



Powada

Ashok Ranade

The *powada* of Maharashtra is not really a full-fledged form like certain other forms of folk music. It has its own musical characteristics; but its *raison d'être* is not exclusively musical. It resembles the ballad, and shares with it certain features like a strong narrative element, a certain length, a particular tradition of performance and vocal expression. Like other forms of folk music (for instance the *lavani*, *ovi*, *abhanga* of Maharashtra) the *powada* has been studied and analysed quite extensively as a literary form. Its metrical peculiarities, its imagery, its social and political content and its other features have also been carefully noted, classified and interpreted.

But there is a yawning gap in these studies. The *powada* has not yet been examined as a form of musical expression. The *powada* is always sung and performed and the fact of its being written in so far as its essential nature is concerned happens to be a matter of secondary importance. That is why this lacuna in the study of this form does give cause for surprise. In fact, it was originally conceived and later preserved as a form to be sung and performed under certain conditions. Therefore, even its literary features were determined to a great extent by its performance-orientation. If we go by the metre employed in the *powada*, the temporal division or distribution does not give us an adequate idea of its actual nature. It is the intonation and the consequent contours in the pitch-line which must be taken into account. The *powada*, as a form of musical expression, calls for minute study if it is to be understood in its totality.

There is another reason which prompts us to urge an immediate musical examination of the *powada*. The *powada* belongs to the category of those fast-vanishing folk musical forms which have been quite well-established till now. Perhaps there are many factors contributing to its gradual disappearance. Every musical form fulfils certain musical needs and when these needs are satisfied to the point of satiety, the form becomes superfluous, falls into disuse and ultimately becomes extinct. This is especially so about musical forms that are functional in nature. Functional musical forms are always related to some extra-musical operation. When this operation or function starts moving out of the need-based structure of a society, the musical form connected with it has to opt for one of the following alternatives. It has either to enter into the art music of a culture or it has to discover a function similar to the one it originally had and then tag itself on to it. If it fails in these attempts, the form inevitably slides down the memory-scale of people. The *powada* is about to succumb to the third possibility and perhaps this is inevitable in the culture dynamic of Maharashtra. So why should one be nostalgic or romanticise about the *powada*? Why attempt an artificial stimulation of scholastic and musicological interest if the form itself is doomed to extinction by the inexorable laws of intra-cultural interaction of social forces? The answer to these problems is twofold. Firstly, the pro-*powada* argument is not a plea for the preservation or propagation of the *powada* as a musical form. What is suggested is an analysis of its musical aspect—a kind of study which has not been undertaken so far. Secondly, no musicology can hope to build up a sound conceptual system unless a musical analysis of folk forms is carried out. The interaction of art music and folk music ultimately determines their respective identities. Musical studies of art music tend to be thorough while folk music forms are comparatively speaking neglected. What our musicology desperately needs is a systematic attempt at a comprehensive rebuilding of its structure. One way to do this would be to have a closer look at our folk music forms.

There could be a third aspect of the problem, demanding a separate statement. Whenever a form establishes itself musically, it does so because it successfully answers certain needs which are important in the field of performance. How is the tempo and throw of words related to each other? Does variety in a tune bring about a dilution of effect and does a repetition of a tune facilitate a concentrated impact? Does limited range in the tune

or melody channelize the attention of the audience more successfully than a wider range does? These and other allied questions are answered in a particular manner and the resultant formula can be described as musical form. Under the circumstances, to allow musical form to disappear without it being studied and analysed, amounts to sanctioning an unnecessary interruption of tradition. At least in the field of art, traditions are a bulwark against fruitless duplication and against the disadvantages of working in isolation. On this account, too, the *powada* calls for a deeper study.

The *powada* belongs to the category of outdoor music. It is sung in the open; so the voice must necessarily be projected vigorously. Open-throated or constricted singing but always with a high basic pitch is the rule. The tune ranges mostly in the middle octave and occasionally touches the *Taar Shadja*. On the whole, the tune includes many places (repeatedly used) where the consonants or the words can be conveniently stressed. Throughout the performance voice-production is permeated with the fricative, voiceless H. In view of the greater amount of breath-energy involved in its production and the consequent increase in the 'carrying power' of the word permeated with it, it seems logical to have H-influenced phonation. The *powada* being, as has been pointed out earlier, a form of outdoor music, needs a longer reach. The unfailing and prominent use of H helps it in the desired communicative endeavour.

Certain other features in the tune of a *powada* are also the result of its outdoor nature. The tune has to be straight and simple. It does not permit decorative effects or tonal nuances. Firstly, the typical voice-production used in the *powada* cannot execute subtleties and ornate designs with ease. In addition, the *powada* seeks to 'hammer' a point. Content-wise, the praise, the glory that is sung of an individual or event demands the repetition of a name or a theme. The contours caused by an intricate tune tend to distract the attention of the audience from the main theme. Hence the simplicity of the tune.

In addition to this simplicity, the tune has to be more unified. This practically amounts to lack of variety. As the *powada* has to reach many, and that, too, quickly, it tends to prefer a particular or very few moulds of melodic structures and it goes on repeating them. The 'mould' is easily recognised and 'known' by audiences. The mould does not demand any independent attention or special focusing on itself every time it appears. Where a melody or a tune is 'used', it is better to have a stock tune appearing again and again. But what is noteworthy is that the tune does not become 'dead' despite the repetition. It goes on consistently and continuously and suggests a definite tonal pattern in which all the auditory contents automatically fall in place. The aural stimuli get neatly and quickly organized. What is significant is that when we read the text of a *powada*, we find the language and words grammatically and phonetically 'distorted', they seem to deviate from the norms of general linguistic usage. The tune is a guarantee that we do not feel disturbed by such elements when a *powada* is actually being sung. Then the linguistic deviation is successfully received as a phonetic rearrangement.

It is in this context that the use of short, four-beat *talas* like Dhumali, Kerwa for *powada*-singing becomes a really significant factor. Firstly, all configurations of even beats are easier to comprehend. Secondly, the tempo used for *powada*-singing is so fast that the intervening duration between two *Sams* is not long. This means that even if one whole *avartana* (complete *tala*-cycle) is left empty without singing, or even if one note is prolonged for the duration of a whole *avartana*, the performance does not suffer a break in music. The music-less spaces accentuate the musically-filled spaces. In fact, the literary and musical content of a filled musical space percolates better due to the unfilled musical spaces. Continuity and significant pauses are so perfectly and effectively balanced in *powada*-singing that even the practitioners of art music can follow the lead with advantage.

On account of this ever-going-forward tempo and refrain, the *powada*, as a musical form, remains singularly free from emotional associations. It is not bound down by those established conventions in art music which seek to build a relation of meaning and music. The *raga-rasa* relationship is not adhered to in the *powada*. The theme could be Sawai Madhavrao Peshwa's Holi festival, or the Battle of Kharda or the heroic death of Tanaji, — the *powada* assumes a neutral position in so far as the tune is concerned. Everywhere it is fast, equally monotonous, repetitive and bent on achieving a specific purpose with single-minded attention and economy of effort. This is the reason why its 'tunes' are not set in any of the *ragas*. A *powada* composer like Shahir Haibati shows close acquaintance with the musicological classification of Hindustani *ragas* and he mentions thirty-six *raginis*. Honaji composes *lavanis* to be sung in regular concerts and is indirectly responsible for the singing-girls substituting these for *khayals* and *tappas*, those established forms of the art music. But the *powada* never strays from its chosen track. A *raga* involves much processing and intricate pattern-weaving which, in turn, means a different kind of voice-production and the consequent denial of the open-air, out-door character of the form. With *raga*, the audience-level has to reach a certain degree of sophistication. This militates against the large number and the qualitative homogeneity of *powada* audiences. The *powada*, with its mass appeal, cannot afford this.

All these peculiarities are reflected in the accompaniment provided to *powada* singers. The *tuntune*, *daph*, *zanz* (in reality the *manjiri*) are, in fact, rhythm-instruments. The *daph* and the *zanz* are a-tonal. They do not have a definite pitch; they do not need any special kind of careful and sensitive tuning, and yet they are capable of reaching fair distances. They do so without dissipating the original sound-energy in any significant degree. The *tuntune*, which, on the face of it, appears to be a string-instrument is peculiarly uncomplicated. It provides a drone to and around the *tuntune*-player himself and what is even more important is that it creates rhythmic pulses that have a sharp, metallic quality. So, for all practical purposes, it is a rhythm instrument.

The vocal accompaniment is equally purposeful. These accompanists pick up the burden of the song with the main singer. The syllables *Ji Ji* are

used at convenient and required intervals to show a completion of a song-division. These syllables are sung at *Taar Shadja* by the accompanists. This use of the *Ji Ji* line gives a respite to the main singer, allows the earlier stanza to 'sink in' and yet does not relax the tension already reached. Even the listeners are repeatedly shocked into consciousness by the comparatively sudden use of high-pitched rendering. In addition to this, the repetition and rendering is of syllables which are in themselves meaningless. Thus they do not affect what has already been received as meaningful. They only deepen its significance. The lack of tonal colour and of variety of tune, increases in considerable measure the value of these *Ji Ji*'s.

It is also noteworthy that *powada*-singers perform in a standing position. A schematic presentation of voice-qualities in relation to the demands made on the voice by prose is possible. It will be: Conversation—natural voice; Discourse—official or processed voice; Speech—effective voice. We can have a parallel presentation in the case of a singing voice. It can be: Practice—private voice; Concert—efficient voice; Outdoors—effective voice. The standing-posture is obviously ideal for throwing the voice. Voice-culturists vouch for the scientific value of the standing-posture. Not too long ago some forms of art music (like the *thumri*) were also rendered in this position.

Any form with outdoor musical content can follow the *powada* with benefit in matters of rendering, voice-production and rhythmic organization. For a general audience listening to a story well-told, and briefly commented upon, nothing can be more entertaining than a *powada*. Musically it has answered certain problems with definiteness and efficiency. That through tradition it has been associated with a historical tale should not blind us to its specific musical merits. It is one of those forms which students of art music ought to study with greater attention, and more seriously.
