The Evolution of Modern ɭhumrī

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I
t is commonplace to speak of the extraordinary continuity of the Indian art music traditions, whose origins can be traced at least as far back as the Nātyaśāstra (ca. 2nd c. B.C.). Although ɭhumrī, the predominant semi-
classical genre of Hindustani music, did not rise to prominence until the mid-nineteenth century, circumstantial evidence links it with some certainty to counterparts in the Nātyaśāstra's time. The antiquity of such traditions has no doubt contributed to the tendency, evident in scholarly as well as popular literature, to overlook the dramatic stylistic changes that have occurred in Hindustani music in the last 150 years. These developments are particularly evident in the case of ɭhumrī, which has changed to the extent that it now bears little resemblance to its nineteenth-century namesake. The course of its evolution, like that of the classical khyāl, has been intimately linked to the fundamental socio-economic transformations that South Asia has undergone during this period. This article attempts to examine the development of modern ɭhumrī from the perspective of these broader extra-
musical changes.

ɭhumrī is archetypically a vocal form, in which a short amatory text with devotional overtones is sung in an improvised style by a solo vocalist with accompanying instruments, stressing emotive interpretation of the lyrics rather than scrupulously correct rendition of rāg; the rāgs and tāls used resemble and presumably derived at some point from the folk modes and rhythms of the Gangetic plain area. Until recently, ɭhumrī was most typically sung by a courtesan as accompaniment to interpretative dance.

The early origins of ɭhumrī

While the “invention” of ɭhumrī is popularly ascribed to Wajid Ali Shah, who ruled the state of Avadh (Oudh) from 1847 to 1856, or to musicians in his court at Lucknow, in fact, references to ɭhumrī can be found as early as the seventeenth century, and as we have mentioned, its ancestry can be traced much further back. Early classical treatises like Dattilam (ninth century), Abhināvabharata (eleventh century), the aforementioned Nātyaśāstra, as well as contemporary Sanskrit dramas (e.g., Kalidasa’s second century Mālavikagnimitra) contain descriptions of light-classical genres.
which were evidently counterparts to the modern īthumrī. These forms (especially cātuspadī, pāṇīka, nādavaṇī, dombika, and čārčārī) consisted of short amatory texts, generally in regional dialects rather than Sanskrit, set to simple, folklike rāsīs, rendered by female singers in a lyrical, sentimental (kaiśīki) style, as accompaniment to interpretative dance. Descriptions of čārčārī and the related rāsīs in later treatises like the Sangītaratnākara (thirteenth century) and the Sangītarāja (fifteenth century) suggest further parallels with modern īthumrī, including the use of diatonic folk modes, regional dialects (eventually including Braj Bhasha') of the Mathura area, the admixture of eroticism and Krishna-based devotionalism in the texts, and performance in court and temple contexts, often by courtesans. Finally, explicit references to īthumrī and related genres in the seventeenth-century Tofat-ul-Hind and Rāg Darpan suggest that the term had by then come into use as denoting a set of loosely-defined diatonic folk modes of the Braj region and, more importantly, semi-classical songs using stylized versions of these modes, sung by courtesans as accompaniment to interpretative dance. The īthumrī of this period appears to have been a simple dance song, lacking the sophisticated rhythmic and melodic improvisation that it was later to incorporate.

Evidence suggests that in the latter part of the eighteenth century, īthumrī began to be appreciated and cultivated as a musical genre in its own right, independent of its traditional function as a dance song. In salons and courts, one evolutionary line of īthumrī started to be influenced by the emerging classical khyāl. While courtesans continued to be the primary exponents of īthumrī, male professional and amateur musicians began to take interest in and apply their talents to it, finding it a fresh, vital, and exciting contrast to the austere dhrūpad, which was declining along with the Mughal Empire and its nobility. By 1800, īthumrī had become the favored semi-classical form of the upper classes. Instrumentalists based a new style on īthumrī, and some rulers studied and composed īthumrī. Historically, too, at this point īthumrī emerges into daylight, as hundreds of nineteenth century compositions are extant, and the names, circumstances, and, to some extent, styles of its prominent exponents are known.

The nineteenth-century bandish īthumrī

In the seventeenth century, Delhi, as the large and prosperous capital of the vast Mughal Empire, was the center of Hindustani music patronage. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, Delhi’s socio-economic decline had begun to weaken its cultural life. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the empire disintegrated rapidly, and the imperial treasury was soon depleted through frivolous palace expenditures, fratricidal wars of succession,
loss of revenue due to dismemberment of the kingdom, and the repeated
sacking of the city by invaders, most notably the Persian ruler Nadir Shah
in 1738. The nobility that had supported the fine arts was ruined, and the
courtesan district, which had itself been the hub of musical activity, fell si-

ten silent and deserted (Hussein 1978:274). Meanwhile, however, the city of

Lucknow was emerging as a political, economic, and cultural center of the
North, and as capital of the newly-independent kingdom of Avadh. The
agricultural prosperity of the region fostered the rise of an opulent and so-

phisticated elite, and accordingly, innumerable courtesans, artists, and mu-
sicians migrated to Lucknow from Delhi and elsewhere to bask in the pa-

tronage of the new gentry (Sharar 1975:33, 134).

Avadh’s political independence was soon compromised by the growing

presence of the British, who, while allowing the Lucknow court and certain
other suzerainties to enjoy nominal autonomy, exacted onerous tributes, in
return for protecting the ruling nobility with British firepower. As a result
of this arrangement, the Lucknow nawābs made little or no attempt to ad-

minister their kingdom, aside from revenue collection, instead concentrat-
ing their interest on court entertainments—especially music and dance. By
the early nineteenth century, Lucknow’s culture, while formerly a provin-
cial derivative of Delhi’s, had begun to acquire a flavor of its own, often de-
scribed as displaying a sort of rococo, manneristic sophistication which con-
trasted with the depth and grandeur of Mughal culture (see, e.g., Chaube
1958:38). Thumrī and the light-classical gazal played an important role in
this new culture, surpassing in popularity the hoary and austere dhrūpad
and even the evolving khyāl, to the extent that, in the words of a contempo-
rary chronicler, Lucknow’s thumrīs “became as famous throughout India
as Lucknow’s melons” (in Sharar 1975:138).

Several factors contributed to the extraordinary flowering of thumrī in
nineteenth-century Lucknow. First, being a smaller town less than half the
size of Delhi, Lucknow bred a culture that was in some respects more pro-
vincial; some Lucknow musicians took an active interest in the local folk
traditions (Shukla 1983:140-1), and such interest evidently extended to the
amatory songs of neighboring Braj from which thumrī evolved. Secondly,
the unusual degree of Hindu-Muslim cultural interchange apparently helped
promote the interest of Muslim musicians in thumrī, which is imbued with
Vaishnavite devotionalism. This unprecedented communal amity appears to
have derived in part from British usurpation of ultimate political power
from the Muslim aristocracy, which had the effect of coalescing the Hindu
and Muslim landlords of Avadh, for the first time, into a relatively unified
socio-economic class with common financial interests (Metcalf 1979:360).
Under such conditions, Hindu-Muslim cultural exchange reached a new
peak, as educated Hindus avidly mastered Urdu and Persian, wore Mughal sherwânis, and even worshipped at Shia 'Imâm-bâras (Hussein 1978:280); meanwhile, Muslim musicians like Tawaqqul Hussein ("Sanad Piya") adopted Hindu pen-names and composed Bhakti devotional thumris, and the devout Muslim nawâb Wajid Ali Shah himself wrote thumris and staged dance-dramas in which he himself played the part of Krishna (Sharar 1975: 64–5).

Moreover, courtesan culture during this period was at its zenith of prestige and influence; prominent courtesan singers were ranked even above contemporary male musicians (Imam 1959:14, 26), and courtesan gentility was considered so polished that nobles would send their sons to them to learn manners and conversation skills (Mukerji 1948:155). In general, the enhanced quality of courtesan music, including thumri, can best be regarded as both cause and effect of the special interest taken in courtesan culture by the Lucknow aristocracy.

The most important factor contributing to the rise of thumri during this period, however, concerned the nature of the Lucknow aristocracy, which consisted primarily of newly-rich speculators and largely absentee landlords who had not inherited traditional Mughal aesthetic taste (Metcalf 1979:27). Under Mughal rule (roughly, early sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries), the state collected revenue through intermediaries called zamîndârs, who were, in effect, hereditary landowners and tax-collectors. The imperial government might harass and fine zamindârs, but it would seldom dispossess or evict them; thus, the zamindârs constituted a landed feudal aristocracy with lineages often tracing back many generations, or even centuries. Aside from the imperial court itself, it was evidently this nobility that had constituted the main source of patronage for dhrûpad, the predominant art music genre of the Mughal period.

As the British gained supremacy, whether direct or indirect, over North India, they came to deem the zamindari system inefficient and chaotic. Hence, between 1795 and 1805 Governor-General Cornwallis implemented in Avadh and elsewhere a land code which drastically altered the land tenure system and even class structure itself. Taxes to be paid by each estate were thenceforth permanently prescribed, and, more importantly, land itself became a saleable commodity. Thus both owners and peasants were subject to eviction—by British troops—if they failed to pay taxes, which were so onerous as to bankrupt thousands of zamindârs and depopulate whole areas of countryside. One result was the decline of the old zamindar class and the rise of a new class of landowners (tâluqdârs), consisting mostly of newly-rich urban speculators and investors (Spear 1965:97). The tâluqdârs, constituting an incipient capitalist mercantile class rather than a feudal nobility,
tended not to patronize Mughal fine arts like dhrūpad, appreciation of which may require considerable exposure, attention, and even training on the part of the listener. Instead, most tāluqdārs evidently preferred the lively and accessible thumri.

These largely socio-economic factors, along with the zealous patronage of Wajid Ali Shah, promoted the rise of thumri’s popularity and its development from a plain and simple dance song to a sophisticated and urbane musical genre in its own right.

Bandish thumri form and style

As the Lucknow thumri gained in prestige and renown, it incorporated several stylistic features from contemporary classical music, especially the use of the sixteen-beat tintāl (rather than folk meters) in medium and fast tempo, accompaniment by ṭabla and sāranga (fiddle), a wider repertoire of rāgs including both classical rāgs and stylized folk modes, a generally enhanced sophistication of style, and the technique known as bol bānt (lit., “dividing words”), in which short textual fragments would be used for rhythmic manipulation and improvisation. These textual fragments came from the composition (bandish) itself, rather than from non-lexical syllables as in tarāna or, often, khvāl; accordingly, the Lucknow thumri composition itself received greater attention than the composition in most other Hindustani classical genres, where attention is focused on improvisation. Hence the Lucknow thumri later came to be referred to as bandish thumri or bol bānt thumri.

The bandish thumri’s composition structure and use of up-tempo tintāl rendered it extremely similar to ēhoṭā (“little”) khvāl, the faster, more virtuosic style of classical khvāl that was then coming into vogue; indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the terms khvāl and thumri were often used interchangeably, although thumri could still be distinguished by its separate origin and its emphasis on bol bānt rather than virtuosic iān (loosely, “riff”).

Thumri and khvāl compositions differ from those of dhrūpad in having two, rather than four, sections; these parts are the sthāyi (Urdu asthāyi), a melody covering between one to four cycles of the tāl, clearly identifying the rāg, and being of sufficient melodic interest to bear frequent repetition, and secondly, the antara, of similar length, which explores the tessitura around the upper tonic. The following bandish thumri composition is among the most familiar; the text is one of many set to this tune, which may have derived at some point from a folk song.
The importance of rhythmic syncopation, and of the bandish itself is often reflected in the incorporation of rhythmic tricks or surprises in the composition, which may serve to obscure the first beat (sam) of the tāl cycle rather than emphasize it, as would be customary. The thumri below (of the aforementioned Sanad Piya) is a favorite example of this sort of deviousness; here, the deception is achieved by placing the inherent final vowels in “na-jar . . . man bas” on accented, odd-numbered beats, rather than on unaccented beats as is normally done.⁸

source: Telang 1977: 112
The Lucknow style's most distinctive feature, as mentioned above, was the technique, evidently derived from dhrūpad, of bol bāṇī, denoting rhythmic improvisations sung to text fragments. Note how in the excerpt below, the sthāyī section (mm. 1–3) is subjected to a series of improvised rhythmic variations.

Example 2.

Example 3.

vocalist: Girja Devi
rāg: Kāfi
source: private tape

vocalist: Sunil Bose
rāg: Zilla', or Misra Khamāj
tāl: tīntāl
In 1856 the British occupied Lucknow, closed the court and externed Wajid Ali Shah to Calcutta, thereby curtailing the lavish fine arts patronage of the nawab’s court. Much of the Lucknow aristocracy was ruined in the devastation of Lucknow during the revolt of 1857–8, such that Lucknow’s importance as a cultural center was considerably attenuated, and many musicians dispersed to Calcutta and elsewhere—thereby spreading thumri so that future musicians could build on its more vital aspects. But while hundreds of bandish thumris survive in published notations and singers’ repertoires, the Lucknow style itself has been out of vogue for over fifty years, and only a few singers attempt to reproduce it today. In general, the bandish thumri may be said to have arisen to fulfill the needs of a particular class at a particular time: the aristocracy of Avadh in the early and mid-nineteenth century. This class was not entirely homogeneous, comprising newly-rich landlords, speculators, and merchants, as well as some elements of the older feudal elite. But the constituents seem to have shared an Epicurean fondness for the fine arts, and particularly for the lively and accessible thumri, which appealed to them more than the esoteric dhrupad. The popularity of the Lucknow style rose and fell with this class, just as the once-flourishing Lucknow styles of architecture and Urdu poetry are regarded as manneristic today. While the bandish thumri itself faded, talented musicians—especially from Benares—transformed thumri into a more profound and expressive medium: the bol banão thumri.

Thumri and courtesan culture on the eve of modernity

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of fundamental cultural and socio-economic developments took place which brought about a transformation of Indian intellectual, political, and artistic life. Reformist religious revivalism, the introduction of mass transport and telecommunications, the rise of literacy and English-medium schools, nationalism, and above all, the rise of a new middle class had profound effects on all aspects of urban culture. Urban society’s transition from feudalism to capitalism was to have prodigious influence on thumri, as the growing bourgeoisie was to become the new source of patronage for art music. But in the early decades of this century, the new middle class tended to disapprove of music and dance, largely because these arts were popularly associated with prostitution and with the decadent vestiges of feudalism—in particular, the remaining petty princes and nawabs, who were discredited by the failure of the 1857 revolt and its reactionary, inchoate goals, and by the obsequious sycophancy which they later came to display toward their British masters. Socially, the bourgeoisie, strongly influenced by puritan Victorianism, tended to be embarrassed by the perceived debauchery of the old gentry (see Meer 1980:122). Thumri was particularly deplored as illicit and decadent,
especially because most thumri singers were courtesans. As a result, through the early decades of this century, thumri generally remained in the domain of the licentious and increasingly stigmatized courtesan society, while throughout North India, centers of musical life evidently continued to be the red-light districts, which sustained the numerous male accompanists and teachers as well as the courtesans (tawā'ifs) themselves. In this period, virtually all professional female singers were tawā'ifs, as it was considered inappropriate for respectable women to practice music as a profession.

Thumri’s association with courtesan culture had considerable effect not only on its image but on its style and content as well. Thumri’s traditional setting was the mahfil—a private gathering of connoisseurs in a nobleman’s house or courtesan’s salon. Such mahfils constituted the primary form of social exposure between the courtesan and her market, for it was primarily through her singing and/or dancing that she sought to attract men and gain customers. On a purely aesthetic level, of course, she sought to please by her talent and imagination, such that she would receive generous tips, but on a more mundane level, she may have endeavored to attract men, for it was through being maintained by a wealthy patron that a tawā'if could obtain the most money, security, prestige, and perhaps even emotional fulfillment. Thumri texts, expressing a forlorn woman’s unrequited love, were ideally suited to this end; many texts were explicitly pornographic (see, e.g., Telang 1977:118). Moreover, vocal style could be enhanced by nakhrā (“blandishments, coquetries”) in which the singer employed histrionic gestures (often stylized into mimetic abhināya), sobbing-like vocal effects, and dramatic changes of vocal dynamics. Tawā'ifs were trained in the art of rendering thumri personal on an explicitly erotic level as well as an aesthetic one.

By the 1920s, however, courtesan culture had begun to decline. Bourgeois attitudes toward the fine arts were changing, through increased exposure to these arts, the dwindling of the feudal elite, the achievements of a few proselytizing scholars and musicians, and, most importantly, a new sense of cultural nationalism (Mukerji 1948:152–8; Meer 1980:122). The result of new middle-class patronage of the arts was a prodigious cultural renaissance, encompassing the founding of colleges, conferences, and publications, particularly under the inspiration of vocalist V.D. Paluskar (1872–1931) and theorist V.N. Bhatkhande (1860–1936). With the advent of independence in 1947, the state, through the medium of All-India Radio, became the largest single promoter and patron of classical music. As bourgeois enthusiasm for music increased, music schools proliferated and many musicians forsook their traditional proteges, the tawā'ifs, to teach middle- and upper-class students. The transition from feudal to bourgeois patronage is perhaps most clearly seen in the support of certain large industrial firms, such as the Indian Tobacco Company (ITC) and Delhi Cloth Mills.
(DCM), both of which hold annual music conferences; ITC has recently opened a large music college in Calcutta, whose faculty includes thumri singer Girja Devi, who herself is from a courtesan background.

As performing arts like thumri moved from the red-light district to the public concert hall, the most prominent courtesan singers were able to establish themselves as concert artists, such that they did not need to supplement their incomes with traditional liaisons. But many other tawaifs who were unable to attain such prominence were obliged to rely more on prostitution for their livelihoods (Nagar 1979:178, 123–4), and thus the courtesan districts, now centers of prostitution rather than fine arts, were subject to increasing repression from the state, such as the dramatic “night-raid” of December 1958 in Lucknow, when the police closed the salons and jailed many tawaifs.

The transition from the courtesan’s salon to the concert hall, while evidently bankrupting many tawaifs, had mixed effects upon the art of thumri. On the one hand, the sensuous, intimate, passionate style of thumri lost much of its raison d’etre and largely disappeared, nakhra no longer being considered appropriate to the concert stage. On the other hand, as the genre lost its occasionally seductive function and became more abstract and purely aesthetic in goals, it attracted the attention of most major classical singers and began to achieve a depth and classical sophistication which it may never have enjoyed previously. In doing so, thumri assumed a new form and changed beyond recognition.

The rise of the bol banão thumri

After the dispersal of the Lucknow musicians, the bandish thumri continued an attenuated existence, documented by a handful of recordings made in Calcutta in the first few decades of this century, of singers including Gauhar Jan, Zohra Bai, Pyare Saheb, Mauzuddin Khan, and others.11 Meanwhile, however, a new style of thumri was evolving in Benares, which had emerged as a new center of music and dance. This style, the bol banão thumri, synthesized regional folk elements with a new classicized sophistication and sobriety. The folk elements were derived from regional genres like kajri, caiti, and holi (hori) songs. Most conspicuous was the replacement of the classical tintāl used in the Lucknow style, with folk-derived tāls, especially kaharva (eight beats), dādra (six beats), sitārkhānī (sixteen beats), and two structurally related tāls of either fourteen or sixteen beats, referred to variously as čāncēr, jat, or dipcaṇḍī.12 The new thumris eschewed the classical rags occasionally encountered in the Lucknow style, restricting modal material to simpler diatonic (and often, folk-derived) rāgs and stylized adaptations of regional melodies (Shukla 1983:186). The bol banão thumris generally concluded with a laggi section—also derived in part from folk
music in which the tabla player comes to the foreground, playing a sequence of dense, virtuosic, extremely fast patterns while the singer relaxes or repeats the sthayi with simple variations. Moreover, the virtuoso scalar runs and tans encountered in recordings of some turn-of-the-century thumris (e.g., recordings of Gauhar Jan and Mauzuddin Kahn) were forsaken for a more relaxed style of textual-melodic development.

Yet the classicization of the new thumri was more readily apparent than its borrowing of folk elements. The bol banao thumri, unlike its predecessor, did not stress rhythmic bol bāñṭ syncopations, or artful compositions sung in fast tempo, but was instead based upon leisurely and systematic bol banāo—roughly, “ornamenting the text,” or “making the words come to life”—in which the singer would develop and elaborate the text through innumerable melodic variations, endeavoring to bring out all possible nuances of emotion latent in a simple line such as “piyā bin nahiṅ āvat āgan”—“without my lover I find no peace.” This text exploration and elaboration generally took the melodic form of systematic exposition of rāg, starting, as in the classical khyāl and dhrūpad, with the lower register and progressing upwards, with accidentals and phrases from neighboring rāgs freely introduced.

As the leisurely bol banāo text elaboration technique matured, the lively, fast rhythmic accompaniment used in the bandish thumri and in Benares folk musics came to be regarded as increasingly inappropriate, with the result that the tempo used in thumri dropped remarkably, from often over 150 mātras (beats) per minute to the current norm between 38 and 55, as illustrated in the following chart of selected recordings:

**Recordings from 1901–1920:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singer</th>
<th>Rāg</th>
<th>Tāl</th>
<th>Tempo ( ( \text{\textbf{j}} ) )</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zohra Bai</td>
<td>Zilla</td>
<td>16-beat jat</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>HMV GC-98–13001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malka Jan</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td>150</td>
<td>HMV P1105 8–13720</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recordings from 1920–1940:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singer</th>
<th>Rāg</th>
<th>Tāl</th>
<th>Tempo ( ( \text{\textbf{j}} ) )</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarasvati Bai</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>14-beat jat</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>EMI-MD-1555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdul Karim Khan</td>
<td>Pilu</td>
<td>16-beat jat</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>Colum 33ECX 3251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirabai Barodekar</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>14-beat jat</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>VE 5015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recordings from 1940–1960:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Singer</th>
<th>Rāg</th>
<th>Tāl</th>
<th>Tempo ( ( \text{\textbf{j}} ) )</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bari Moti Bai</td>
<td>Pilu</td>
<td>14-beat jat</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>SNA Archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasoolan Bai</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>sitarkhan</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Colum GE 18016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The deceleration of thumri paralleled that of barā (“big”) khyāl, which emerged in the twentieth century as a context for methodical and leisurely rāg development with ābla accompaniment in extremely slow (ati-vilambit) tempo.

In forsaking the lively gait and histrionic effects of the bandish thumri
for the sober, leisurely, and more abstract developmental techniques of the bol banào thumri, the modern thumri lost some of the very characteristics which had made it inherently appealing to listeners not steeped in the hoary classical tradition. It is paradoxical that this change took place at a time when the genre became more dependent than ever on a newly-rich middle class. Evidently, the modern audiences’ appetite for fast, lively music is well satisfied by čhoṭā khyāl and, for that matter, film music; thumri has come to occupy a special function in Hindustani music as a “sweet,” more languorous and accessible, and somewhat sentimental alternative or sequel to khyāl.

We have noted above some general tendencies within thumri since 1800: the growing number of khyāl singers (especially males) who began singing thumri, and the genre’s increased prestige and musical sophistication. These trends went hand-in-hand, reinforcing each other. After 1920, they culminated in what is regarded as the prime of thumri. During this period, practicing courtesans gradually ceased to be the primary exponents of thumri, since prominent tawā’if singers were able to abandon prostitution, and, more importantly, nearly every prominent khyāl singer incorporated thumri into his repertoire; khyāl singers Abdul Karim Khan (d. 1937) and Faiyaz Khan (d. 1950), were particularly celebrated for their (very distinct) thumri styles, and Patiala vocalists Bade Ghulam Ali Khan (d. 1968) and his brother Barkat Ali Khan (d. 1963) introduced a new sub-style of thumri, the Punjāb āṅg, characterized by luxuriant, rapid ornamentation and some usage of Punjabi folk modes and tāls. Thumri thus lost its disreputable association with courtesan culture. As a result, excluding the older generation of former or hereditary courtesans, there is no longer a distinct class or caste of singers who specialize in semi-classical music (i.e., thumri, gazal, tappā, and dādṛā) as did most courtesan singers. That some of these former specialists have taken to singing khyāl suggests that they are trying to disassociate themselves from the traditional role of their class. While some younger singers from bourgeois backgrounds continue to specialize in thumri and dādṛā, they do so out of choice, or from lack of training or technique in khyāl, not because they are expected as courtesans to sing only light music.

Other notable changes in thumri style and presentation have taken place as well. The use of microphones and amplification has led to softer vocal production, but even critics who disparage this trend tend to acknowledge that standards of intonation, technique, and control of nuance are at least as high, if not higher, than they were two generations ago. The extinction of seated abhināya is another development: a century ago, courtesans and male kathak dancers often performed seated mimetic interpretation as they sang, but this tradition has all but died out, probably due to its unsuitability for the large concert hall; thus, while thumri (generally in a simpli-
fied bandish thumri style) may still be used to accompany dance, the vocalist will sit at the side of the stage and the kathak will be performed standing by a dancer.

Pedagogy has also changed, as many student vocalists receive their initial training in music schools rather than in the traditional teacher-disciple manner; meanwhile, mass accessibility to music via the radio, records, and public concerts has enabled musicians to familiarize themselves with and imitate other styles at will.

In the last two or three decades, two broad developments may be noted: the rising standards of technique and variety, and, at the same time, the relegation of thumri's status to that of a short, light "dessert" concluding a recital. Even critics of modern thumri tend to acknowledge that it has achieved a certain sort of sophistication and polish which previous singers often did not display. It seems clear that while the new bourgeois patrons may be relatively undiscriminating about matters like correct delineation of rāg, they are particular about voice production, technique, and variety and scope of musical ideas. Vocalist Rita Gangoly observes:

Becoming conscious of voice production and of the audience's desires is the call of the day. You can't have a bad or ill-trained voice. Earlier, maybe a singer could get away with it, in a small chamber, but not today . . . Every note has to be in tune.  

The enhanced musical variety and richness of modern thumri may be illustrated by contrasting a singer like Parween Sultana with, say, Rasoolan Bai of the preceding generation. The latter was reared in the restrictive atmosphere of the salon, where her musical influences were evidently limited primarily to the musicians in her immediate milieu. Her numerous recordings, although expressive, are extremely repetitive and would probably be considered monotonous by most listeners today. Rasoolan's audiences, however, greatly enjoyed her singing and evidently were not disturbed by her narrow range of melodic ideas, perhaps because they accepted or even preferred a straightforward, predictable interpretation of rāg.

A modern singer like Parween Sultana (b. 1948), by contrast, not only has grown up and lived in a much different environment, but also sings to quite a different audience, with substantially different tastes from music-lovers of the previous generation. Parween has studied intensively from representatives of three different gharānas (family musical traditions), toured the West several times, and become familiar with the music of all major Hindustani artists of the last fifty years, whether through mass media or personal contact. She is also well acquainted with non-Hindustani musics (e.g., Western and Karnatak) and has musical friends throughout the West. She continues to be receptive to criticism from friends, her teacher, and the
press, and whenever possible, she listens analytically to recordings of her own concerts. One result is that aside from her dazzling technique and three-and-a-half octave range, her palette of musical ideas is much richer than was Rasoolan’s, such that, for example, Parween may sing a ṭhumrī for twenty-five minutes with very little melodic repetition, whereas even Rasoolan Bai’s shorter recordings (including several of the same rāg) are full of repetition. Again, these differences may also reflect the modern audience’s demand for melodic variety and fresh, broad interpretation of rāg (a demand that may induce many musicians to prevaricate from the rāg itself in order to sound novel). One should not necessarily conclude that Parween is a greater ṭhumrī singer, for such a contention might be contested by some (who note that she occasionally forgets words and sings lines out of order, suggesting inattention to the lyrics); rather, both singers reflect their social and musical environments, and when judged by the standards of their own periods, might be considered of roughly similar stature.

The second broad development of the last generation is that ṭhumrī is now seldom sung as a main item in a concert, but rather as a short, sentimental finale to follow a khvāl and conclude the performance. Benares courtesans used to sing entire concerts of semi-classical music, in which the featured item would be one (or more) lengthy, elaborated ṭhumrī, lasting thirty minutes or more. In such concerts, the opening ṭhumrī would occupy the place of the khvāl in a typical modern performance; the ṭhumrī could be followed by tappā, dādrā, bandish ṭhumrī, čāttī, kajrī, or even another bol banāo ṭhumrī. But such concerts are rarely heard today. One factor is the aforementioned decline of the tawā‘if class of semi-classical specialists. But the classical music audiences’ demand for “serious” music seems to be the main factor, which, while contributing to the rise of the sophisticated bol banāo ṭhumrī, has meanwhile “lightened” ṭhumrī by relegating its status to that of a short, sentimental finale, while attention is concentrated on khvāl. Purists feel that khvāl singers who have not seriously studied ṭhumrī tend to exploit its melodic freedom while failing to do justice to the text. Rita Gangoly laments:

Every Tom, Dick, and Harry is singing a ṭhumrī at the end, but they don’t really know what a ṭhumrī is. They just sing a few sentimental notes, like a simple gī [song], although often with great virtuosity, but then it’s over . . . A khvāliya [ignorant of the depth required of ṭhumrī] takes up ṭhumrī and murders it; he thinks it’s just a platform, without any obligation to rāg, where you can jump around, do whatever you like. It’s most unfortunate that, having fulfilled their obligation through the khvāl, they just take ṭhumrī as a plaything.

Accordingly, as audiences grow accustomed to hearing ṭhumrī in this diminished capacity, they seem to expect less from it.
Conclusions

This article has attempted to summarize the dramatic evolution of thumri over the last two centuries, emphasizing the development of the modern bol banao thumri from the Lucknow bandish thumri. The rate and degree of change have been so marked that a nineteenth-century listener might not even recognize the modern thumri as such. These changes, and the development of the bandish thumri itself, did not occur in isolation, but must be seen, at least in part, as responses to the extraordinary changes in Indian society and, in particular, to the transition from feudal to bourgeois forms of patronage.

Thumri’s evolution must also be understood in terms of its relation to the pure classical forms, viz., dhrupad and khyāl. The decline of Mughal nobility and the rise of a nouveau-riche mercantile aristocracy in the nineteenth century effected a corresponding decrease of interest in dhrupad and a concentration of patronage on the emerging khyāl and thumri; these two genres, while influencing each other, constituted more accessible alternatives to the austere dhrupad, whose decline has not abated since. In the twentieth century, however, thumri and khyāl followed more distinct lines of evolution. Khyāl itself bifurcated into two linked sections: the bara khyāl, used as a context for leisurely, methodical development of rāg, and the faster, more virtuosic chotā khyāl. The bandish thumri of the turn of the century, which had come to resemble chotā khyāl, thus became superfluous; the new thumri emerged in its place as a vehicle for emotive text elaboration in medium or slow tempo. It thus continued to constitute a more accessible alternative to pure classical music, while being increasingly relegated to the capacity of a sentimental and subordinate, albeit essential, concert finale. Finally, the emergence of thumri as an important instrumental style similarly seems to be insuring the genre’s continued popularity, while at the same time further altering its significance for Indian audiences.

Addendum

Given below is a transcription of a bol banao thumri performance which may be regarded as typical of the purāb (“eastern,” i.e., as opposed to the Punjab) style, with the exception that it is relatively brief. After a few short phrases in free rhythm, the vocalist sings the sthāyī of the composition (“nāhak . . . videś-vā chā morā”), and then commences bol banao improvisation, elaborating text fragments and punctuating them with returns to the mukhrā (“face”—denoting the section of the first line of the sthāyī immediately preceding the sam of the tāl)—here, “nāhak lāe gavanva.” Eventually the antarā is sung (“kahti . . . jobanvā morā”), and text exposition contin-
Modern Thumri

ues, exploring the upper register. The piece ends with *laggi* in fast tempo, during which the *mukhrā* is repeated, with some variation, in a process known as *tek*.

Example 4.
Example 4. Continued
Example 4. Continued

Singer: Girja Devi  
rag: Bhairvi  
Source: EMI ECSD 2784  
tāl: 14-beat dīpṇandi
text: Nāhak lāe gavanva mora
Ab to saiyan videśva chā (morā)
Kahti čhābile sovat ras bas bhae
Bit jāti jobanva morā

translation: Unjustly they’ve brought me to my village (i.e., away from
my husband), and now my lover has gone away; that handsome one tells me
“sleep peacefully”(?), but my youth is ebbing.

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and Cuba.

Notes
1. Braj Bhasha is a dialect of western Hindi spoken in the Mathura area; from the fif-
tenth through nineteenth centuries, it was the primary literary dialect of the Hindi group of
languages in North India. Braj literature was specifically associated with the Krishna Bhakti
cult, which was itself centered in the Mathura region. Most thūmrī and khyāl texts are written
in simple Braj Bhasha, which aficionados of Hindustani music are usually able to follow.
Transliteration used in this article corresponds to that used in Platts (1968).
2. Dattilam’s description of the dance-song pānika is discussed in Lath (1978:142–3). See
Desai (1976) for discussion of dombika, an interpretative dance described in Abhināvabharatā,
and of cātuspadī, a dance-song used in Sanskrit dramas such as Mālavikagnimitrā. Also see
relevant passages in the Nāṭyaśāstra itself (Bharata 1951:148–237). Nādavatī, an erotic semi-
classical song mentioned in the Brhaḍḍēśī (ca. 8th century), is discussed in Sharma (1970). Also
see Shukla (1983:74–5, 110–11, 180) for discussion of cārcarī and some of the aforementioned
genres. All these genres, as well as other topics discussed in this article, are treated in greater
detail in Manuel (1983a).
3. References to thūmrī in these unpublished manuscripts are discussed in Shukla (1983:
58ff) and Manuel (1983a:66–8); Rāg Darpan (1665) describes thūmrī as a variant name for rag
Bārvā; Tofat-ul-Hind (1675) lists thūmrī as a rāginī (subsidiary mode) of Sri rāg, sung in the
Doab region (Gangetic plain).
5. Indian feudal systems differed in some respects from classical Western European
feudalism. See Kosambi (1975:353–9) for a comparison.
6. Aside from the pure classical rāgs occasionally used in Lucknow ṭhumrīs, there is a
distinct group of roughly two dozen rāgs which are used only in ṭhumrī and other light-classical
forms. Most of these rāgs are diatonic, using alternate notes (e.g., natural and flatted seventh),
and lacking the complex, oblique (vakra) patterns and augmented seconds found in many clas-
sical rāgs. Most of these rāgs are not mentioned in treatises before 1700, instead appearing to
have coalesced in the last two centuries, as melodic possibilities latent in folk and semi-classical
songs crystallized into distinct rāgs.

7. In all notations in this article, C is to be taken as the modal “tonic”; sāraṅgi and ḥ tabla
are not notated in the transcriptions. Dotted bar lines show internal structural subdivisions of
the tāl cycle, which are also marked above the staves by Indian symbols, e.g., “x” for sam and
“0” for the unstressed khāli portion.

8. In Hindustani singing (as in Sanskrit recitation), unaccented, inherent “shwa” vowels
are generally inserted after final consonants; thus, spoken and written tan man mora (“my
heart and soul”) would be sung tan tana mana mora.

9. Mirza Ruswa’s celebrated novel Umrao Jan Ada, relating the life of a Lucknow cour-
tesan, illustrates how the protagonist sought to allure particularly desirable men through her
singing (1961:136 ff.). The Kama Sutra (Vatsyayana 1961) of the Gupta period also stresses
musical talent as the single most important asset a courtesan must develop.

10. Many male singers (including Faiyaz Khan, in the dādṛā on EMI MOAE 131) imitated
these effects, and some singers—particularly Pyare Saheb and Anant Nath Bose—sang almost
exclusively in falsetto.

11. See Gronow (1981) for a discussion of the early years of the record industry in Cal-
cutta.

12. The structural interrelationships of cāṅcār tāls and their distinctive treatment in ṭhumrī are discussed in Manuel 1983b.

13. The terms bol bāḥṣ and bol banāō are thus very distinct in meaning, and should not be
regarded as synonymous, as Meer (1980:45) has done.

14. The introduction of step-by-step rāg exposition, as well as the general refinement of
the bol banāō ṭhumrī, is associated in particular with the late Benares singer Siddeshvari Devi.

15. Pitch density of bara khyāls in Bhatkhande’s Kramik Pustak Malika suggests that
around 1910 the standard tempo was around \( \frac{3}{4} \) = 40; in modern bara khyāl, tempos average
about \( \frac{3}{4} \) = 14.

16. Quotations from Rita Gangoly are from personal communications in May 1981.

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