

Appreciating Hindustani Music
Dr.Lakshmi Sreeram
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture 46
The Enchanting World of Thumri

Thumri is a musical genre that gained prominence in the 19th century in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh. The Nawab patronized musicians and dancers and poets in his court and was himself a musician and composer of considerable merit. One of the most beloved thumri-s of all time, an archetypal one, is babul mora naihara chooto hi jaay. This thumri in Raag Bhairavi depicts a bride departing from her home to go to her husband's house. Bidai as it is called. "Four men lift my dholi, the palanquin and I am leaving behind those who were my own." Pathos, longing, yearning, hope, nostalgia, fear, anxiety, vulnerability - all these emotions are contained in the few lines of this thumri. More poignantly, it is believed that the Nawab composed this thumri when he was to depart from his beloved Lucknow when the British exiled him.

So, what is Thumri? It is primarily a compositional form that expresses and explores the multitudinous hues of srngara, romantic love. Most thumris are based on the theme of romance. Thumris are also set in ragas and talas, but they are not regarded raga sangeet because a thumri presentation is not concerned with a raga's grammatical and correct presentation, but it freely bends the rules of the ragas in the interest of evocative expression of the lyrics of the composition.

It is for this license with ragas that we often find description of thumris as being in the raga Mishra Khamaj or Mishra Shivaranjani etcetera. "Mishra" means mixed suggesting that the raga will be mixed with other notes - phrases not belonging to it in the interest of emotive exploration of the text.

And, it is for the same reason that thumri is not regarded "classical music", but is called semi classical or upa-shastriya. Thumri is also significantly less austere and restrained in employing various ornaments and other devices to express the emotions packed into the text.

Thumri is more explicitly concerned with invoking emotions than Dhrupad or Khayal. And is therefore, sometimes described as Bhaavapradhaan - that is a form in which expression and evoking of emotions is a central concern. And for the same reason it also lends itself to the abhinaya segment of dance forms like Kathak. Indian classical dance forms have an abhinaya segment in which compositions are rendered in dance through stylized gestures body movement and mime.

In fact, the word thumri derives from the word "thumakana" which means to dance and thumri singers of an earlier generation would often also perform abhinaya while singing. And thumri is therefore, also called abhinayathmaka sangeet.

Thumri nestles in the intersection of folk music traditions and art music. It has close links with folk songs such as Chaiti, Kajari, Hori, Sawan, Jhoola etcetera; these names evoke seasons and festivals.

Chaiti for example, is the month of Chaitra, the harvest season; Hori is of course, a festival of colours; Jhoola and Sawan are associated with the monsoon and we have song forms that are called Jhoola, Sawan etcetera and these songs are sung in celebration of various seasons and festivals. And these songs too are rendered in the thumri idiom by singers. But thumri is also heavily improvisational, much like Khayal. Of course it is very stylized and its technique and aesthetics is quite different from Khayal or Dhrupad.

Here in thumri the emphasis is on the text and improvisation consists entirely of stylized variations of the text. We do not speak of raag vistar or badhat here because the concern is not the raaga. In the context of thumri we use the phrase Bol banaav, that is, it is leisurely and expansive forays into improvisation using the text of the song which is found in the Purab or Benares style of thumri singing.

Some of the greatest performers of thumri performed the Purab or the Benares ang. The other style of thumri singing is a faster and more light footed Punjab style which too has had great performers like Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Sahab. Some links to thumri performances by celebrated performers are given below for you to listen to at your leisure.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zraiQjitSO8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1cbJmNbKpk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmKVeGvY39I>

Thumris are generally in less weighty ragas like Khamaj, Pilu, Bhairavi etcetera or it is possible equally that since these ragas have such a strong presence in thumri with its lacks treatment of ragas. These ragas have acquired a less weighty persona. In any case these ragas are regarded lighter.

The talas used are also specific to this idiom such as the 14 matra Deepchandi or the 16 matra Addha Teentaal and Chachar. The thumri composition also has a sthayi and an antara and is also presented in a way similar to the Khayal format because first the sthayi is rendered followed by improvisation using the bol. And then the antara mukhada is sung, more bol banaav, after which the antara is rendered fully and then the sthayi is sung again. And, here there is a very unique feature of thumri called laggi. Now, we have a sudden change of pace when the tabla goes into what is called laggi and here fast that is, quadruple speed of the original speed. The patterns are four times the speed of the original speed and these patterns are played with variations while the singer also improvises in rhythm to then round off and finish the presentation. The laggi is very unique to the thumri idiom and is indicative of thumri's strong links with dance.

So, let us listen to Nirbhay Saxena who has learned from Shrimati Girija Devi. He has learned thumri from Girija Devi who was one of the most celebrated performers of this genre. Ab ki saawan ghar aaja this is a widely performed thumri in which the nayika is imploring her husband or lover to come back to her during this season of rains. Rains are when lovers are supposed to be together.

She pleads with a crow to carry a message to her lover. Ud jaa re kaagaa le jaa sandesawaa. You will notice that the mukhda is on aa that is - ab ke saawan ghar aa Please also note the laggi at the end.

Now, we are presenting a thumri and this special thumri is from Purab or we can say the Benares gayaki of thumri. So, first I will tell you the words of this thumri

Ab ki sawan ghar aaja piya more

Antara is
Ud ja re kaaga le ja sandesawa
Tori sone chonch madaiyo

This thumri is composed in a Raga Mishra Tilak Kamod and I am singing this from madhyam means my Sa is madhyam and the tala of this thumri is Jath. The other name of this tal is Chachar.

This is of 16-beat and usually used in madhyalaya, not too slow nor too fast. So, I will just demonstrate to you

Dha , dhin ,

dha dha tin ,

ta , tin ,

dha dha dhin ,

[Music] [Music] [Music]. So, this was tal chachar. [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music]
[Music] [Music] [Music] [Music] [Music].