

BHAJAN AND IT'S WAY OF INTERPRETATION: A GENERAL STUDY

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Abstract

Bhajan is a music genre found in India which is devotional in nature. Bhajan is rooted to Hindu religion mainly. It worked like a tool of spiritual consciousness. Bhajan had been mandatory in Hindu Temples as rituals from the beginning of Bhakti Movement and was an inevitable part of the process to attain detachment and liberation (Mokshya). With the passage of time, Bhajan became popular as a music genre when professional musicians started to interpret Bhajans in different ways. Since evoking of emotion (Bhakti Bhao) has been its aim, so liberty has been natural in its interpretational style for singers. This writes up intends to discuss shortly the general theories about 'Bhajan' and its interpretational styles based on North Indian vocal musician's style.

Key words: Bhajan, Bhakti, Indian Music, Devotional Songs, Bhajan interpretational style.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Bhajan is a music genre in India which is connected to spirituality. This is a study based on 'Bhajan' and its background and origin, its core concept and studying its interpretational style in a general way. All the knowledge interpreted here is based on related literature review. The interpretations have been done based on the data I collected while my doctoral thesis. All the web links are shared and mentioned in the reference section. (This article will only discuss the North Indian Vocalists singing style). This article aims to have an idea on the scope of 'Bhajan' as a Music Genre.

BHAJAN AND ITS ORIGIN:

Bhajan is devotional genre music in India. The time when harmony was almost collapsed between Hindu and Muslims in Indian subcontinent, at that time, in order to maintain the harmony, the saint poets started to educate people with their philosophies, advices with music. "The Bhajan genre was originated at that time. In Indian history, that time is called as 'Bhakti Movement which brought Indian music among common people from the emperor's court. Bhakti Movement was initiated in South India during 8th and 9th century with the influence of Adi Shankaracharya. Later in 11th century, Saint Ramanuj Jnanpradhan started worshipping Lord Rama and Goddess Lakshmi through music. Saint Anandtirtha also had contributed in 13th century through worshipping Lord Krishna.

Since 13th century Bhajan evolved in Northern India as an inevitable part of Hindu Culture and it started its journey from inside the Temple. As Mohammedan attack on Hindu worshipping places were destructive, so Hindu Idols were being protected inside the Haveli's (Big House in Gujarat and Rajasthan). Almost at the same time, by the Saint poets like Kabir, Guru Nanak, Meerabai, Tulsidas, Surdas started teaching philosophies through music. They used to take simple languages and lyrics in Hindi or region-influenced Hindi mostly and demonstrated the creations with Melody and Taal. The subject matter of their creation used to

be on harmony over diversion of religions, culture and society with an understanding and complete surrender towards the supreme power. According to the subject matter, the contents of these Bhajan can be divided into two categories, 'Saakar' and 'Nirakar'. Sakaar Bhajan represents the devotions towards such deities who are accepted, believed and worshipped in a particular form and way. Niraakar Bhajan compositions are consisted of the praise for the formless God. According to 'Niraakar-baad', God is One, He is formless, fearless and he exists everywhere. He can be attained by constant meditation, chant, and pure thoughts, noble intensions. 'Niraakar' philosophical saints are Kabir, Guru Nanak, Sant Tukaram etc. They raised voice against caste and creeds in that time Indian society. In the expansion of 'Saakar baad', Meerabai, Tulsidas, Surdas etc. Poets had contributed a lot." (Ghosh, 2023)

BRIEF INTRODUCTION ABOUT SOME OF THE 'BHAKTI MOVEMENT POETS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION:

Sant Kabir: Sant Kabir was born to a Hindu family according to some researchers and was left newborn. Then he was brought up under the affection of Niru and Nima (his father and mother) who were tailors by caste. He was born around 1398 according to history and some people believe that he was alive more than a hundred years. Kabir never believed in religion and all his creations carry that philosophy. He took his 'Diksha' from Saint Ramanand who had been the disciple of Saint Ramanuj. Kabir's main aim was establishing harmony among Hindu and Muslims. Some examples of Kabir's write up are given below:

"Moko Kahan Dhundho re Bande

Naa mai teerath mein naa main Murat mein,

Khoji hoye toh turant mil jaun

ek pal hi ke Talaash mein

Kahe Kabir Suno

Suno bhai sadho,

mai toh huun viswas mein".

Kabir used to worship Lord Raam as well. Some lines are given below:

'Guru kripanjana Payo mere Bhai

Raam bina kachu jaanata naahi

Andar Raam hi, Bahar Raam hi,

Jahan dekho waha Raam hi Raam hi'.

Guru Nanak: Guru Nanak was born in 1469 at Taalmandi in Punjab. His father was Kaluvedi and mother was Tripta. Guru Nanak was Hindu Khastriya by birth but never believed in religion. He did a lot of ‘Saadhna’ and got the ‘Hukum’ of Nirankar. Later he went for ‘Udasi’ in order to spread his realization on the oneness of God. He never appreciated show-off culture of any religion. He believed in Guru’s advice and hence founded a new community that is famous as ‘Sikh’. Guru Nanak always created a place for Raga application for all of his ‘Shabad’ and Bhajans. Some of his creations carries Raam Naam. But his aim always had been establishing formless Oneness ‘Nirankarbaad’.

Meerabai: Meerabai was born in 1504 in Rajasthan and she is famous for her krishna Bhajans. She had accepted Lord Krishna as her Husband from a very tender age and believed and worshipped Him throughout her life with that belief. Meerabai had to face many difficulties throughout her life but she overcame every hurdle with her immense love and dedication for her Lord Krishna. She contributed in ‘Bhakti Movement’ with her devotion and love for her Lord through poetry and Music.

For Example:

“Paga Ghungru Baandh Meera Naachi re

Vish ka Pyala Rana jee ne bheja

Peewata Meera hassi re

Meera ke Prabhu Girdhar Naagar

Saj mile Avinaasi Re”.

Four categories are found in Meerabai’s Bhajan.

‘**Chetavani Ka Ang**’: where God consciousness has been emphasized,

‘**Updesh Ka Ang**’ where Meerabai advised the mind to become dedicated and focused in worshipping God,

‘**Prem aur Virha ka ang**’ where Meerabai’s state of mind has been reflected in her lines sometimes full with love and sometimes with a pain of not attaining her Lord as per her desire,

‘**Prarthana aur Aatmanivedan ka ang**’, where she keeps praying to see her Lord and to attain Him eternally.

Tulsi das: Tulsidas was born around 1532 in Uttar Pradesh in India. His father’s name was Atmaraam Dube and Mother was Devi Tulasi. Tulsidas had contributed in Bhajan by his poetry full of surrender and devotion towards Lord Raam. His ‘Raam Charit Manas’ and

‘Hanuman Chalisa’ are most influential creation of that time. Apart from that his creation always represented the greatness of Lord Raam. Example:

“Jab Janaki Naath Sahay Kare toh
Kaun Bigad Kare Nar Tero
Jaaki Sahay kare Karuna Nidhu
Taaki Jagat mein Bhaa Badhe ro
Raghubansi Santan sukha daayi
Tulsidas charanana ko chero||”

Apart from them, Saint poets like Surdas, Raidas, Dadu Dayal, Swami Brahamananda has contributed a lot for Bhakti Movement and Bhajan.

BHAJAN AND ITS WAY OF INTERPRETATION:

Concept of interpretation: “Bhajan means sharing emotion. Bhajan has been originated from the word ‘Bhaja’. A devotee expresses his or her feelings about his or her worshipped deity in his or her own way with the help of music. That is called Bhajan. Certain Ragas like Khamaj, Mand, Pilu etc. and Talas like Dadra, Kaharwa etc. are used in Bhajan. Bhajan’s main aim is evoking the emotion of the song. Exhibiting the efficiency of the singer is considered to be secondary.” (Ghosh, 2023) Devotional words and spirituality can be found in Dhrupad, Dhamar, Khayal, Thumri, Dadra also. But those are not considered as ‘Bhajan’ because of their certain protocols. They project the Raga first, then there are certain ornamentations and improvisations which are expected to be maintained all the time. Thumri is a genre which appears like the confluence of singing Raga and acting the lyrics while singing, but its duration and ‘Rasa’ are different than Bhajan. Thumri does not carry any emotion than ‘Romance’ that is ‘Shringer’.

Bhajan is sung inside Temples as rituals. Apart from that, professional singers also sing Bhajans. Since pre independence, Indian singers who sing other genres like Dhrupad, Khayal, Thumri, Playback music, started to sing Bhajan. D.V. Paluskar, Pandit Omkarnath Thakur, Pandit Hariom Sharan , Pandit Purushottam Jalota, Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle , Pandit Jasraj, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Vidushi Kishori Amonkar, Vidushi Girija Devi, Pandit Channulaal Mishra, Vidushi Veena Sahasra budhdhe , Vidushi Arti Anklikar, Vidushi Shubha Mudgal , Devki Pandit, Sanjeev Abhyankar, Rattan Mohan Sharma ,Shruti Sadolikar , Anuradha Paduwal , Shreya Ghosal, Jagjit Singh, Anup Jalota Hariharan, Suresh Wadkar, Pandit Ulhas Kashalkar, Pandit Ajoy Chakraborty, Vidushi Kaushiki Chakraborty, Arijit Singh, Jubin Nautiyal , Palak Muchchal are all the prominent leading professional singers who are found interpreting Bhajans regularly. Padmashree Anup Jalota is considered to be

‘The Bhajan Samrat’ in India for his inevitable contribution and universal achievement and influence on this genre. Apart from him, the other singers also have interpreted Bhajan in different ways. Here are some examples:

BAANKE BIHARI KRISHNA MURARI SONG BY JAGJIT SINGH:

link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbLmluZrgeU> (1)

This song is composed by Ravindra Pathaniya,

Company: Saregama.

This is composed in Mishra Piloo Raga and Set in Taal Kaharwa with a Tempo 480 BPM approximately. All the lines in this song are Sung once by the singer and once with Chorus voice. Music Arrangement is contemporary yet the use of Manjira is evident which is an important Temple instrument. There is not much improvisation in singing, but a lot of repetition of lines exists. The whole composition maintains the Raga throughout the interpretation.

SUNO SUNO RE MHARI ARJI BY VIDUSHI ARTI ANKLIKAR:

YT link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACLBaEMLS64\(2\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACLBaEMLS64(2))

This is another Meera Bhajan interpretation with a duration of 10 minutes. The song is composed in Bhimpalashri (Considering Madhyam as Saa). It is set in Rupak with a Rajasthani Folk rhythm pattern. There are lots of ornamentations like Murki, Gitkiri, Aakar Vistar and lots of repetition and improvisation throughout the song. The singer herself interpreted the whole song and it has a tempo of 210 BPM. The vistar is influenced by Khayal style but the usage of lyrics is very specific. Mainly Hindustani Classical Music instruments have been used in the song. There is a small aaochar aalap at the very beginning.

JAGAT MEIN JHUTHI DEKHI PREET BY VIDUSHI GIRIJA DEVI:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpnjgEuCJ4g> (3)

This song is composed by Guru Nanak. This song is composed in Mishra Bhairabi. There are lots of repetitions and hold on the Raga as well throughout the song. The duration of the interpretation is 8:06 minutes. The song begins with a brief alap. There is a brief aakar vistar keeping synchronicity with the compositional tune. This song is set in Taal Dadra with a tempo of 180 BPM approximately.

MHARA RE GIRIDHAR GOPAL BY LATA MANGESHKAR:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCpmy4p7qNY> (4)

This song is composed in Mirabai Ki Malhar by Hridaynath Mangeshkar. No aaochar or vistar are found in the interpretation. Tempo is almost 120 BPM. The raga is maintained throughout the song. Many repetitions are not found in the song.

DISCUSSION

A brief discussion on the point of view of Anup Jalota on Bhajan interpretational style: Padmashree Anup Jalota who is often addressed as ‘The Bhajan Samrat’ is found expressing his opinion with many details an interview of AIR Mumbai in 1991 where he had clearly emphasized on the literature of Bhajan to focus. According to him Bhajan is a literature-based music where the improvisation should be enhancing the beauty of the composition. He also thinks that singers have to take the responsibility of keeping the impact of the lyrics while singing and that requires a spiritually surrendered state of mind. Real feelings of devotion make a Bhajan interpretation influential. He demonstrated one of his most famous Bhajans from the Album ‘Bhajan Sandhya’. That is ‘Aisi Laagi Lagan’ and demonstrated how he thinks about the improvisation keeping the lyrics intact. He also appreciated a lot other singers’ way of interpretation. According to his opinion, if the liberty of interpreting Bhajan can be executed with responsibility, it always would be making the audience happy. This is how the audience accepted every different singing style of different singers.

LINK: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O19y61-FbMg\(5\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O19y61-FbMg(5))

RESULT AND CONCLUSION:

Based on the overall interpretation study and Jalota’s point of view there is indeed a vast space in bringing more uniqueness and creativity in Bhajan interpretations. This is a genre which can accept more or less ornamentation, improvisation, vistar, chorus, alap, and can also go completely without it as well. Repetition is something which is present in almost every performance. Its carries liberty and dignity of trust and spiritual awareness at the same time. Hence, the scope of studying and improving ‘Bhajan’ as a ‘Music Genre’ is infinite.

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