

# In conversation with Gundecha Bandhu

*in Hindi with Sanjeev Jha*

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*English translation by P V Vivekanand*

*Sanjeev Jha:*

## **What do you mean by Dhrupad?**

*Umakant Gundecha:*

In the conception of Indian classical music, Dhrupad has been an important point of departure. Normally, Dhrupad is known only by its literary meaning from the words Dhruva and pada but it differs in its conceptual meaning. It is the circulatory construction of our music. Dhruva means unmoving. It implies the return of the Swara (tonal), Kala (time) and Shabda (textual) trajectories to a fixed point. This was an innovative thought as compared to its predecessors. All music existent today has attained this stature of construction because of Dhrupad. Perhaps this is the reason Dhrupad is considered as the soul of Indian music. If you could see the old compositions, they contain an indication to repeat the initial text-phrases. This is Dhrupad. The other meaning is that it has certain fixed rules for execution.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

## **Alap is known as an important element of Dhrupad. What is Alap?**

*Ramakant Gundecha :*

That which is not a tune is Alap. It is the microtonal experience of the Raga. Thakur Jaidev Singhji used to describe Alap as the soul of Indian music. It is the experience of the tones in their natural existence. It is a creative dialogue between the notes, their construction and reflection with each other. It is the arrangement of phrases, of pause and movement; the experience of the infinite between one Swara and another. These are beyond the grasp of a tune. We are generally accustomed to listening to a raga like a tune. Therefore, Alap demands special attention both from listener and singer. It breaks our common ways of listening. The intense experience of raga resides in the Alap only. The very nature of the microtonal construction of a raga reveals itself in the Alap. Alap is such an entity that its experience exists even in the voids of tune. Alap manifests an insight into the mind of the performer and therefore the listener is able to find a spiritual experience within it. Even academically, it is suggested that one who has mastered the art of Alap would have the raga presentational ability naturally ready.

Dhrupad therefore attributes an important place for Alap for which the study of and contemplation over Swara is imperative.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**Music, even till today, holds the guru-shishya tradition as important. Why?**

*Umakant Gundecha:*

Swara eludes written language. The feeling of Swara is possible only through attentive listening. Any endeavour to write down the notes would collapse their true essence and change their form. Therefore except for the memory from listening, there is no other way to learn. Only from the master can this be learnt. All institutionalized efforts to promote our music through the notation system were not as successful. They couldn't bestow a refined knowledge of Raga and Swara to the students. We learn and understand Raga music just as tunes. Shri Mukund Lath has contributed valuable research in this realm. It is quite an eminent body of work for all musicians. To sum it up, you will always see a great guru behind the making of a maestro.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**Dhrupad vocalism was not so popular for a time. What were the reasons?**

*Ramakant Gundecha:*

In Dhrupad, a lack of intellectual insight, improper training, methods of presentation, some of these have been the cause for this. Even for us, when we started training, there was not much scope and encouragement for this art. We anyway took the path because we had immense faith in the inherent brilliance of this music. It was our great fortune that we had legendary gurus like Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar & Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar who together showed us the expanse of the art, imparted to us its hidden treasures and made clear key insights of the presentation of this music through their teaching. It is a historical achievement that our gurus have trained many students outside their family and community and successfully so.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**How do you see the concept of Gharana and traditions of music?**

*Umakant Gundecha:*

Unfortunately the perception prevalent towards these terms is both unscientific and unnatural. When you start copying verbatim your guru, the present scenario considers you to be the authentic

representative of the tradition. This is more an idea from Western classical music. First, we should understand that what we call tradition is not by virtue of the music being an exact copy of a teacher or lineage; it is the effect of a creative genius which he built on the principles and musical elements available in his time. So, no tradition survives in the real meaning unless it is touched by the natural self of the artist. The other problem is about the copying of voice. No two voices can be the same; and to mimic the voice of a guru or a gharana is most unnatural. It is this imitation that reduces the creative ability of an artiste to a great extent. It is therefore necessary to question carefully the meaning of tradition and lineage. If great legends like Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Ustad Faiyaz Khan and Ustad Amir Khan had merely imitated the voices of their gurus, we may not have been mesmerized by their historical stature.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**How do Western and Indian classical music differ from each other?**

*Ramakant Gundecha:*

Western and Indian classical music differ in perspective. Just as we consider God omnipresent, in our music, every sound is considered of equal importance. The need is just to establish the exact harmonic reflections. This is the fundamental concept of our music. Raga music has evolved on the model of the swayambhoo gandhar emerging out of a well-tuned tanpura. Our ancestors centuries ago knew that the intervals between the seven notes are not equal and hence they didn't construct tempered scales. Instead, they used the very same vividness of shrutis as the basis of our raga music. In the past five hundred years, due to orchestration in Western classical music, there was a need for the tempered scale, which had all the notes divided at equal intervals. But according to our raga music, the tempered scale is out of tune. Therefore our ancestors never constructed any keyed instruments. The harmonium is a 'vivadi' swara in our music.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**Is it for this reason you do not use the harmonium in Dhrupad?**

*Umakant Gundecha:*

It is not only for Dhrupad but for the entire raga music that the harmonium remains inappropriate. Its tempered scale is the reason

for this. As we said before, it doesn't construct the experience of raga but only its tune. It turns raga music into desi music. It has created readymade structures for our ragas and so has become very popular. But this is visible only when one listens attentively to the intricacies of Swara and Raga. Unfortunately, music learning doesn't pay much attention to these issues. Another discrepancy is that the parallel theory emanating from this instrument is so popular that our students achieve gold medals based on that.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**Why do we have so few Dhrupadiyas? Are you working on this?**

*Ramakant Gundecha:*

Dhrupad singers are themselves responsible for this. We speak much about the art but have not been able to pass the knowledge on efficiently. We popularized Dhrupad as a difficult art to keep listeners and practitioners away from it. When we have young Indian technocrats soaring new heights every day, would Dhrupad be difficult for them? No. What is responsible for this is we have never thought of an accurate and scientific methodology for the transfer of the knowledge. Rather than a systematized and analytical study of the art, we learnt to be in awe of and fear it. But our teachers, Ustad Mohiuddin Dagar and Ustad Fariduddin Dagar made an effort to instruct us with immense thought. Dhrupad is not difficult. Even if it is, it might be just as difficult as becoming a medical doctor or a scientist. Today, if the new generation receives correct guidance, it would without doubt conquer new heights. As our endeavour, we have set up a Gurukul in Bhopal. There are many students from all over the globe learning under the guru-shishya tradition. We have faith that in another five to ten years, not only Indian students, but foreigners too would emerge as Dhrupad performers. Even foreigners have deep interest in Dhrupad and their dedication in the learning is commendable. Presently, Aliya Rashid of Lahore and Amita Sinha Mahapatra of Bengal are performing well. We have been constantly aspiring for the creative research of Dhrupad and are now seeing the results. We have also a vast audio-visual library in the Gurukul to assist in learning and research.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**You have been credited for making Dhrupad popular and a lot of people feel connected to this music. What did you change?**

*Umakant Gundecha:*

The fundamental concepts of Dhrupad remain the same. But from the beginning we took notice of why listeners are keeping away from such powerful and mesmerizing music. We rigorously studied these issues with a questioning mind in the light of the taleem (education) we received from our teachers and there were good results. There were many nuances that were often overlooked in the presentation of Dhrupad music and were a source of disappointment to the listener. We tried to include these necessary nuances. Voice culture played a vital role in making Dhrupad less popular. We have observed voice culture as an important issue from the beginning and aimed at better vocalism. Swara, Laya, Taala, Pada, Upaj and the dialogue with the Pakhawaj were key areas. We never expected audiences to accept Dhrupad just because it is considered a great art. But we did care that it should hold true to the expectations of a cultured and intelligent audience. We tried to incorporate all these issues in our performance.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**Often your voices arrive together while singing and this reflects the harmonizing quality present in Western classical music. What is your opinion?**

*Ramakant Gundecha:*

Centuries ago our masters thought over the fundamental swar-samvad theory. Western music is still younger in this respect. Our Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar used to play tribhinna Swara (three notes at a time) on the rudraveena. Tribhinna swar is a state of natural harmony. We adopted this in our singing. It is true that we were the first to try it and it contributed positively to the presentation.

*Sanjeev Jha:*

**Tanpura has an important role in our music. Would you like to comment?**

*Umakant Gundecha:*

The entire realm of raga music is based on the natural reflection of notes of the tanpura. When we make consonance of the Shadaj of the tanpura and the rest of the notes, only then the true nature of a raga reveals itself. Therefore without tanpura, raga music does not exist.

*Sanjeev Jha:* **But many instrumentalists avoid the tanpura. Why is it so?**

*Ramakant Gundecha:* In our opinion, it is not right to avoid the tanpura. If all the Swaras of raga through voice or instrument are not reflected by the tanpura, their purity becomes questionable. Fundamentally, it is a bit difficult to present a raga (through voice or instrument) to the accompaniment of the tanpura. This may be the reason for it.

*Sanjeev Jha:* **Your vocalism differs slightly from that of the Dagar Gharana. What are your thoughts on this?**

*Umakant Gundecha:* Actually, music differs with every person even though they belong to the same lineage. If you see all the seven Ustads of the Dagar Gharana, you will find varied vocalisms. If you standardize one, the others get questionable. Therefore, we were taught from the beginning not to imitate our Ustad. The difference is natural and not intentional.

*Sanjeev Jha:* **You sing music from the Dagar gharana. So, can you be called Dagers?**

*Ramakant Gundecha:* The usage of 'Dagar' as a last name began with Ustad Rahimuddin Khan Dagar Saheb. Before that, nobody in the family used it. Actually it is not related to the family; it is a stylistic recognition. Whoever sings this style is a Dagar but we don't feel that it is required for us.

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