

# A Historical Account of Marathi Stage Music

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## *The Beginnings*

The inception of Marathi stage music coincides with the birth of Marathi drama. The origins of Marathi drama are usually traced to Vishnudas Bhave's *Seetaswayamvara* (1843), which was in the style of a Pauranic *akhyana*. Recent investigations trace the origins to 1818 and consider Goa as the birth-place of Marathi drama. Without entering into this controversy of dates, one can safely state that Marathi drama came into being accompanied by stage music and that stage songs have continued to capture the imagination of spectators for more than a century. The creative efforts of actor-singers and directors have contributed to various changes in the style of presentation of stage music and its development. A study of such transformations and of the response they evoked from audiences will help us to understand how stage music gained acceptance and also suggest the line of development likely to be evolved in the future.

Stage music is essentially music used in relation to a dramatic performance. It is not rigorously classical in style, neither is it in the nature of mere recitation. It stands midway between the two. Its function is to reinforce the emotional content of a play and highlight the action and incidents in it.

## *Stage Music till 1880.*

The first phase of stage music extends from the time of its inception (whether we consider it to be 1818 or 1843) to 1880, when Annasaheb Kirloskar's *Sangeeta Shakuntala* was performed. Stage music in this first phase lacked variety. The plays were in the style of *akhyana*-s and the *sutradhara* alone sang. He used various musical forms, arranging them to suit a particular context in the play. Which were the forms prevalent during those times? Listeners, with a background of classical music, favoured the *dhrupada* singers. The relatively unsophisticated among the spectators preferred the *kirtankara*-s. (These *kirtankara*-s were gifted with strong voices and had usually received some training from the musicians in the service of small principalities in Maharashtra.) Then there was the *lavani* form: the *baithaki* mode sung sitting by courtesans or the kind of *lavani* presented by the *daulatzada*-receiving girls or dance-boys in the *tamasha*.

On the whole, it was the *kirtankara*-s who had the largest following among old and young alike. The *kirtankara*-s were divided into two groups: the Varkari and the Naradi. The first group usually concentrated on an exposition (*nirupana*) of the subject and inserted a few *abhanga*-s and *pada*-s. (But these were hardly ever introduced with a musical bias.) The Naradi or Haridasi *kirtana* held its appeal for all strata of the people, because it did employ the medium of music. An *akhyana* was introduced in the latter half

of the *kirtana* to illustrate the first and expository part. The *akhyana* was replete with dramatic and musical elements.

The *kirtana* was, in fact, like a one-man stage musical. Perhaps the convention influenced Vishnudas Bhave to place the entire responsibility of music on the *sutradhara*. The *sutradhara's* style thus came to be modelled on the lines of the musical presentation of the *kirtankara*. It is interesting to note in Balkrishnabuwa Ichalkaranjekar's biography that he, too, was part of the *kirtankara* tradition, and that he had played the role of the *sutradhara* in the Pauranic *akhyana*-s of the Amarchand Wadikar troupe before he left for Gwalior to embark on a serious study of classical music.



*Vishnudas Bhave*

That the part of the *sutradhara* was played by those who had imbibed the *kirtankara* tradition is evident from the background of those who took part in the Pauranic plays of the time. The *kirtankara's* range extended from the classical *dhrupada* style to folk music. Since his audience embraced a wide strata, the strictly classical elements of the *dhrupada* and the recitative aspect of the folk forms (such as the *ovi*, *dindi* etc.) receded into the background. They were replaced by a more attractive style in a 'light' (*lalit*) vein. The musical charm of the *lavani* and the *thumri*, the pace of the vigorous *tappa* with its whirling *tana*-patterns were appropriated by the *kirtankara*-s. For



*Annasaheb Kirloskar*

example, a prominent *kirtankara*, Narayanbuwa Gogte, studied the *tappa* style from his father Devajibuwa (who in turn had imbibed it from Devajibuwa of Dhar and made it popular in Maharashtra even before the advent of the *khayal* here). Narayanbuwa's style had such a strong impact that until 1880 this *lavanibaj* singing style, based on the *tappa*, was adopted by the *kirtankara*-s and also by the *sutradhara*-s of the Pauranic plays.

#### *Sangeeta Shakuntala (1880) and After*

The next phase in stage music begins with Annasaheb Kirloskar's *Sangeeta Shakuntala* and the style remained in vogue for nearly twenty-five years.

The *sutradhara*'s singing style (which had its origins in the *kirtankara* tradition) made for a certain degree of monotony. Besides the *sutradhara*'s music hardly blended with the acting styles of the other actors. Perhaps directors would have liked these actors to resort to music and thus add some verve to a performance. But there was a dearth of actor-singers and the sole responsibility for music had to be entrusted to the *sutradhara* mainly to avoid the possibility of a performance being marred through indifferent singing by other actors. The situation remained unchanged from the days of Vishnudas Bhave till 1880, when Annasaheb Kirloskar arrived on the theatre scene.

In Annasaheb Kirloskar's biography there is a reference to the inspiration he derived from Wajid Ali Shah's production of *Inder Sabha* in which

accomplished musicians and dancers of the Lucknow court participated to make the performance a success. Annasaheb Kirloskar was also acquainted with the musical tradition of Karnataka where several actor-singers used to take part in *Sangeeta Parijataka* and other plays. In Maharashtra, efforts in this direction had to be abandoned in the previous decades mainly because good actor-singers were not available in sufficient numbers. But Annasaheb Kirloskar who could count on the support of two good actor-singers, Balkoba Natekar and Moroba Waghlikar, initiated a change in the conventional pattern. A little later he was fortunate enough to enlist in his troupe an exceptionally talented actor-singer, Bhaurao Kolhatkar. As a result, the Kirloskar Sangeeta Mandali's dominance in the sphere of stage music continued for twenty-five years.

Balkoba Natekar was a proficient singer. Moroba Waghlikar (owing to his *kirtankara* background) had a powerful voice; he had also spent some years with a *lavani* troupe, imbibing that style of music. Annasaheb's own connections with Karnataka prompted him to include some attractive melodies based on the Karnatic style in the music of *Sangeeta Shakuntala*. But these were transformed on the stage to blend with the general Haridasi *kirtana* style of singing and almost nothing was left of the Karnatic mode of presentation.



*Bhaurao Kolhatkar*

A characteristic feature of the music of this play was the prominence it gave to words. The *tana-s*, *khatka-s*, *murki-s* were not patterned on notes but intended to stress poetic essence and word arrangement. This was insisted upon at the time of rehearsals on the suggestion of connoisseurs like Kerunana Chatre. Balkoba Natekar, being primarily a musician, tended to emphasize the note-structure, which provoked criticism from the press. Later when Bhaurao Kolhatkar joined the group, the music for *Sangeeta Soubhadra* was conceived with his talent in mind. Bhaurao, too, came from a *kirtankara* background, and he also had a strong interest in the *lavani* form. He had the additional advantage of being acquainted with prominent musicians from Baroda. Besides, he was gifted with a powerful voice and a keen musical imagination. *Sangeeta Soubhadra* incorporated *pada-s* based on classical *raga-s*; it had Haridasi *sangeeta*, Karnatic-based melodies and tunes based on the *thumri*, *lavani*, and *tappa*. It was, in a sense, all-inclusive.

Other events of the time are also of some significance. Balkrishna-buwa Ichalkaranjkar returned to Maharashtra after a period of training in Hindustani classical music at Gwalior. In 1895, Ustad Alladiya Khan arrived in Maharashtra and settled here. In Bombay, the Bhendi Bazar *gharana* had already come to occupy an important place in the field of music. In the old days it was *kirtankara-s* who used to turn to veteran musicians for guidance. The place of the *kirtankara-s* was now taken by actor-singers. Kirloskar's music still retained the *lalit* touch though efforts were made by Narayanbuwa Dongre and Pandoba Yavteshwarkar to introduce serious *raga*-based music on the stage. This attempt gained some popularity at the start because it was new. But, as stage music, it did not capture the hearts of the spectators and its success was short-lived.

In course of time, the specific function of stage music was relegated to the background. Actor-singers seemed more keen on displaying their own virtuosity. Swift *tana-s* and a more dramatic presentation tended to impress the audience. Bhaurao himself changed the simpler structure of Kirloskar's music: he introduced complex *tana-s* and placed greater emphasis on the *swara* element in the simple *pada-s* of the Haridasi style. His presentation left such a strong impact that it came to be equated with the style of stage music.

A new factor appeared when Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar tried to introduce tunes on the lines of the music in Urdu plays. But these tunes did not strike root here. There was some novelty in this undertaking but the style of presentation remained essentially that of Bhaurao.

Now a new element was noticeable. Actors turned more and more to *swara*-based music, relinquishing the claims of the word: Bhaurao's earlier style of presentation was restrained and balanced but later he, too, was tempted to opt for *swara*-based music. The accompanists now sat in front, facing the stage and the actor-singers tried to seek audience approval through dazzling *tana-s*. The base was undoubtedly Haridasi music. But whether it was a folk form like the *dindi* or *saki*, or a *pada* in the Karnatic vein, or a melody on the lines of the songs of the Urdu stage or a song based on

a classical *raga*, the style of presentation increasingly relied on swift *tana-s* derived from the *tappa* mode and sung in a high pitch. Audiences, too, soon came under the spell of the *swara*-oriented style adopted by the actor-singers.



*Natyacharya Khadiikar*



*Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar*

Bhaurao Kolhatkar died in 1901 but the influence of the style survived for yet another decade. Krishnarao Gore, Nanasaheb Joglekar, Dattopanta Halyalkar were all wholly under the sway of the style adopted by Bhaurao in the later phase of his career.

One of the negative features of this period was that actor-singers, eager to display their virtuosity, began to have a say in the choice of tunes. As a result, that balancing factor which determined the use of appropriate music for a play and its particular needs was forgotten. Instead, tunes were devised to suit the requirements of talented actor-singers. As Govindrao Tembe puts it in his *Jeevana Vyasanga*, "a marsh of *tana-s* grew around rock-like words".

#### *The Early Decades of the Nineteenth Century*

Nevertheless, it was a decade that sowed the seeds of a transformation in Marathi stage-music. This was primarily due to the contribution of two great actor-singers, Bal Gandharva and Keshavrao Bhosle, and the advent of Bhaskarbuwa Bakhle on the musical scene. As a youth Bhaskarbuwa had worked in Kirloskar's Company but had left it in pursuit of training in serious classical music. At first he studied with Faizmohamed Khan, imbibing from him the Gwalior *gayaki*, with its emphasis on a vigorous pre-

sentation of the *astai* and *antara* to create the atmosphere of a *raga*. From Natthan Khan he learnt the secret of *badhata* of a *khayal* (in a medium tempo) through the use of *bol-anga*. The artistic deployment of *tana-s* was what Ustad Alladiya Khan taught him. Govindrao Tembe has in his *Jeevana Vyasanga* described these influences and their impact on the aesthetic quality of Bhaskarbuwa Bakhle's music.

Bhaskarbuwa Bakhle was quick to grasp the distinctive features of the Agra style: the *gharana's* emphasis was on the *madhya laya* and on the embellishment of words through *bol-s*. A line could thus be presented in a variety of ways. The *alap-s* were few, but in accord with the *laya*; the *tana-s* limited in number and scope. A *bandisha* could be sung in the style of a *thumri* or a *khayal* in *madhya laya*. Usually *bandisha thumri-s* accompanied dance and the element of rhythm was predominant in them. On the



Govindrao Tembe with Bhaskarbuwa Bakhle

whole, the Agra *gharana's* style managed to achieve a correct balance between *swara* and *shabda*.

An actor-singer, as talented as Bal Gandharva, turned to Bhaskarbuwa for guidance and the latter trained him to assimilate this style of music. The emotive quality of the style harmonised with Bal Gandharva's interpretation of female characters and was particularly suited to the delicate timbre of his voice. On the other hand, another notable actor, Keshavrao Bhosle, had been groomed earlier on by Jambhekarbuwa. Then he tried



*Bal Gandharva in ordinary life and on stage*

to seek the guidance of Ustad Alladiya Khan but when he failed in the attempt, he had to follow Ekalavya's 'method': he studied music with one of Alladiya Khan's disciples. In any case Keshavrao Bhosle was able to profit from the lessons in music he had from Ramkrishnabuwa Vaze for he imbibed his robust style and it was very effective in his portrayal of manly roles.

Bhaskarbuwa Bakhle's musical imagination had the strongest influence on Govindrao Tembe. Besides, Govindrao Tembe was also captivated by the *purab anga* as presented by the well-known *thumri* and *kajri* singers of the time, particularly Goharjan. While creating the music for Khadilkar's *Manapaman* (1911), Govindrao Tembe drew heavily on this style. Bal Gandharva's presentation did full justice to this conception and he added his own subtle nuances to heighten the tender emotion in each song.

1918 marked the entry of Master Dinanath (Mangeshkar) in the world of the theatre. He had been trained by Ramkrishnabuwa Vaze but through Pandit Sukhdev Prasad he had also imbibed the vigour of the Punjab-Patiala style. Master Dinanath's presentation was striking; he was endowed with a resonant voice and a fertile musical imagination. The element of surprise in his arrangement of note-patterns fascinated theatre-goers and soon he became a very popular theatre personality.

Stage music in the earlier part of this phase had succeeded in fusing *swara* and *shabda*; it had a *lalit* (semi-classical) touch and the *madhya laya* was particularly suited to its presentation. But as it gained in popularity, actor-singers tended to forget its essential nature. They came to regard stage music as Marathi *khayal*-s based on Hindi *cheeja*-s. Words began to count for less than notes and spectators came to the theatre to satisfy their thirst for music. Naturally stage music deviated more and more towards the 'classical'. At the same time, since it was not rigorously classical, it did not have to adhere in too meticulous a manner to *raga* structures. A time came when most of the *raga*-s had been employed in some form or the other in stage songs. Krishnarao Fulambrikar, to some extent, and later Govindrao Tembe tried to compose new music to suit the mood of a play and bring out the beauty of the words in a song. And the two plays *Nandakumar* and *Patwardhan* bear witness to this effort.

#### *After 1925*

Around 1925 the lyric made its appearance in Marathi literature. Earlier on, the poets Tambe and Tekade had composed poems meant to be sung. The poems of the Ravikiran Mandal group widened the scope of this effort. The more educated among theatre-goers welcomed the attempt to infuse literary sophistication in stage songs. A classical musician like Manji Khan set Govindagraj's *Murli* to music. Thus a new musical form, the *bhava-geet*, was born. *Swara*-s became an attractive medium designed to enhance the beauty of the *shabda* of a lyric. G. N. Joshi set Tambe's poems to music and the experiment won wide response. When Keshavrao Bhole had Jyostnabai Bhole sing a *bhavageet* in *Andhalyanchi Shala*, a new and fresh element entered the sphere of stage music. In the late thirties and forties, though



*Keshavrao Bhosle*

the influence of Bal Gandharva and Master Dinanath persisted, a parallel strain also gained acceptance: theatre-goers began to be captivated by Jyostnabai Bhole's renderings of Anant Kanekar's lyrics. In these *bhava-geet-s* the lines were sung in diverse note-patterns to express the latent emotion in the lyric. In the earlier phase of stage music Bhausahab Kolhatkar or Balkoba Natekar (drawing on the Haridasi style) used to set the usual *jati-vritti-s* to attractive tunes. The *bhavageet-s* employed the same principle in changed conditions.

Thus from 1880 to 1945 Marathi stage music passed through various phases: first the Haridasi mode, then *khayal* singing in *bol-anga*, followed by its *swara*-biased form with the accent on dazzling musical effects and finally the *bhavageet* style.

#### *From 1943 to 1957*

An important event took place in 1943. The Festival organised by Dr. Bhalerao to celebrate the Centenary of the Marathi Drama was so successful that all fears about the musical drama being extinct were dispelled. Actor-singers began to perform in musical plays. Spectators crowded to the theatre to watch Bal Gandharva (who was by then more than sixty) appear in his former roles. The music of these plays still bore the stamp of the earlier tradition and managed to cast the same spell. From 1944 to

1957 there were several attempts to revive the more successful of the musical plays in Bal Gandharva's repertoire: *Saubhadra*, *Sharada*, *Sanshayakallola*, *Manapaman*, *Swayamvara*, *Vidyaharan*, *Ekacha Pyala*.

These thirteen years, in fact, saw the parallel existence of two streams: traditional musical drama and relatively recent plays, of the kind popularised by Jyostnabai Bhole and based on the *bhavageet* tradition. The latter stream embraced the works of playwrights like P. K. Atre (*Jag Kai Mhanel*, *Panigrahana*), M. G. Rangnekar (*Vahini*, *Majhe Ghar*, *Maher*, *Rambha*, *Bhatala Dili Osri*, *Dhakti Ayi*), A. V. Warty (*Ranicha Bag*), C. Y. Marathe (*Honaji Bala*), G. N. Dandekar (*Radhamai*), P. L. Deshpande (*Amal-dar*) and others. It continued to foster the *bhavageet* tradition that had become so popular in the previous decade.

#### *1957 and After*

But from 1957 onwards music in plays ceased to conform rigidly to either the traditional or the *bhavageet*-based styles. The tendency at synthesis which had followed in the wake of the Drama Centenary Festival led after 1957 to the incorporation in musicals of various earlier forms. Among others, the musical ingredients in the *kirtana* (namely the *saki*, *dindi* and *ovi*), the *lavani*, *khayal*, *thumri*, *tappa*, *tarana*, *ghazal*, *kajri*, *abhanga*, *bhajan*, *abhinaya geet*, the duet, the dance, *shershayri* were all



*Ganpatrao Mohite and Dinanath Mangeshkar*

appropriated by stage music. *Panditrao Jagannatha* (1960), *Suvarnatula* (1960), *Matsyagandha* (1964), *Madanachi Manjari* (1965), *Jai Jai Gaurishankar* (1966), *Priti Sangam* (1968), *Meera Madhura* (1971), *Deva Deenaghari Dhavala* (1971) represent these efforts to integrate various musical forms in plays. This phase saw the attempt to build a play itself round the central concept of music. Plays were written on the lives of musicians. *Mandarmala* (1963), *Baiju* (1966), *Meghmalhara* (1967), *Katyar Kaljat Ghusli* (1967), *Dhanya te Gayanikala* (1968), *Rangat Rangla Shrirang* (1970), *Swarasamradni* (1972) illustrate this trend.

But the music itself of these plays (that were built round the germ idea of 'music') or of other plays for that matter was not basically different from that of earlier days. The style of presentation also remained the same. The themes of the plays had undergone a transformation but the mode of presenting music still harked back to the tradition of Bal Gandharva, Keshavrao Bhosle, and Master Dinanath.

Perhaps the one exception to the rule is *Lekure Udanda Jhali* where the musical elements were borrowed from the style of *My Fair Lady* or



*Krishnarao Fulambrikar*



*Jyostnabai Bhole*

possibly from the folk drama of music director Jitendra Abhisheki's home-state, Goa. Its verse forms often managed to achieve a rapport with spectators. True enough, the musical elements had notes but there was no 'musicality' to speak of. The lines *could* be sung but they did not add up to a musical composition. There were echoes of the *katav* principle present in Deval's play *Sharada*. (The principle could be described as a mode of enunciating words in a specific rhythm on the basis of notes.) But the style does deserve praise because it was a new musical experiment. Another important innovation worth mentioning was Bhaskar Chandavarkar's novel use of folk music in *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) and *Ajab Nyaya Vartulacha* (1973).

A new definition of stage music has been suggested in recent times by musicians Ashok Ranade and Bhaskar Chandavarkar. According to them, a poem set to music ought not to be regarded as the sole ingredient of stage music. They feel that if the *dhvani*, *nada*, *swara* in vocal and instrumental music and the total 'noise' created by them in unison help to highlight a dramatic moment and make it more effective, then these musical elements should be regarded as stage music. It is this approach which represents current thinking on stage music.

### Conclusion

On the whole, it appears that Bhaskarbuwa Bakhle's choice of the *khayal* with *bol-anga* and Govindrao Tembe's introduction of the *purab anga* were ideally suited for the needs of our stage music. After all, the very soul of *thumri* singing lies in the expression of emotion. Unfortunately, in course of time, artistes began to neglect the element of voice projection which made the style so effective. Instead, they opted for the 'classical' mode; they modified it, believing that strict adherence to *raga* norms was not required in stage performance. They even tended to forget the important fact that the Haridasi style was effective precisely because the *kirtan-kara* tradition laid such great store by voice projection.

This is not to suggest that the Haridasi style should be revived. But one needs to emphasize the fact that, in stage music, it is the *natya* which is predominant; the musical element provides an added aesthetic value. By its very nature the *thumri* has closer affinities with the stage, because of the relatively secondary position occupied (in the form) by *alap-s* and *tana-s* and the possibilities of expressing emotion through *bol bano*. Govindrao Tembe grasped this significant fact and had his conception been developed further, stage music in Maharashtra would have absorbed the qualities of restraint and balance and become an appropriate vehicle for illuminating the emotional core of a play through song. But this did not happen and the period following 1957 marked no radical break with the past and there was no major contribution to stage music as such.

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— Editor.]