

Folk Music of Maharashtra

(A Presentation)

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The University Department of Music, Bombay, organized a presentation of folk-music of various types on August 4, 1980. Of the ten items, two were song-dances by tribal troupes and, strictly speaking, their music belonged to that still useful musico-aesthetic category — primitive music.

Starting from the Konkan-based *Khele*, the following items were performed in quick succession: *Dahaka*, *Gond-geet*, *Karan Dhol*, *Bhil-geet*, *Dandhar*, *Tumdi geet*, *Ran-Halgi*, *Dindi* and *Dhol-Gaja*. For about ninety minutes, an audience, consisting mostly of students of art-music, was exposed to music and dance welded together by a variety of rhythmical progressions that were both complicated and repetitious. The items were 'edited' (to the chagrin of the performers), apparently with the intention of bringing out the musically interesting portions into relief.

Khele

Khele was a group-presentation infused with dramatic quality. Beginning with a prayer offered to Ganapati (who stepped forward with a mask), it was succeeded by the enactment of a Radha-Krishna episode. The choral participation provided musical interludes. Two *Mridanga* players kept up a repetitive, rhythmic pattern in which dialogues were inserted. Krishna (played by a small boy) occasionally came forward and delivered an oration referring to Kamsa (and others) in a rhetorical, stylized fashion popular on the Marathi stage. The Gopis were played by boys.



The form obviously betrays the influence of the professional Marathi stage-tradition. The language of the dialogue, the choral expression and the speech — all suggested various degrees of urban or sophisticated influences. Flanked and led by the *Mridanga* players, the chorus provided *Zanz*-accompaniment and also a sort of verbal continuity. The characters which needed prominence used to step forward and do their dramatic bits. Such presentation-procedures exhibit flexibility. It is a drama-oriented form and its musical attraction is not of a high order.

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Dahaka

In all, there were four participants. Two of them sat opposite each other and held the conical, scraped drum in the hollow formed by the fore-foot and the ankle of the left foot. The remaining two participants accompanied on *Zanz*, and a *Khanjari*-like instrument. The main players narrated a story (*Akhyana*) which consisted of both singing and rhythmic prose. There was no clear-cut rhythmic cycle perceived in the narration except in the initial *Mukhda*. The vocalization was full of *Gamaka*-s but the main channel of expression was narration. It was mainly by knee-movement that pressure was applied to the strings for stretching the membranes, and the drum-face was both scraped and struck by small, slightly curved sticks. The sound was harsh and abrupt.

As is often the case, the name of the form and the name of the major instrument are identical. On enquiries I learnt that the participants are carrying forward a family tradition and that they are hair-dressers by profession. The drum-skin is extremely thin and hence their practice of swathing the instrument in a very long cotton-strip (about one and half inches broad) seems to be the product of a performer's wisdom. The general practice in case of instruments is to keep them in cloth-bags. Here the exception is seen to be legitimate. I also learnt that the

skin used is that of the cow. The lower placement of the participants in the traditional social scale and the age-old reverence for the cow amongst the Hindus seem to be related here. The predominance of the solo-element, the exclusive association with male-singers, the question-answer construction, the extempore verbalization, and the preoccupation with metaphysical themes are other characteristics worth noting. The song-type is also said to be sometimes associated with potters— again a class placed on the lower rung in the traditional social scale.

Tribal Music and Dance

The items presented by the tribal groups were perhaps witnessed for the first time by the city-dwellers. The Gond group danced a marriage-song and later the male participants did a *Ghorpad* (monitor-lizard) dance. The drum-beats and the rhythms provided by the male and female dancers were all different. The body-movements were synchronized extremely well. Singing was high-pitched and it had a tonal range of three to four notes. A repetitive tune and constricted and thin voices were discernible. The *Ghorpad* dance was presented by four male participants, who executed crawling movements on the ground to the accompaniment of drums. Throughout the dance, the participants supported themselves only on toes and palms.

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The Bhil song described the brothers deliberating about bringing home their married sister for the Diwali festival. This song with its private content was sung in chorus with a highly repetitive, short-ranged tune and in a voice that was not relaxed.

The marriage song-dance of the Gonds had a poly-rhythmic quality—with the basic reference provided by the drummers. The steps of the male participant

were vigorous and quicker than those of the female. Hers barely touched the ground and were slower in rhythm.

The monitor-lizard dance is obviously very functional. In this dance, the movement of the lizard is accentuated and patterned. The ability of the lizard to climb steep rocks and hold fast to the footing thus gained is legendary and this must have been the reason for the origin and nature of the dance.

The Bhil song had a private content and its choral presentation was thus a surprise or, in a way, an indication of the closely-knit lives of the Bhils — perhaps nothing is too private or domestic in their social structure.

Karan-Dhol

As an item, *Karan-Dhol* proved very attractive. There were three *Dhol*-s; one long, base-horn, one *Shehnai* and one *Zanz*-pair. The total thrust was towards variation of a rhythmic frame-work of six, eight or twelve beats in successive short presentations. The *Shehnai* provided a constant melodic *dhun* for reference (as does a *Sarangi lehra* in *Tabla* solo in Hindustani art-music); the base-horn provided the drone; two of the three *Dhol*-s supplied the rhythmic reference frame-work and the improvisation was left to one *Dhol*-player and the *Zanz*-player (incidentally a boy in his teens). The latter two often executed *Sawal-Jawab* patterns of admirable complexity and virtuosity.

The *Karan-Dhol* players showed obvious marks of systematic training comparable to the *Talim* of the art-musicians. Later, in a brief interview, the chief *Dhol*-player explained that they have distinctive mnemonics for the study and practice of the *Dhol*. The *Bol*-s which he then recited were couched in syllabic clusters like *Gaa Giri Giri Gaa* etc. He also showed how the rhythmic pattern is maintained by palm-finger movements. Significantly, he did not use the word *Tala*; instead he talked of *Matra* (beats). Further, the palm-finger movements (that he showed us) included the closure of the palm and such other movements that are not current in Hindustani music but are seen to some extent in Karnatic music. These are also described in great detail in the *Ratnakara*-based scholastic tradition. The group were from an area where the influence of Kannada culture is discernible. The *Karan-Dhol* playing indicates two noteworthy points. Firstly, though their music is included in the folk-music category, the systematised training and the solo and virtuosity aspect (which goes against the grain of collectivity that is assumed to permeate the folk variety of music) place these players and their music in a special class. Their music is on the margin of folk music and touches very closely the periphery of art music. Secondly, their music confirms that the medieval musicological tradition has percolated to the performing tradition of the folk forms. Thus if we want to make better sense of the medieval tradition, a closer study of the performing folk tradition is more in order than an intensive scholastic-textual study. Such a study is likely to give the lie to the theory that there was a complete cultural break after the twelfth century. For all practical purposes, performing traditions do not die. They percolate to or permeate the societal layers in which they did not originate. Thus, when contemporary artistes talk of returning to the folk traditions to seek inspiration or renew forces, they are, in fact, reinforcing urges towards cultural atavism.

Dandhar and Dindi

Dandhar and *Dindi* were presented by the same group but the former was comparatively more secular in character — the latter being a religious procession of the followers of the Varkari devotional sect based in Vidarbha (Maharashtra). *Dandhar* was a dance-song item in which the dancers were dressed as Gopis. Standing closely, in a linear fashion, they held painted *Tipri*-s in one hand. One of the dancers was dressed as Krishna. Accompaniment was provided by drums. The group presented a *Gan*, in which Lord Ganesha was praised, and also sang/danced a *Gaulan* briefly. In *Dandhar*, the dancers stamped their feet on the ground vigorously, and thrust their hands forward precisely and forcefully. The rhythmic pattern was simple, energetic and repetitive.

The *Dindi* was certainly a religious procession but rhythmically it was off-beat in a very surprising manner. While chanting 'Devakinandan Gopala', the stresses were in the middle of the deity-names and not in the beginning. In *Dandhar*, two points were significant: firstly, the dancer's movements (especially the thrusting of hands) were stylized to the extent that one was reminded of a Kathak dancer's movements; secondly, the group character of the expression as well as its forcefulness, was not perceived as contrary to the theme of *Shringara*. The group was from Nagpur.

Tumdi Geet

Tumdi Geet was accompanied by *Tumdi*, a small rattle-drum made from a white pumpkin of suitable size and shape. It was well-decorated. The language of the song had a fair mixture of Hindi words. Essentially, it was a solo-performance of the *Powada*-type and the function originally assigned to the singer was to carry information from one place to the other in a rather clandestine manner through the composition.



Predictably, the singer composes extempore and the tune is simple. The rhythm in 4 or 8 beats is repetitive and less demanding musically — on the listeners as well as on the singers. The functional role rules supreme and musically the form becomes less exciting.

Ran-Halgi

Ran-Halgi is all aggression as the name suggests. Beginning with a long phrase blown on the *Tutari*, the player of the *Halgi* (a rim-drum played with the fingers and a stick) — executed forceful eight-beat patterns and strikingly-dressed *Lezim*-players danced to it.

Lezim is an idiophonic instrument which had its origin probably in Maharashtra. A chain, consisting of metal-discs, is attached to both ends of a wooden stick and, using both hands, the players strike the chain on the stick in step with the required rhythm and dance accordingly. The *Halgi* is warmed on fire before use and emits a sharp sound with clear implication of an outdoor performance.

Dhol-Gaja

Dhol-Gaja specializes in using a huge drum for accompanying the shepherd dancers who are colourfully dressed and have equally colourful handkerchiefs waved expressively. A number of quick and high leaps are included in the dance. The song is in praise of the God of the shepherds.

Dhol-Gaja might well vie with *Bhangda* because of its rhythmic appeal and challenging physical verve. The song has end-phrases which drop suddenly but softly into tonelessness. The singers execute these with an effortless ease that is amazing. Choreographically, too, the dance is extremely interesting and its capacity to provide visual satisfaction has to be seen to be believed.

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Could there be a musical moral to a performance of folk-music 'framed' for the art-music-conditioned audience? The moral is three-fold.

Firstly, if the motivation is to try to preserve folk-music by giving encouragement to the musicians concerned, then the whole activity is going to prove futile. Folk culture is not a static culture and there is no reason why we should try to make it so.

Secondly, if the art-musicians are seeking for new inspiration to vitalize their own creative powers, they have to be selective. All folk-music is not musically motivated in an equal measure. It is on the marginal forms that one should concentrate. The rest of the folk-music is bound to prove despairingly unmusical. An attractive or fashionable ideological position should not blind us to cultural realities.

And finally, it must be acknowledged that in the absence of a well-conceived and comprehensive strategy to deal with the problems posed by intra-culture confrontations, our concern for the development of culture is likely to remain a mere romantic posture.

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1. *Khele*
 2. *Dahaka*
 3. *Ghorpad*
 4. *Ran-Halgi*
 5. *Dhol-Gaja*
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