peer at

the darkness beyond, to acknowledge our 'other' nature, and to see ourselves and our limits as fallible and provisional.' 'We accept', he says, 'the provision of our happiness. We learn to forgive. We grasp the secret of kindness.' And so it is with thumri.

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