

## TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN A MODERN SOCIETY: DR. TAPAN KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA

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Stability, change, and adaptation are important issues for every traditional culture. Modernization often poses a significant challenge to cultural systems, demanding that traditions adapt to new forces if they are to remain vital. In the nineteenth century, the introduction of Western institutions and technology into India by the British prompted widespread patterns of cultural accommodation that continue to this day. The implications of cultural change have had an impact on such classical art forms as music. For musicians who have left India to live in Western countries, the necessity for adaptation has become particularly important.

The following article concerns one man who has been singularly successful in adapting the traditions of his culture to life in Canada: Dr. Tapan Kumar Bhattacharyya. While continuing to perform Indian classical vocal music in the traditional manner, he has modified the conventions of teaching this music. Unsupported, or perhaps unhindered by the traditional structures of Indian society, Dr. Bhattacharyya has adapted traditional teaching methods to the realities of life in Canada in order to ensure the transmission of his musical heritage. In this article, I will examine the teaching of Dr. Bhattacharyya, considering it within the context of modernization and change.

Born in 1940, Dr. Bhattacharyya came to Toronto from his native Calcutta in March of 1976. My contact with Dr. Bhattacharyya began in August 1986, little more than half a year before he left Toronto to live in the United States. The research for this article is based on an extended interview with him, as well as observations of lessons and a *mehfil* (private home concert). Defying conventional Indian definitions of a vocalist, i.e., that one is involved in full-time performance and teaching of music, Dr. Bhattacharyya is not a professional musician. Indeed, he is a research biologist, formerly at the University of Toronto, now at the University of Chicago. Nonetheless, he is an accomplished musician, whose reputation as a singer was widespread in the Toronto Indian community.

Notably, many aspects of his own musical training in India incorporate non-traditional elements. For example, he never had a formal *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) relation with any of his teachers. Before tiring of its rigid, grammatical approach, Dr. Bhattacharyya spent three years at the Arya Sangeet Vidyapeet, a music college modelled upon Western educational institutions. His principal encounter with the great Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, who inspired him to pursue musical studies, was through recordings. Conflicts with university studies, however, never allowed him the full-time training that most Indian musicians have. Finally, the system of *gharana* styles (*gharana* literally means "of the house of...") forming Dr. Bhattacharyya's musical tradition was in itself an adaptive response to modernizing forces, in the nineteenth century.

Dr. Bhattacharyya had his own "school", which he started in 1980. He states that for the first four years after arriving in Canada, he did not

want to teach because of work-pressures at the University of Toronto, but in 1980 he started, with a few students. Interestingly, his first student was a Westerner, John Campana, a professor of Italian and aficionado of Indian culture. Since 1980, his school swelled to forty students, primarily Indian, and ranging from small children to elderly men and women.

While Dr. Bhattacharyya considers his musical teaching to be a "school," which he advertises in the programme-notes of local concerts, his was not a school along the line of the Western, institutional model of music colleges in India. Rather, it was a school in the traditional sense of "in the house of..." based on the traditional one-to-one teacher-disciple (guru-shishya) practice of teaching. Lessons were private, and held in the basement of Dr. Bhattacharyya's home. One thing that struck me as Dr. Bhattacharyya talked about his teaching was the utter sincerity with which he regarded teaching. For him, teaching is a direct link with the tradition of Indian classical music.

My concept was that I should have a few students, but *good* students. That they should be sincere, dedicated enough, that was my idea. I never wanted to have a commercially successful music school, like other music teachers in Toronto, because with my gurus, I got a lot of loving care...so I always try to do that, to give that.

And in the beginning stage, the students who...came to me, they were treated by me just as my household members, which is, or was, the real tradition with Indian musicians, to treat the disciple as your own son and daughter. For instance, an elderly woman may come to me, but in my eyes, that woman, that person, will be just like a small child.

Often, as in India, he would invite students for familial get-togethers, with meals provided by his wife. For the first two years, he had a mehfil on the occasion of Saraswati Puja, a celebration of the goddess of learning and music:

On that night, it is the tradition of Indian musicians to practise, and the students to sing together.

As his number of students increased, however, he was obliged to discontinue such get-togethers, as the strain of cooking became too great for his wife. A mehfil hosted on October 4, 1986, was the first gathering of students and friends at his house for over a year. He had wanted to have one for quite a while. In a sense, the social aspect of teaching Indian music is as important for Dr. Bhattacharyya as the actual music being transmitted:

That is the traditional image of the teaching of Indian music. I still have that, and I will *always* have that. I may spend the rest of my life in North America, but when it comes to teaching Indian classical music, I will always like to have students who are very gentle people, who would have similar vibrations with myself. I don't want to have nasty people coming to me. In other words I don't want to sell my music for money.

Dr. Bhattacharyya sees himself as a direct participant in Indian musical culture, someone who has inherited a tradition and wishes to pass it on. Nonetheless, in several respects his attitudes towards the teaching process break with tradition. In India, the cornerstone of the transmission of musical knowledge is the guru-shishya relationship. This is not an observation made by outsiders alone but something acknowledged by Indians themselves (Neuman, 1980, p.30). It is a formal and binding relationship, symbolized at the outset by the tying of a multi-coloured thread around the wrist of the disciple. Transmission of musical knowledge

involves no monetary exchange, but rather a transaction of much more culturally charged services. In return for lessons, a disciple signifies his or her dedication and obedience by performing household chores, running errands, giving small gifts and doing other favours for the guru. As a further corollary of having bound him/herself to a guru, the disciple is not free to leave if (s)he gets bored or finds a better musician in the area. To do so would be to commit a deep social transgression. (Neuman outlines several details of the guru-shishya relationship in 1980, pp. 43-58.)

Dr. Bhattacharyya has never had any formal disciples. When I asked him why not, he replied,

In India, musicians always do that, with the ceremony of tying the thread. I never did that. I cautiously avoided doing that, because I don't want to impose the typical rigours of the guru-shishya relationship, which is done by other musicians. Because, I thought, that is not the proper way. So instead of just being a formal guru, I try to be their friendly receptor [smiles]. And I am also very liberal in that respect. Compared to other teachers in town, who are more demanding, I am more liberal in this respect.

Part of this liberality may have been influenced by the fact that he never "tied the thread" with his teachers in India. While he calls both Akhil Banbhu and Shankar Bose his "gurus," and had with them the intense relationship typical of formal guru-shishya relations, he never became a formal disciple. The reason for this, he explains, is that Bengali teachers usually don't tie the thread with their disciples, this ceremony being practised more in the northern parts of India. Dr. Bhattacharyya probably means the region around Delhi, where most of the lineages in the gharana system a rose and flourished.

Another factor influencing Dr. Bhattacharyya's decision not to take formal disciples may have to do with the fact that he is not a full-time professional musician. On this, however, I am speculating. Dr. Bhattacharyya's sincerity in wanting to pass on musical knowledge unencumbered by traditional obligations relates to his philosophical attitude towards the nature of music and music teaching.

I would like to be with [my students] not only just as a guru, but more a friend, a philosopher, and in that way be able to encourage them. That is the only way I can train them up. Because...teaching them this music is not only teaching them the notes or certain melodies, it is also teaching them a philosophy of life. That is my basic conception of thinking of Indian music. When I think of the broader perspective of Indian music I think, it's not just the singing of a few rags, raginis and that kind of stuff, it's just a philosophy. Unless you can get really deep into this philosophy, you can never do justice to this music...That philosophy is basically a very meditative approach to life, searching the inner peace.

Dr. Bhattacharyya's philosophy about musical meaning, then, extends into another integral part of Indian music — the metaphysics of *ras*, or mood and feeling. While musical practice in this century has abandoned many of the refinements of *ras*, there is still a core, a "meditative approach" that Dr. Bhattacharyya is very sensitive to, and wishes to pass on to his students. Dr. Bhattacharyya's enlightened views regarding the nature of music were, no doubt, illuminated by his experience with the music of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. He speaks of Ghulam Ali, whom he considers his "real guru," with the utmost reverence and respect, noting with pride the blessing from Ghulam Ali that he still carries on his head:

That was a wonderful discovery for me — finding the music of Ghulam Ali, drowning myself and being nurtured in that music. You see, you need experience. It totally revolutionized my ideas of music. I could see that the highest form of intellectual music could be found in his music, what he gave...Everybody in India, they agree that Ghulam Ali has left a legacy which probably won't be fulfilled for another 500 years. It is doubtful that the kind of musician, a singer, of his kind of golden voice, will come — everybody knows that. So when I came under his influence, my whole world changed. And the one thing that from that stage I could gather, one thing that struck me, was that in singing classical you must hold an extremely high level, that is — the *goal* is extremely high...and I am very happy to say, that with God's grace, after coming to Canada I have made a lot of progress in terms of my practice, in terms of my style of singing, and in this regard, my interaction with my students and my teaching has also helped me a lot.

For when I started teaching, I had to go deeper and deeper into it, because I found that unless I go deeply into the music I cannot give a lot of good things to the students. In other words, I have to teach them from a very high level — a very high level. Unless I can do that, I can never make them properly [breaks thought]...and especially living *here*, so far away from the homeland, which is India, I *have* to give from a high level.

And you'd be surprised to know that some of my students that have gone back to India for a short period of time, they have had some music teachers, some reputable teachers, and they were very unhappy with those teachers — so they came back crying to me, and said they were very happy with me! Can you imagine?

Part of the “high level” that Dr. Bhattacharyya speaks of is the philosophical attitude discussed earlier in the paper. Another part, however, involves the practical aspect of singing. When I asked Dr. Bhattacharyya what he, as a teacher, feels are the most important things to pass on, he replied, “The art of singing.”

At the practical level, Dr. Bhattacharyya has a largely traditional approach to teaching. To teach the art of singing, Dr. Bhattacharyya says that he divides the lesson into three parts. In the lessons I observed, the emphasis he gave to certain areas varied, sometimes to the exclusion of some or all of an area. In his own conception, a lesson generally follows this pattern:

1) Vocal Drills — “...to break the rigidity of the voice, to make the voice very soft...so as to be able to sing Indian music in the proper way. Especially people with a Western background, they have a very rigid voice.”

2) Teaching of rag/ragini, major melody types — Although Dr. Bhattacharyya did not say so explicitly, it seems that what he means here is the teaching of actual compositions, i.e. the *ciz* or *bhandesh* of khyals, bhajans, dhrupads, thumris and other genres. Along with this he teaches a number of *tans*, melodic passages, that can be used in the improvisatory part of a vocal performance.

In addition to this, says Dr. Bhattacharyya,

comes another difficult thing, not only for Canadians, but also for children of our own background who are being brought up in this environment — that is, singing the songs in our language. This is a big, big barrier.

So, as well as teaching the melodic aspects of any song, Dr. Bhattacharyya must as well explain the meaning of words, and their correct pronunciation. This he does “gently,” as he says, so that a student does not feel as if he's “learning Greek,” learning an alien language:

If there is a barrier with the language, they can never do justice to the music.

3) Theories of Indian music — Dr. Bhattacharyya teaches the theoretical aspects of both the technical and metaphysical elements of music. The technical aspects of *raga* (mode) and *tala* (metre) are taught so that his students have a solid theoretical background, so that “they become literate musicians, not illiterate musicians like singers of the street.”

For more advanced students, he tries to explain and interpret the *ras* of the music, so that, as he says, even the most subtle and technically difficult ornamentation can be appreciated as an expression of the mood.

The actual process of a lesson, as I have noted before, can vary considerably in the emphasis he gives to different aspects of his teaching. Some lessons involve a great deal of singing, the student performing a composition that (s)he is working on and being corrected on finer technical points by Dr. Bhattacharyya. Often Dr. Bhattacharyya will demonstrate an entire passage and have the student replicate it. He always plays harmonium to accompany his own or the student’s voice, except for occasions when he beats out the *tal* on his own set of *tabla* drums. One must note, however, with regard to these kinds of lessons, that the student is not encouraged to duplicate the sound of Dr. Bhattacharyya’s voice. A number of his students have mentioned to me that he encourages them “to find their own voice.” In this respect, he does not spend time teaching voice production in the way that most teachers of Western classical music do.

Other lessons may resemble stenography sessions, with the student writing down songs and melodic passages as Dr. Bhattacharyya dictates them. Although music in India is primarily an oral tradition, and Dr. Bhattacharyya himself learned mainly through oral transmission and memory, he usually gives the notation of songs to his students. Because he often only sees a student two times a month, he doesn’t “want a student to suffer, to despair.” He himself has volumes of music that he has written down instead of storing merely in his memory. But rather than being a capitulation to Western methods of teaching, he considers notation to be a “working guide.” The notation of these songs is not in Western graphic notation. Instead, in a prescriptive system similar to *tablature*, the note syllables (*sargam*) and the words and beats they correspond to are given. Nonetheless, he also teaches some songs without giving notation,

to develop the faculty of musical memory, which we Indian musicians greatly emphasize, upon which we place a lot of importance...that is called *sruti*...[a] faculty of hearing, but also memory associated with it, so that the ear is *sushar* — so that not only can you absorb, not only listen like a rabbit, but memorize instantly, at a level so you can reproduce that instantly.

The oral tradition of Indian music is something that Dr. Bhattacharyya wants to preserve. His use of notation is a concession to the reality that neither he nor his students are involved full-time in music.

An implicit fact in Dr. Bhattacharyya’s teaching is that he does not transmit merely his own techniques and style, but that of the *gharana* that he is associated with as well (Neuman, 1980, p. 53). *Gharana*, as noted above, literally means “of the house of,” and denotes a formally structured system of musically and socially distinct singing styles. Neuman has given extensive documentation of the social politics of the *gharana* system, so I will not discuss it in detail here. Briefly, though, the

gharana system is related to the steady rise of urbanisation and increased communications links in the nineteenth century. As an adaptive strategy to modernisation, gharanas served two functions: 1) through kinship obligations, to maintain a carefully controlled pool of individuals from which highly specialized musicians could be recruited, and 2) to provide a "sociomusical" identity or pedigree for musicians who, with increased transportation and communications networks, were exposed to a diverse and anonymous public (Neuman, 1980, pp. 168-69). Even though gharanas seem centuries old, through historical links to earlier times and people, the system was consolidated as a response to social and cultural change.

In her book on khyal, Bonnie Wade analyzes the histories and stylistic characteristics of the major gharanas. At the close of her study, she notes that the rise of a "star-system" and the development of individual musical styles which incorporate aspects of several gharana styles have led to a breakdown of the gharana system (1984, pp. 279-80). Dr. Bhattacharyya himself concurs on this fact:

...nowadays, people are sort of getting blended into everything, because now there is no more rigid classification, or rigid training...Nowadays you will find one person being trained in one school, then finishing up and going to another school, and so it becomes a hodge-podge of various styles.

Dr. Bhattacharyya was trained, through Shankar Bose, a disciple of Ghulam Ali, in the style of the Patiala gharana, and considers himself to belong directly in the Patiala tradition. Of his teaching, he says,

First is the general broad essence of Hindustani music that must be taught, but when the student comes to the appropriate stage, I teach the stuff that is very much typical of the Patiala gharana...in other words I give the cream of everything [smiles].

#### (Summary)

Dr. Bhattacharyya, like India itself, is a blend of old and new. He is both eclectic and a purist, liberal and traditional. His status as a semi-professional musician relates to his residing in North America. In addition, the ability to combine several non-traditional elements into his teaching methods suggests a certain flexibility that would not be available to him in India. Were Dr. Bhattacharyya a full-time professional musician, he probably would not have left India, nor would his musical philosophy be so catholic. Nonetheless, the issues raised in this examination of Dr. Bhattacharyya's musical life prompt one to consider the nature of musical outlets for all immigrant musicians. Indian sociologist M.R. Srinivas characterizes tradition as something developed in the past, redefined in the present, and projected into the future. Although he has left India, Dr. Bhattacharyya, through redefining the modes of musical transmission, has ensured that his tradition will survive and remain vital.

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Resumé: *Lise Waxer discute la musique hindoue en examinant la philosophie et la technique de Tapan Kumar Bhattacharyya, qui enseigne la musique à Toronto depuis 1976. Waxer montre le lien entre la musique de Bhattacharyya et la culture indienne, et discute comment il réalise la combinaison d'éléments et traditionnels et modernes dans ses chansons et sa musique.*