

Folk Music from Mustard Fields

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We never know who wrote the lyrics or tune of a folk song. The most succinct comment on the authorship of folk songs comes from an aging *baul* (a wandering minstrel of West Bengal). He simply pointed to the swollen river and the many boats sailing its meandering course and then showed the almost dry canal where boats stood docked in slush and mud. He asked: *Do boats in full sail leave any trace of their passage? On the other hand, the track of the boat being pushed along the muddy docks is plainly marked in the mud.* The simple and natural move nimbly along in the current, the laboured creations get mired. *Leaving footprints is artificial and unimportant.* he said. The anonymity of the folk song is its great asset. Compositions are passed down generations through individual singers or groups whom add and innovate. The same composition may be played and sung in a radically different way after incorporating local colour. However, all folk singers of the traditional ilk stick to some austere rules and regulations concerning folk compositions. In Punjab there are compositions like the *dulla* which will not be sung in any other way but in the given tempo and meter. The *mirza* is to be normally sung in the evening since the tune is based on the *Tilang*, and evening *raag*.

Punjab is multi-layered cultural region and its music tradition stretches back for thousands of years to the Vedic period. Lying between the Gangetic Plain with its agricultural riches and the steppes of Central Asia, this region has been exposed to many cultures, each with their own musical modes. It is this unrelenting exposure to the new that has given Punjab's folk music a remarkable sophistication. With repeated invasions and conquests, Punjab's cultural traditions, instead of crumbling were further enriched. People assimilated the prevailing influences and bounced back from cultural shocks with their diversity enhanced. Within the existing forms, Punjabi folk music absorbed, imbibed and added to its repertoire.

Folk, devotional and classical music have flourished side by side here for centuries. While it may prove a difficult exercise to try to trace the affinity of the more refined *raags* to cruder folk tunes, in many cases the *raag* and *Taal* are obvious. It must not be forgotten that classical music has often drawn on folk forms, resulting in a shared musical vocabulary. Also, many folk artists spend

their youth with a *guru* who teaches them the basic *raags* and regains and grounds them in utilising the various *raags* for composition.

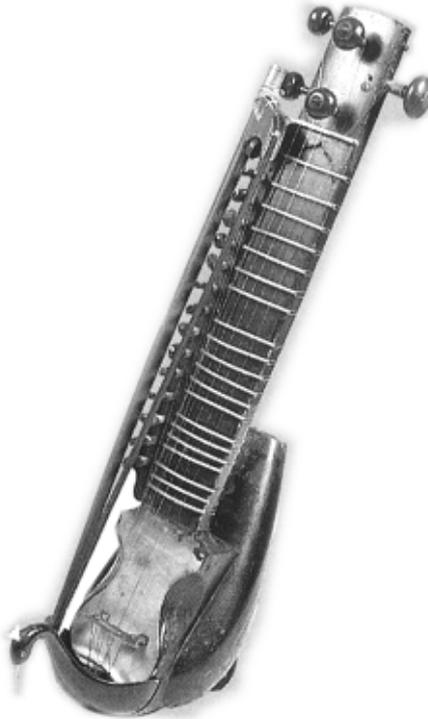
Today the situation is changing rapidly. As I crisscrossed the state time and again, I marvelled at the way music lives in rural Punjab-but just barely. The industrious Punjabi woman still works shoulder to shoulder with the men and it cannot be said that hard work has stifled her inherent aesthetic sensibility. She sings, dances,

weaves, does embroider and paints fashions of everyday objects adorning each with some motif of the agricultural society.

At the same time, modernisation and development have taken their toll and one of the first casualties has been the folk art. I found very few young women who were familiar with the crafts of their mothers. Village children no longer play *rassa-kassi*, *gulli danda*, *lukka-meechi*, *bhand-bhandar*, *kotlachupaki* or even *kabaddi*. Even the *ghoul*, a form of wrestling, has disappeared from the village. Village fairs have lost their power to attract. I saw no *kathputli-wallahs*, no *baazigars*, *nat-nati*, and *madaris*. Likewise, the *lok gathawans*, the *lok khedan* and *tamashas* were unknown to the young of modern Punjabi village—they were however completely up-to-date on the music channels

broadcast on satellite television. Gas stoves, washing machines and microwaves had completely overshadowed the *choler* (cooking stove), the *chapatti* (urn used to setmilk) and the *khoo* (well) where the women of the village would sit together and weave their dreams and aspirations. Water flows from taps, washing machines, videos and television has become the source of entertainment. Songs that accompanied domestic chores in olden days are sung-but one is more likely to hear them on a college or university stage than in a village courtyard.

The large community of entertainers have lost their source of livelihood. The maker of toys is now a daily wager, and the traditional instrument-maker has become a carpenter, even as a carpenter he is really not able to eke out a living, for the handicrafts of Punjab are singing their own dirges. At the Kartarpur *algoza* market, there were two old men who were undoubtedly making



algozas, (flutes) but for the sheer love of it. *My son gives me the wood, and some pocket money to live, for I cannot even earn my own living. I will keep making them till I die*, said Piaru Lal who had dozens of *algozas* in his little shed. He gave me two pairs of *algozas* happy that a city slicker had bothered to speak to him. Piaru Lal makes *algozas*, which are hardly bought. There are hundreds of Piaru Lal's in the villages of Punjab, who in the evening of their lives are silently crying over the loss of their craft and the accompanying traditions. Fifty years ago, the instrument-maker was a busy man, keeping his clients waiting for their orders. Today if they get a customer it is an occasion to celebrate.



Algoza is a complex wind instrument that uses two flutes with many embellishments
Photo - ARTIMES, 1998

The *guru-sishya parampara* (teacher-student tradition of affiliation and service) is extremely important to folk performers and they adhere to it strictly. The student swears allegiance to his guru and serves him devotedly for years till he is blessed with the gift of a talented performance. Puran Shahkoti and his student, Hans Raj Hans, at Jalandhar provide an example of this relationship. Hans served his master diligently and sang along with his guru at *mazaars* and local *melas*. Shahkoti was rich in talent and knowledge but materially impoverished. The fruits of success started trickling into Hans's life after he was given a chance to perform on television. Hans realised that he would have to

modify his performance to make it a saleable act. Shedding the black raiment and austere style of the Sufi singer, he took to colourful even, gaudy, attire and enlivened his performance with dance movement. To his regret, he had to short-change folk compositions and folk instruments and adapt to the technological sounds and fast paced composition. But the change paid off. Today he is one of the most sought after stars whose booking charts reads like a who's who. Hans is travelling all over the world and commanding his own price.

Whereas Hans's guru Shahkoti has to work at other jobs to survive. They may get little time, but they devote it to the pursuit of excellence in their particular musical tradition.

The situation of Naratta Ram of Patiala is also symptomatic of the same malaise. This renowned and talented *sarangi* player has five disciples who come to his home one or twice a week to learn the *sarangi* and folk compositions which Naratta Ram in turn imbibed from his guru as a youth. Knowledge passed down orally from generation to generation. But the teacher and the students cannot have regular practice sessions because they are all busy earning to eke out a living. Naratta Ram is now worried about the *health* of his *sarangi*. The instruments tend to dry out and become raspy if it is not played regularly. His son, Ranjit Singh, has taken to the *douroo* as he feels that the instrument needs little maintenance beyond being loosened and tightened regularly.

The need of the hour is documentation. The folk tradition is not a codified genre. Even the most modern of *ustads* do not write down either the poetry or the melodies they compose. Instead folk music is transmitted from *guru* to *sishya*; a student may spend years training under a master. This old fashioned human element may turn out to be the folk musician's saviour.

[This essay has been culled out by the author from her book, *From Mustard Fields to Disco Lights* published by Mapin. The book is also accompanied with a CD of some traditional folk tunes. — Editor]



Ganesh, Goalpara, Assam