



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Ustad Amir Khan's Vision Of Tarana: Unraveling Its Mystical And Musical Essence

Dr. Sakshi Sharma
Assistant Professor
P.G. Department of Music Vocal
Govt. College for Girls, Patiala

Abstract

Tarana is a unique and vibrant musical genre in Hindustani classical music, often attributed to Hazrat Amir Khusro, a court musician of Alauddin Khilji in the 13th century. The word Tarana is of Persian origin and became widely recognized during the Mughal era. It consists of seemingly meaningless syllables such as Ta, Na, Ri, Tana, Dir, Nom, Tom, Odani, Tadani, which are sung in fast rhythmic patterns. While most musicians regarded these syllables as nonsensical, Ustad Amir Khan took a revolutionary approach by uncovering their hidden meanings through extensive research. His scholarly contributions earned him the prestigious Zakir Hussain Fellowship from the Bihar Sangeet Natak Academy in 1957. His work not only redefined the essence of Tarana but also restored its original purpose, which was deeply rooted in spiritual and devotional expression. He introduced Tarana in various ragas, including Suha, Megh, Hansdhwani, Malkauns, Darbari, Jog, Shudh Kalyan, Puriya Kalyan, Todi, Abhogi, Chanderkauns, and Gujri Todi. His innovations and deep understanding of Tarana serve as an inspiration for future generations.

Keywords: Tarana, Khayalnuma, Haal, Bol, Ustad Amir Khan

Introduction

Music has always played a significant role in human civilization, not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium of spiritual and intellectual expression. Among the various genres of Hindustani classical music, Tarana holds a special place due to its rhythmic complexity, fast tempo and unique syllabic structure. Traditionally, Tarana has been linked to Hazrat Amir Khusro, who is believed to have developed it by blending Persian and Indian musical traditions. However, over the time, the original intent behind Tarana was lost and it was largely reduced to a mere showcase of vocal dexterity.

Ustad Amir Khan, the pioneer of the Indore Gharana sought to restore Tarana to its authentic form by analyzing its linguistic and musical elements. He believed that the syllables used in Tarana were not meaningless but had profound spiritual and philosophical significance. Unlike other musicians who performed Tarana merely as a display of speed and virtuosity, Ustad Amir Khan emphasized its deeper, meditative aspects. Through his meticulous research and innovative approach, he provided a new dimension to Tarana singing, proving that it was much more than an exercise in vocal agility.

This paper explores the historical evolution of Tarana, its misunderstood aspects and Ustad Amir Khan's invaluable contributions in redefining this musical form.

Historical Background of Tarana

The origins of Tarana date back to the 13th century and are often credited to Hazrat Amir Khusro, a great poet, scholar and musician of the Delhi Sultanate. Tarana is believed to have been inspired by the Nirgiti compositions, which contained sushka-aksharas (meaningless syllables) and pat-aksharas (mnemonic drum syllables). However, unlike Nirgiti, which used hard consonants, Khusro's Tarana incorporated softer Persian words that could be arranged to convey some meaning. Thakur Jaidev Singh states: "Tarana was entirely an invention of Khusrau. It was a song with Persian words. Khusrau had the example of Nirgiti songs using meaningless syllables and mnemonic drum syllables. Such songs were in vogue from the time of Bharat Muni. But Khusrau introduced two innovations—firstly, he used mostly Persian words with soft consonants and secondly, he arranged these words in a way that bore some meaning."¹

Sufi saints commonly used Tarana during their prayers, often singing it in a state of trance (Haal). It was also employed by the tenth Sikh Guru, Sri Guru Gobind Singh, in compositions like "Jagardang Nagardang Bagardang."² According to S. M. Tagore: "In Tarana the slow alaps as the Dhrupad are limited up into different group of melodic orders. Which serve as model links for the tans and particular or the bottom in which melody fully brings out the values of the syllables employed. The tower of the melody consisting of such model links preserves all the niceties of the raga."³ However, over the time, many musicians ignored the meanings of the Persian words and focused only on the fast rhythmic execution of Tarana.

Ustad Amir Khan's Contributions to Tarana

His Unique Perspective

Ustad Amir Khan (1912–1973), the founder of the Indore Gharana, was not only a legendary vocalist but also a profound thinker. He devoted significant time to researching the origins and meanings of Tarana, challenging the widely held notion that the syllables were meaningless. Unlike most musicians, who merely saw Tarana as an opportunity for vocal acrobatics, he approached it with scholarly rigor and spiritual depth.

He was concerned that musicians had distorted Tarana by incorporating tabla, pakhawaj and mridang syllables (Dha, Kid Tak, Dhum Kid Tak), which turned it into a mere rhythmic exercise. He believed that Tarana was meant to evoke a trance-like state, leading the singer and listener to a deeper emotional and spiritual connection. He researched the Tarana form quite thoroughly and tried to take it back to its pure form as originally dictated by Hazrat Amir Khusro. It was the indeed the greatest contribution of Ustad Amir Khan. In 29 June 1974, in an All India Radio Program, Acharya Brihaspati said Amir Khan used to recite the Tarana in Khayal Ang.⁴ the Taranas of Ustad Amir Khan were Khayalnuma (consisting sathai and antra) and were completely different from others. Many times during the concerts he used to explain the hidden meanings of Tarana as well. By doing a great research he revealed the meanings of Arabic and Persian lyrics of Tarana for which he was given Zakir Hussain fellowship by Bihar Sangeet Natak Academy in 1957.

Deciphering the Hidden Meanings

Through extensive research, Ustad Amir Khan decoded the meanings of many Persian and Arabic words used in Tarana. Some of the meanings he uncovered include:

- Dar – inside
- Dara – get in or come inside
- Dartan – inside the body
- O dani – he knows
- Tu dani – you know
- Tanandara – come inside the body
- Tom – I am you
- Nadirdani – you know more than anyone else
- Tandardani – one who knows what is inside the body

Tarana Compositions by Ustad Amir Khan

Ustad Amir Khan recorded several Taranas in different ragas, each reflecting his refined musical philosophy.

Some notable examples include:

• **Tarana in Raga Megh**

- “Abre Tar Saihane Chaman, Bulbul O Gule Phasale Bahar Saki O Mutrib O May, Yaar Be Saihane Guljar”
- Meaning: “The clouds are wet (drizzling rain), there is a garden in the courtyard, the nightingale is present, the season of spring is here, there is a singer, there is wine, and my beloved is present in the courtyard.”

• **Tarana in Raga Hansadhwani**

- “Ittihadista Miyane Mano To, Mano To Nista Miyan Ne Mano To”
- Meaning: “There is such a connection between you and me that there is no distinction left between ‘I’ and ‘you’—a realization of oneness.”

• **Tarana in Raga Suha**

- “Sakiya Barkhej Dar Deh Jamra, Khaq Bar Sar Kun Game ayyamra”
- Meaning: “O beloved! Rise and give me the wine of love, and let go of the sufferings of the world.”

• **Tarana in Raga Darbari**

- “Ya re man biya biya, dat tam tadim, Tanan tanatadin, tanan tana dim tom ta na nana”
- Meaning: “O friend, come quickly, come to me, and merge into my being, for I am yours.”

Conclusion

Ustad Amir Khan was not only a brilliant vocalist but also a revolutionary thinker who redefined the art of Tarana singing. His research proved that Tarana was much more than an exercise in speed—it was a profound expression of spiritual and emotional depth. By deciphering the meanings of its Persian and Arabic lyrics, he restored Tarana to its original glory. His legacy continues to inspire musicians, ensuring that Tarana remains a meaningful and integral part of Hindustani classical music.

References:

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