



Cinema and Hindustani Classical Music in the Deccan

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“When it adapts from any other art, be it literature or music, architecture or its absence, the cinema has to submit to it, simultaneously as the cinema demands the submission of all arts. To preserve the dignity of every art that comes together with the other, it has to let those lotus-buds open out like eyelids awakening.”

- Shahani (2015)

This writing looks to detail the interaction between abstract ideas and concrete practices associated with making a film on the tabla musician Ustad Nizamuddin Khan while placing the deccani artistic worldview at its heart. The writing also looks to synthesize a relationship between the Buddhist and Marxist frameworks on the nature of reality, to create a suggestion as to where the film as a work of art may locate itself. More importantly this writing is an appeal to filmmakers to understand their social position within society, the filmmaker does not exist independently in society but instead all artistic creations arise through a process of dependent origination which are embedded in their class-caste social circles, philosophical relationship with the mind and external objects, religious affiliations, and ethical factors while making films.

At the start, I would like to highlight two concepts which I hope will explain my approach to making my film, 'Kaifiyat'. I refer to the terms in use by the Buddhist Dharmakirti of *samanya-laksana*¹ (universal nominal) and *sva-laksana*² (unique particular). The reason for bringing these concepts into our discussion is to emphasize the relationship between the mind and external objects³ and the dialectical unity of such a relationship. In my view the individual and their art should be seen and identified through their unique properties that contain its *samanya-laksana* or the universal nominal characteristic, and to elaborate it further, these two are not posed in a binary but rather in a dialectical unity. Among the various uses Dharmakirti had for these concepts, the most prolific use can be seen in his rejection of the universal nature of the *jatis* in social classification through ontological grounds by suggesting that there was nothing inherent or eternal about properties assigned through *jatis*, he attacked the unreality of such universal nominal concepts⁴ over the lived experiences of individuals, that humanity is unique and undifferentiated. Within the realm of writing on aesthetics, György Lukács, states that⁵ the "individuality of phenomena (subjectivity) is without any degree of generalization while universality refers to the 'all' and is the ultimate generalization". Only the dynamic-dialectical unity of the two may achieve a category between the two, the category of speciality, 'which contains elements of each' but is a synthesis of these two.

In a manner of speaking the tabla player, Nizamuddin Khan and his son, Kamaluddin, remained rooted in Hindustani classical music with all its influences through sustained economic and sociological interactions with urban centers and smaller courts. Through accompaniment with Kathak dancers, Sufi *pirs*, commercial film music and several other systems of knowledge and practice. In the tabla playing style of Ustad Nizamuddin Khan, we get to hear how these various layers create universal effects of what is considered a tradition. We see how market demands placed an increasing burden on musicians, the system of tabla *gharanas* *had to* become rigid to pronounce their differences. Yet within these contradictions we see that the art of Nizamuddin and Kamaal remained between the conceptual and sensuous, rational and evocative, objective and subjective.

Historical Progress

Neela Bhagwat while teaching the Gwalior gharana frequently cites the Bhakti metaphor of the Banyan tree, 'the banyan tree is Gwalior [gharana] and from each root spawns a new gharana'. It is this carefully constructed metaphor from where my critical understanding of tradition begins. The banyan tree metaphor does not come from a mystical realm but rather from objective material reality that touches the subjective reality of the people who learn music. It encourages a student of music to; seek a deeper connection with the material reality of music, the changing nature of the social life of musicians, understand the transformations of the term's caste and class, gender in interpersonal and professional relationships, market driven voice-creations that are influenced by political realities, it grounds singing in a series of concrete and abstract forces which always engage the banyan tree as an ever-growing continuous process.

When I first began my research on the film, the word eclectic was used by various senior musicians to describe the tabla style of Nizamuddin's family. By learning tabla styles from different gharanas⁶ Nizamuddin and his son had successfully melted the rigid epistemic categories of gharana styles to arrive at a mode of playing that was unique, individuated and yet combined the universal way by which a gharana's tabla had to be played. As I spent time with Kamaluddin he graciously told me the history of his father and grand-father's life, he recited several *gats*⁷ and revealed the micro-tonal differences from one gharana style to the other, each perceived transgression he said was a micro tonal change in a tradition that was perceived to be static and unchanging. In further interactions, I got to know that Ustad Nizamuddin had spent decades of his life playing all throughout the Deccan, in that moment the Deccan became the spark that lit up all these various facets of cultural and artistic creations. Perhaps, if Kamaaluddin did not pass away before we could shoot or record him, the film would not have reached the form it did now. What became increasingly clear was that this family of musicians had gathered and been influenced by the innumerable geographical spaces they inhabited by encountering musicians, that is to say, even they could not be distinguished from their social and historical environment.

The early modern and Deccan

It is a tragedy that in the nationalist history taught in schools we look at the early modern era of this geographic space known as the Deccan with great suspicion. We are led to believe it was dominated by a singular force of Muslims who not only invaded but ruled by the sword. This patriarchal mode of history also tells us that Shivaji ushered in a new era of peace by ending 'their' rule through his sheer force. After which a new era of peace was ushered. On the other hand, we have newer interpretations, which problematically, espouse visions of cosmopolitanism in which the Deccani sultanates (Bahmani and successor dynasties) are seen as being led by Persian emigres (Freely switching between Shia-Sunni binaries) and frame the Deccan as a somewhat frontier of the Persianate Cosmopolis⁸. Though this research has increased awareness of social structures, taxation systems, land revenue approaches, and provided integrated views of Bhakti poetry in these centuries, we still commit ourselves to further binaries. In the 20th century, two historians and thinkers of South Asia, the historian, D.D. Kosambi provided an exposition of how there has been a Brahmanical capture of knowledge that was consolidated over centuries of writing. He was able to articulate the failures of nationalistic and traditional Marxist historiography. He was able to do this because he did not uphold a dogmatic understanding of historical materialism, Kosambi's historiography comes alive as it engages with the roots of society across time. Perhaps one of the most unique interpretation of the dialectics of historical materialism in India comes to us through Sharad Patil who frequently layered the revolutionary Buddhist logic of Dignaga onto historical materialism, he shaped it into a dialogic mode known as Sautantrika Marxism⁹, the primary interest for Sharad Patil in such a form of Buddhist thought had been able to acknowledge the external reality of objects through the subjective mind, through conscious and unconscious thoughts.. He actively merged the knowledge bases that Phule and Ambedkar had generated, to address the lacunae of caste, *varna* and *jati* in the formulation of class. So any creative work on a film, has to be able to also contain and approach the intermixture of the lived realities of *varna*, *jati*, caste and class of its subjects within it. Perhaps the mightiest challenge to overcome is the unified category of 'Hindu' identity in this writing on history¹⁰. Though if we stop seeing it as an unchanging object, what is revealed is their constituent forms, so we can even begin to distill the presence of various cults and appreciate the

individuation any of their forms afford to their practitioners, indeed this path offers for further exploration.

My predilection with early modern and medieval forms comes from my guru, Kumar Shahani from whom I have learned how to approach filmmaking, in a thorough pedagogical relationship. In different ways, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Sergei Parajanov who envisioned modern and classical myths, legends and folktales in their films always remain in my mind. In Pasolini's earlier films we see an exploration of the proletariat lives of Rome, Naples etc. Even as he worked towards interpreting myths, epic and early modern literature through an internationalist framework to his selections in music, textile and location. Parajanov's films gave us insights into the culture of the Caucasus region that we may never see again, though he ossified his filmmaking into tableaux vivants. So as I understood it, a filmmaker or artist, engaging in making films can only do so by transforming historical, social and cultural traditions from the past and grounding them in the present time and space. It means that interpreting significant phenomena of social reality such as myths and legends, is something art can never give up.

The Deccan and its artistic forms fall in between most of the conventional historical approaches of what is considered North Indian and Carnatic music. While never drawing comparisons, the Deccan allowed me to look at one book of songs known as the *Kitab-i-Nauras*, which by its name is bent towards Rasa theory. The work elaborately draws from a wide array of metaphors from the region, while continuously embedding it within its early modern form, it actively looks to synthesize Shaivite, Sufi and other forms of daily life. It has been remarked that the compositions are an intermediary between the Dhrupad form and the Khayal form, this can be found in the content of the music. It is in the lyrics that we observe an affiliation with Sufi-Bhakti poetics as we see the number of songs dedicated to the beloved. Forms like the *chakki-nama* and the *charkha-nama* are prominent in the region, even till date, they reveal the proximity between similar works in Marathi or Kannada, which feel closer to achieving unity when we see it as part of a continuous landscape¹. The beloved that Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II calls out to is not exactly the same as the beloved of Bulleh Shah, it is different and individuated yet a part of a universal approach towards the guru, but to navigate it in the visual means an engagement with the Deccani painting form of the Yogini

which by its Shaivite leanings mixed and merged aristocratic/semi-feudal forms of adornment, it detailed states of asceticism, the musculature of the musician, the Yogini is not merely the female ascetic, and so a moment in the film means exploring the elusive words of the mazjub, Bahri of Gogi who speaks of the divine in the largest mountains and the smallest leaves and if I wish to explore it further then I may attempt to decipher the spatio-temporal rhythms of the architecture of those years, which lie in ruins presently, and when that sequence ends there are words of Eknath's Bhakti offering a stringent critique of the ontological position of the divine itself, which cannot be filmed for beauty and pure pleasure but continues its plunge into the material reality of the present of Nizamuddin and his family, the severe degradation of a majority of Muslim musicians in a post-independence phase must be shown, in a form that does not beautify their brutalisation. It must show the instrument maker and his labour involved, the worship of the divine in the contemporary, all the while attempting to raise questions of what the meaning of tradition and the creation and destruction energies of every moment in time is. All the while maintaining a dialectical relationship between image and sound, coming close through approximations like our srutis but never falling subservient to each other. That such culture cannot be replicated to appear 'authentic' but that these aspects are transformed and reworked through visual elements, gestures, facial expressions, intonations, pauses, all these movements of the nervous system provide a gateway to individuation at every given moment. Nizamuddin's relentless devotion to this restlessness in rhythm is on full display as he continually elongates this moment of *Sama* that he has generated in his listeners and in himself. That madness had to affect the very fabric of the film. Even as these sparks of great creativity made by Nizamuddin had increasingly rendered the women in his family completely mute to their own feelings. All this while I am constantly reminded of my own position as an outsider to these places, due to differences in religion and caste-class. I was raised as a catholic in Bombay, my family comes from a line of agriculturalists and horticulturalists from South Canara.

Pramana and Film

Before I conclude this writing, I wish to ask the question if the work of art can produce a distinct cognitive episode of knowledge in the viewer. The short answer I believe in is yes, it can. I do not wish to create a methodology, but I wish to locate this process in Lukács's speciality¹² in aesthetics along the concept of *pramana*. His term of the speciality can be layered with the usage of the term, *pramana*. Though the Buddhist writing on *pramana* does not directly refer to aesthetics, if we accept that a work of art falls under the category of perception or inference then we can carry this suggestion further. I refer to the Buddhists Santaraksita and Kamalasila who follow in the *pramana* tradition¹³ of Dharmakirti¹⁴, and state that, 'any cognitive episode does not differ from the episode itself'. That this *pramana* is a 'trustworthy awareness that reveals or makes known a previously unknown object'¹⁵. I believe, this episode of knowledge is not different from reality around us, the film or work of art is borne from this reflection of the dialectical unity of the subjective and objective world. In his work on *rasa* theory, James D. Reich shows us how in certain thinkers who wrote on *rasa*, the conception of *rasa* finds expression in differing approaches to the creation of *rasa*, in the non-dual Vedanta aesthetics of Bhatta Nayaka the subjective and the objective worlds coalesce into each other rendering the work of art into a blissful and actionless awareness in the one who perceives it. In the Shaivite monist Abhinavagupta, there is an emphasis on a deeper subjectivity such as the way in which Shiva actively apprehends himself, though an objective reality is not excluded from this.

I do not wish to carry this as a theoretical discussion any further, for only if the theoretical can be transformed in the act of making the film at every moment in time, can it be of any use. The cognitive episode of knowledge and by extension this aesthetic category of speciality may offer us a deeper reflection of this world around us, and that to be free is not to be bound to only through aesthetic detachment, pleasure or bliss, but that it may be able to provide a 'shock'¹⁶ by which humanity could be spurred on to make our own history.

To sum up, at every moment and at every point of interaction between any human beings, traditions are transformed and cease to be eternal or permanent. One of the main contentions in the creation of the appearance of an unchanging

tradition is the reliance of writers and practitioners who rely on abstractionism and idealism (even aided by the subjective idealists) who deliberately mystify the process of the creation and the reception of art. As the smallest of examples, the form of Sufism and Bhakti that we encounter around us dependently arise from diverse sources themselves, so they evade the traditional classification of 'religion' and at their most radical are not essentialized forms, which can be easily placed into such distinct categories. These two concepts are just drops in the ocean of our culture which continues to echo throughout our spaces around us. Lastly, any nuanced approach towards making films must not give up on interpreting myths and legends in our time. As suggested, if films can be looked as episodes of knowledge and as a category of speciality, we may widen the question on filmmaking and its theoretical approaches. Finally, as I bring this commentary to a close, I offer a thought from the Buddhists Santaraksita and Kamalasila,

“Only knowledge which offers liberation through the ability to teach everyone that the highest good for all sentient beings and not just for the self alone is the fundamental of life.”¹⁷

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Notes

1. "sāmānya-lakṣaṇa" from Keown (2004)
2. I refer to the essay by Yoshimizu Chizuko (2004) for a clearer definition of Svalaksana.
3. Lukács's primary contention for all philosophy and by extension, work of art.
4. See Eltschinger (2012)
5. See Kiralyfalvi (1975)
6. I treat Gharanas as varying epistemic modes of knowledge within music, popular approaches with gharanas in vocalism advocate for a purity in their singers, while in the tabla players (and perhaps broadly instruments) there has been greater intermixture.
7. A sequence of tabla vocabulary, which are learned through vocal recitation and played on the tabla
8. For example, newer scholarship on the Deccan intends to make the connection with Iran prominent. Example, Eaton's latest writing (2018)

9. From Shetye (2010)
10. From recent writing particularly by Dwivedi, Mohan and Reghu (2021)
11. See Eaton, 1974.
12. As Lukács observes, "The dynamic-dialectical unity of the two is achieved in the category of specialty, which contains elements of each, and in a certain sense, especially as a means of artistic reflection, is superior to both. Moreover, specialty, when represented in a finished, individual work of art, is a category independent of both universality and individuality." Quote from Kiralyfalvi pp. 74 (1975)
13. Though not exclusively, prominently the Buddhists held inference and perception as pramana.
14. To quote Reich "Dharmakirti presents a universe composed of discrete, unique, atomic entities, each of which flashes into and out of existence instantaneously, leaving behind another discrete, unique entity in its place. These unique entities bear no real relationship to each other except for causal relationships and relationships of identity—any other ostensible relationship is explained as nothing, but a concept imposed onto reality. One consequence of this view is that perception is the only real contact we can have with reality" (2016)
15. McClintock notes that "Naiyayikas, Vaisesikas, Samkhyas, and Bhatta Mimamakas, all of whom generally regard the pramana, or means of determining that a particular cognitive episode is an instance of indubitable knowledge, as distinct from the resultant instance or action of indubitable knowing (the pramiti)." (2010)
16. I refer to the concept of Sahvega (Pali)/Samvega (Sanskrit), which is a layered word and would need a longer writing to explore. For a nearest possible approximation, I refer to Rotman's use of the term from his book Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism (2008)
17. From McClintock (2010)