

## **Role of Criticism in Indian Music**

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***‘Nindak niyare rakhiye angan kuti chabaye, binu pani binu  
sabuna nirmal kare suhay...’***

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...We may have come across this very famous *doha* of Kabir Dasji many times in our lives meaning a critic is like a cleanser who without water or soap washes us of our mistakes thus one should never part from the critics!

We the thinking animals , the human beings have been especially endowed with the faculty of discriminating and analyzing. Be it art, science, politics, technology or cooking! Criticism can be said to belong to this school of discriminative potential of man.

It is said that anything taken in a positive stride gives fruitful results and is beneficial in the long term. This ideology is equally relevant for the phenomenon of ‘criticism’ as well. Philosophers and saints since time immemorial have been preaching self-criticism for the seekers of Truth. Indian Classical Music too in its long journey was not spared by criticism rather it can be said if not exaggeratingly that criticism brought new facets to its various dimensions.

South Indian or Carnatic Music remained glued to its originality in the absence of this ‘criticism’ since the southern lands weren’t that much exposed to outer invasions of cultures or in other words couldn’t have the opportunity to imbibe novelties in its renditions. But North Indian Classical Music due to its continuous associations with the world outside exuded uninterrupted assessment and modifications, on the basis of the saying ‘as many heads, so many thoughts’! But the positive point of this assessment or criticism was that North Indian Classical music received more variant shades.

If analyzed in a positive light, the act of criticism introduced Desi Sangit from the Margi Sangit, Khayal from the Dhrupad, Dhamar-Thumri-Tappa from the Khayal.

A kind of unfulfilment or emptiness invoked criticism which in its flow brought about various genres of music from its prior state.

### **Criticism in its essence**

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What exactly do we mean by criticism?

“According to the Oxford Dictionary, “ a critic is one who pronounces judgement on any literary or artistic work- one skilled in textual criticism.” Normally the tendency is to believe that a critic has to be critical. In other words, the critic has to be negative about a performance or any artistic piece of work. This, however, is a fallacy.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Indian Classical Music and Criticism**

Music is considered to be the foremost amongst all its fellow disciplines of Lalit Kala. Being a highest and subtlest form of art, a student of music is encouraged to chase perfection lifelong. Music is compared to the ocean which requires many lives for perfecting it. In such a mental ambience of music a genuine musician or a seeker of music does his *sangeet sadhana* for years together regardless of his or her age or appreciation received from the audience.

### **Importance of Criticism in Indian Classical Music**

Right from the very beginning a student of music is supposed to remain under the critical canopy of his *Guru*. This canopy later proves to be vital saving him from major blunders and shortcuts of music. But this was more practical in the *guru-shishya* tradition of music wherein a disciple used to surrender at the feet of his guru and learn the nuances of the art for years together.

“In the olden days one learnt music under the *guru-shishya parampara*, which involved several years of serious study, staying with the guru, with no other diversions, with about six to eight hours devoted to the study of music and rest of the time, spent listening to others sing, others being taught, participating or listening to discussions on music. This meant a total dedication to music to the exclusion of everything else. Hence it was possible for a student to pick up very

well our complex and abstract music, the style of the guru, the embellishments, the vocal intonations, the development of the raag that made his master's style unique.”<sup>2</sup>

North Indian classical music is unique in the sense that it originally is based on tradition. It is basically a *guru-mukhi* and *guru-sahachari vidya*, wherein a disciple not only learns directly from the guru but also assimilates his guru's entire thought pattern on music and life as a whole living in close quarters with his guru.

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The newness and the moment- to- moment created nuances provide freshness to North Indian Classical music but also bring in its wave criticism and evaluations.

The following excerpt by the renowned vocalist of Kirana Gharana may help us scientifically gauging the concept of criticism.

“Criticism is both art and a science. It can be mastered only by those who are prepared to invest strenuous labor in it. For the artist, systematic training, sustained study and contemplation are regarded as basic requirements. Are they not equally indispensable for the music critic? Is a working knowledge of music and some writing skill enough to become a music critic? The art of music and its exposition has a tradition that goes back thousands of years. By contrast, newspaper criticism of music, particularly in India, is still in its infancy. It has yet to evolve an equally impressive tradition, its own conventions, disciplines and language too. This is something can cannot be achieved overnight. It might takes years, perhaps a generation or two. No wonder, there is a strong demand by the artists, listeners and researchers to groom critics by special training.”<sup>3</sup>

Be it a listener, teacher, patron, organizer or a by-passer, Indian classical music has had its share of critics from time immemorial. With the arrival of the Britishers, the patronage of Indian Classical artists was transferred from the Royal hierarchy to the elite, rich and corporate class of the society. In the former , every single individual at the receiving end had a ‘dignified’ knowledge of the art they were receiving and so could be characterized as learned critics which both inspired and alerted a performer of his or her repertoire. But today, this attribute is the possessed ‘job’ of the critics.

The following excerpt establishes this phenomenon:

“Whichever role the patron took (listener and /or performer), and for whatever reasons, one belief seems to have been shared by Hindu and Muslim alike: listeners were expected to know a great deal about what they were hearing and to respond to the performer accordingly. This capacity was not the intuitive receptivity to emotion suggested by the music that is involved in *rasa*; it was the empirical “I know what are you doing every moment and why”. It was an expectation that kept the performers on their toes and made the listener- performer relationship an intensely personal one. The result was an elitist ideal of a musical sort. And, indeed, Indian Classical music has been mainly for the elite.”<sup>4</sup>

Not only Indian Classical musicians but even for Light music and Gazal singers, Indian audience till today gives a tough fight as learned critics. Once Ghulam Ali, the renowned Gazal exponent is recorded to have said that he has to start his daily ‘*riyaz*’ six months before coming to India for a concert! Such is the reputation of the Indian connoisseur’s of music.

Whatever be it, Indian Classical music has also had a fine tradition of critics who from time to time have inspiringly chased musicians to perfection. They are Mr. Mohan Nadkarni who wrote for almost three decades for *The Times of India*, Mr. Kumar Prasad Mukherjee who wrote for *Kolkata Statesman*, Shri Prakash Wadhera who writes for the music soirees of Delhi, Mrs. Manjiri Singh who gives her precious reviews awaited by all in *The Hindu* etc.

On a positive note we can conclude with these views of Vidushi Prabha Atre:

“Classical music and musicians today are facing problems. The music critic must show a greater sense of responsibility and lighten their burden by sharing it. One solution could be frequent meetings, more dialogue between the artist and the critic. This will be a step towards a healthy relationship between the artist and the critic and a meaningful musical criticism in general.

An artist has to strike a balance between his art and the demands of his profession. He has to reach his audience which today comprises people of varying tastes and demands. A critic must also take notice of the inevitable interplay between artist and the audience.”<sup>5</sup>

**References:**

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3. Atre, Prabha, Enlightening the Listener, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2000, Page 147
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5. Atre, Prabha, Enlightening the Listener, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2000, Page 149-150