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Thumri, Ghazal, and Modernity in Hindustani Music Culture

PETER MANUEL

If historians of Indian classical music have been obliged to rely primarily upon a finite and often enigmatic set of treatises and iconographic sources, historical studies of semi-classical genres like thumri and ghazal confront even more formidable challenges. Such styles and their predecessors were largely ignored by Sanskrit theoreticians, who tended to be more interested in hoary modal and metrical systems than in contemporary vernacular or regional-language genres sung by courtesans. It is thus inevitable that attempts to reconstruct the development of such genres involve considerable amounts of conjecture, and in some senses raise more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, thumri, ghazal, and earlier counterparts, which we may retrospectively call "light-classical", have played too important a role in South Asian music to be ignored by historians. Further, as I shall suggest, the study of their evolution may yield particular insights into the nature of Hindustani music history, especially of the modern period. Central to this study is a fundamental paradox characterizing thumri and ghazal history: specifically, that while both genres may be seen as mere variants or particular efflorescences in a long series of similar counterparts dating back to the early common era, there are other senses in which they are unique products of a particular historical moment marked by unprecedented socio-historical features. In this chapter, I attempt to explore this apparent contradiction, and further suggest how the divergent trajectories of thumri and ghazal in the later twentieth century illustrate the distinctive form that modernity has assumed in Indian music culture.

THUMRI AND GHAZAL PREHISTORY, FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE NAWABI ERA

Thumri and ghazal do not begin to emerge into historical daylight until the mid-nineteenth century, and hence it is not entirely surprising that publications continue to appear which attribute the origin of thumri, and even the light-classical ghazal art-song, to Wajid Ali Shah's Lucknow court (r. 1847-56). Nevertheless, if the ghazal-song's prehistory remains obscure, serious scholars of Indian music have established that thumri itself in some form predates the Lucknow nawabi era by nearly two centuries, and moreover that it can be seen to have counterparts, if not direct or indirect roots, in a set of comparable light-classical genres which date back to the time of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. As recapitulated and interpreted in my own volume,

Thumrī in Historical and Stylistic Perspectives, Indian musicologists Prem Lata Sharma, Mukund Lath, Chaitanya Desai, and especially Shatrughan Shukla have exhaustively and perceptively illuminated this prehistory as documented or implied in Sanskrit, Persian, and vernacular-language treatises; in this chapter I will only briefly summarize such findings.¹

The first extant reference to thumri appears in Faqirullah's *Rāg Darpan* of 1665-66, in which he states that the Indian raga or *naghma* Barwa is similar to and occasionally referred to as "thumri".² Mirza Khan's 1675 Persian text *Tuḥfat al-Hind* similarly describes thumri as a modal entity; specifically, it is listed as a *rāgiṇī* of Shri-raga, sung mostly in the Doab region, containing elements of ragas Shankarabharana and Maru, and linked at least indirectly in this fashion to contemporary ragas such as Kafi and Pahari. While these descriptions are ambiguous, Shukla convincingly argues that they suggest that thumri was a mixed mode containing elements of modern-day Kafi, Bilaval, and Khamaj *thāt*. Accordingly, Pratap Singh's *Rādhāgovind Saṅgī Sār* of 1803 also describes thumri as a raga—again, like modern Kafi, using lowered seventh and both raised and lowered third degrees (i.e. *komal ni*, and *śuddh* and *komal ga*).³ The pre-modern thumri thus appears to have been a kind of vernacular, light-classical mode or song-type, which, like most modern thumri-*aṅg* ragas, freely mixed raised and lowered forms of the third and seventh scale degrees (*ni* and *ga*). Quite probably it was a relatively simple and unpretentious idiom which functioned mostly as a courtesan dance-song, as suggested by the etymological root *thumak* (a choreographic stamp of the foot).

By the 1830s thumri emerges more clearly as a genre *per se*. Willard's 1834 essay describes it as a familiar style in Braj Bhasha and ranks it fourth in importance after dhrupad, khayal, and tappa.⁴ *Bandish* thumri compositions also survive which are attributed to contemporaries, including Man Singh (maharaja of Jodhpur from 1803 to 1843) and Javan Singh (maharaja of Kisangarh and Naghdar in the 1830s). The *Rāg Kalpadrum* includes texts of dozens of thumris (labelled as such) in light ragas currently used for that genre. The thumri which came to flourish in nawabi Lucknow thus represents not an entirely original creation, but a refined, standardized, and popularized form of an earlier genre. Its evolution was closely linked to that of *choṭā* khayal. However, it differed from that genre in its increasing reliance on a distinct set of light, mixed ragas, its emphasis on rhythmic word-division (*bol bani*) rather than virtuosity or scrupulous delineation of raga, and its association with dance, courtesans, and a particular set of male, mostly Lucknow-based composers all using the pen-name "— Piya" (e.g. Lallan Piya, Sanad Piya, and so on).

Moreover, as Shukla and other musicologists have argued, thumri did not emerge out of a vacuum but can be seen as a recent variant of a long line of earlier counterparts. These precursors, whether or not directly related to thumri, shared its traditional function as a vehicle for interpretive dance (*abhinaya*, *nṛtya*), its use of vernacular dialect, its affinities with folk music or folk-derived light-classical elements, its erotic (*śṛṅgār ras*) character, its flexible rather than scrupulous adherence to raga, and in some cases its association with Krishnaite *bhakti* and the vernal Holi festival. An early antecedent to such songs would be the light, erotic

¹Desai 1976; Lath 1978; Manuel 1989; Sharma 1970; Shukla 1983.

²Faqirullah 1996: 226-7.

³Sawai Pratap Singh 1912, part VII: 285-6.

⁴Willard 1990: 103.

catuspadī dance-song described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which was to be performed by women, in the *lāsya* (graceful, effeminate) manner.⁵ Subsequent similar genres would include the *nādāvātī* outlined in the eighth-century *Bṛhaddeśī*, the *pāṇikā*, as described in the *Dattilam* (c.200-800), and the *ḍombikā* dance-song discussed in the eleventh-century *Abhinavabhāratī*. From the latter era on, the spread of the *bhakti* movement and the rise of Krishna-worship in the Braj region stimulated the flowering of several folk and folk-related dance and music genres which synthesized Vaishnava devotionism with a worldly eroticism. Shukla and others persuasively argue that some of these genres, such as *caccarī/carcarī*, *chalik*, *rās/rāsak*, and *hallīśak*, as well as earlier counterparts, bore significant affinities to what would eventually crystallize under the name thumri. These affinities comprise not only socio-musical parallels—such as the *ḍombikā*'s implicit association with female professional entertainers (*ḍom*)—but also similarities in form and technique, including *ḍombikā*'s fast, concluding *laggī*-like section, *nādāvātī*'s loose and informal treatment of raga, and the preference in *caccarī* and other genres for simple metres in six, eight, or later fourteen beats. One may assume that over the centuries in different regional patronage centres, several other comparable genres also flourished which, however, did not find mention in surviving treatises.

THE EARLY GHAZAL ART-SONG

In its heyday of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, thumri was closely linked to its sister genre ghazal in terms of style, status, performer castes, and socio-musical contexts. Prior to this era, however, ghazal's musical evolution would have been quite distinct. As a product of Indo-Muslim urban culture, ghazal would have had nothing to do with Sanskrit drama or Krishnaite folk dances; hence it is not surprising that we find no references to it in Sanskrit treatises, including those written during the Mughal era by theoreticians with an active disinterest in contemporary Indo-Islamic culture. What is more confounding to the historian is the paucity of references to ghazal as a music genre in Indo-Persian sources, given the hoary pre-eminence of ghazal (in Persian or Urdu) as a literary genre, its prominence as a song text in traditional Persian music, and Amir Khusrau's popularization of it as a distinctively Indian musical idiom.⁶ As it is, only a handful of scattered and ambiguous references to ghazal as a sung genre *per se* have surfaced prior to the Lucknow era.⁷

Instead, what are common, especially in Mughal-era Indo-Persian sources, are references to *qaul*, a prominent Indo-Muslim genre of the court and *dargāh* (shrine) whose song texts

⁵The *catuspadī* song in the second act of Kalidasa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* is one such item, see Desai 1976: 46-7.

⁶For example, in one couplet Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) enjoins others to sing his ghazals in Indian style, see Nath and Faiyaz "Gwaliari" 1981: 115.

⁷The *Jahāngīrnāma*, for example, mentions a prominent ghazal singer; Mohammad Umar (1975: 374) cites historian Barani as stating that *qaul*, ghazal, *holi*, and *kalani* were popular music genres during the reign of Kaiqubad (1287-90); see also Brahaspati 1974: 20. Dargah Quli Khan's *Muraqqa'-i Dehli* (1739-41) mentions a courtesan who learned ghazal-singing from court musician Na'mat Khan ("Sadarang"); Dargah Quli Khan 1989: 121. A few eighteenth-century Indo-Persian texts, such as Dakani's *Mofarah ul-Qulūb*, also mention the singing of Persian ghazals. Aside from qawwali and art-song formats, ghazals are also sung at *mushā'ira* in *tarannum* style, and at Shi'a *majlis* functions.

undoubtedly included ghazals (predominantly in Persian). The question, for our purposes, is whether *qaul* as a musical genre bears any significant stylistic and historical relation to the light-classical ghazal-song which emerged in the nawabi era. Writers have generally related *qaul* not to this genre, but to qawwali, noting not only the obvious etymological link between the two words but also textual references suggesting that *qaul* flourished primarily in the Sufi *samā'* assembly, that is, as an animated group song rendered by devotees in shrines of saints like Nizamuddin Auliya. However, *qaul*, as described in texts like the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* and *Muraqqa'-i Dehlī* (1739-41), was also performed in courts and private *mehfil*, and it remains possible that the term also comprised soloistic renderings of *fārsī* ghazals in a style not unrelated to that of the nineteenth-century light-classical ghazal. Indeed, most of the commercial recordings of qawwali marketed through the 1940s featured not ensemble singers but solo vocalists (like Pyare Qawwal and Kallu Qawwal); the only feature distinguishing their performances from the ghazal art-song was their more rhythmic rendering.⁸ Just as the evolution of qawwali in the nineteenth-century was closely linked to that of khayal, so might it have been allied to that of the light-classical ghazal emerging around the same period.

The alternative, and perhaps more persuasive viewpoint would argue that qawwali and the light-classical ghazal are quite distinct in terms of historical evolution as well as contemporary style. In this view, *qaul*/qawwali was a vigorous, devotional genre of male Kalawants and Qawwals, while the Urdu ghazal-song, by contrast, emerged primarily from the *koṭhā* (courtesan salons) in the early nineteenth century, as patronized by literati, nobles, and other assorted gentry, especially in Lucknow and Delhi. Its development, while paralleling the literary ghazal's shift from Persian to Urdu, may thus have involved quite a distinct trajectory, deriving less from the music of the Qawwals than from that of the Kanchanis and other courtesans who visited the Mughal court occasionally.⁹

Whatever its relation to *qaul*, and however distinct its evolution was from that of thumri, the nineteenth-century ghazal-song came to share many features with thumri, and, by extension, with thumri's aforementioned precursors. Like those genres, the light-classical ghazal-song was a word-oriented (*śabd-pradhān*) amatory song, embodying an informal and liberal approach to raga interpretation, often rendered as accompaniment to interpretive dance, and associated especially with courtesan performers and male musicians linked to the same milieu.

THE LUCKNOW ERA

If both thumri and ghazal in some form predate the court of Wajid Ali Shah, there is no doubt that they achieved unprecedented prominence in the nawabi era, and further that their efflorescence in that milieu is much better documented than that of previous epochs. The precondition for these developments was the decline of Delhi in the eighteenth century and the subsequent rise of Lucknow as the pre-eminent centre for fine-arts patronage in north India. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 the Mughal Empire had all but collapsed, with the

⁸Given the frequent ambiguity of such distinctions, it is not surprising that one encounters many early recordings, and also many song texts in contemporary anthologies like the *Brahmānand Bhajan Māla*, labelled *qawwālī-ghazal* or "*ghazal-qawwālī*"; see Brahmanand 1966.

⁹Aside from Abu'l Fazl's description of the *akhārā* in the *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, see Bernier's contemporary discussion of Kanchanis in *Travels in the Mogul Empire*; Bernier 1935: 274.

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effective authority of subsequent emperors barely extending beyond the borders of Delhi, which was itself repeatedly sacked by marauding invaders. If Dargah Quli Khan's *Muraqqa'-i Dehli* portrays a surprisingly lively musical ambience in the immediate aftermath of Nadir Shah's 1739 pillage of Delhi, there is no doubt that the city's ability to sustain musical patronage suffered dramatically thereafter. By the late 1700s, *Pax Britannica* had imposed a certain sort of political stability over north India, but Lucknow was by this time replacing Delhi as the region's cultural lodestar. From 1775 to 1856 the Lucknow court received formal recognition and military protection from the British in exchange for paying a heavy annual tribute. Thus denied (or relieved of) fiscal and administrative responsibilities, the most celebrated Lucknow nawabs—especially Wajid Ali Shah—concentrated their energies on cultural patronage.¹⁰ As Lucknow's courts and noblemen avidly supported literature and the fine arts, many of Delhi's performers, poets, and artists flocked to Awadh's thriving capital.

Although Mughal arts and fashions retained a certain prestige, Lucknow's cultural ambience was in many respects lighter and less rigorous than Delhi's, if nevertheless displaying its own sort of rococo, manneristic refinement, whether in architecture, poetry, or music and dance. The causes for this cultural reorientation were numerous, complex, and in some cases rather intangible. Perhaps ultimately most important was the gradual decline of the Mughal feudal zamindar nobility and its increasing replacement, from around 1800, by a new class of proto-capitalist, *nouveau riche* entrepreneurs, speculators, and landlords (*tāluqdar*).¹¹ These new elites, although often avid patrons of the fine arts, generally lacked interest in and exposure to Mughal-era genres like dhrupad, which they came to perceive as dull and archaic.

Accordingly, contemporary accounts—especially Muhammad Karam Imam's *Ma'dan al-Mūsiqī* of 1856-57—indicate that thumri and ghazal were the most popular and vital urban music genres of the nawabi era.¹² Although performed most extensively by courtesans (tawaifs), both genres also profited from the increasing attention of male professional musicians like Sadiq Ali Khan and Vazir Mirza (Kadar Piya). Thumri and ghazal flourished as genres accompanying interpretive *kathak* dance, while simultaneously coming to thrive as independent musical items. Their popularity spread accordingly to other cities and appears to have extended even beyond the milieus of the court, the courtesan salon, and the homes of the gentry. In Delhi, by the 1850s-60s, the new ghazals of Urdu poet Zauq would be sung the next day by court musicians and street singers, and his rival Ghalib would suggest particular ragas for the musical rendering of his own verses.¹³ Meanwhile, Abdul Halim Sharar's colourful account of nawabi Lucknow speaks of "bazaar boys" expertly singing Bhairavi and Sohni (thumri-*āṅg* ragas) and Lucknow's "Bhairvin *rāgiṇī*" becoming "as famous throughout India as Lucknow's melons".¹⁴ The British annexation of Awadh in 1856 and the disruptions resulting from the "Mutiny" of 1857-58 truncated Lucknow's prominence as a cultural centre. Nevertheless, these events appear to have aided the spread of Lucknow-style thumri and ghazal, as performers dispersed

¹⁰Such policies were not atypical of local courts elsewhere in the colonial period; for example, the cultural rivalry between the Jogjakarta and Surakarta courts under Dutch rule in Indonesia.

¹¹See Manuel 1989, chapter 3.

¹²See Vidyarthi's translation of relevant portions of Imam Khan; Muhammad Karam Imam Khan 1959; also see Mirza's 1899 novel *Umrāo Jān Adā* (1961), which dramatizes the life of a contemporary courtesan.

¹³See Russell and Islam 1969: 80; Rahbar 1987: 5.

¹⁴Sharar 1975: 138-9.

to other cities, especially to Calcutta where the deposed Wajid Ali Shah retired with much of his retinue.

The Lucknow thumri, like its modern counterpart, typically consisted of a Braj Bhasha, Krishnaite/amatory text, set to a "light" raga in a manner stressing textual elaboration rather than virtuoso technique or rigorous modal development. In other respects, however, it bore greater resemblance to the evolving and closely related *choṭā* khayal. Like that genre, the Lucknow thumri—the *bol bant* or *bandish* thumri—used a two-part (*sthāi-antarā*) composition, typically set to medium or fast-tempo *tīntāl*, often in serious khayal-*aṅ* ragas like Malkauns or Malhar. However, the *bandish* thumri differed from *choṭā* khayal in its association with *kathak* dance and courtesan performers, its emphasis on rhythmic manipulation of text fragments (*bol bant* or "word-division"), and its preference for light, mixed ragas. These included presently familiar thumri-*aṅ* ragas like Khamaj, Bhairavi and Pilu, alongside a variety of modes which are now either obscure (e.g. Zilla', Jangla, Ghara, Dhani) or effectively extinct (e.g., Banjara, Lum, Barhans, Rasra, Bihari, Kasuri, and compounds like Pahari-Bhairavi and Jhinhoti-Pilu).¹⁵

SEMI-CLASSICAL SONG IN ITS PRIME: 1900 TO c.1970

The first few decades of the twentieth century were transitional ones for thumri and ghazal in terms of style as well as performance milieus. The stylistic evolution was most dramatic in the replacement of the *bandish* thumri by the *bol banāo* thumri, which emerged in Benares (Varanasi) and soon spread throughout Hindustani music circles. In accordance with Benares' more provincial character and the greater presence of folk (especially Bhojpuri) culture therein, the Benares thumri, as popularized by Bhaiya Saheb Ganpat Rao (d. 1920), Mauzuddin Khan (1878-1926), and others, increasingly forsook the classical *tīntāl* for the more folk-oriented *sitārkhāni*, *jat*, and *dīpcandī* talas, and abandoned khayal-*aṅ* ragas in favour of the traditional light ragas similar to regional folk modes, and to the aforementioned modes used in pre-Lucknow-era thumri and related genres. At the same time, the modern thumri acquired a more classical character in its increasing dissociation from *kathak* dance, in the dramatic deceleration paralleling that of *badā* khayal, and in the performance of affective textual-melodic elaboration (*bol banāo*). While the latter process is unique to *śabd-pradhān* semi-classical music, the systematic, thorough, and leisurely manner in which it came to be unfolded reflected the clear influence of *badā* khayal, and of khayal singers like Abdul Karim Khan (1872-1937) and Faiyaz Khan (1886-1950) who took an increasing interest in the genre. Many ghazal recordings from the early twentieth century (such as those of Zohra Bai and Mauzuddin Khan) reflect a similar sort of classicism in their incorporation of virtuoso fast *tān* and serious, khayal-*aṅ* ragas. By the 1930s, however, such virtuoso displays went out of fashion, as ghazal-singers concentrated solely on *bol banāo*. Classicisms notwithstanding, courtesans specializing in semi-classical music and dance continued to be foremost exponents of both thumri and ghazal; similarly, most of the prominent male *khayālīya* who sang the genres (like Abdul Karim Khan and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan) were themselves Mirasis or former sarangi players musically reared in the same social milieu, that is, the *koṭhā*. For its part, the *bandish* thumri can be

¹⁵Such raga names abound in contemporary treatises and anthologies like the *Saṅgīt Rāg Kalpadrum* (1848) and the *Brahmānand Bhajan Mālā* (1901).

regarded as either disappearing or, as rendered by mid-century singers like Lakshman Prasad Jaipurwale, effectively merging with *choṭā* khayal.

The evolution of modern *bol banāo* thumri and ghazal styles is documented, however incompletely, by the numerous commercial recordings marketed from 1903 on by the Gramophone Company of India and its lesser rivals. Such recordings, together with the recollections of elders and other sources, indicate that the *bol banāo* thumri and ghazal art-song enjoyed a zenith of sophistication and vitality in the period roughly 1920-60. This was the heyday of the great courtesan-background singers like Siddheswari Devi (1908-77) and Begum Akhtar (1914-74), and of male exponents like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan (1902-68) and Barkat Ali Khan (1910-63). During this period thumri and ghazal became increasingly independent from dance and acquired much of the sophistication of khayal while retaining their own distinctive intimacy of expression and style. Ghazals sung in languages other than Urdu also enjoyed new popularity.¹⁶

As suggested, there are respects in which modern thumri and ghazal can be seen merely as recent variants in a long series of precursors. In other respects, however, thumri and ghazal in their mid-twentieth-century heyday are distinctive products of a unique moment in Indian cultural history, representing a particular stage at the advent of modernity. The most salient feature of this moment was the transition from feudal or pre-modern forms of patronage to bourgeois ones. The survival of several quasi-feudal entities (zamindar domains and princely states) until 1947 ensured that this transition was gradual rather than abrupt, and certainly facilitated the successful adaptation of Hindustani music to the new situation. By mid-century, however, the new capitalist bourgeoisie, inspired by cultural nationalism and by musical proselytizers like V.D. Paluskar and V.N. Bhatkhande, had come to enthusiastically patronize Hindustani music, including modernized and modified forms of thumri and ghazal.

Modern scholars may regard as hyperbolic, Karl Marx's dictum that all substantive history consists essentially and exclusively of class struggle. Nevertheless, it is primarily and precisely such a struggle—particularly the emergence of a bourgeoisie—which distinguishes this aspect of Indian cultural history from earlier epochs. Over the course of prior millenia, genres like *nādāvātī* and *pāṇikā* rose and fell along with dynasties and fashions, but modern thumri and ghazal were conditioned by distinctively new socio-historical factors. This class transition was particularly overt in the decline of the courtesan milieu, which the new, Victorian-influenced middle class came to regard as archaic and disreputable. As the concert hall and radio studio replaced the traditional *mehfil*, tawaifs were obliged either to remake themselves as respectable performing artists (as in Akhtari Bai's "reincarnation" as Begum Akhtar) or—if unable to do so—to rely increasingly on prostitution, thereby further delegitimizing their profession.

Celebrated vocalist Gauhar Jan (c.1875-1930) represents an early sort of transitional figure in this respect. Despite her career as a thumri and ghazal specialist and her lifestyle of a flamboyant "public woman", in some respects she does not fit easily into the category of courtesan/tawaif, however inherently ambiguous these always were. An independent woman of Jewish-Armenian parentage, Gauhar Jan effectively exploited the new media of commercial records and silent films to boost her fame and wealth. As Farrell argues, "The musical and

¹⁶Aside from the Bengali ghazals of Kazi Nazrul Islam, one finds many Hindi ghazals in *bhajan* anthologies like the *Brahmānand Bhajan Mālā*.

dancing skills she had acquired were those of a courtesan, but she represented a distinct, and emerging stratum of professional urban musicians at the turn of the century".¹⁷ If many contemporary American blues singers could be cajoled to record for a few dollars and a bottle of rum, courtesans like Janki Bai, drawing on millennia of experience in dealing with customers, proved to be shrewd in dealing with the emerging record industry and with capitalist commerce in general. Such skills facilitated the adaptation of many tawaifs to the new milieu, and in a more general sense aided the largely successful transition of thumri and ghazal from the *koṭhā* to the concert hall.

The mass media also had other beneficial effects on semi-classical music. The advent of records and radio, together with enhanced transport and communications facilities, linked singers in provincial towns like Gaya to counterparts elsewhere and enabled them to be exposed to an unprecedentedly broad range of other artists, styles, and music genres. Thus, for example, records of Gauhar Jan and others constituted formative influences on the music of the youthful Siddheswari Devi in Benares.¹⁸ While such exposure may have contributed to a certain homogenization of style, it undoubtedly enhanced the increasing refinement and sophistication of thumri and ghazal, as performers enriched their melodic repertoires and emulated the higher standards of leading artists.

THE GREAT DIVIDE: CLASSICIZATION VERSUS COMMERCIALIZATION

Since the heyday of the mid-twentieth-century decades, the erstwhile sisterly genres of thumri and ghazal have followed markedly divergent paths, neither of which has been entirely salubrious. In general, their uneven and disparate trajectories can be seen to illustrate the problematic status of "intermediate" light-classical idioms in a modern cultural field increasingly polarized between high art and commercial pop.

This dichotomization is a central theme in the writings of Theodor Adorno on Western music. In Adorno's view, the maturation of bourgeois capitalism and the growth of the commercial entertainment industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries posed an insuperable barrier to the continued thriving of a dynamic and integrated music culture. Serious art music was obliged either to withdraw into purist esotericism and marginality, or else to accept commodification and descend into philistine commercialization; both paths were inherently alienated, constituting twin halves of a former unified whole which henceforth failed to add up. Of particular relevance here is Adorno's conception of a vital and socially integrated realm of light music which, prior to this crisis point, comfortably straddled the realms of elite and popular art. He writes: "The last instance of their reconciliation, utterly stylized and teetering as on a narrow mountain bypass, was *The Magic Flute*"; after whose era the two realms suffered an "irrevocable dissociation".¹⁹

Adorno's views have been widely contested, and it is only with considerable qualification that any theories regarding Western culture can be productively used as templates for non-Western cultures like that of India. Nevertheless, there are certain significant parallels between

¹⁷Farrell 1997: 122.

¹⁸Jagannathan 1973: 17.

¹⁹Adorno 1976: 22.

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the scenario sketched by Adorno and the South Asian experience. Particularly striking is the way that a vast realm of "intermediate" Indian cultural forms reached a point of crisis around the mid-century decades, after which they were either absorbed into classicized high art, were bowdlerized as commercial kitsch, or declined dramatically. As I shall suggest, thumri became successfully classicized, but at a stiff price, while ghazal was reincarnated largely as a commercial pop phenomenon.

The realm of intermediary expressive cultural forms in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Indian culture comprised a wide range and diversity of genres. In the broadest sense, these could be taken to include events like various sorts of public festivals (*melā*) in Benares, which were avidly patronized and attended by members of all social classes as features of an integrated civic society. However, as Freitag relates, by the 1930s the Banarsi upper classes largely withdrew their patronage from these events, which they came to regard as too plebeian, unruly, or otherwise incompatible with reformist bourgeois nationalism.²⁰ A similar decline befell the once-flourishing *nautankī* music-drama. *Nautankī*, along with dance-dramas like *Indarsabhā* and *Gopicand*, had incorporated elements from both Hindustani music (including thumri and ghazal) as well as folk songs and dances, serving as a conduit for the transmission of such forms between different social strata. These dance-dramas, however, declined dramatically by mid-century, primarily due to their inability to compete with the new medium of cinema.²¹

Within the realm of strictly musical idioms, a similar process of dichotomization can be seen to have transpired. Throughout north India, a variety of music genres had flourished which combined elements of the "Great Tradition" of classical music with those of local, folk "Little Traditions", or which represented idiosyncratic or regional variants of the former. This category would include such genres as the light-classicized versions of *kajrī* sung in Benares; the Hathras-style *rāsīya*, with its complex system of prosodic metres and melody-types; and the music of western Rajasthani Langa and Manganiar castes, which uses a wide repertoire of ragas and talas surviving from the era of patronage by local courts. All these genres have declined markedly since the mid-century, as traditional patrons—especially neo-feudal zamindars—were replaced by a bourgeoisie attuned instead to modern pop culture and/or pan-regional high culture.²²

In south India, a similarly intermediate stratum of music culture had flourished in Hindu temples, especially as cultivated by *devadāsī* courtesans. As Matthew Allen has noted, music performed in temple contexts included "pure" classical *kṛitī*, stylized renditions of folk songs, and many dance-oriented *padam* which defied classification as strictly "folk" or "classical". In the early twentieth century, the decline of the *devadāsī* and of fine-arts patronage by temples, together with the consolidation of a new, nationalist discourse sanctifying a pristine "classical" artistic sphere, vitiated this entire performance milieu and threw into a liminal and secondary status much of the distinctive music it had sustained.²³

Thumri and ghazal were quintessential representatives of the intermediate stratum of fine-arts culture which flourished in the century preceding Independence. There may, of course, be

²⁰Freitag 1989: 29-31.

²¹Hansen 1992.

²²See, for example, Jairazbhoy 1980; Manuel 1994; Banerjee 1986.

²³Allen 1998: 22-52.

some exaggeration in the nineteenth-century accounts of “bazaar boys” singing thumri ragas and of Zauq’s verses resounding through the streets of Delhi. Nevertheless, thumri and ghazal clearly thrived as idioms performed by specialists in semi-classical music, in performance formats featuring them as primary rather than subsidiary items. While they have not declined substantially in terms of popularity or visibility, both their divergent trajectories illustrate an evaporation of the intermediate cultural ground that they once occupied. One essential concomitant of this process was the aforementioned eclipse of the courtesan class of specialists in light-classical thumri and ghazal; along with that class, the entire arena of “semi-classical music” declined as an autonomous cultural entity. Another factor has been the standardization of modal repertoire in Hindustani music, resulting both from the concerted efforts of theorists like V.N. Bhatkhande and the more inexorable homogenizing effects of the mass media and transport networks. As a result of this, a rich variety of lesser, often regional thumri-*aṅg* ragas (e.g. Lum, Kasuri, Zilla’, and Jangla) have essentially disappeared from the repertoire.

Under such influences, thumri, rather than overtly declining has been absorbed into the relatively sanctimonious and standardized realm of classical Hindustani music. Instead of being performed in intimate *mehfil* devoted entirely to light-classical song, thumri is now generally rendered in large formal concerts, as a sort of sweet dessert after the main item, that is, one or more khayals. Accordingly, it is performed not by specialists in semi-classical music, but primarily by khayal singers, many of whom have had no formal training in thumri as such and have little feel for its distinctive features—especially the process of *bol banāo*. In the process of adapting to the concert stage, thumri has acquired an undeniable sophistication and polish, but it has also lost some of its most unique and arguably dynamic features, as outlined in my earlier book, and as most insightfully shown in Vidya Rao’s excellent essay “Thumri and Thumri Singers”.²⁴

An initial step in this Sanskritization process occurred as thumri became an autonomous musical idiom independent from dance. This development undoubtedly accompanied a general enrichment of thumri as a music form; but as Rao notes, it can also be seen as part of the process by which thumri was “cleansed” of its association with courtesans, eroticism, and sensuality in general. Largely forsaken along with interpretive dance were a repertoire of overtly erotic compositions, the singer’s rendering of interpretive gestures (*adā, bhāv*), and a gamut of vocal mannerisms (*nakhrā*), which had all been central to the courtesan style, even as rendered by male singers like Pyare Saheb and Faiyaz Khan. Traditional thumri’s ineffable, almost conversational intimacy of delivery was also inevitably lost in the transition from the private *mehfil* to the large, impersonal concert hall, with its formal atmosphere and darkened, invisible mass audience. Accordingly, notwithstanding the nostalgia pervasive in South Asian culture, there may be much substance to the general consensus of the cognoscenti and elders that today’s thumri singers, however skilled and numerous, do not compare with Siddheswari Devi, Barkat Ali Khan, and other stalwarts of the previous generation.²⁵

²⁴See Manuel 1989, chapter 5, and Rao 1996.

²⁵Girija Devi, a veteran of that generation, is perhaps the only contemporary artist able to render thumri in its traditional depth—but even she has concentrated in recent decades on khayal instead of semi-classical music.

“POP GOES THE GHAZAL”

If many aficionados regard modern thumri as a diluted facsimile of its former self, elder enthusiasts of the light-classical ghazal, as rendered by Begum Akhtar, Barkat Ali Khan and their contemporaries, are even more negative about the modern state of that art. As in the case of thumri, ghazal as an intermediate semi-classical idiom, performed in *mehfil* by trained specialists (especially tawaifs), has long since ceased to thrive. However, ghazal, unlike thumri, has definitively failed to incorporate itself into the milieu of Hindustani art music. For if many khayal singers do perform thumri (whether sensitively or not), few if any will publicly sing ghazal, which they would regard as too light, too limited in its scope for improvisation and—in recent decades—too tainted by its reincarnation as a pop style. Nevertheless, ghazal per se, far from declining in popularity, has instead enjoyed a prodigious vogue, but as a trendy commercial idiom rather than a hoary light-classical one.

In the decades of the mid-twentieth century, ghazal had already enjoyed a parallel career as a commercial popular music, in the form of the film ghazals composed by innovators like Anil Biswas and sung by Talat Mehmood, Mohammad Rafi, and others. The film ghazal, while retaining the basic form of its light-classical counterpart, avoided improvisation, replacing *laggī* interludes with orchestrated passages and extemporized *bol banāo* with rote renditions of melodies; in effect, the film ghazal became a pre-composed song, rather than a processual elaboration in *bol banāo* style. By the 1970s, however, the film ghazal was itself in decline, as film music became more disco influenced and Urdu comprehension attenuated in north India.

Around this time, however, a new style of crossover ghazal emerged, initially as popularized by two talented Pakistanis, Mehdi Hassan and Ghulam Ali. As in the light-classical style, both singers generally eschewed large ensembles and performed improvised or improvised-sounding passages on the non-rhyming first lines of each couplet. At the same time, however, in contrast to the dramatic intensity of the traditional style, they generally crooned softly into the microphone and sang in a relaxed, often languorous manner. In the 1980s a new set of Indian singers—especially Jagjit Singh, Anup Jalota, and Pankaj Uddhas—promoted a similar, but even more populist style of ghazal, which appealed to a broader section of the north Indian bourgeoisie. Although having much in common with the earlier style, the new crossover ghazal was distinguished by its diluted Urdu diction, simplified melodies, its silky, string-dominated instrumentation, the general absence of improvisation, and an overall relaxed and lullaby-like ambience. The new ghazal style, which arose in direct connection to the spread of the audio-cassette medium, has appealed especially to bourgeois audiences who find film music too rowdy and proletarian and yet lack familiarity with art music. In its use of Urdu and its occasional tame improvisations, the modern ghazal retains a distinctly aristocratic image or pretension, perpetuating at least the mannerisms, if not the substantive content, of its traditional light-classical precursor. Although often performed in concerts, the new style also lends itself well to use as “easy-listening” background music in restaurants, elevators, and offices. As such, aficionados of the older style regard it as bland commercial kitsch, incomparable in depth or intensity to the traditional ghazal of Begum Akhtar and her contemporaries.²⁶

²⁶For more extensive discussion of such attitudes, and of the modern pop ghazal in general, see Manuel 1993, chapter 5.

CONCLUSION: LIGHT-CLASSICAL MUSIC AND INDIAN MODERNITY

As I have suggested, thumri and ghazal, while sharing many features with their precursors dating back some two millenia, are in other ways the distinctive products of a particular phase of modern Indian history. In retrospect, their true heyday appears particularly brief, as the *bol banāo* style does not appear to have matured until the early twentieth century and, in the eyes of many, has declined in recent decades. Adorno's description of a polarization of elite and popular arts, and of a decline of an intermediate cultural realm, finds remarkable parallels in the South Asian scene, particularly in the evisceration of thumri, ghazal, and their specialized exponents and performance contexts. The parallel, I would argue, is not merely superficial or coincidental, but is related to processes of nationalism, mass mediation, cultural institutionalization, and other phenomena shared by many modern and modernizing societies worldwide.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the trajectories of thumri and ghazal have been conditioned by the specificities of South Asian history, including the distinctive form that modernity has taken in that context. It need scarcely be pointed out that in South Asia, modernity—whether socio-economic, technological, ideological, or aesthetic—coexists with various forms of pre-modernity. Regardless of the overall positive or negative effects of this situation, it can be seen to have contributed to the continuing vitality of Hindustani music. Indeed, the comfortable continuity of Indian classical music history finds no parallel in the West, where the realm of art music has suffered for a century from an awkward and in some respects crippling disjunction between public tastes and contemporary composition styles. In contrast with Adorno's portrayal of Western music, Indian classical music has been able to remain contemporary without having to choose between extremes of esotericism or commercialism. Moreover, the very changes in Hindustani music—including the decline of thumri and ghazal—can be taken to reflect its flexibility and adaptability, such that it flourishes not as a museum piece, but as a distinctly modern entity.

The modernization of Hindustani music, although evident in stylistic parameters, is perhaps most overt in the realm of institutions and social practices, including the entire infrastructure of public concerts, music schools, and mass-mediated forms of dissemination. While this chapter has focused on the effects of this modernization on semi-classical music, some of the same processes can be seen in the realm of the dominant style of khayal as well. For example, the standardization and coalescence of style and repertoire occurring since the early twentieth century have led to the extinction not only of thumri-*āṅg* ragas like Kasuri, but also to a shrinking of the classical raga repertoire. Similarly, the perceived pre-eminence of mid-century light-classical singers like Siddheswari Devi, Barkat Ali Khan, and Begum Akhtar finds a clear parallel in the general consensus that today's khayal singers, however adept, do not equal those of the preceding generations, such as Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Amir Khan, and Faiyaz Khan. In both cases the causes are to some extent intangible, but appear to suggest something about that particular moment in Indian cultural history in which musicians could enjoy the benefits of the new infrastructure while remaining steeped almost exclusively in a world of Indian traditional music. Further studies and speculations are needed to understand the factors conditioning twentieth-century Hindustani music and the ways that they reflect and embody a distinctively South Asian form of modernity.