

ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF SELECTED PROMINENT MUSICIANS OF THE 21ST CENTURY IN PROMOTION AND PROPAGATION OF HINDUSTANI CLASSICAL MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century has witnessed a transformative evolution in the global music landscape, driven significantly by the efforts of prominent musicians who have played a pivotal role in propagating music across various frontiers. This article examines the contributions of selected 21st-century musicians, analyzes the impact of their contributions to music through case studies from diverse backgrounds. The study highlights how these musicians have leveraged media platforms, collaborations, and advocacy to reach wider audiences and inspire emerging aspirants.

The article examines the significant role and contributions of eminent vocalists—Rashid Khan, Rajan and Sajjan Mishra, Chhannulal Mishra, Shubha Mudgal, Ajoy Chakraborty, and Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande—in promoting and propagating Hindustani classical music in contemporary times. These artists have not only upheld rich gharana traditions but have also adapted to modern platforms, using digital media, public outreach, and cross-genre collaborations to reach newer audiences. The study explores their impact on music education, cultural continuity, and performance innovation while highlighting their efforts in mentorship, archival recordings, and international representation. By bridging the traditional and the modern, these musicians have ensured that Indian classical music remains relevant and revered in the 21st century.

Keywords: Indian Classical music, Hindustani vocalists, music promotion, 21st century; Gharana tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Indian classical music, with its profound spiritual depth and rich aesthetic tradition, has been an enduring cultural force for centuries. In the 21st century, however, this art form faces new challenges and possibilities. Rapid globalization, digital disruption, changing audience preferences, and the decline of the traditional guru-shishya parampara in its original form have prompted both concern and innovation within the classical music community. Amid these shifts, a few towering figures have emerged as torchbearers of tradition while also serving as catalysts for modernization and outreach. This article explores the invaluable contributions of five such eminent Hindustani classical vocalists: Ustad Rashid Khan, Pandit Rajan and Sajjan Mishra, Pandit Chhannulal Mishra, Shubha Mudgal, and Dr. Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande. Each of these artists has played a significant role in not only preserving the purity and legacy of their respective gharanas but also expanding the reach of Indian classical music through innovative approaches to performance, education, and media engagement.

These musicians have performed on prestigious stages across the world, mentored the next generation of artists, and embraced modern platforms—from digital concerts to fusion collaborations—without compromising the essence of the classical idiom. Their work illustrates how tradition can coexist with transformation, and how individual dedication can shape the cultural narrative of a nation. Through a close examination of their musical journeys, teaching philosophies, and outreach strategies, this article aims to highlight how their efforts have contributed to the promotion and propagation of Indian classical music in the 21st century, ensuring its relevance and vitality for future generations (Bhatia, 2016; Roy, 2015).

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study examines the contributions of selected prominent Hindustani classical vocalists of the 21st century to the promotion and propagation of Indian classical music. It focuses on six influential figures—Ustad Rashid Khan, Pandit Rajan and Sajjan Mishra, Pandit Chhannulal Mishra, Shubha Mudgal, Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, and Pandit Ajoy Chakraborty—who have significantly shaped the contemporary landscape of Hindustani vocal music. These artists have maintained fidelity to traditional forms while simultaneously engaging diverse, modern audiences. The scope of the study includes the following areas:

- **Performance and Innovation:** This includes how artists have upheld gharana-based traditions while also integrating contemporary elements, such as fusion, film music, or new compositions. For instance, Ustad Rashid Khan's crossover collaborations have helped make khayal more accessible to mainstream listeners (Roy, 2015; 2023).

- **Pedagogical Contributions:** Many of these artists have taken active roles as educators. Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty, for example, founded the institution Shrutinandan, which emphasizes early vocal training and aims to nurture future generations of classical vocalists. Ashwini Bhide Deshpande has also contributed significantly through music workshops and the publication of bandishes (Deshpande, 2022).
- **Cultural Preservation:** Artists like Pandit Rajan and Sajan Mishra and Pandit Chhannulal Mishra have devoted their careers to preserving and performing traditional dhrupad, khayal, thumri, and bhajan repertoires, especially from the Banaras and Purab traditions (Bhatia, 2016; The Hindu, 2021).
- **Public Engagement and Media Outreach:** The study considers how digital and mass media have been employed to popularize classical music. Shubha Mudgal, for instance, has been instrumental in using platforms like Raaggiri.com and NCPA Digital to reach wider audiences, including youth and diaspora communities (Mudgal, 2020).
- **Global Representation:** Several of these musicians have performed internationally, taught students abroad, and participated in global collaborations, thus playing key roles in the internationalization of classical music (Roy, 2015; NCPA Digital, 2021).

Study is limited to the Hindustani vocal tradition and does not include artists from the Carnatic system. Furthermore, it focuses on developments and activities predominantly within the 21st century, although it acknowledges the artist's earlier contributions wherever relevant.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach aimed at understanding the artistic contributions and cultural impact of selected Hindustani classical vocalists in the 21st century. The methodology is based on secondary data analysis, combining descriptive case studies with media and literature reviews.

Selection of Subjects

The musicians chosen—Ustad Rashid Khan, Pandit Rajan and Sajan Mishra, Pandit Chhannulal Mishra, Shubha Mudgal, Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, and Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty—were selected based on the following criteria:

- Long-standing contribution to Hindustani classical music.
- Active engagement in performance and/or pedagogy in the 21st century.
- Recognition through awards or institutions (e.g., Sangeet Natak Akademi, Padma awards).
- Presence in digital or global media platforms, indicating outreach beyond traditional audiences (Bhatia, 2016; NCPA Digital, 2021).

DATA SOURCES

- **Literature Review:** Books, biographies, and academic texts were reviewed to trace the musicians' lineage, stylistic evolution, and contributions (Roy, 2015; Bhatia, 2016).
- **Online Media and Interviews:** Content from Scroll.in, The Hindu, Indian Express, and official artist websites were analyzed to study public narratives, artist philosophies, and ongoing projects (Mudgal, 2020; The Hindu, 2021; Deshpande, 2022).
- **Audio-Visual Material:** Concert recordings, interviews, and teaching sessions, available on platforms like YouTube and Raaggiri.com, provide insight into stylistic approaches and audience engagement (Mudgal, 2020; Scroll.in, 2023).
- **Institutional Websites and Archives:** Information was gathered from institutions such as Shrutinandan (Chakrabarty, n.d.), NCPA Digital, and Sangeet Natak Akademi to understand their role in music education and promotion.

Analysis Techniques

The study used thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns in the musicians' contributions across five main domains: performance, pedagogy, preservation, outreach, and global influence. Case-based comparisons allowed for understanding both shared and distinct contributions among the artists.

Validity and Limitations

To enhance validity, multiple sources were cross-verified, and only credible publications and verified platforms were used. However, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data. No primary fieldwork or direct interviews were conducted, and findings are interpretive rather than statistical.

DISCUSSION

Ustad Rashid Khan

Ustad Rashid Khan, a prominent exponent of the Rampur-Sahaswan Gharana, is widely regarded as one of the finest khayal vocalists of his generation. A child prodigy trained under his grand-uncle, Ustad Nissar Hussain Khan, Rashid Khan is known for his rich voice, impeccable sense of sur and laya, and deeply emotive renderings of ragas (Roy, 2015). His gayaki is a seamless blend of traditional technique and personal creativity, marked by long, meditative alap and subtle taans. Apart from classical concerts, Rashid Khan has ventured into light classical and fusion genres.

He has composed for and performed in Indian films, including *My Name Is Khan* and *Morning Raga*, thus introducing khayal-based singing to a broader audience (Scroll.in, 2023). His openness to collaborate with Western jazz and Sufi music artists shows a modern, boundary-crossing spirit while staying rooted in the classical tradition. He has performed at prestigious international festivals and has been a visiting teacher at music institutions abroad. His influence in making classical music more accessible and emotionally resonant for modern listeners remains significant (Roy, 2015; NCPA Digital, 2021).

Pandit Rajan And Sajan Mishra

The legendary duo of Pandit Rajan and Sajan Mishra belonged to the Banaras Gharana and were torchbearers of one of the most respected gharanas in Hindustani classical music. Known for their rich and spiritually infused khayal renditions, they exemplified a perfect blend of tradition, brotherly coordination, and devotion to music (Bhatia, 2016). Their performances were marked by soulful elaboration of ragas, precise taal control, and an emotional depth that resonated with audiences across generations.

In addition to khayal, the duo excelled in presenting devotional forms like bhajans and Sanskrit verses, preserving the religious and philosophical dimensions of Indian music (The Hindu, 2021). They contributed to pedagogy through masterclasses and mentorships, both in India and abroad. Rajan-Sajan Mishra were recipients of the Padma Bhushan and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, among other honors, and their legacy continues through recordings and disciples they trained (Bhatia, 2016).

Pandit Chhannulal Mishra

A doyen of the Purab Ang gayaki and a leading exponent of the Banaras Gharana, Pandit Chhannulal Mishra is revered for his renditions of thumri, dadra, kajri, chaiti, and bhajans. His music is rooted in rural idioms and the spiritual ethos of the Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb, blending classical rigor with folk flavor (The Hindu, 2020). Mishra Ji's ability to communicate profound emotion and devotional sentiment through accessible musical forms has made him beloved by classical and non-classical audiences alike.

His bhajan albums dedicated to Lord Rama, Krishna, and Shiva have a wide following, both in India and in the Indian diaspora (Roy, 2015). Despite his strong classical foundation, he has remained open to modern recording methods and YouTube outreach, which has helped him connect with younger generations. He has also mentored students and participated in numerous lecture-demonstrations on folk-classical traditions (The Hindu, 2021).

Shubha Mudgal

Shubha Mudgal is one of the most versatile and socially engaged musicians in India. Trained in Hindustani classical music under eminent gurus like Pandit Ramashreya Jha and Pandit Vinay Chandra Maudgalya, she is known for her powerful voice and experimentation with various musical forms (Mudgal, 2020). In addition to her khayal and thumri performances, Mudgal has composed and performed non-traditional music with themes ranging from Sufism to social justice. She has written extensively about music policy, the status of classical musicians, and gender in the arts.

Her digital initiatives, especially her involvement with Raaggiri.com, have made classical music more accessible through online workshops, artist interviews, and educational content (Mudgal, 2020). She also contributes to public discourse through newspaper columns and speaks out on cultural preservation. Shubha Mudgal's commitment to innovation, education, and activism places her at the intersection of tradition and modernity in Indian music.

Ashwini Bhide Deshpande

Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, an accomplished vocalist of the Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana, is known for her scholarly approach and immaculate raga rendering. She trained under her mother and later with Pandit Narayanrao Datar and Pandit Ratnakar Pai. Her

performances are marked by complex raga architecture, rare ragas, and intricate bandishes (Deshpande, 2022). She has published compilations of bandishes (Raag Rachananjali volumes) and writes regularly on issues related to classical music and pedagogy. Her approach is both analytical and emotive, often combining traditional elements with carefully curated innovations in presentation (Deshpande, 2022). Ashwini Bhide is a dedicated teacher who regularly conducts workshops and lecture-demonstrations in India and overseas. Her online presence through concert recordings and masterclasses has grown, making her an accessible figure for students and connoisseurs alike.

Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty

Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty, an eminent vocalist of the Patiala Gharana, is known for his versatility, vocal range, and commitment to nurturing new talent. He trained under several great masters and later founded the institute Shrutinandan in Kolkata, which emphasizes early voice training and emotional connection with music (Chakrabarty, n.d.). His performances encompass khayal, thumri, bhajan, tappa, and even Carnatic compositions, reflecting a pan-Indian musical vision (Roy, 2015).

As a teacher, he has mentored many acclaimed vocalists, including her Kaushiki Chakrabarty, and conducts global workshops and lecture-demonstrations. Chakrabarty's global engagements include teaching residencies in the U.S., U.K., and Europe. Through Shrutinandan and his online initiatives, he has successfully created a model for music education that blends traditional values with modern techniques (Chakrabarty, n.d.; NCPA Digital, 2021).

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the role and contributions of selected 21st-century Hindustani classical vocalists, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Scope Restriction:** The study is limited to vocalists within the Hindustani classical tradition. It does not include instrumentalists or artists from the Carnatic tradition, thereby narrowing the breadth of Indian classical music as a whole. As such, the findings may not fully represent the broader trends in classical music propagation across India (Roy, 2015).
- **Reliance on Secondary Data:** Due to practical constraints, the research relies solely on secondary sources such as published interviews, articles, recordings, websites, and biographies (Bhatia, 2016; Mudgal, 2020). While these sources are credible and widely cited, the absence of primary data—such as direct interviews with the musicians or their students—limits the depth and specificity of personal insights and firsthand experiences.
- **Interpretive Nature of Qualitative Research:** This study employs a qualitative approach, which is interpretive by nature. Assessing a musician's "influence" or "contribution" can be subjective and may vary based on cultural, generational, or regional contexts. What is considered a significant contribution by one audience segment may not carry the same weight with another (Scroll.in, 2023).
- **Language and Accessibility Barriers:** Some original materials, especially those involving Pandit Chhannulal Mishra and other artists with deep roots in regional traditions, are primarily available in Hindi or regional dialects. This linguistic limitation may have restricted access to certain nuanced content and performances.
- **Digital Divide in Outreach Analysis:** While digital media is a central focus in evaluating modern outreach, the study does not comprehensively assess the digital divide—i.e., the unequal access to technology across regions and age groups. This may affect how outreach efforts by artists like Shubha Mudgal or Ajoy Chakrabarty are perceived and received (Mudgal, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The study of prominent 21st-century Hindustani classical vocalists—Ustad Rashid Khan, Pandit Rajan and Sajan Mishra, Pandit Chhannulal Mishra, Shubha Mudgal, Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, and Pandit Ajoy Chakrabarty—demonstrates their pivotal role in both preserving and innovating within the classical music tradition. These musicians have successfully upheld the rich legacy of their respective gharanas while embracing contemporary methods to broaden the reach of Hindustani classical music (Bhatia, 2016; Roy, 2015).

Through dynamic concert performances, pedagogical commitments, and extensive use of digital platforms, they have made classical music more accessible to a new generation of listeners, both in India and globally (Mudgal, 2020; NCPA Digital, 2021). Their efforts reflect a nuanced balance between tradition and modernity, ensuring that classical music remains vibrant and relevant in an increasingly globalized cultural landscape.



However, the challenges of limited direct engagement and the digital divide highlight areas for future research and expanded outreach strategies (Scroll.in, 2023). Nonetheless, the collective contributions of these artists have been instrumental in revitalizing interest in Hindustani classical music and securing its place in the 21st-century musical world.

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