



Bishnupur Gharana Musical Journey - A Retrospective Study Of The Intangible Heritage

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Abstract:

The Eastern Regional Center of Anthropological Survey of India has conducted a study on Bishnupur to document its cultural heritage. Bishnupur, a historical town, located in the district of Bankura, western West Bengal, lies in the south of the Dhaleshwari river. It has been the capital of the Hindu Mallabhum King, which has its long history ranging back since 8th century AD. The Mallabhum dynasty was once the most important Hindu dynasty in Bengal. Historians suggest that 'Mallabhum' had once been the cultural center of Eastern India. Among its cultural achievement, music had the highest applause. It has been observed that with the evolving trend, in the cases of presentation style of vocal music followed by string instrument practice especially sitar playing and presentation of raga-raginis of the musicians of present generation are quite different from that of the ancestral musicians of this gharana, which are largely unknown to mankind due to lack of knowledge and publicity. Therefore, in order to find some answer to the inquisitiveness of the music lovers and researchers, there is a need to revitalize and reorganize the history of the musical practice of Bishnupur gharana considering its immense importance as a cultural heritage. Musical forms act as repositories of cultural memory, holding stories, languages, and rituals in their melodies and rhythms. Folk songs pass down historical narratives, while religious chants preserve spiritual traditions. Music thus ensures the continuity of culture across generations.

Key Word: Bishnupur, Mallabhum, Raga-Ragini, Music, Gharana, Intangible Heritage, Culture

The Malla rulers showed their loyalty to the Mughal emperors and paid revenue as feudal lords to maintain the sovereignty of their kingdom. Historical records show that the Malla kings appointed court singers in their royal house which eventually led to a tradition of music evolving down the ages from the thirteenth century onwards. A few compositions extant, belonging to the period of Veer Hamveer's reign bear evidence of the beginning of a new style of song and music under the patronage of the king, and deeply influenced by the Vaishnavite tradition.

To discuss about the musical practice of Bishnupur, firstly, it is necessary to have the geographical knowledge of this region. The former capital of Mallabhum was Pradyumnapur and later Bishnupur became the second capital. Earlier, Bishnupur, the second capital of Mallabhum was not so popular with its existence. The then Bishnupur was surrounded by deep forest and accordingly entitled 'Bon-Bishnupur'. Many people opines that Bishnupur had been brought into being by Jagatmalla, the 19th emperor of Bishnupur. The Time of establishment was 997 Khristabda (A.D.), 303 Mallabada, Bengali year 404.¹

The Bishnupur Gharana is a form of singing that follows the Dhrupad tradition of Hindustani Music, one of the two Indian classical music forms. It was originated in Bishnupur, West Bengal. The name of the town means "city of Vishnu" in Bengali. In the ancient past, this area, known as Mallabhum was the abode of Malla kings who were vassals to the Mughal Empire, were the devotees of Lord Vishnu and patrons of music. Bishnupur Gharana was established in 1370 A.D. by the court musicians of Malla Kings.²

Bishnupur is one of the famous musical hubs of Bengal. Among the ancient places well known for the practice of classical music, Bishnupur deserves special mention. There were many musical institutes in Bangladesh which were older compared to Bishnupur, but Bishnupur Gharana is the oldest one in Bangladesh. The tradition of classical music developed by the musicians of Bishnupur is unique in all respects and is not seen elsewhere in Bengal. Although raga-raginis were being practiced for about 200 years, but Bishnupur is a paradigm in establishing the traditional music in Bengal. The main reason behind this may be its geographical environment. Being located in the western part of Bengal, Bishnupur has got a close connection with the western region of India. 'Darbari Raag -Sangeet' is basically the creation of west. Many people believe that this tradition of music has got its maturity a lot in the 'Darbars' or court of kings of India in the pre-modern era and in this respect, Bishnupur is also not an exception. In the Bishnupur region, the practice of classical music has got enriched with the help of the royal dynasty. The people related to the Bishnupur royal family had got the chance to learn music from the eminent musicians of the king's court & as a result classical music had got its expansion there.

The tradition of the Bishnupur school of Music is distinguished by its extreme open mindedness to any forms of classical and regional art that flourished across the country and would be accessible to the contemporary local musicians through any resourceful avenue. A passing musician, a new lyric, a devotional hymn, the court musicians of reputed gharans, any available source that would enrich the musical knowledge of this town's aficionado was greeted with open arms and undisputedly added to the collection of the disciples, the would-be gurus in later years. The insatiable thirst for knowledge and musical scholarship led to the formation of a well defined lineage of musicians who passed on their expertise to their able disciples and their heirs. The gharana had a two directional expansion along the line of the sons, daughters and relations within the family and along the line of the disciples.

Gharana is a French word which has been adopted as an Indian word. Traditional behavioral pattern may be regarded as Gharana in our society. Likewise, certain particular style of presenting music by certain musical family may be regarded as Gharana. Hence a continuation of the presentation of professional music by certain musical family may be regarded as Gharana. Hence a continuation of the presentation of professional music in a particular style with a fragrance of their own may be termed as silsila of that Gharana.

Each Gharana has its own individual identity or silsila which has to be strictly followed by the practitioners of that Gharana. It must be remembered that gharana does not imply blind imitation of the style but should be adapted as the basis of the tradition. Individual performers of that gharana may have his/her own flavor with an individuality of his/her own. As a result of this, two individual performers of the same Gharana, may have different flavors or quality during their presentation.³

The Bishnupur Gharana of Bengal has a prestigious past, the history of which has little been revealed. 'Bishnupur, the town of Lord Vishnu, is at present a 'sub-division' town of Bankura district in west Bengal is Mallabhum. Though not vast in area, the region holds a significant position in matters as political vigor, civilization and culture. Historians suggest that 'Mallabhum' had once been the cultural centre of Eastern India. Among its cultural achievements, music had the highest honour.⁴

The Gharana is reputed to have been established in the 13th century, even though there is no historic evidence to support this. In the 17th century, during the reign of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, Islamic fanaticism was at its peak in the Mughal empire, and thus many musicians moved to the court of the Maharaja of Bishnupur who was a known patron of the arts.⁵ The famous Dhrupad Singer Bahadur Khan of the Senia Gharana, descendant of Tansen, fled to Bishnupur and made his Gharana popular and sought refuge in the court. Bahadur Khan was not a vocalist but could also efficiently play on such instruments as the Veena, the Raabab, surashrinagaar. The King, Raghunath Singh Deo II, made all arrangements to honour him as his court singer. The Maharaja also announced that anyone having a sweet voice and interested in Music could learn from Bahadur Khan without any fees. He also bore the financial liability for the poor students. In time, a good number of students became the disciples of Bahadur Khan.⁶

Historical evidence points to Pt. Ramachandra Bhattacharya, a disciple of Ud. Bahadur Khan as the founder of the gharana. Bishnupur Gharana therefore has strong link to Betia Gharana through this unbroken relationship.⁷

Among the disciples of Bahadur Khan, the name of Gadadhar Chakravorty is noteworthy. Bahadur Khan was not only a vocalist but could also efficiently play on such instruments as the veena, the Rabaab, the surashrinagar. Gadadhar Chakravorty learnt from his master both local and instrumental music. Among his worthy disciples were such talents as Ram Shankar Bhattacharya India.

Most of the exponents of Bishnupur learnt Dhrupad song and instrumental music simultaneously. Bishnupur was at that time the cultural capital of India.⁸

In the later part of the eighteenth century and towards the early and mid-nineteenth century, when music of different 'Gharanas' were gradually assimilating around the Khayal style, the Dhrupad style continued flourishing among the musicians of Bishnupur. Vishnu Narayan Bhatkande desired to be a disciple of Radhika Prasad Goswami since he found the most authentic renditions of the renditions of the ragas and the most exhaustive repertoire of songs in Bishnupur Gharana. In 1921 when Prince Edward came to visit India, six artists of various gharanas were chosen to perform six Ragas for six Seasons. Three of them were from Bishnupur Gharana: Gopeswar Bandyopadhyay, Satyakinkar Bandyopadhyay and Khetra Mohan Goswami.⁹

First maiden Gramophone record in khayal in 1902 Tara Parameswari, by Lal Chand Baral, who learnt under Ramprassanna Bandyopadhyay published by Gramophone Concert and Nicole.

Vishnu Narayan Bhatkande first came across the ustads of Bishnupur in a conference in Banaras around 1921/22 and this conference was attended by Radhika Prasad Goswami, Gopeswar Bandyopadhyay and Satyakinkar Bandyopadhyay. They gave a trio performance in Dhrupad. After this they gave individual performance. Satyakinkar Bandyopadhyay also played Sitar in that conference and stood first along with Enayat Khan.

In this style, the artist excels in unfolding the beauty of the Raga through the alap. It is simple, devoid of heavy, cumbersome ornamentation. It is free from intricate play with rhythm. Layakariis however allowed in Dhamar, an another form of vocalization. The khayal of the Bishnupur School is noted for its sweet lilting melody. It is adorned with the usual ornaments, which add variety to the melodic presentation of the Raaga.

The dhrupad of the Bishnupur gharana uses shudha dhaivata in raga vasanta, a touch of komal nisada in the descending notes of Raga Bhairava. It has abandoned kadi madhyam in raga ramakeli and uses sudha dhaivata in raga vehaga. It has also developed its own character with regard to rhythm. It was this gharana which invented the tradition of Sawal – Jabab in Hindustani Music. Its origins and the development have led to a great openness in the teaching and evolution within this gharana.¹⁰

The Bishnupur Gharana , where artists unfold the beauty of Raga Bhairava through the Alap. It is actually melodious presentation by using Suddha Dhaivata in Raga Vasanta. There is a touch of Komol Nisada of Bhairava Raga.¹¹ The famous Bengali Torja was invented from this Gharana tradition and this Torja is still very popular in West Bengal . Akash Vani organizes this kind of programs frequently. In this modern age of modern Pop music still this Bishnupur Gharana finds a place and acknowledgement from modern artists too. That is the victory for this Bishnupur Gharana.¹² While music serves as a custodian of cultural traditions, it is not static. Musicians constantly innovate, incorporating influences from other cultures and adapting musical forms to reflect changing times and societal perspectives. This dynamic process ensures the continued relevance and vibrancy of cultural identities. It would be pertinent to say that although every gharana has its own distinctive style of presentation, no creative art can develop within any rigorous binding . Music is the highest among fine arts. Every individual has his own build-up of the mind , his own environmental influences that will leave remarkable traces upon his music. Through his creation the artist, in a sense , manifests his soul- i.e. the Atma. While presenting his art , he is in a state of emotional exaltation . Hence , two artistes , belonging to the same gharana, need not necessarily have the same way of presentation , variations must be accepted , otherwise creative music would have become identical with composed music.¹³ In light of the above it would be wise to say that cultural identity influences musical taste more than the other way around.

Source

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