

Etawah Gharana of Music: A Historical Analysis of Imdad Khani Gharana

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This paper is a historical study of the Etawah gharana (Imdad Khani gharana) with a view to exploring one of the most significant instrumental gharana in Hindustani classical music. The gharana is set in its historical context in the development of musical lineages that solidified in the late Mughal and colonial era, and how it was developed by Imdad Khan (1848-1920) and passed down from one generation to the next through individuals like Enayat Khan, Wahid Khan, Vilayat Khan and Imrat Khan. The paper methodologically combines secondary literature in ethnomusicology and music history with detailed accounts of the biographies of the gharana's key players and interprets the lineage not just as a collection of techniques, but as a social institution mediated by patronage, migration, recording technology, and cultural nationalism. The main claim is that the significance of the Imdad Khani tradition is to have adapted the khayal voice idiom (gayaki ang) to the sitar and the surbahar, shifting the instrumental aesthetic of North India from the model of the Senia, which was derived from dhrupad, toward a voice-imitative, lyrical style. The paper also suggests that the gharana's survival of the courtly, urban-bourgeois and globalised concert economies renders it a telling example of the adaptation and non-dissolution of a hereditary tradition. The study ends with a fairly balanced assessment which separates the facts from the legends handed down.

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1. Introduction

The term gharana is the organising principle of much of modern Hindustani classical music. At the very least it refers to a group of hereditary musicians, their students, and the unique stylistic repertoire they pass on from one generation to the next, and can be seen as a combination of a social fact (membership and pedigree) with a cultural fact (style) (Neuman, 1990). While the term conjures up old ideas, the concept of gharana as a brand of identity is mostly a product of the late eighteenth or nineteenth century when courtly patronage was broken up, compelling

musical families to turn their inherited knowledge into something marketable and defensible a "brand" of distinction (Bakhle, 2005; Neuman, 1990). In the context of the system, instrumental gharanas have a niche. The gharanas of the sitar and surbahar are as important as the vocal gharanas (e.g. Gwalior, Agra, Kirana) for understanding how art music of North India was modernised, though they are less well documented. Of these, the Etawah gharana also known as Imdad Khani gharana, named after the small town near Agra where its defining master, Imdad Khan, lived, played a key role in shaping the presentday sound of the sitar (Miner, 1997; Devidayal, 2018).

This paper is an inquiry into the Etawah gharana from a historian's point of view, not just a descriptive musical viewpoint. It asks where the lineage came from and how it became what it is, and how it was passed on and changed over time by successive generations of people under different social conditions. The research problem has been two-fold; first, to reconstruct a historically defensible account of the gharana's evolution in which the documented fact is separated from the legend which envelops many hereditary musicians and second, to attempt an interpretation of the significance of the gharana in the social and cultural history of Indian music. There is a focus on both the historical development as well as the cultural importance and musical contributions of the Imdad Khani tradition, especially in the context of the sitar and the surbahar.

2. Historical Background of Hindustani Classical Music and the Gharana System

Hindustani classical music developed over many centuries as a synthesis of indigenous raga theory, devotional and folk practice and the cosmopolitan court culture of the Indo-Persian world (Deva, 1981; Bor et al., 2010). By the Mughal period, art music had become a prestigious courtly accomplishment and the relationship between musician and patron defined the conditions of musical life. Recent historiography has complicated older assumptions about this period. For example, the long-repeated claim that Aurangzeb simply "banned" music is now understood to be far more nuanced than the anecdote suggests (Brown, 2007). What is clear is that Mughal and successor courts sustained dense networks of hereditary performers whose status, repertoire and even marriages were organised around the transmission of specialised knowledge (Qureshi, 2007).

In its later form, the gharana system can be seen as a reaction to the political fragmentation which occurred after the central Mughal authority ceased to exist. The patronage of these families came to be distributed among the local courts (Lucknow, Rampur, Gwalior, Jaipur, Indore etc.) and eventually to the urban elite under the British rule, while music families scrambled for resources, playing up the purity, antiquity and exclusivity of their lineage (Neuman, 1990; Miner, 1997). According to Neuman, family style became a claim of legitimacy through the "politics of pedigree". A gharana may be referred to by the name of the town in which the first musician of the lineage lived, such as Agra, Gwalior, Kirana, or by the name of a particular master whose innovations were so striking as to form a new gharana (Neuman, 1990).

These identities were as much socially and culturally determined as they were musically. Hereditary professional communities, many of Muslim background, some with earlier Hindu Rajput roots such as the Imdad Khani family, played a crucial role as artists but had ambiguous status as members of society (Qureshi, 2007; Devidayal, 2018). The reform efforts of Bhatkhande and Paluskar in the twentieth century aimed at the systematisation, notation and 'respectabilisation' of classical music through its institutionalisation, its incorporation into conservatories and the developing nationalist imaginary (Bakhle, 2005). In this way, the gharanas went from the world of the court *mehfil*

to the concert hall, the radio broadcast and the gramophone disc a move the Etawah gharana would make with considerable success (van der Meer, 1980).

3. Origins and Development of the Etawah Gharana

The roots of the Etawah gharana can be found deeper in the vocal traditions of Gwalior and the instrumental traditions of the nineteenth century of North India. As per the narration in the family and mentioned in secondary sources, they are the descendants of musicians from the Mughal cultural sphere, with the father of Imdad Khan, Sahabdad Khan, originally trained in the khayal genre with Haddu Khan and Hassu Khan of the Gwalior circle, but later switching to instrumental music (Devidayal, 2018). Later, the family moved to Etawah where the gharana is popularly known.

These tales of origins need to be handled with care by a historian. Many hereditary houses maintained genealogies that connected them, often very weakly, with famous ancestors like Tansen, both as a way of gaining prestige and to establish their claims in a competitive patronage system (Neuman, 1990; Miner, 1997). Secure history is only from the mid-nineteenth century. However, the instrumental identity of the gharana was formed within the context of the dominant Senia tradition, the dhrupad-oriented instrumental tradition. Which was passed on from Tansen through his descendants, particularly through the work of Masit Khan and his followers, in shaping the early codification of the technique of sitar and surbahar (Miner, 1997). The pivotal historical moment that led to the Etawah lineage was the departure from the older instrumental aesthetic based on dhrupad to the newer aesthetic associated with the khayal vocal form which emerged in the recent past (Miner, 1997; Slawek, 1987).

The area was significant in itself. Etawah and the Agra–Braj belt was located in a rich cultural corridor of musical associations, where musicians could move around among patrons due to their proximity to courts and urban centres. The family's eventual migration from Etawah towards Calcutta with Enayat Khan, towards central and western India (Indore, Hyderabad) with Wahid Khan reflects the general geographical shift of musical talent from princely courts to colonial era cities as sites of patronage (Devidayal, 2018; Hamilton, 1994). The early masters' major achievement was, therefore, not so much to create a gharana from scratch as to develop a more unified instrumental style that could convey the many expressive qualities of vocal music.

4. Life and Contribution of Imdad Khan

Imdad Khan (1848-1920) is no doubt considered as the nucleus, who has named the gharana and infused its true essence. First started to sing, then drawn to the sitar, he is said to have practised intensely for years, alone (*chilla*), and imbibed from the many musicians who were contemporary to him, including the been tradition of Bande Ali Khan (Devidayal, 2018; Miner, 1997). The importance of this eclectic apprenticeship lies in the fact that it shows how an individual musician, who may be synthesising techniques from a range of instrumental and vocal idioms, may be creating a recognisably new style and thus establishing a gharana in his own name (Neuman, 1990). The chief innovation of Imdad Khan was to introduce into the khayal genre the ornamental and melodic vocabulary of khayal singing, a style that was the accepted norm of the day and not employ the Senia style, which was by that time the standard style for the plucked string instruments (Miner, 1997; Slawek, 1987). He and his immediate circle are given credit for developing a voice like style of playing on the sitar and surbahar, the bass instrument on which the contemplative *alap* is played and also for instrumental refinements, such as in the construction of the instrument and the right-hand technique, which became the hallmark of the school (Hamilton, 1994; Devidayal, 2018).

Imdad Khan's career is also a case in point of the shift in patronage in his time. Even as the focus of his family's life moved to Calcutta, the cultural and commercial hub of British India, he was working at princely court, in central and southern India (Devidayal, 2018). More significantly, he is one of the first sitar players to be recorded commercially in the early years of the gramophone, a historical detail that puts the gharana on the verge of the recording age which would change the manner in which Indian music was disseminated and memorized (Devidayal, 2018; van der Meer, 1980). Though it remains in the realm of family tradition, there are some claims related to his life, including performances for colonial royalty, which must be taken with a pinch of salt. The substance of his legacy documents his stylistic innovations and his sons (Devidayal, 2018). He passed on his art to Enayat Khan and Wahid Khan, both of whom he is said to have called 'two hands' (Devidayal 2018), with the former focusing on the sitar and the latter on the surbahar.

5. Musical Characteristics of the Imdad Khani Gharana

The word *gayaki ang* the "vocal manner" of instrumental performance best embodies the musical identity of the Etawah gharana. While the older Senia instrumental style was based on the grammar of dhrupad, and the percussive, *been*-influenced articulation of notes, the Imdad Khani style attempted to imitate the inflections, glides and ornaments of the human voice, particularly those developed in khayal (Miner, 1997; Wade, 1984; Slawek, 1987). It is this aesthetic reorientation which is the gharana's signal contribution to the history of the instrument. The technical aspects of this vocalisation focus in the use of *meend*, which is a pulling of the string over the curved frets, allowing for gliding between notes. It was the gharana's musicians who were able to produce a greater range and subtlety of *meend*, which came to emulate the melodic fluidity of the voice with greater perfection over the generations (Devidayal, 2018; Slawek, 1987). Specifically, during unmetred *alap*, the surbahar was able to present the grammar of a raga in a slow meditative mode and the sitar took the lyrical exposition into the rhythmic sections (Hamilton, 1994; Clayton, 2000). The sequence of the different stages of *alap* to *jod*, the use of a regular pulse without fixed metre to *Jhala*, the climactic fast strumming of the drone strings was consistent with the general pattern of instrumental performance in Hindustani music, but each stage was marked by the gharana's emphasis on melodic clarity and the balance of two-handed control (Slawek 1987; Sorrell & Narayan 1980).

In the Etawah style of raga presentation, patience and a disciplined structure of development and tonal refinement are more important than virtuoso ornamentation, while speed and accuracy with *taan* patterns are also appreciated (Bor, 1999; Slawek, 1987). The school's willingness to the *thumri* genre and other lighter forms of music that are voice-based, also demonstrate its vocal leanings and its sensitivity to changing tastes of the audience (Manuel, 1989). In general, the style of Imdad Khani is songful, *gayaki* centric, lyric and is markedly different from the Maihar style of Allauddin Khan and popularised by Ravi Shankar, which had a strong *been*, dhrupad-based structure and a unique ensemble and *alap* style (Slawek, 1987; Miner, 1997). Care should be taken when making such comparisons, because there is overlap in repertoire and influence, it is really a contrast of emphasis, not of absolute split.

6. Major Musicians and the Legacy of the Etawah Gharana

The Etawah gharana is the extent of the continuity over four recorded generations. It was founded by Imdad Khan; his sons furthered it in divergent directions. In Calcutta, Enayat Khan (c. 1895–1938) took up residence and was one of the most important sitar and surbahar players of the early twentieth century, who is credited with innovations in the instrument and for adding a contemplative, vocal quality to the idiom of the family (Devidayal, 2018; Hamilton,

1994). His brother Wahid Khan focussed on surbahar and continued the tradition in the central and western parts of India, keeping the gharana's name alive as the custodian of the grave, contemplative *alap* (Devidayal, 2018). The best known of the lineage was Vilayat Khan (1928–2004), considered a pivotal figure in the history of the sitar. His family members, who survived, and he himself, through his tireless experimentation, influenced him musically (Devidayal, 2018). Vilayat Khan brought the *gayaki ang* to its full realisation, re-imagining the sitar as an instrument that could “sing”, and made structural changes to the sitar that helped set a new standard for the instrument, which sometimes is called the Vilayatkhani sitar (Devidayal, 2018; Miner, 1997). His work also reflected the modern concert economy lots of touring, recording and international engagements (Devidayal, 2018; van der Meer, 1980). His brother Imrat Khan carried the tradition of sitar and surbahar, which was a key part of the gharana since it was founded (Devidayal, 2018).

It has been continued by the successive generations including sons of Vilayat Khan (Shujaat Khan), Imrat Khan (sons of Imrat Khan) and sons of Wahid Khan (Shahid Parvez) who have introduced the style to the twenty-first century and adjusted it to modern times of performance (Devidayal, 2018; Raja, 2005). The gharana's expansion also involved a departure from previous gender norms, with the formal training of a female member of the family, as classical performance drew women in the twentieth-century (Bakhle, 2005). Over these generations, the gharana didn't so much split as it did continuously develop: each master received a clearly established idiom and added to its vocabulary of expression in a way that exemplifies the way a living tradition reproduces itself with fidelity and innovation (Neuman, 1990; Raja, 2005).

7. Cultural and Historical Significance

The cultural importance of the Etawah gharana is not limited to the technical history of a particular instrument only. The gharana's work in transposing the khayal idiom to the sitar and surbahar contributed to a reassessment of what was possible with instrumental music, helped to bridge the gap often perceived between vocal and instrumental art, and raised the standing of the sitar as a medium for serious raga elaboration (Miner, 1997; Wade, 1984). This contribution coincided with and reinforced the general twentieth-century prominence of instrumental soloists over vocalists, who had always been given precedence, and instrumentalists who had traditionally accompanied the vocalists (Neuman, 1990; van der Meer, 1980). The gharana also had a formative influence on the modern traditions of concerts. Among its leading musicians were those who would take the intimate style of the courtly *mehfil* and make it work in the public auditorium, the radio broadcast, the long-playing record, and establish what has become the standard architecture of the solo recital (van der Meer, 1980; Hamilton, 1994). In doing so, the lineage became a part of the broader process of the reimagining of Indian classical music as a national cultural heritage during the last few decades of colonialism and the early postcolonial period (Bakhle, 2005; Ranade, 1997).

From the point of view of Indian cultural history, overall, the Imdad Khani tradition is indicative of a productive interplay between continuity and change. It maintained the deep grammar of raga and the disciplined practice ethic of the hereditary musician, and it changed the surface and the sound of instrumental music in a way appropriate to the new audience and new technologies (Neuman, 1990; Raja, 2005). In this way the gharana is a microcosm of the modernisation of Hindustani music itself.

8. Challenges and the Changing Context

As with every gharana, the Etawah has suffered a lot in the modern world. As a result of the decline of the hereditary system with the disintegration of the patronage of the princes, the musicians were no longer able to rely on concerts, recordings, teaching, and being taken up by institutions like All India Radio (Neuman, 1990; van der Meer, 1980). The developments of conservatories and university music departments, while opening doors, may have threatened the exclusivity of the family-based transmission that defined gharanas, partly because notation and standardised pedagogy have replaced the intimate *guru-shishya* relationship (Bakhle, 2005; Neuman, 1990). The recording technology was a technology that was inherited and a double-edged sword. It on the one hand fixed and spread style, thus democratising and simplifying the uniqueness upon which gharana identity relied and on the other hand, preserved performances and extended a musician's reach far beyond the concert hall (van der Meer, 1980; Raja, 2005). These dynamics were further exacerbated by globalisation, when Etawah musicians were playing for international audiences and experimenting with other genres, and questions of authenticity, adaptation and the limits of the tradition remain to this day (Raja 2005).

The gharana continues to evolve with the contemporary performance practices. With the fading of the social significance of the gharana and with changing audiences and markets, scholars have wondered if the gharana is still a viable stylistic reality or has become an increasingly prestigious and nostalgic label (Neuman, 1990; Raja, 2005). In the case of the Imdad Khani tradition, it is possible that the solution lies in the fact that the tradition can continue to exist as both an active musical practice and a potent symbol of historical continuity in the altered cultural economy.

9. Conclusion

Etawah (Imdad Khani) gharana is a central gharana in the annals of Hindustani classical music. Its significance lies primarily in a single, sweeping change in aesthetics. The adaptation of the khayal vocal idiom to the sitar and surbahar, via the *gayaki ang*, which shifted the trajectory of North Indian instrumental music from its older foundations in dhrupad to a goal of imitating the voice and continues to influence the field today (Miner, 1997; Slawek, 1987; Devidayal, 2018). The gharana can be seen as a model of how a shared tradition can remain alive and have a consistent identity while at the same time constantly expanding its means of expression, from Imdad Khan's original synthesis to the further elaborations by Enayat and Wahid Khan to the definitive statement by Vilayat Khan. A well-balanced historical assessment should balance two elements. The gharana's true accomplishments (stylistic, technical and institutional) are well documented and considerable. Meanwhile, the collective historical stories that envelop it (of antiquity, royal honor, and unique invention) should be treated more as a set of claims of prestige and thus as a gharana system, than as historical fact (Neuman, 1990; Miner, 1997). So read, the Imdad Khani tradition becomes a process, not just a relic of the past, but also a historical agent that aided in the movement of Indian instrumental music from the court to the concert stage, and its ongoing vitality is a testament to the adaptive resilience of the gharana as a cultural form.

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