

'If Music Be The Food Of Speech...':

(Hindustani vocalist and English language poet Anand Thakore demonstrates and discusses parallelisms and points of departure central to his growth as an artist; areas where the aesthetic assumptions of raag, taal, bandish and khayal gayaki, have defined his poetic processes and vice versa. Chauraha Event NCPA, Mumbai, Thurs. 20th. April 2006. The written draft of this presentation was subsequently published by Dilip Chitre in New Quest with hindi transliteration)

Raga Bageshri (roughly thirty minutes)- 'Ritu basant tum'. Madhyalaya Teentaal and 'Gund lavo ri malaniya', drut teentaal. Tabla accompaniment: Rupak Kharvandikar, Harmonium: Srirang Parab

I must confess that I am not used to making presentations of this sort. This is, in fact, my first attempt at making music and reading poems in public for the same audience on the same evening. This is why I thought it best to begin by singing- which is an area of performance I have been reasonably familiar with since childhood.

Speaking about one's own creative processes is always a tricky business. There is the danger of making out a case for or against something one just did because one thought, at a particular time, that it needed to be done; and the greater danger of becoming so creative in one's analysis of one's own processes as to completely lose sight of them. In other words, I am still asking myself why I am doing this; but I have chosen – if only for this evening – to steer at random through such treacherous waters; and I have a vague hunch that this sort of attempt has more to do with self-clarification than self-expression. I have been sensing, of late, more strongly than ever before the presence of an underlying connection between the processes of song and poetic speech. I am personally interested in knowing more about how and to what extent my study of Hindustani music and my involvement in the English Language as a poet have related to one-another over the years and how, of course, to maintain, as a practitioner of both art-forms a steady and pragmatic symbiosis between the two activities. Oscillations between song, and the reading of poems has been becoming, a frequent event, over the last few months, when I am in the company of fellow poets and musicians. This occurs, I admit, at a casual, domestic level and does not belong to the space of full-fledged performance, as I presently understand that mysteriously simple phrase.. But for good or ill, I am carrying aspects of the kitchen into the dining-room and can only hope that my guests are not offended.

At sixteen- when I was just out of school- aren't such emergences invariably liberating?- I composed my first complete Bandish in Braj - or in, if one must be precise, that polyglot welter of hindi dialects that has become a linguistic basis for the art of Khayal composition. (Gindeji, by the way, often stressed the fact that the Hindi of the Khayal Singer was no single language and had no identifiable and consistent grammar.) Kumarji was an important presence in those days, as he remains today. I remember singing it for him and for Satyasheelji.; and being told that my treatment of the structure of Bhairav

pushed the raga dangerously close to the neighbouring province of Kalingda I was also informed with half-affectionate condescension that the text of my composition had managed to arrange itself quite delicately in the 12-beat metre of Ektaal. Chand pe chand daalne ki jo baat hai- the juxtaposition of a syllabic construct against a recurring metrical cycle. Maaf kijiye bhairav ka vaqt nahin hai par ijajat hain to sunata hun:

Bandish with improvisation: Milun re kab

Milun re kab sajan,
Baat dekhungi tori, nain asuvan.
Akeli kahe mohe chode-re,
Baat dekhungi tori naain asuvan

Chalo Aisi bandish maine solah saal ki umar me banayi.....

Angrezi shiksha, sanskruti, sahitya aur bhasha ka kitna bhi mujh par parinam raha ho us vaqt, akhir, bandish ke bol dhundhte samay maine ‘ baat dekhungi’ hi kaha, ‘ baat dekhunga’ nahin kaha – isliye ki khayalsangeet ki tahjeeb tab tak mere ragon me kai barson se a basi thi.

Bade sidhe sade bol hain Inhe sirf kaho- svaron ka sahara liye bagair- to na inme arthgaurav hai na padlalita- yani voh Kavita ke star tak nahin pahunchte hai. Parantu un me ek svabhavik chandatmakta, shabdon ki baat, aur bhavna ki taraf akarshit karnevale kuch sukshma sanket; ye saare gun mujhe jarror najar ate hain. Jaise ki Tablle ke saath inka sirf padhant kiya jaye to:

padhant

Angreji kavya-bandhan ke aangan me jab pair dalta hun to main khud ko aksar inhi gunon ki khoj mein pata hun- aur is sambandh ke bare mein main aage bolna chahta hun, lekin pahle is bandish ke bolon ki taraf jara phir mud jaayen:

Rachanakaar yahan par, shabdik naveenta aur chamkruti ki talash mein nahin hai; Shayad us vaqt uska prashna sirf itna that ki viraha ki saral bhavna ko – jo Solah baras ki bali umariya me kuch adhik hi teekshnata se mehsus hoti hai – is bhavna ko raag aur taal ke shastrokt dhanche me kis tarah bandha jaye.. Ya shayad uska prashna ye that ki is bhavna ko raag aur taal ke mukt vilas ke liye kis tarah se ek srijanatmak aadhar banaya jaye. Acha - Us vaqt, is bandish ko janam denevala mera voh kalajanak prashna kya tha, is saval ka mere paas aaj ki tarikh mein taiyar jawab nahin hai. Lekin, apne bite hue ladakpan ki yeh jhalak dekhte hue, mujhe khud ke bare main ek baat saaf najar ati hai- aur voh yeh hai ki bhasha sanskriti aur madhyam ki bhiinntaon ke bavjud, meri sahityik aur sangeetik sanvedna aur shaili kahin ek gahre star par judi hui hai.

For a few years I compsed bandish-es feverishly. Looking for new points of entry into a raag, new ways of playing with and against the taal-cycle, also at times for fresh verbal

conceits. However, as Satyasheelji exposed me to various aspects of the tradition, it became more and more evident to me that most of my compositional work was redundant except perhaps as a technical exercise, a way of strengthening my improvisatory skills. Most of what I was doing had been, in essence, 'done' before and in far more effective and valuable ways; and there remained a huge number of traditional compositions to learn, and creatively re-interpret as an improvisator. It made more sense to focus my skills on memorizing, studying and interpreting existent compositions than to go about like Columbus in search of new routes to known destinations. There remain a handful of my own compositions – about six or seven- which I feel reasonably confident about, and would still consider singing at public concerts today. The interesting thing is that my forays into bandish-composition gave me a way of focusing upon sound and sense, rhythm and tone which was to gradually become a basis for my strategies as a poet. What I think it gave me, essentially, was a sharpened sense of architechtonics and temporal form, which still serves as a firm foundation on which to base my poetic attempts today

For many years, while learning Hindustani singing from Satyasheelji, studying Literature at college and University and occasionally performing, I wrote reams of what seemed to me like obviously bad free verse- none of which I would like anyone else to read and all of which I have abandoned completely. Almost nothing I wrote- until I reached the poems published in 'Waking in December' – seemed even beginning to be anything like poetry for me.. Its hard to say for sure but I suspect I was trying to do something with the English language that didn't quite gel with my aesthetic moorings in Hindustani Music. It is possible that I was trying to be 'modern' and succeeding in being nothing but inexpertly imitative of what I perceived to be 'modernist virtues' I abstained completely, for instance, from, rhyme, metre, stanzaic patterning and other 'traditional' components of poetry.; and at times I attempted forced celebrations of the fragmentary; and of the multiple-voice technique exemplified in *The Wasteland*. It was only when I began working with traditional stanzaic forms like the sonnet that I produced something out of the English Language that I felt reasonably confident about reading in public or showing to someone else. I am not sure to what extent I can safely draw inferences from autobiography and realize that what I am now entering is the realm of hypothesis; but it seems reasonably credible to say that it was only when I had produced something out of the English language that sounded and felt adequately bandish-like, that I began to feel the presence in my writing of a clearly identifiable poetic voice. I am not going to carry this analysis much further; since the inevitable question - 'Is this really MY voice?' lingers menacingly round the next corner, calling me at my own peril towards the beginnings of a self-analytical-bordering-on-confessional dissection of my own music and poetry. No. Not somewhere I presently want to go.

What I would like to do instead is trace out areas where my poetic and musical efforts have clearly involved very similar concerns and strategies; and points of departure where I have felt compelled to move away from one medium towards the other, where, for instance I felt the need not only to develop a mood of loss and estrangement- for which purpose a gharedaar bandish in raag puriya and vilambit ektaal seemed adequate material; but to verbally address in tightly rhythmic yet long-breathed sentences the summoned image in my head of an ex-lover's pet tortoise.

When composing verse in the English I often find myself looking at language through certain paradigms basic to my Hindustani-musical training, employing formal methods of organizing sound and sense, thought and feeling, that seem to stem from my compositional and improvisational experience as a musician. I can also sense, at times, a clearly visible merging of aesthetics and underlying belief-systems: the importance, for instance, that unity of tone theme and thought have for me as a poet and the way in which this co-relates with the notion of raga, with an aesthetic that emphatically values the exploration of a single raga for considerable duration; or the growing belief that a poem, for me, to be a really strong poem, must center around a single emotional axis a central bhav and the way in which this broadly corresponds to the notion of rasa, sthayi bhava, teerav bhava and chaya bhava. These are terms, of course, like many others which I am going to use- which will need considerable clarification for those unfamiliar with all this Hindustani jargon. I will try to do this as best I can;

‘Rasa’ I am not even going to try and define. In any case it’s a term used in many ways by many people over here and has a lot of contemporary currency. I remember my Professor Khsirsagar Sanskrit professor at Elphinstone; repeatedly using the phrase ‘aesthetic emotive sentiment’ as a working English equivalent, if that is any help.....

The ‘ Sthayi bhava’ of a raga is its basic mood, a mood that is evoked by the repetition of certain fundamental tonal patterns. without which the structure of a raga would either fall apart or never be established ‘Teerav bhav’ on the other hand is a mood evoked by pushing a raga to its edge, to those points where its essential identity comes to be threatened and it dangerously teeters where it might turn into something (or some-one) else. ‘Chaya bhava’ is the mysterious sense that a particular raga has wandered into the shadow of another; as for instance the sense that malkauns has begun to sound like bageshri because the ‘chada hua’ treatment of komal dhaivat

Ok. So how does all this relate to my practices as a poet? I think the key-phrases here, clichéd as they sound, are ‘ Unity of theme’ and ‘wholeness of conception’. Another word which comes immediately to mind is the popular hindi word ‘dayara’ which translates loosely as ‘border’.

‘Raga’ , as a notion, and the training I have had since early childhood in working within the ‘dayara’ of a single raag helps me identify and delineate the parameters I am working in as a poet at a particular time. It helps me know for instance, whether a stray line of verse I may come up with belongs to a particular poem I am working on or not. And It assists me hugely in the process of selection and exclusion, the attempt to stay true in a particular poem , to a particular theme and technique. There have also been

times , when I have felt the lingering presence of a particular raag- with its concomitant 'rang' during the composition of a particular poem. The presence of this raag has often helped me stay with the poem at hand, for long enough and intensely enough to achieve those levels of concentration required to arrive at a point of completion.. This connection between raag and poem is usually a very abstract one based entirely on personal and to some extent culturally shared mood-associations; but there are times when the connection is also established at a more archetypal level, as I believe, happens at times in poems like the following sonnet which associated itself strongly for me with raag Multani, with the early-evening pathos and the sense of loss that I cannot separate from the basic phrases of the raag.

DUSK OVER AZAAD MAIDAN

To think it all begins at the edge of a window-
This slow retreat of light across the lawn;
A crow's startled flight, and my shadow
Growing, with its old impulse to be reborn.

Now watch this aging sky pour its beer,
Yellowing the skin of coconut-palms;
Here no signal prompts the seer,
In praise of dead gods to raise his arms-

Only the din of crowds going home,
The roar of traffic as lights turn green,
And flamboyant in the distance a station dome,
Though now in the dark only dimly seen;
O do not long for what you are looking for - come,
Here is no sign of what might have been.

When I first read that poem for Ranjit Hoskote, ten years ago at a bar near Kala Ghoda, His first response was ' You've got the cadences all right!' Yes, cadence, like tone itself, is a very important thing for me when I am composing verse. I find myself repeatedly searching for a tonal movement in language, a structure composed of rising falling and neutral tones- and the raag or a particular bandish in a raag often serves as a useful model on which to base my attempt. The presence of the particular raag or bandish I associate with a particular poem is not, of course, available to the reader of my poems. For him there are only the words- the meal served on the dining table. And by and large, I am content to leave it at that, with the notable exception of this evening, of course, which is devoted, as I said earlier to the kitchen-experience.

When I consider- no not how my light is spent- but how I move from one line to the next, I find that tone plays a very important role as a motivating factor. The question that recurs- among many others, of course- is ' what is the tone of my next utterance?' Is it to start with – loud or soft, is it high or low, does it rise, fall or stand still, is it flippant or gravid- is it cantankerous, savage, weary, belligerent or placid and so on and so forth. This is a question I tend to ask myself long before the words themselves show up- if at all, that is, they choose to grace the occasion.... The tone of a particular line, further, has to connect organically, for me, with the general tonal territory of the poem, much in the way in which particular svar-sangati, or musical phrase connects with the broader architectonics of a raag. I would like to read a poem a little later on , in which , tone seems to have taken the upper hand over other semantic and formal concerns but before I do that I would like to deal with certain temporal rather than tonal concepts- with laya taal chand and avartan and with badhat- the art developing a raag, or a particular bandish in a particular raag.

If the raag works for me as a model on which to base my search for coalescence and specificity, the same also applies to certain temporal concepts basic to Hindustani music. The difference is, I think that temporal laya- based concepts play a much more active and clearly visible role in my poetic processes than tonal svar-based concepts like raag. The reason for this is obvious; rhythm is a basic component of poetry, of spoken language. So is naad or dhvani both of which broadly refer to all forms of sound energy. whereas svar , as such, which may be narrowly defined as the musical note is not. When I speak of tone, in poetry I am talking about speech tones, not musical notes. The relationship between speech-tones and the tones of pure song remains for me a strong though often tenuous one. In fact I have a suspicion that It is precisely the tension between song and speech that keeps me going either way. I perceive cadence as an organization of speech-tones- whether in free or metrical verse- that approaches yet never quite achieves a melodic order. It never achieves this, I believe, because it is not really the business of poetry to do what 'pure' song does. The strange thing is that in seeking do get to where it never reaches, a poem may achieve amazing effects valuable in themselves. The same is often true of Hindustani vocal improvisation where song itself begins to approach the quality of raw speech –as in the bola ang- of which Faiyaz Khan Saheb and Kumarji come to mind as the last centuries greatest exponents . There is, of course, a History to such thinking. One could go back to scaupenhauer and quote him on the aspiration of all the arts towards the condition of music. But I am not making out a case over here, for the condition of music as a superior state of being. It is tempting to do this at times but I don't really know enough about such things experientially to philosophize about them with any confidence. What I do know is that the pushing of the spoken word towards the sensual tonal and temporal qualities of the musical note, is an activity I find aesthetically valuable; as also the stretching of Hindustani vocal improvisation, at times, towards the rawness of raw speech.

Ok now back to those temporal concepts I mentioned, components of music concerned essentially with time and the business of effective timing:

First of all some clarification of terms: Laya. Taal. Chand Avartan.Aamat.

Laya corresponds roughly but not exactly to the English word 'rhythm'. I say not exactly because laya is a much broader concept than rhythm whi simply refers to repetition of anything at regular intervals. Laya on the other hand embraces the temporal relationships underlying all forms of movement irrespective of regularity- jaiseki ek pate ke girne ki bhi apni laya hai .

Taal refers to a cyclic pattern of beats that repeats itself indefinitely. It comes close to the literary concept of metre though more accurate Sanskrit equivalent for metre is 'chand'

The word avartan literally means turning. But in Hindustani music it refers to the specifically to the taal-cycle.

Aamat literally means ' arrival' 'aane ka tarikha' or simply 'aana' but in Hindustani music it refers to how one approaches and arrives at the first beat of the next cycle.; a matter that Hindustani music I think is on the whole more obsessively concerned with than related forms like carnatic music or jazz.

I am now going to read a poem:

THE FANTASIST

- for Mukul Sivaputra

Ivariably, as a child, when dusk wept flame,
Once more, after prayer, he would shut his eyes,
Wading through the deepening swamp of the self,
As if beyond the tides of wrong and right,
There were a private island in the mind;
A land not promised yet one he chose
To search for with small hope of getting there –
The no-man's-land of anything-goes.

Time taught him an outward reverence for rules;
Though neither the frenzy of rhapsodic nights
Nor studious years of relentless denial,
Could tell him for certain if nature had in mind
Some law more venerable than those he knew;
Or if the soul would prove more than meat for crows;
Dark knots he would not need to unravel
In the no-man's-land of anything-goes;

For there, unsaddled in a minute
Of the cumbersome weight, the bit and the reins
That had driven him for years, he would know
Himself untutored and afresh, broken
By no will outside his own. There would be
No mission to complete, no need to pose,
No promises to make or break or keep
In the no-man's land of anything-goes.

His conscience thawed in the slow heat of his days,
Easing its grip over his aging nerves,
Till brown pipes and white pills, the smell of crushed hemp,
And the amber haze of open decanters,
Lit up the dark way to the unpromised land;
But when he rose to go there his warm feet froze,
Bound like a ship upon a frozen sea,
For the no-man's-land of anything-goes.

Now drained by the steady pull of time, he looks
Once again for the home he never had;
Though the surfaces of things clearly in sight
Urge his tired eyes to make themselves at home;
To resign themselves to the hard margins of space,
And make peace with gravity before they close;
Ceaseless the tides that wash the first strand
Of the no-man's-land of anything-goes.

The metricality and presence of a four beat structure is quite obvious here;but
What I personally find interesting and even questionable, looking back on this poem four
years after writing it- is my obsessive concern over here with the search for an 'avartan'
and a sense of 'aamat' in the English language. When I read this poem on the phone to a
hindustani singer-friend some years ago her instant reaction was 'yani tumne angrezi
bhasha mein aise avartan bhare aur aisi aamaten banayi , chalo thik hai par thoda gaana
bhi sunao agle baar phone karoge tabhi.....'. Thik hai sunayenge aapko jab malik ki
ichha hogi.....but however that may be, I was glad at the time that she could feel the
presence of an avartan in my work, a way of turning each verse full cycle, till it reached
the same recurrent line, discovering new land, perhaps, like Columbus once again, in his
search for new routes to a known destinations. And here's another poem that follows the
same cyclic structure

THE THING ITSELF

-For Ranjit

-No hope of redemption beyond bone and flesh,
Or benediction from the blue vaults
Of the compassionate dead; nothing
That does not lie here, naked, before the eye,
Nor even the thought of it- they said,
The yellow monks in red- just
Sunlight on a tree obscured by dust.

What meets the pure eye is as nameless as you are,
As little concerned with the vastness of things,
A wordless thing that has nothing to say;
At once- they said - take it in as it is,
While being is fluid, lest the self take shape,
And stiffen, like wet clay, into a crust;
Sunlight on a tree obscured by dust.-

Sight ends with seeing- only vision survives, to screen
The hurt eye from the hard stare of the visible;
Yet is that peace- to live and look and long for
No meaning in what the eye sees- the random
Delight of a selfless eye? I live amongst words,
For they are friendlier, and easier to trust
Than the light on a tree obscured by dust

Light sways with the tree- a shimmering chiaroscuro;
I feel the haze quiver, yet take this as a sign,
And rejoice to be where I have chosen to be-
For here, in the half-dark of words, like any man in love,
I desire to believe what I love my own-
And care no more to be cured of that lust
Than the light on a tree obscured by dust.

I remember consciously wanting, when I composed that poem years ago, to make the English language revolve decorously around a single visual image, its cadences centred as it were around sunlight, dust, and of course the tree in question. And I can clearly see how this relates to my improvisatory strategies when I am singing a raga, the need for a disciplined, at times processional movement culminating at a foreknown conclusion. Yani bhasha ke chakravyuha me kahin se bhi pravesh karo... nikalke vapis vahin par aana hai.....

The next poem I am going to read is in the popular french form of the villanelle- a form that employs alternating chorus lines across six three verse stanza-s. I remember conceptualizing it as a dvimukhi bandish- a bandish with two heads so to speak, which gave one the option to sing the first line in either of two ways, according to one's whim, without breaking away from the general theme, the structure of the raag.

VILLANELLE

Unveil the mirror and begin to see
What visions deny before the eye laid bare-
Or if the mirror be a veil, let it be.

Were these the eyes that woke at noon to see
White wings leap free from a winding stair?
Unveil the mirror and begin to see-

Now dark comes down on what I have longed to be-
A thing at home in its own despair;
If the mirror be a veil, let it be.

-But climb if you dare; flight takes the free,
The spirit too light for the flesh to bear;
Unveil the mirror and begin to see

If love arise where all images flee
A self dismantled beyond repair-
Or if the mirror be a veil, let it be.

Now pluck from the heart the poison-tree,
And watch unmoved what is moving there;

Unveil the mirror and begin to see-
Or if the mirror be a veil, let it be.

I am reminded at once of two bandishes both of them in todi. Satyasheelji often alternates, in his rendition of these compositions between two versions of the same basic line. Jaise ki

Tarana with improvisation- Did did ta noom deem tom ta noom

When I ask myself what I am doing in these poems in terms of an established formalist tradition- I can clearly see that by and large I am not inventing new forms, as such, based on raga and taal; What happens instead for me is that I am instinctively drawn to traditional stanzaic forms that have been popular in the English language though only notably so before say 1945. The first two poems belong to the tradition of the Elizabethan lyric with a recurrent chorus line- a form that Yeats was perhaps the most widely known twentieth-century celebrant of. The second is a villanelle- and immediately calls to mind William Empson, Theodore roethke and W.H. auden amongst many lesser known poets. What I want to point out here is that my own search for equivalents in English verse to my musical thinking has not yet provoked me to set about inventing radically novel stanzaic patterns. Instead it has taken me back to existent forms that have had decreasing popular currency over the last fifty years. I must confess this has made me feel uncomfortably old-fashioned at times, but it has also been deeply rewarding and reassuring to feel in my verse the presence of an ancient pulse, to re-experience in English the value of cyclical forms so basic to my Hindustani musical thinking.. Perhaps the need to contain thought and emotion within the framework of established forms is itself an extension of my Hindustani aesthetic- an extension of the need to work within the delineated territory, or the 'dayara' of raag and taal.

One notable exception to this tendency on my part to reach back across the decades for established English verse forms is the following poem which attempts to put ghazal form to some effective use

Ghazal.

GHAZAL

Shall I hold my tongue, lord, or call tonight?
Contain myself, or start another brawl tonight?

My dead mentor returns. Shall I silence him with words,
Or wrap his image in a shawl tonight?

I am lured by the dark I longed to outgrow .
I long to crawl back into that caul tonight;

And the words of the saints fade like bad dreams.
Their voices will not fill this hall tonight

Leave me, Lord, leave me alone with my song,
For I shall not be your thrall tonight;

And leave the door open, behind you, when you leave.
I have another guest to enthrall tonight.

Come, my heart, let us be friends again,
And celebrate the ancient fall tonight.

Avartans and cyclical forms in poetry puzzle me and I think my ambivalence towards them, connects with broader philosophical debates about cyclical approaches to time, with the terrifying Nietzschean doctrine of eternal return on the one hand, and with spiritual philosophies, on the other, that view the process of return as one of redemption. If cyclical forms assist me in the process of poesis, there are often occasions when I feel the need to break out of an avartan-based structure; when I reach out for a more linear and narratorial development of tone and thought. This brings me into the territory of freer verse-forms, though I think rhythm- if not metre- remains for me an extremely important aspect of the poem, when I am in such seemingly pathless terrain. I find that my oscillation between free and metrical or stanzaic verse corresponds quite directly with various approaches to 'badhat' the art of musical development and elaboration, the craft of unfolding. 'Badhat' is something that has been seen very differently in different gharana-s, with emphases on wholly different aspects of the musical art. Badhat may refer to the tonal progression of one's music, the development of a raag even without the assistance of taal – as in nom-tom alaap. It may refer to the development, on the other hand, not of a general theme, but of a specific precomposed bandish. One could thus speak either of 'raag ki badhat' or 'bandish ki badhat.' very broadly speaking The kirana ghraana has specialized in the svar-by-svar development of the raag; whereas the gwalior Jaipur and Agra Gharana-s seem more interested with the development of a specific precomposed statement.. In a conversation with satyasheelji years ago, I remember the tabla maestro Pandit Suresh Talwalkar using the terms 'Raag-alaapi' and 'rupak-alaapi' These broadly translate as 'development of theme' and 'development of set composition' I feel these terms have strong literary equivalences. Most of my poems clearly veer in one direction or the other; though of course these terms are not mutually exclusive; in fact one implies the other; quite in the way that free verse to be verse at all must have its formal moorings, and metred or stanzaic verse, to be poetry at all must at times play against the patterns it assumes.

Some months ago I found myself reading Rumi and Shakespeare on the phone to this mysterious singer friend of mine. Whom I mentioned earlier. I had been singing Bhup in vilambit jhoomra and both these poets came startlingly to mind during my riyaz-session. I was considering ways of approaching the sama, the first beat of the cycle; And it seemed as if at times I was putting so much effort into arriving there- as if each beat were at war

with next; whereas at other times the first beat just drew me towards it like gravity; often leaving me wholly unaware of what had elapsed in between. I shared this with my friend and couldn't resist quoting in context that most masterful of sonnets that begins : Like as the waves do make for the pebbled shore / So do our minutes hasten to their end / Each changing place with that which goes before. / In sequent toil all forwards do contend.....phew. 'Sequent toil...' That phrase really sums things up for me. Yani ek ek matre ka kuch aapasi jhagda hai, pichle matre se aur aanevale matre se. But here's the sonnet in full:

Like as the waves do make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity; wherewith being crowned
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And time, that gave, doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand
Praising thy worth despite his cruel hand.

Rumi , of course sees this very differently.....

'You are so weak. Give up to grace.
The ocean takes care of each wave
Till it gets to shore.
Say 'Bismillah' to your old self
To find your real name.....'

In the context of Hindustani music One could perhaps see the first beat as the shoreline, and each improvisation as a sound-wave motivated solely by its longing to arrive. Yani sama ko kinara aur har upaj ko ek tarang mano to.....Around that time certain geological events motivated me to write a poem which I will now read. I was referring to this earlier when I said would read a poem that seemed more concerned with the search for tone than anything else.

TIDAL WAVE

Believe me,
I didn't mean to do this.
I believed, with the seers and ecstasies,
That the sea would bring me

Where I needed to arrive,
 That no amount of lunging shorewards or holding back,
 Could alter anything about to happen.
 I began as a tremor,
 A shudder in the brooding loins of the sea,
 That set me moving to no visible end;
 Her sway seemed to hold all motion in place
 And I dreamed of nothing that breathed beyond her skin,
 Was granted no visions,
 As she urged me on -
 Spurring me out of her yet tightening her grip -
 Of the fields I would swamp, the children I would drown,
 The homes I would crush with soft claws of water;
 Nor could I tell -
 As those doomed coasts drew near -
 That in their ruin lay also my own:
 Or the end , at least,
 Of the only chance I thought I had
 Of being truly born;
 Of being anything more than an aspect of sea.
 Unspawned, I remain now as ghosts remain,
 A voice in the veins of those who survived me
 That clings to a theme they long to forget;
 Yet hear me now,
 Women of the coast, offspring of the dead,
 You whose progeny I snatched from your arms,
 Whose crops I wrecked and whose cattle I killed,
 Hear me and see how softly I speak:
 No roar. No crash.
 No surging crescendo, no deafening cascade,
 No rapt interjections of spindrift and surf;
 And no more of that turgid, moon-depraved magniloquence
 That brought me briefly to believe myself
 A being apart from the sea that bore me.
 Friends of the departed, lovers of the drowned,
 Hear me when I say I had no will in this matter.
 Hear me, and forgive.

I feel that structures like the kind in that last poem relieve me gently of the need for taut metrical effects and allow me to focus more intensely upon the tone of each utterance. Linear structures of this kind have a lot in common with the note-by note development of nom-tom alaap. As the durational values of the notes in nom-tom alaap , remain

important for me, so also in free verse does the length of any single breath, though I am not trying to accommodate each breath within a rigidly patterned view of time.

A little earlier in this presentation I used the phrase ‘adequately bandish-like’ with reference to my own writing. I would now like to read the first complete poem I wrote that seemed to live up to that description. It is the first poem in my book, a sonnet that concerns itself entirely with movement; a geographical movement from one place to another, but also a movement through and possibly out of language.

HARBOUR CROSSING

Beyond the bay- about half a mile of surf and wind-
The last bus awaits us at ferry wharf.
The island is a cyclops about to sleep; behind,
The hunched mainland shrinks into a dwarf.

So, to put it bluntly, we are neither here nor there.
The moon seems to understand this, pretending once again
To be young, rolling herself into an orange flare
As you speak of Greece and a bluer sea; then

Dark flags, mastheads and green meshes drift between,
And over the sea her charred beams are sparse;
You do not ask what this worn-out scenery might yet mean-
Let this remain- you say, and watch them pass,

Till slowly over the docks the moon returns to grey,
Salvages from time a minute- then anchors us to Bombay

So what do I mean when I say ‘bandish-like’? I am clearly not talking about cyclic patterns, or recurrent chorus lines or even regular iambic rhythms for that matter. What I think I mean – as clearly as can define it- is the sort of writing that involves a heightened attention towards the way sound and sense move in time:

I am reminded in context of Eliot whom Sridhar insists I am terribly fond of:

Words move, music moves.
Only in time; But that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach

Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.
Not the stillness of the violin while the note lasts,
Not that only, but the co-existence
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end
And all is always now. Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip slide, perish
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.....

I have spoken about the way in which my poems derive their energies from musical sources. I would also like to say a word about the way in which my choices as a musician tend to be influenced by my poetical processes. I think the clearest example of this is my fascination with the verbal text of a bandish and with its development in the bol-ang. Over the years, Satyasheelji exposed me to various improvisational techniques, various 'anga -s' of 'badhat.. But the bol-ang remains form me the most important of these. When I received a scholarship from the ministry of culture ten years ago, to study music full-time, I sought the guidance of Pandit Baban Haldankar of the agra gharana, and I think what attracted me to the Agra style was essentially the careful attention paid to the verbal text of the composition. The bol ang is essentially improvisational development based on the words of a composition rather than on mere syllables as in nom-tom or tarana, or on pure vowel sounds as in the aakaar and of badhat. This might need some demonstration so I am going to try.....

If my music and poetry have shared common concerns over the years, there have also been sudden necessary veerings away from one medium towards the other. I had intended to describe these in detail but I'm afraid this presentation has already gone on for too long and I am beginning to tax my audience's patience.....

All I am going to say is that I repeatedly feel the need to do something in words that only words can do, however closely connected they may be to the musical art; and the need moreover, to do in music what can only be achieved by musical sound. This is why a thumri in bhairavi that goes- prem ke phande me aakar sajani, main phas gayi anmol' provokes me to write a long English poem in three strophes called 'hangman's knot'; and why after addressing an ex-lover's pet tortoise in three pages of free verse I feel compelled to return to puriya and vilambit ektaal

There are also areas where I have tried to bring one medium close to another and failed, Times for instance when I have tried capture in poetry images centred around the shaiva

tradition that was a major source of inspiration for kumarji I have two long incomplete poems centred around Elephanta and Babulnath Mandir, both attempts to embrace shiva-imagery in the English language without sounding either stilted or clichéd; But whenever I grapple with these themes I find, I feel the English language breaking down all over again and leaving me at the verge of bairav or bhatiyar . Accommodating a hindustani sensibility within the framework of the English language is by no means an easy or straightforward business.....

One attempt of this sort which did lead to fruition- though I cannot confidently call it successful fruition- was a poem inspired by Kumarji's great bandish in bageshri and jhoomra- a serene and joyous panegyric in praise of Sarasvati..... Shall I dare to sing that bandish?- I have brought my CD player and a recording of kumarji's rendition- in case I decided to cop out- chalo koshish to karte hai.....

Rendition- bageshri – 'sohat hath mein been'

Those broad capacious fourteen-beat avartans of jhoomra prompted me to think in terms of large 20-line stanza-s all culminating with the same phrase. But now for my concluding poem:

PRAYER FOR A YOUNG SINGER

Lady of the white robe, insubstantial mother,
You who were never here, in the flesh, to betray,
But afloat upon the calyx of serenest sound;
Vision of deft silences, swift-fingered muse-
Your lips forever sealed to the mortal ear-
Be kind to him, spirit, for my sake, if not his own;
Though your name quiver for shame upon my tongue-
For the godless may still have faith in pure song;
Acquaint him with pain till it stir in his veins
That febrile strain at the core of the earth;
Yet lave him with the drone of ever-widening waters,
That he may hear in their tone his breath's own low hum;
May he befriend the stone-deaf and be at peace amongst them-
But from the heartless rant of canting pedants,
And the thoughtless banter of obsolete mentors,
Who shall think themselves wise because they forgave him
For what he did not do;
And from the tone-deaf cheer of raving throngs
Whose faithless cravings may secretly enslave him -
Save him.

Spear him with echoes. Pierce him with resonances,
Wrack him with rhythms and wound him with cadences.
Hurl him into chaos - yet fetter him with your laws,
And haunt him with the terror of meaningful sound,
Till he hears the blithe music of the lively dead,
And learns how to sing in praise of now -
Of the shimmer on a crest, the low swoon of a wave
Breaking upon a shore no thought disturbs;
At peace with history, and neither in love
Nor at war with his vision of death,
But afloat upon the sea of his own deep breath,
Like a leaf, that thinks of nothing, before it sinks.
Grant him an ear that seeks its own joy,
Yet guard him from the surfaces of polished mirrors,
Which will show him nothing his heart needs to see,
Urging him to sing in fear of change,
And to cling, in his singing, to what nobody may hold,
Till he murders his own music with the sound of his name;
And from the smooth grey faces of silicon discs,
Grooved with thin lines in which the years shall engrave him-
Save him

Grant him a tone as tremulous as it is fierce,
An earthy flamboyance, a muscular grace,
And the courage to hurl himself into the flux of sound;
Bless him with the power to be certain of nothing,
And the strength to bear witness when shame comes over him,
Beseiging him with visages that visit him alone,
With phantoms of his own pristine ugliness;
Teach him to look on them gently and smile;
Moving on nonchalantly through the hollows in his bones -
Calling out into the empty crevices of the soul,
Heedless of all ears other than his own;
Yet may he know,
As he meanders alone through those resounding streets,
Those pathless desolations and alleyways of tone,
That he walks where others have walked before him;
And from the vain enchantments of the unwalked way -
That dark, unloving, echoless dead end,
Which may lure him on and trample him flat,
And with its own contorted desires pave him -
Save him

May he lie with the beast and look his demon in the eye,
Waking to harness their guileful strength,
In a single, clear, unflinching glance,
Singing of vast spaces, undaunted by horizons,
In time with their passing and at home in time.
Open his ears, spirit, to the hidden rhythms of things,
And may he know, when he hears them,
That it is you he hears;
Yet guard him, in such knowing,
From what he shall make of you,
You whose image shall stand between him
And the zero of his being;
For he shall come to see himself
As seer and seeker,
Besotted by the glory of his servitude to your will,
Till the willful strain he raises in your praise
Deafens him to those silences that first urged him to walk;
And musing upon the thought of your unheard lute
May quite deprave him –
Save him

Thank you.....

