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HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL VOCAL COMPOSITIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DHRUPAD, KHYAAL, AND THUMRI

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ABSTRACT

Music is memory, organised. That is a useful frame for approaching Hindustani classical music — an oral tradition in which fifteen centuries of aesthetic argument are sedimented into the three vocal forms this paper examines: Dhrupad, Khyaal, and Thumri. The aim here is neither comprehensive nor encyclopaedic. What is attempted, rather, is a structural reading of how one genre gives way to the next, and why. Dhrupad established the philosophical spine of the tradition — austerity, tonal purity, the treatment of sound as ritual. Khyaal, whose very name (Persian for 'imagination') is already a polemic, opened the form to improvisation. Thumri returned music to the body, to the erotic-devotional register, to a kind of emotional directness the earlier genres had actively refused. Drawing on Sanskrit treatises, Persian chronicles, and contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship, the study argues that these transitions were never merely aesthetic. They were always also political.

Keywords: historical evolution, Indian classical music, dhrupad, Khyaal, Thumari.

Introduction

Begin with an obvious claim, then complicate it. The obvious claim: Hindustani classical music is old. The complication: 'old' and 'continuous' are not the same thing. A great deal of what we now call classical was institutionally reconstructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — by reformers like Bhatkhande and Paluskar, under the specific pressures of colonial modernity, through a nationalist anxiety about cultural respectability. The tradition is genuinely ancient. It has also been genuinely remade.

This paper addresses three vocal genres that between them trace the major aesthetic trajectories of North Indian music. *Dhrupad* is the oldest — severe, architecturally precise, philosophically committed. It dominated the Mughal courts of the sixteenth century and then, over the next three centuries, slowly lost ground. *Khyaal* replaced it. So thoroughly, in fact, that many educated listeners today would struggle to recognise Dhrupad as belonging to the same tradition. *Thumri* is the third — and the most politically uncomfortable. Routinely dismissed as 'light classical,' it carries an unresolved historical burden: its association with the *tawaif* (courtesan) culture of nineteenth-century Lucknow has made it, for more than a century, a subject that respectable scholarship approaches with a certain nervousness.

What this paper does not attempt is a survey of the hundreds of *gharanas* that have shaped each form, nor a technical manual of raga grammar. Those are important subjects, addressed elsewhere by scholars such as Deepak Raja, Daniel Neuman, Katherine Schofield, and Martin Clayton. The aim here is narrower but, I think, still worthwhile: to trace the logic by which one genre generates the conditions for the next. Musical evolution in this tradition has never been purely aesthetic. It has always, also, been political.

Methods

A word, first, about methodological constraints. Hindustani classical music is transmitted orally — from *guru* to *shishya*, body to body — and much of what matters most never reaches any written text. A raga can be notated; notation captures the skeleton. The flesh — the particular inflection of a particular note, the unspoken understanding between vocalist and *tabla* accompanist, the interpretive habits that distinguish one lineage's reading from another's — lives only in sustained practice. Reconstructing such a tradition from textual sources alone would, frankly, produce caricature.

The present study therefore combines four lines of inquiry, not equally weighted. First, textual analysis: Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* (c. 2nd century CE), Matanga's *Brihaddeshi* (c. 6th century), and Sharngadeva's *Sangita Ratnakara* (13th century) provide the theoretical scaffolding. The medieval Persian chronicles — the *Ain-i-Akbari* (1593), Faqirullah's *Raag Darpan* (1666), and *Tuhfat al-Hind* (1675) — document the mature genres and identify specific practitioners, though the biases of courtly historiography must be kept firmly in view. Second, ethnographic conversation with practising musicians and *gharana* masters, which reveals interpretive frameworks no text records. Third, comparative technical analysis — tracing, for

example, how the *meend* (glide) central to Dhrupad was reinterpreted as the *khatka* and *murki* of Khyaal. Fourth, socio-political contextualisation: the collapse of Mughal authority, the annexation of Awadh in 1856, the early-twentieth-century reform movements — these are not background. They are causal.

Results: The Evolution of Dhrupad

Dhrupad is the oldest of the three genres and the least commonly performed today. These two facts are related, but not in the simple way one might suppose. Its age is, in Indian aesthetic terms, a credential — antiquity confers authority. Its relative absence from contemporary performance is a function of altered listening habits: audiences shaped by radio, cinema, and the standard ninety-minute recital format find Dhrupad's demands excessive. A thirty-minute *alap* without percussion does not travel well into modern concert logistics.

The genre descends from the *Dhruva Prabandha*, a specific category within the medieval Sanskrit taxonomy of vocal compositions described in the *Sangita Ratnakara*. Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the transition from *Prabandha* to Dhrupad involved a shift from Sanskrit to the vernacular Braj Bhasha — the literary dialect of the *Krishna-bhakti* movement. By the fourteenth century, Dhrupad had become the central form of *Haveli Sangeet*, the devotional music of the Pushtimarg tradition in the temples of Mathura and Vrindavan. This matters. In its earliest phase, Dhrupad was not entertainment. It was theology set to sound, grounded in the concept of *Nada Brahma* — sound as the creative principle of the universe.

The first explicit reference to 'Dhrupad' as a distinct genre appears in the *Ain-i-Akbari* of 1593, but Abu'l-Fazl is describing something already mature. The decisive transitional moment came earlier — in late fifteenth-century Gwalior, under Raja Man Singh Tomar (r. 1486–1516). Man Singh gathered the leading musicians of the period — Nayak Bakshu, Baiju Bawra, Nayak Pandaviya — and commissioned what became the *Man Kutuhal*, the first systematic theoretical treatment of Dhrupad. Under his patronage, the genre acquired a secular-courtly vocabulary without abandoning its metaphysical roots.

The reign of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605) is conventionally treated as Dhrupad's zenith. The central figure is Tansen, though the mythological accretion around him makes sober historical assessment difficult. What we can say is that the period saw the codification of four stylistic lineages — the *Banis* — which functioned as the structural precursors of the later *Gharana* system.

Bani	Associated With	Defining Character
Gaugahar	Tansen	Meditative, tonally pure; least ornamented.
Khandar	Raja Samokhan Singh	Robust, forceful, rhythmically emphatic.
Nauhar	Srichand Rajput	Swift melodic leaps, traditionally 'lion-like.'
Dagar	Brij Chand of Dagur	Melodically flowing; the lineage still most active today.

Structurally, Dhrupad's distinguishing feature is its four-part compositional architecture: *Sthayi* (lower and middle octaves — the raga's home), *Antara* (upper register), *Sanchari* (the wandering synthesis), and *Abhog* (the conclusion, often containing the composer's signature). Preceding the composition is the extended *alap*, performed using 'Nom-Tom' syllables derived from sacred mantras, unfolding through three stages: the glacial *Vilambit*, the moderate *Jod*, and the intensified *Jhala*. Percussion enters only with the composition, provided by the *Pakhawaj* — whose bass resonance suits Dhrupad's rhythmic demands in a way no lighter drum can.

By the late nineteenth century, the genre was in serious decline. Khyaal had displaced it in popular taste. The courts that sustained it had collapsed or diminished. What rescued the tradition, unexpectedly, was international academic interest in the 1960s and 70s, combined with a renewed domestic appetite for meditative listening. The Dagar family became central to this revival. Today, Dhrupad occupies an odd position — less performed than Khyaal, but perhaps more deeply respected.

Results: The Evolution of Khyaal

Khyaal won. That, more than anything else, is the salient fact of the modern Hindustani tradition. Walk into any serious classical concert in India today — from the Sawai Gandharva festival in Pune to a modest *mehfil* in Varanasi — and you will almost certainly be listening to Khyaal. This dominance is so complete that it has become almost invisible, a kind of default condition of the tradition. But it is, historically speaking, recent. As a fully mature genre with its current characteristics, Khyaal is at most three hundred years old.

The name itself is the argument. *Khyaal* derives from the Persian-Arabic term for 'imagination' or 'thought' — a nomenclature that signals, from the outset, a break from Dhrupad's fixed-composition aesthetic. Where Dhrupad valued discipline, Khyaal values inventive improvisation. Where Dhrupad demanded structural completeness, Khyaal offers a simpler compositional frame precisely to open space for elaboration.

The genre's origins are contested. One theory credits Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), the polymath poet-musician of the Delhi Sultanate, with developing an early form of Khyaal by blending Perso-Arabic ornamental technique with the *Prabandha* framework. The narrative is attractive but difficult to verify — the gap between Khusrau's death and the first reliable textual references to Khyaal is more than three centuries. An alternative attribution credits Sultan Hussain Shah Sharqi of Jaunpur (r. 1458–1479) with composing the foundational *Bada Khyaal* compositions. The honest answer is probably that Khyaal emerged through a long, diffuse process of experimentation — in Sufi lodges, regional courts, the informal musical culture of medieval North India — and that single-figure attribution is more narrative convenience than historical reality.

What can be dated with precision is Khyaal's crystallisation into its modern form: the eighteenth-century court of Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah 'Rangila' (r. 1719–1748). Two musicians — Niyamat Khan ('Sadarang') and his nephew Feroz Khan ('Adarang') — are the central figures. Sadarang, a descendant of the Tansen lineage and a master of the *Been* (veena), effectively translated the instrument's gliding ornamental vocabulary into vocal music. His compositions established the pattern that persists today: slow, expansive *bandishes* set to the twelve-beat *Ektal* or sixteen-beat *Tilwada*, emphasising *Vistar* — expansive melodic elaboration — over rhythmic density.

Structurally, Khyaal reduces Dhrupad's four-part architecture to just two stanzas: *Sthayi* and *Antara*. A full recital typically pairs a *Bada Khyaal* (slow, meditative) with a *Chhota Khyaal* (fast, virtuosic). Ornamentally, the genre admitted devices Dhrupad had excluded: the *Khatka* (a quick note-cluster around a pitch centre), the *Murki* (a rapid trill), and various categories of *Tan* (fast melodic runs). The accompanying percussion shifted from the *Pakhawaj* to the *Tabla*, whose lighter timbre better suits the rhythmic demands of *Drut* elaboration.

As Mughal authority collapsed through the eighteenth century, Khyaal singers dispersed to the surviving princely courts — Gwalior, Jaipur, Agra, Rampur. This dispersal produced the *Gharana* system: stylistic lineages functioning simultaneously as schools, families, and brand identities. The Gwalior Gharana, preserving the closest continuity with Dhrupad's robustness, is considered foundational. Kirana emphasised melodic interiority and the treatment of the individual note. Agra prized rhythmic power and muscular vocal delivery. Jaipur-Atrauli stressed grammatical comprehensiveness and structural rigour. These are not cosmetic distinctions. They continue to generate real debate among practitioners.

Results: The Evolution of Thumri

Thumri is the most misunderstood of the three genres, and the reason is not musical. It is political. The 'light classical' label that attaches to Thumri is, in origin, a twentieth-century value judgement dressed up as a musicological category. Thumri is 'light,' in this framing, because its historical performing community was female — specifically, the *tawaif* artists of nineteenth-century Awadh — and because its aesthetic priorities (*bhava*, affective state; lyrical flexibility; emotional directness) were not the priorities that the male-dominated reform tradition had defined as 'serious.' Whether this framing tells us more about Thumri, or about the social anxieties of the people who invented it, is a question worth keeping open.

The genre's precursors can be traced to the dance-song forms of the *Natyashastra* — types like the *catuspadi* — oriented toward theatrical expression rather than abstract melodic grammar. The first explicit textual mention of 'Thumri' occurs in Faqirullah's *Raag Darpan* (1665), which notes that the raga *Barwa* was commonly rendered in a 'Thumri' style. At this stage, the term apparently denoted a manner of rendering rather than a fully independent compositional genre. By the early eighteenth century, Thumri had achieved sufficient autonomy to be ranked, in some accounts, as the fourth major vocal form after Dhrupad, Khyaal, and Tappa.

The etymology is revealing. 'Thumri' derives from *thumak* — the rhythmic stamp of the foot in dance. The genre was, from its earliest documented phase, inseparable from bodily movement. This was not peripheral. It was constitutive.

The decisive period for Thumri's mature development was the reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh (r. 1847–1856). Wajid Ali Shah, who composed under the *takhallus* 'Akhtar Piya,' was both patron and practitioner. Under his direct influence, the Lucknow court became the most sophisticated centre of Thumri culture in North India. The style that emerged — *Bandish Thumri* or *Lucknow Ang* — was fast-tempo, rhythmically strict, and lyrically explicit in its handling of *Shringar Rasa*. The performance context was the *mehfil* — the intimate salon — where the *tawaif* integrated vocal performance with Kathak dance and *mukh-abhinaya* (facial expression). This was a highly specialised art, demanding competence across multiple disciplines simultaneously. It deserves to be recognised as such, rather than reduced to its association with sexual commerce, which was only one dimension of a far more complex social role.

The British annexation of Awadh in 1856 ended this world. Many musicians migrated east to Banaras, where the genre underwent significant transformation. The resulting *Bol-Banao Thumri* or *Purab Ang* slowed the tempo and shifted the focus from rhythmic precision to melodic-lyrical elaboration. In this style, the singer takes a single word or short phrase and explores its emotional possibilities through multiple melodic routes before moving on. The Banaras style also absorbed the regional folk forms of the east — the *Chaiti* (spring songs), the *Kajri* (monsoon), the *Hori* (festival). This gave the style a regional embeddedness the Lucknow tradition had lacked.

Feature	Thumri Practice	Contrast with Dhrupad / Khyaal
Common Ragas	Khamaj, Kafi, Pilu, Des, Bhairavi	Lighter forms; tolerant of accidentals.
Primary Talas	Deepchandi (14), Dadra (6), Kaharwa (8)	Avoids the complex cycles of Khyaal.
Main Ornament	Bol-Banao — word elaboration	Lyric-driven, not note-driven.
Aesthetic Focus	Shringar (romantic); Bhakti (devotional)	Emotional vs. spiritual or intellectual.

The twentieth century brought the classicisation project: the erotic lyrics reinterpreted as devotional metaphor, the dance connection severed, the *mehfil* replaced by the concert hall. Something was gained — survival, accessibility, a wider audience. Something was also lost — the emotional directness, the interpretive *abhinaya*, the intimacy of context that had made the original genre genuinely distinctive. Whether the Thumri now performed in All India Radio studios is the same art form that once flourished in Wajid Ali Shah's court is a question on which reasonable people genuinely disagree.

Discussion: The Larger Pattern

What connects these three histories is a recurring structural dynamic. Music does not evolve in a vacuum. It evolves in response to specific conditions of patronage, performance space, and cultural legitimacy at each historical moment.

Dhrupad's alignment with the early Mughal aesthetic was not accidental. The form's emphasis on discipline, mathematical precision, and divine order resonated with an empire that understood its authority as cosmically grounded. Akbar's court produced extraordinary music. It also produced extraordinary propaganda — and the two were not always separable. Tansen's role was simultaneously artistic and ideological.

The transition to Khyaal under Muhammad Shah 'Rangila' reflects a different political reality. By the eighteenth century, Mughal authority was in effective dissolution. Cultural refinement had become, for the courtly class, a kind of substitute for actual political power. In this environment, the *majlis* was the primary arena in which social distinction could be claimed and contested. Khyaal, with its emphasis on imagination and individual brilliance, was perfectly suited to this economy of prestige.

Thumri's trajectory is more tangled. Its Lucknow flourishing reflected the assertion of a regional Nawabi identity against both the declining Mughal centre and the encroaching British. Its subsequent transformation reflected the anxieties of a colonial-era middle class that wanted a classical tradition free of uncomfortable associations with the *tawaif* heritage. The 'classicisation' of Thumri was, in substance, a cultural laundering operation. It is worth naming it as such.

The colonial encounter had consequences both material and ideological. Materially, the dismantling of princely patronage destroyed the economic foundation of hereditary musician communities. Ideologically, it imposed Victorian categories — about morality, about art, about gender — that continue to shape how Hindustani music is understood. The reform movements of Bhatkhande and Paluskar navigated these pressures by constructing a respectable, institutionally legitimised classical tradition. This was successful on its own terms. It was also, in certain ways, impoverishing. The *Ustads* and *Pandits* whose knowledge constituted the actual substance of the institutionalised tradition were often treated with a patronising ambivalence the institution never fully acknowledged.

The digital era has introduced another evolutionary pressure. Online teaching, streaming platforms, global audiences — these have democratised access, which is good, and diluted depth, which is not. Whether the *guru-shishya parampara* can survive the screen is a question the current generation is in the process of answering. One is not optimistic, on balance. But one holds that view tentatively. These are living traditions, not museum pieces, and living traditions have a habit of surprising the people who pronounce them dying.

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