

QUESTIONS  
AND ANSWERS ON THE ART OF  
DHRUPAD

## **1. WHAT IS DHRUPAD? WHAT IS ITS HISTORY?**

From almost 2,000 years ago sound has been used in the cultural region of India to convey Vedic knowledge and inspire devotion. The epic scriptures (such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata) were learned and transmitted through repetition and recitation.

In the 11th and 12th centuries innovations took place which resulted in what today is known as *Dhrupad*—a compound from *Dhruva* (the fixed star, the Polestar or North Star in the heavens) and *Pada* (a musical composition). The word itself tells us something about the intended musical ideal and structure. Whereas the earlier musical recitations proceeded in a literary or lineal manner, the “new” genre—Dhrupad—introduced a formal artistic construction whereby a musician first presents the tonic *Sound (Sa)* from which the whole musical structure will evolve and a central phrase (as part of the stanza) from which the musical and textual theme will develop.

The first stanza is called the *Sthaayi*, literally, “established” or “unchanging,” like the heavenly Polestar by which the traveler on earth finds his direction. From this introductory statement the artist plants a melodic seed from which he will cultivate an entire musical composition. The composition follows a creative process which is both deeply meditative as well as elaborately improvisational. What was mere text in the Epic Age is given a larger, poetic life—imbued with creative powers to draw the listener into the artist’s own subjective joys and revelations.

This simplified description of the musical nuance and innovation of Dhrupad is very important to our understanding of *all* forms of classical and semi-classical Indian music from the early centuries of Dhrupad compositions.

Whether they be vocal or instrumental compositions, the structure and development have evolved from this “mother” form, Dhrupad.

## **2. WHAT ARE THE SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF DHRUPAD? WHAT IS ITS FRAMEWORK?**

Dhrupad is Yoga. More specifically, **Nada Yoga**. Dhrupad implements the intensity of this ancient practice of equilibrium.

Its structure/framework can be outlined as the presentation of:

1. **Swar-sthan** and **Swaar-bhed**, in the Alaap

In which the depth and width of relative resonances of swar are explored.

2. **Layakari**, in the Bandish

By which the subtle yet unshakable filament of time (through laya and tala) are observed.

For a raga to be presented in clear form, both of the above aspects must be contained and offered by the musician in as complete a manner as achievable.

Dhrupad, from its meditative tendency, constructs a path to the listener.

*(The true teacher, across time, has been given the rare power of exactness in expression. The practice of a skill like the Yoga of sound in the presence of a Guru slowly and progressively refines the expression of the disciple.)*

### **3. HOW DOES THE DHRUPAD DIFFER FROM ITS COUNTERPARTS?**

Speaking practically, we need to inverse the statement. i.e., other forms of our music are different from Dhrupad because Dhrupad is the fundamental form of music.

Arguably there is no musical genre in our system that has not been impressed and influenced by Dhrupad. The existing differences can be distinguished though.

- a. The classical genre *Khayal* though influenced initially by the epic sound of Dhrupad evolved into a completely new means of expression, employing different techniques in its presentation. It is notable that the *kriya* in *Khayal* are basically Dhrupad Kriya, absorbed into the form and therefore altered by the masters. Every *Gharana* of *Khayal* traces back its origin to Dhrupad.
- b. Many semi-classical genres like *Thumri*, *Tappa*, *Hori* etc., present the more “emotional” versions of mind probably to some extent because they employ the medium of poetry and lyric.

#### 4. WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF DHRUPAD?

Dhrupad has ten concepts called *kriya*.

Aakaar

Lahak

Dhuran

Muran

Dagar

Kampit

Aandol

Gamak

Sphurita

Hudak.

The Alap that is performed in three phases and the Pada sung after this, both comprise all these concepts.

#### 5. WHAT ARE THE FORMS OF DHRUPAD PRESENTATION.

Dhrupad has three major presentations.

Vani (Vocal), Veena (Rudraveena) and Venu (Flute).

Vani can be any human voice, male or female; Veena (actually Rudraveena) comprises of stringed instruments; similarly Venu comprises of all wind instruments.

#### 6. CAN DHRUPAD BE PERFORMED ON INSTRUMENTS.

Yes. Dhrupad can be performed on instruments too. The style or philosophy of Dhrupad can be adopted by any instrument, any wind or string instrument. It has been said that Vani, Veena and Venu go together. It has to translate into any medium.

#### 7. WHAT IS ALAP?

*Alap* literally means *expression*. It is an expression / introduction of the raga. It is an uncomposed melody. *Alap* is not a *Dhun*. (not a fixed pattern). *Alap* also unfolds the beauty between two notes.

## 8. WHAT IS THE SPECIALITY OF ALAP IN DHRUPAD?

*Alap* is used to express the finer nuances and aesthetics of raga. It plays the role of unveiling the raga. An extensive alap such as is found in Dhrupad isn't present in any other genre of Indian classical music. The unveiling of a raga requires a few things, some of them being: a) depth of understanding, b) clarity of thought and c) impeccable presentation... the paths to the mind are varied and long and such sound can manage to travel the distance.

Dhrupad *alap* employs the following dhyana shlok: Hari on ananta narayana tu hi tarana taarana. The syllables from this line are separated to form the body of words one can use to speak with in the music. Subtle microtonal variations are visible / audible.

## 9. ARE DHRUPAD ALAP AND ALAP DONE IN DIFFERENT GENRES DIFFERENT?

Dhrupad's Alap has influenced many genres. Alap as a concept came from Dhrupad.

## 10. WHAT IS UPAJ?

Upaj means spontaneity. In Upaj, you bring Laya, Sur and Tala in spontaneous union. This is an intuitive ability necessary in the practice of Indian Classical music. The concept of Upaj is employed in both Alap and bandish. In Upaj, the musician is expected to improvise and elaborate within the discipline of Swar, Laya and Tala according to the raga and composition. Upaj can be explored in Layatmak, Talatmak, Swaratmak, Dhwanyatmak, Ragatmak and Nadatmak interpretation of the raga by the artist.

## 11. WHAT IS DHAMAR?

Dhamar is a name of a Tala (rhythmic cycle) comprising 14 beats. There are many traditional compositions, which are sung only in this Tala. These compositions are also known as Dhamar. The subject is generally a description of Holi (festival of colours) played by lord Krishna with Radha and Gopis, in many hues and shades.

Traditionally, Dhrupadiyas used to perform Dhamar in various ragas. The term “Dhrupad-Dhamar” as a substitute for the word Dhrupad became regular usage. The lingual accent of these compositions is slightly archaic in nature.

## 12. WHAT IS PADA

Pada is a composition set to different taals, for instance, Chautaal (12 beats), Sooltaal (10 beats), Tivrataal (7 beats) etc. They are known as Bandish. Usually a Pada has four stanzas: Sthaayi, Antara, Sanchaar and Aabhog. But, in practice, there are many Padas that have only two or three stanzas. In the days of old, the language was Sanskrit. Bharata’s Natyashastra and other scriptures mention many Dhruva-Padas. This changed to Pali and then to several dialects of Hindi (like Brij bhasha, khadi boli, modern Hindi etc.). As the lingual dialect is never a constraint, the fundamental pattern of the singing becomes the only criteria. However the discipline has been maintained intact in the tradition.

## 13. WHAT ARE THE SUBJECTS OF PADAS?

Traditionally, a Pada features Devata Stuti or Raja Stuti (praise of either almighty or a king). Also, there are several other subjects such as Prakrti Varnan (praise of Mother Nature); Shringar (beauty); Veera (bravery). Actually there is no thumb rule for the subject of a Pada. Many revered masters have adapted classical literature in to Dhrupad.

## 14. IS DHRUPAD DEVOID OF VIRTUOSITY?

The perfect or accomplished presentation of any art demands many abilities. Technique, skill, process, are required for the presentation of any art. And for sure in Dhrupad, it is requisite. Dhrupad demands a lot of control to follow the discipline of singing. Perhaps the lack of virtuosity amongst some dhrupadias had setback Dhrupad. Being inclined towards spirituality doesn’t mean to suppress virtuosity. Presentation of Alap in the simplest way is itself a matter of great virtuosity.

**15. WHAT IS CREATIVITY IN DHRUPAD?**

Creativity is a matter of the mind. It is always difficult to be creative within the discipline of Swar, Laya ad Tala of Raga. Whereas Dhrupad enforces strict discipline, it gives a musician the greatest space to work.

**16. WHY IS DHRUPAD LESS POPULAR THAN OTHER STYLES OF INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC?**

- a. Dhrupad is deep and meditative and not meant for much entertainment. Comparatively it has been less popular than other forms of music. Music audiences have given feedback that Dhrupad left the aesthetic field...
- b. Dhrupad singers did not take care to reach Dhrupad to the wider audience and to teach it. As a result of that there were very few Dhrupad singers and less Dhrupad performers available to perform.

**17. IS DHRUPAD RIGID?**

No. It is only perceived to be rigid.

**18. WHO CAN LEARN DHRUPAD?**

Anybody who is interested can learn Dhrupad except in cases where the natural voice is deformed.

**19. DOES DHRUPAD SIDELINE THE CONCEPT OF RASA IN ITS MUSIC?**

No art form can survive without Rasa. Rasa is a method of communicating with a listener. Dhrupad used predominantly only a few Rasas and therefore it might have been perceived, unduly, that Rasas were sidelined.

As Dhrupad is deep and meditative, it uses predominantly those Rasas that accommodate the expression. And Rasa has certainly not been sidelined in Dhrupad.

## 20. IS DHRUPAD CONNECTED TO PHILOSOPHY

Yes. Dhrupad imbibes the finer nuances of Yoga and Vedanta. Some researchers have proved the influence of pure notes on the human body and mind, and indicate that correct resonances affect positively the Chakras (resonance centres) of our body. Dhrupad has for sure been a way of thinking and practice.

## 21. WHAT IS THE INTER-RELATION BETWEEN THESE?

Music in its real form is a spectrum of creative mind. So, music is a strong path for one to go inside his mind as well as to express his mind. The musician and (through him) the listeners, transverse back to their mind and soul by the music. Therefore any music which has the ability to make a journey inward to the mind has a philosophy on its own.

## 22. HOW IS DHRUPAD PREVALENT STILL IN THE MODERN TIMES?

Music is not bound by time and space. This is especially so with classical music. Dhrupad, just as every fundamentally well-conceived art, survives from its ability to transcend everything else and become a state of being.

## 23. IS DHRUPAD BOUND TO INDIA ONLY?

Not at all. Since the syntax of Dhrupad incorporates the yoga of sound, the music is inherently universal. This then can only include, never exclude, whoever wishes to make its acquaintance. At its core, Alap in Dhrupad is wordless. It represents no religion, race or ideology. Although the Bandish use words, their sentiment is the general knowledge of the heart.

## 24. WHAT ARE THE VARIOUS INSTRUMENTS THAT LEND THEMSELVES TO DHRUPAD MUSIC?

Rudraveena, Surbahaar, Violin, Cello, Sarod, Sitar, Flute and many more.

**25. WHAT ARE THE ACCOMPANYING INSTRUMENTS USED IN DHRUPAD?**

Tanpura is used for Shruti (drone) accompaniment and Pakhawaj is used for rhythmic accompaniment.

**26. WHY DOES DHRUPAD USE ONLY TANPURA?**

Our raga system is based on Samvad (reflective feedback). The Samvad of Raga System cannot be found in the tempered scale. Tanpura is the instrument that provides the natural swar samvad for an artist to get the perfect organization of Raga. Tanpura denotes the basic Sa (or the tonic) of the artist. Through which the artist explores the different microtones of the raga and thus the soul of the raga. Most importantly, the human voice cannot be reproduced by any instrument. All instruments inherit their own limitations. So, the concept of accompaniment in vocal Dhrupad is truly unnecessary.

**27. WHY DOES DHRUPAD USE THE PAKHAWAJ INSTEAD OF THE POPULAR TABLA?**

Pakhawaj produces deep resonant sounds which are more suitable to the nature of Dhrupad. Also, tabla arrived much after the pakhawaj, which was already in use in the exploration of Dhrupad as an art form.

**28. DOES DHRUPAD RESTRAIN THE USE OF COMPOSITIONS?**

No. Traditional compositions of Dhrupad have their own beauty. But this does not inhibit the birth of new compositional ability. We have many examples of classical Hindi literature being composed and sung in Dhrupad form. The Gundecha Brothers have composed many poems of Tulsidas, Keshavdas, Kabir, Nirala, Mahadevi Varma etc., in Dhrupad.

**29. IS THE CONCEPT OF GURUKUL ESSENTIAL FOR DHRUPAD?**

It is, in fact, essential for all genres of Indian Classical Music. Here, the student lives with his guru and learns many things one-on-one during his taleem (education). The guru guides his disciple even in his practice hours. The Gurukul system helps establish values like harmony with co-learners, friendship, exchange of ideas, healthy competition and so on.

**30. DOES DHRUPAD RESTRAIN ITSELF TO SPECIFIC RAGAS?**

No. An artiste can sing / perform any raga in Dhrupad.

**31. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON NOTATION IN INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC?**

Our music is not meant to notate. It is based on Shruti (the tradition of listening). The student is expected to listen to the Swar-Bhed (microtonal difference) carefully from the teacher in order to memorise and master it. On the contrary, if one tries to notate the Raga he will certainly miss the finer nuances in the music. It is not at all possible to write the correct intonation of the Swara, which is the main characteristic of our music. Written up, the Raga is reduced to a tune. Every Raga has a personality of its own. It has an experience to go through. This way the Rasa of a Raga is created. It is not a tune like film song. A tune is like a shadow; and shadow is not a personality. This is why we do not subscribe to the idea of notation for Raga music.

**32. DO YOU NEED A GURU TO TEACH YOU.**

Yes. Our music can be taught accurately and effectively only through the Guru-Shishya tradition. Only a knowledgeable Guru can demonstratively teach the Gandhar of Bihag and Shankara; or the Dhiavat of Darbari or

Malkauns; or the Rishabh of Bhairav and Shree. Though the same phrases (by name) are used in various ragas; we can differentiate the raga only through Swar-Bhed. This knowledge comes only from the revered teacher. His part is not just to transfer the knowledge, but more importantly, to inspire and nurture the student's musicianship.

### 33. WHAT ESSENTIALLY DOES A STUDENT NEED TO LEARN FROM THE GURU?

The student's acuity of mind is foremost. He/she must develop listening and observation. This can be sharpened by a true guru. With a considerable amount listening, one becomes more capable of identifying Sur and Besur (in-tune and out-of-tune). But the music is very subtle. Our music is not based on the mathematical division of 12 keys. This yields innumerable microtones. Therefore to identify the different shades of a note (shrutis) one needs to be trained properly under the Guru. Only the guru can teach us the difference between two swaras. He also teaches why to select a particular shruti for a particular raga and why to sing in that way. He ably demonstrates the shift of emotions, rasa and feelings by the change of approach.

### 34. CAN'T ONE LEARN FROM HIS INNER SELF?

Like how one needs to be trained for years to become a good professional, a student of music must also undergo the training. Though it is true that the inner-self of everyone leads them to great heights, it is initially dormant. That inner-self must be trained in order to lead the student. This is particularly evident in the performing arts of music, dance, sculpture, etc. Only after the proper training by a guru, the inner-self is able to start talking to oneself. This process is like how a stone must be chiselled in order to become a good sculpture. There is no way to bypass this age-old time-tested law. Our tradition has thus given the highest state to a guru. Many masters, even at the pinnacle of their career, acknowledge the role their Gurus played in their lives and their music.

**35. SO YOU DO MEAN THE SAME NOTE APPEARS IN DIFFERENT RAGAS WITH DIFFERENT SHADES?**

Yes. Our great masters have been saying that there is a different Sa (the first note) for every Raga. This enormous secret is revealed only by Swar-Bhed. For example, the Shuddha Rishabh (by name) appears both in Raga Yaman and Jaijaiivanti. But, to trained ears, the two microtones of Rishabh are different. For example, we notice that a good sitar player always changes the positions of the frets, though subtly, to bring in the exact shades of microtones in changing Ragas.

**36. WHY DON'T YOU USE THE HARMONIUM AS AN ACCOMPANYING INSTRUMENT WHEN MOST MUSICIANS PREFER IT?**

Any keyed-instrument is foreign to our music. It is a very unscientific instrument according to our Raga theory. It makes use of the tempered scale, which divides an octave in to 12 equal parts. But, our Shruti is an aesthetic calibration process and a more complex mathematical system. Moreover, chromatic instruments like the harmonium don't imbibe many ornamentations or Kriya of our Raga system. For example, harmonium cannot represent Meend, Soot, Sphruti, Hudak etc., which are the integral parts of our music. Similarly a harmonium cannot travel from one note to another and cannot show a set of Shrutis in transition. The use of the harmonium has hazardously limited our tendencies of finer listening to swara because of its chromatic division.

**37. WHAT IS THE ULTIMATE PHILOSOPHY OF INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC?**

Indian Classical Music can take the mind to a level of inner peace, which is the origin of equilibrium. And peace, for sure, transforms one into a good human being.