

---

# Mirasis: Some Thoughts on Hereditary Musicians in Hindustani Music

*Adrian McNeil*

---

Gharanas occupy a special place in contemporary Hindustani music.<sup>1</sup> In fact it would be difficult today to find a professional Hindustani musician, male or female, vocalist or instrumentalist, who would not identify socially or musically with one, or more, of these hoary institutions. In a musical culture dominated by hereditary music specialists until the twentieth century, the importance of gharanas has been due to their capacity to potently evoke pre-modern times in the present. Through gharanas a rich corpus of oral histories and inherited repertoires along with the nostalgia of a legendary musical past are carried powerfully into the imagination of contemporary non-hereditary performers and their audiences. It is this quality that has imbued gharanas with a purpose that sits well beyond their functions as social groupings or schools of musical interpretation.

Gharanas first emerged in the last half of the nineteenth century at a time when the networks and structures of patronage in urbanised colonial cities such as Calcutta, Mumbai and Delhi seriously challenged those of regional centres. The *gharana* system emerged as a new social and economic framework, one through which hereditary musicians in regional areas could engage new-found sources of patronage in the rapidly expanding colonial cities.<sup>2</sup>

The subsequent development of gharanas is reasonably well known and will not, therefore, be discussed here.<sup>3</sup> However considerably less detail is understood about the social fabric

---

<sup>1</sup> Hindustani music here means the Classical / Art music of North India, which is also called *Shastriya* or *Raag Sangeet* in India. I am grateful to Dr Shubha Chaudhuri from the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) in New Delhi for ongoing assistance in accessing historical materials.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, see Aneesh Pradhan, *Changing Facets of Indian Music in a Colonial Situation: A Case Study of Mumbai*, PhD thesis, Mumbai University, 2000; Pradhan, 'Perspectives on Performance Practice: Hindustani Music in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Mumbai' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 27.3 (December 2004): 339–58; Adrian McNeil *Inventing the Sarod* (Kolkata: Seagull, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For details of this development, see Vamanrao Deshpande, transl. S.H. Deshpande, *Indian Musical Traditions: An Aesthetic Study of the Gharanas in Hindustani Music* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1973); Shrikrishna Haldankar, *Aesthetics of Agra and Jaipur Tradition* (Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 2001); D.P. Mukhopadhyay, *Bharatiya Sangeetey Gharanar Itihas* [in Bengali] (Calcutta: Mukherjee, 1977).

of musicians prior to this.<sup>4</sup> Neuman opened up the important area of social organisation of this musical tradition and while the present discussion is indebted to that work, the aim here by comparison is a modest one.<sup>5</sup> This paper is intended as an initial attempt to reopen this area of investigation. In doing so, just four of perhaps the most common terms for musicians are encountered in discussions of the musical past: Mirasi, Dhadhi, Kalawant and Qawwal. They are significant because they are the labels of hereditary musicians most often linked to the formation of gharanas. While Neuman has also touched upon these in his study, it is the intention here to consider their scope and range of application in a little more detail.

Yet this task is not straightforward, as relevant information is located in fragments within and across a wide range of primary and secondary sources, most of which do not have music as a major concern. These include colonial documentation such as found in Census reports and Gazetteers written in English, court chronicles in Persian, Hindi and other languages, administrative records and ethnological studies in many regional languages, photographs, local oral histories and so on. When considered together, this body of information begins to reveal a much more complex picture of the pre-modern social organisation of hereditary musicians than is often portrayed.

### **Mirasis: Patrons and Clients**

In the past villages or clans in North India that could afford to do so supported their own group of musicians. These Hindu or Muslim musicians belonged to endogamous castes, sub-castes or some other communities of hereditary music specialists. They generally shared a number of common occupational functions, which included maintaining the genealogy of their patron groups, praising them and their ancestors through song, accompanying them into battle and performing ritual ceremonial or celebratory music for their weddings, births and so on. These local and regional based castes were formally attached to a patron group through a generic sort of social contract. This contract took the form of a 'system of hereditary obligations of payments and of occupational and ceremonial duties between two or more specific families of different castes in the same locality.'<sup>6</sup> Patron groups and hereditary musicians maintained 'not an idyllic mutuality, but unequal relationships based upon power rooted in land tenure, numerical superiority, political connections and the ritual-scriptural sanctions of caste hierarchy.'<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> There are few studies that have focused in detail on a handful of specific regional musician castes; see for example, Gordon Thompson, 'The Charans of Gujarat: Caste, Identity, Music and Cultural Change,' *Ethnomusicology*, 35.3 (1992): 381–82; Thomson, 'The Barots of Gujarati-Speaking Western India: Musicianship and Caste Identity,' *Asian Music* 24.1 (1992/1993): 1–17.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Neuman, 'Country Musicians and their City Cousins: The Social Organisation of Musical Transmission,' *International Musicological Society, Report of the XII Congress* (Berkeley: IMS, 1977); Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Wayne UP, 1990 [1980]). This area has been significantly expanded by a recent publication on hereditary musician castes in Rajasthan; see D. Neuman, S. Choudhury with K. Kothari, *Bards, Ballads and Boundaries: An Ethnographic Atlas of Music Traditions in West Rajasthan* (Kolkata: Seagull, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas O. Beidelman, *A Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System*, Monograph Series VIII (New York: Association for Asian Studies, 1959) 6. This contract of exchange is often called Jajmani. See William H. Wiser, *The Hindu Jajmani System: A Socio-economic System Interrelating Members of a Hindu Village Community in Services* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1950); Peter Mayer, 'Inventing Village Tradition: The Late 19th Century Origins of the North Indian Jajmani System,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 27.2 (May 1993): 359–95. It is unclear when the term Mirasi was first used in the subcontinent in relation to hereditary musicians. Nevertheless, it is generally believed that castes of such musicians have existed since ancient times.

<sup>7</sup> Beidelman, *Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System* 6.

exchange that took place between the two groups is commonly characterised as a patron-client or master-servant relationship.

The status of village based musician castes, the functions they performed, the type of music they specialised in, and the social organisations of their members varied according to both the ancestries of the musicians involved and the status (or particular needs) of their patron group or village. Collectively, these hereditary occupational music specialists, at least in the West and North-Western regions of the subcontinent, were known as *Mirasis*.

Like all the client ... classes, the *Mirasi's* position varies with that of his patron, and a *Mirasi* permanently attached to a Rajput clan is benefited by it and ranks higher than one who is merely a strolling player or casual attendant at a Jat [farmer's] wedding.<sup>8</sup>

Besides community based or itinerant musicians, other endogamous groups of hereditary musicians were in the service of the innumerable Hindu, Jain and Sikh temples across North India. In the Muslim communities too, hereditary musicians belonging to the Sufi sect were in the service of *Dargahs* (shrines) of a number of Sufi saints and the *Khanqahs* (hermitages) of Sufi teachers. *Mirasis* in a village or religious institution tended to belong to the same broader community as their patrons.

To these can be added the many other strata of hereditary musicians in the service of imperial administrations and courts of political power, such as occurred with the Mughals and their allies. In these networks and structures of patronage occupational music specialists performed a range of functions, which included accompanying imperial armies into battle, and for performing ceremonial and ritual functions. Smaller numbers of highly trained specialists were engaged in entertaining rulers and the gentry in their courts and private chambers. The wealth and prestige of these courts and their administrations attracted music specialists from diverse communities, not just from the subcontinent but also from Central and West Asia. Under the Mughals, a multi-ethnic configuration of musicians came together under one network and structure of patronage. The syncretic practices of the Mughals continued in the courts and administrations of numerous successor states such as Awadh, Jaipur and Gwalior from the late eighteenth century onwards. This mode of patronage was in contrast to the village and religious based musicians who were employed in situations where the clients and patrons tended to belong to the same locality or belonged to the same broader community.

*Mirasi* is often used as an umbrella term to denote heterogeneous and endogamous communities or sub-castes of hereditary music specialists ranging from those based in villages through to those in the service of imperial courts.<sup>9</sup> The range of contexts in which they were found is articulated in the following 'Mirasi proverb' documented in a nineteenth-century colonial report on the tribes and castes of the north west of the subcontinent:

<sup>8</sup> H.A. Rose after Denzil Ibbetson and Edward Maclagan, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province* (Patiala: Languages Department, Punjab, 1970 [1883]), vol. 3, 106.

<sup>9</sup> The use of *Mirasi* is applied widely in India, and is not just restricted to musicians. It seems that since the nineteenth century, artisans, craftspeople and musicians (clients) who entered into the feudal patron-client system of exchange with a *jajman* (patron) were known as *Mirasis*; see Mayer, 'Inventing Village Tradition.' As to how the condition of *Mirasis* in non musical situations compared to that of hereditary musicians lies outside of the scope of this paper and is worthy of separate investigation.

*Guniyan ke sagar hain, zat ke ujagar hain, bikhari badshahon ke;  
Parbhom ke Mirasi, Singhon ke Rababi, Qawwal Pirzadon ke;  
Sabhi hamen janat hain, Dum maljadon ke.*

[We are the ocean of knowledge (*gun*), enlighteners of castes (genealogists),  
beggars of kings, Mirasis (hereditary bards) of our patrons, Rababis of the Sikhs,  
and Qawwals (story tellers) of the Pirzadas (Shaikhs).

Everyone knows us; we are the Dums [beggars] of the wealthy.<sup>10</sup>

The same report details that in this region alone there were at least forty distinct communities of Mirasis.<sup>11</sup> Other sources suggest that similar distinctions were evident in many other parts of North and North-West India.<sup>12</sup> Like many musical terms in India, it becomes apparent from primary and secondary sources that Mirasi is used in more than one way. At this point a distinction can be noted between the use of Mirasi as a collective term to denote all hereditary music specialists and its local use to denote a specific caste of musicians from a specific place.

Whether used as a collective or local term, Mirasi nevertheless signified a common hereditary occupational role. Mirasis were expected to keep the genealogies of their patron groups. In the past, this job was an important function, as it served as an historical record of a line of family or clan descent. This was essential in defining acceptable marriage links between different castes and even between entire clans. In a feudal political economy these records potentially represented a significant resource for forging political and social alliances, and not least of all for determining the inheritance rights within a patron group. This last function might partially explain the etymology of Mirasi—which is derived from the Arabic and Farsi *miras*, meaning inheritance. Equally, the term could also be derived from the inherited, exclusive right Mirasis had to service their traditional patron castes

In a number of other places, the term also contained another layer and was used to denote the musical accompanists to courtesans and prostitutes (*tawa'if, randi*). It is in this sense that Mirasis are listed in an 1891 Census Report for the Marwar region of Rajasthan. Here, Mirasis (which appear third in the list below) are said to be one of the twelve major categories of musicians:

1. Binkar: one who plays the bin
2. Kalawant, those who play tampura and sitar sitting down, They do not sing standing up and are also know to accompany 'randi'-s (prostitutes)
3. Mirasi: play the sarangi and stand next to a 'randi' when she dances
4. Gandharb: sing praises of Jain deities
5. Ustadji: those who teach 'randi'-s to sing
6. Katthak; Brahmins who are considered expert musicians and dancers

<sup>10</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab*, vol. 3, 114.

<sup>11</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab*, vol. 2, 106.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of North Western India*, in 4 vols (New Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 1974 [1897]); Tod James, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or, the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1972 [1829]); Neuman, Kothari and Choudhury, *Bards, Ballads and Boundaries*.

7. Mursal: they are found in North India and play the nakkara while riding a horse
8. Qawwal: sing 'Qual' at the Dargahs of Pirs and is influenced by Sufism
9. Tabalchi: those who play the tabla to accompany 'randi'-s
10. Pakhavaji: those who play the pakhavaj drum and sing
11. Jodi wale: those who play 'jhanjh' and manjira cymbals
12. Kirtaniye: those sadhus who sing bhajans and kirtans in temples.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note that out of these twelve categories, four have been linked with prostitutes. Somehow the stigma of this association also carried through to urban centres in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where it was even extended by the rising middle classes in the cities to almost all hereditary musicians. Mirasi became a derogatory label in this setting and as later discussion shows it became the oppositional marker to the *gharanedar kalakar* (a musician belonging to a *gharana*). It is in this sense that the term is most commonly used in colloquial speech about music in regional languages today.

### Dhadhi

The term Dhadhi specifically refers to endogamous communities of hereditary castes of musicians from the West and North-West of the subcontinent, stretching from Rajasthan through Panjab to Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> Nahata states that the term originally referred to an 'endogamous caste of Hindu Dhadhi and Dhadhin musicians and dancers from Marwar in Rajasthan who, in ancient times, used to sing and dance in the temples devoted to Krishna.'<sup>15</sup> He also states that at some later period Dhadhis were also employed as musicians by the Rajput courts.<sup>16</sup>

The colonial documentation of the nineteenth century has shown that Dhadhi and Mirasi were not mutually exclusive terms. Those Dhadhis with 'higher caste patrons Jat, Raika, Bishnoi, Sunar Khatri, Chhipa and Rajput in Marwar are called Mirasis. All dhadhis are genealogists to their patron communities.'<sup>17</sup> In another nineteenth-century report from Marwar, it was stated that

The Dhadhis can be Hindu or Muslim, but Muslim Dhadhis are called Malanoor. Dhadhi women sing at the homes of their 'jajmans' (patrons) but do not dance. They can recite information at will, and compose songs of these on the spot.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Glossary of Tribes and Castes of Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province* of 1883, Dhadhis were noted to have been 'spread over a wide geographical area and that there is a Hindu and a Mohammedan branch' amongst which there are some forty different communities.

<sup>13</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar, jisme Marwar ki koumon ka itihās aur unki reet rasam ki jarurui – 2 hal ikhagaya hai* (Jodhpur: Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner, Jodhpur Record Section, 1891) 370–71.

<sup>14</sup> A number of variations in the Devanagari spelling of this term and in its pronunciation exist. The distinctions between these variations do not readily translate into Roman script. Two variants have been used here: Dhadhi and Dhari. The former tends to specify an endogamous community and the latter an occupational category in the Mughal administration and its successor states such as Awadh.

<sup>15</sup> Agarchand Nahata, 'Rajasthan ke Gane Bajanewale Koumen aur "Dhadhi"', *Sangeet* (October 1961): 27.

<sup>16</sup> Nahata, 'Rajasthan ke Gane Bajanewale Koumen aur "Dhadhi"' 27–28.

<sup>17</sup> Munshi Hardyal Singh, *The Castes of Marwar: Being the Census Report of 1891* (Jodhpur: Books Treasure Publishers and Book Sellers, 1990) 369.

<sup>18</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwa* 369–70.

In Panjab, Dhadhis are so named because they played (and still do) on the hand-drum, *dhadh*, to whose accompaniment they sing praise of God or their patrons.<sup>19</sup> Dhadhis are also known as one of the three principal groups of hereditary musicians of the Sikh community, the other two being Ragis and Rababis.<sup>20</sup>

While Dhadhi musicians in Rajasthan and Panjab also shared cultural links with their patron's groups, by comparison Crooke notes that some Dhadhis in the North-West Provinces were itinerant and not fixed to patron groups or locations.<sup>21</sup> This observation is confirmed by Ibbetson: 'the Dhadhi is a genealogist or story teller and is not attached to any particular family or tribe,'<sup>22</sup> and also by Sherring, who observed that Dhadhis in that region are:

a class of Mahomedan players. Both men and women perform on musical instruments, or sing, or dance, wherever they can obtain employment. When they have no engagements they wander about the country visiting villages and towns, or performing in private houses, and in this manner earn a livelihood.<sup>23</sup>

It is also significant that musicians from Rajput Dhadhi communities have long been associated with the development of rag sangeet. Amongst the thirty-six most accomplished singers in the Mughal emperor Akbar's court (1556–1605), five of them were Dhadhis and they sang dhrupad. In a later court chronicle from the mid-seventeenth century a number of Muslim Dhadhi musicians are mentioned and in the chronicler's opinion no one was seen to excel Miyan Dalu Dhadhi in the performance of dhrupad at the time.<sup>24</sup> Other musicians from within this community such as Mishri Khan Dhadhi and Bakshu Dhadhi were well-known and important musicians in their time.<sup>25</sup>

However, around this time, Dhadhi also began to acquire a different meaning within the Mughal and Lucknow court administrations. The principal chronicler of Akbar's court describes 'Dharis' as those musicians who 'chiefly chant the praises of the heroes on the battlefield and lend fresh spirit to the fight.'<sup>26</sup> The eclecticism displayed by the Mughals in matters of religion, culture and the symbols of authority was also evident in the ethnic composition of their armed forces. The unparalleled strength of the Mughal forces was derived from the massive numbers of troops that they were able to recruit from amongst their Afghan, Hindu, Persian and sundry other political allies in North India. Out of these allies, it appears that the largest contingent of troops were the Rajputs.<sup>27</sup> The imperial administration labelled the heterogenous ethnic mix

<sup>19</sup> Crooke, *Tribes and Castes of North Western India*, vol 2, 276–77.

<sup>20</sup> Gobind Singh Mansukhani, 'Indian Classical Music and Sikh Kirtan,' 1982, <http://fateh.sikhnet.com/sikhnet/Gurbani.nsf/0/2ed7326ec9b61b5f872565bc004de7a9?>> (accessed 24 April 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Crooke, *Tribes and Castes of North Western India*, vol. 2, 276–77.

<sup>22</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab*, vol. 2, 119.

<sup>23</sup> M.A. Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes together with an Account of the Mahomedan Tribes of the North-West Frontier and of the Aboriginal Tribes of the Central Provinces*, in 2 vols (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1971 [London: 1879]), vol. 1, 275.

<sup>24</sup> Faqirullah [Nawab Saif Khan], *Tarjuma-i-Manakutuhala and Risala Raga Darpana*, ed. and notated by Shahab Sarmadee (New Delhi: IGNC&A & Motilal Banarsidass, 1996 [1670]) 193.

<sup>25</sup> Hakim Mohammad Karam Imam, transl. Govind Vidyarthi, 'Melody through the Centuries,' *Sangeet Natak Akademi Bulletin* (11–12 April 1959 [1856]): 15–18.

<sup>26</sup> Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak, transl. H. Blochmann, ed. S.L. Goomer, *The Ai'n-i-Akbari* (Delhi: Aadiesh Book Depot, 1965) 276.

<sup>27</sup> Dirk A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustani 1450-1850* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990) 171.

of musicians who performed this common function as Dharis. Nahata argues that it was in this cultural setting that the spelling of Dhadhi changed.

After the Muslims came to India these older terms (Dhadhi, Dharhi) were corrupted to Dhari due to the trouble that Persian speakers, such as the Mughals, had with the pronunciation of the retroflex sound, *dh*.<sup>28</sup>

The new term was presumably derived from the military role of Rajput Dhadhis accompanying their patrons into battle as musicians. It then seems to have been adapted and applied as an occupational category to a multi-ethnic grouping of musicians employed to carry out this function in the imperial forces.<sup>29</sup> In this context the term came to denote an occupational category within the imperial forces, as distinct from its specific use as a Rajput caste name with the occupational function of genealogist.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Dhadhi/Dhari acquired yet another meaning reflecting a significant change in the sources of patronage. With the dismantling of regional military labour markets across North India in the late eighteenth century under British forces, many hereditary musicians in the service of local militias and communities lost their local sources of livelihood.<sup>30</sup> It was during this period that substantial migration began to take place from villages and towns to regional cities such as Lucknow.<sup>31</sup> One of the most easily accessible means of making a livelihood for such displaced musicians was in the urban brothels accompanying courtesans.<sup>32</sup> Regional musicians migrated to Lucknow, the largest of the post-Mughal cities in the North. There many found employment in the renowned courtesan culture of that city and were collectively lumped together as Dharis. A commentator of the time observed that 'most of the Dharis earn their living by accompanying dancing girls ... [and] these people possess a fine style for accompaniment.'<sup>33</sup>

These Dharis were Muslims from diverse communities across North India. In Lucknow they were socially and musically distinct from those court musicians from the Dhadhi community who sang *dhrupad* or were involved in Shia devotional music.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst Dharis employed in the Lucknow court were generally held in high regard, their courtesan-accompanying namesakes were summarily dismissed by one contemporary cultural commentator of the city: 'the rest of the Dharis in Lucknow are crazy idiots fit only to teach dancing to tawaif [dancing girls].'<sup>35</sup>

The association between Dharis and courtesans was not confined to Lucknow but was evident in the north-west provinces too. The following proverb more directly asserts that Dharis acted as pimps for the courtesans/prostitutes [*Randi*] they accompanied:

<sup>28</sup> Nahata, 'Rajasthan ke Gane Bajanewale Koumen aur "Dhadhi"' 27.

<sup>29</sup> Adrian McNeil, *Inventing the Sarod: A Cultural History* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2004) 39ff.

<sup>30</sup> Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy* 187.

<sup>31</sup> McNeil, *Inventing the Sarod* 46–50.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Neuman 'Country Musicians and their City Cousins: The Social Organisation of Musical Transmission,' *Proceedings of the 12th Congress of the International Musicological Society* (Berkeley: IMS, 1977) 133.

<sup>33</sup> Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries' 18.

<sup>34</sup> Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries' 26.

<sup>35</sup> Hakim Mohammad Karam Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries', 19.

*Randi ki kamai, ya khae dharhi, ya khae gari*

[The prostitute's earnings go to the pimp (*dharhi*) or cabman]<sup>36</sup>

The term Dhadhi can be noted to have been ascribed both collective and specific meanings. A particular shade of meaning was contingent on the historical and cultural context in which it was used. Dhadhi originally denoted an endogamous hereditary caste of Rajput musicians and genealogists spread across North India and Afghanistan. In the Mughal and Rajput courts they were accomplished singers of dhrupad. Within the Mughal and Lucknow administrations, Dhari became an occupational category to describe a multi-ethnic mix of military musicians. With the disenfranchisement of the regional military labour market under British colonisation, Dhari became another occupational category most commonly denoting the musical accompanists and associates of courtesans.

### Kalawant

As with Dhadhi, the earliest use of Kalawant originally denoted an endogamous caste of Rajput musicians. According to Nahata, Kalawant were a *koum* (a community, endogamous group or caste) of musicians who originated in Rajasthan and whose family background was unequivocally Hindu.<sup>37</sup> The term was still used in this way in the late nineteenth century in the *Census Report of the Castes of Bombay and its Neighbourhood* where Kalawants are described as a distinct sub-caste divided into five branches, namely: Patra, Ramjani, Ghikari, Ranganli, Kanchan. These sub-castes eat together, intermarry, and follow the same profession of singing, dancing and prostitution; 'Hindoos of other castes and Mahomedans also engage them.'<sup>38</sup>

The use of the term to denote local endogamous communities is also evident in the Marwar district of Rajasthan, where an 1891 Census Report describes Kalawants as:

simply singers, as they do not dance at all. They number 36 in Marwar (males 19 and females 17). The name seems to be derived from the Sanskrit *kala* art and *vanti* master. They are all Pardesi [from beyond Marwar] Musalmans and belong to the Sunni sect. There are two divisions of them in Marwar, the first comprising those, who were originally Gaur Brahmans and used to sing hymns or bhajans in the Hindu temples, but were converted to Mohamedanism by Mahmud of Ghazni when he destroyed the temples. The second division consists of those who originally belonged to the *Tank* clan of Chohan Rajputs and are now know as Tank-Sultan.

They strictly adhere to the tenets of their faith. They occupy a higher position among the Doms or Dhadhis of Marwar ... They came to Marwar in the time of Maharaja Ajit Singh and are said to have flourished during the reign of Maharaja Man Singh who is stated to have a taste for the art.<sup>39</sup>

In the North West Provinces Kalawants are described as 'Mahomedan performers [b]ut are much higher in rank than the Dharhis; are regarded, indeed, as persons of reputation and

<sup>36</sup> W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of North Western India*, 4 vols (New Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 1974 [1897]), vol 2, 267–77.

<sup>37</sup> Nahata, Rajasthan ke Gane Bajanewale Koumen aur "Dhadhi" 27.

<sup>38</sup> M.A. Sherring, *The Tribes and Castes of Rajasthan, together with Descriptions of Sacred and Celebrated Places of Historical Value in Rajasthan* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975 [London, 1881]) 200.

<sup>39</sup> *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwa* 374.

respectability.<sup>40</sup> This observation is also supported by Ibbetson who, later in the nineteenth century, adds that Kalawants are the Mirasis of the Rajputs, and that 'they especially affect the dhurpat [dhrupad].'<sup>41</sup> Outside of these sub-castes of Rajputs, ethnically and musically distinct communities of Kalawants in Panjab were called the Mirasis of the Sikhs and they were known to have played the *rabab*.<sup>42</sup> In the North-West Provinces Kalawants are noted to be more skilled than the Mirasi (here indicating Dhadhis).<sup>43</sup>

Hindu Rajput Kalawant communities attached to the Tomar clan of Rajputs were employed in the leading courts in Rajasthan and many are noted as important figures in the development of Hindustani music. Raja Man Singh of Gwalior brought the musical experts Swami Haridas and four nayaks,<sup>44</sup> Bhanu, Chharju, Dhuhdhi and Chanchal Shashi to his Rajput Gwalior court in the sixteenth century. These four nayaks were from Hindu Kalawant communities. Most of these communities eventually converted to Islam under the Mughals. Erdman has documented that Kalawants were still by far the most numerous group of musicians in the Rajput court in Jaipur as late as 1933.<sup>45</sup> Both Hindu and Muslim singers and instrumentalists who belonged to endogamous communities of Kalawants were listed in the chronicles of Mughal courts as among the top musicians of the period. They sang dhrupad and played the plucked lute, *rabab*.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to signifying an endogamous caste of musicians, the appellation Kalawant was also awarded as a title of accomplishment in the Mughal court to those 'gandharva and guni musicians who performed dhrupad, *trivat*<sup>47</sup> and other such things. The Mughal emperor Akbar is said to have conferred this title on four musicians in his court, whom he refers to as the 'original' Kalawants.<sup>48</sup> In this context the term was first and foremost a title of recognition and did not necessarily indicate a connection to any endogamous groups of Kalawants. This was also the way the term was used in the early seventeenth-century Bijapur court of Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah, where all categories of court musicians were collectively known as Kalawants.<sup>49</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, unspecified numbers of Kalawants had migrated to cities such as Lucknow in search of work where, like Dharis, they had also become musical accompanists in the rapidly expanding courtesan culture of the region.

There are many musicians that call themselves Kalawants but their claims are baseless. It is interesting to note that they do what is taboo in a Kalawant family i.e. they openly accompany dancing girls, thus putting even the devil to shame.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Sherring, *Tribes and Castes of Rajasthan* 275.

<sup>41</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab* vol. 2, 110.

<sup>42</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab* vol. 2, 119.

<sup>43</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab* vol. 2, 119.

<sup>44</sup> In pre-modern times, Nayak was an honorific title bestowed on individuals in recognition of outstanding accomplishments as musicians.

<sup>45</sup> Joan Landy Erdman, *Patrons and Performers in Rajasthan: The Subtle Tradition* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1985) 81.

<sup>46</sup> Faqirullah, *Tarjuma-i-Manakutuhala* 195–211.

<sup>47</sup> *Gandharva* and *Guni* refer to a high level of musical accomplishment. *Trivat* is a vocal form that utilises syllables as the basis of its textual content. These syllables may have also been derived from either the drum strokes of the barrel shaped drum, the *pakhawaj* or the syllables used for stroking patterns of stringed instruments.

<sup>48</sup> Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries', 14.

<sup>49</sup> Ibrahim Adil Shah, transl. Nazir Ahmed, *Kitab-i-Nauras* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1956) 46ff.

<sup>50</sup> Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries' 14.

Over time, the term Kalawant has also come to accommodate a range of meanings depending on the historical and geographical context in which it was used. The various meanings included: an endogamous caste of Rajput and Sikh Mirasis; an honorific title for the prized singers of dhrupad in Rajput and Mughal courts; a general term for court musicians in Bijapur, and another label denoting accompanists to courtesans in Lucknow. Overall, it seems that their social and music status in general was higher than other musician castes. As noted earlier, even as accompanists to prostitutes they remained seated while performing rather than following a subservient practice of standing and playing.

### Qawwal

Qawwals are most commonly recognised as musicians belonging to the Sufi sect of Islam. The etymology of *qawwal* is derived from *qa'ul* which is an Arabic and Persian word meaning axiom or dictum. Qawwals are most commonly described as musicians who traditionally sing *qaul* and *qaulbana*, the hymns or praises of God and dictums of the Sufi saints in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Hindustani and so on. Beyond this though there is the sense that all hereditary musicians from the Sufi community are generally known as Qawwals. Traditional patron groups of Qawwals belonged to the various endogamous subgroups that comprised the eclectic Shaikh community,<sup>51</sup> out of which the Qureshis were perhaps the most prominent.

Qawwals, who are Sufis by sect ... play the guitar [sitar]; but they also act as Mirasis to the Quraishis... They too claim to be descendents of the Prophet: yet they intermarry with the low-caste [Rajput] Charan.<sup>52</sup>

Outside of their hereditary association with Sufi Shaikhs, Qawwals are perhaps best known for their role as hereditary musicians at the significant numbers of Dargahs (shrines) of Sufi saints (Pirs) found throughout North India: 'Qawwals [are the] (story tellers) of the Pirzadas, Pirain or Pirhain.'<sup>53</sup> This is a role that Qawwals still fulfil in the Dargahs actively maintained in the subcontinent today. Out of the many dozens of these dargahs, those of the saint Nizamuddin Auliya Chishti in Delhi and Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Hasan Chishti in Ajmer are the most well known.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond their roles as Mirasis and devotional singers, Qawwals were also singers and instrumentalists in Indian *raag sangeet*. Various individuals and family lineages of Qawwals performing Indian art musics have been in the service of Afghan, Mughal and Hindu courts over the centuries also. In the earliest Persian treatise on Indian music, 'Ghunyatu'l Munya,' dating from around 1370, Qawwals are documented as accomplished singers performing a wide range of genres of music. By the end of the fourteenth century they were 'no longer purely Qawwal singers, ... they were fully immersed in the technique and aesthetics of art music like Gunis and Gayakas [honorific titles designating musical accomplishment].'<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> For a further discussion of Shaikhs and Quraishis, see Imtiaz Ahmad, ed., *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (Delhi: Manohar, 1973) 169ff.

<sup>52</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab* vol. 2, 117.

<sup>53</sup> Rose, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab* vol. 2, 119.

<sup>54</sup> For further discussion on the role of Qawwals in the Dargahs, see Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context, and Meaning in Qawwali* (Cambridge & New York: CUP, 1986)

<sup>55</sup> Shahab Sarmadee, transl. and ed., *Ghunyatu'l Munya: The Earliest Persian Work on Indian Classical Music* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2003 [1370]) 127.

A well-known lineage (*silsila*) of Qawwals, the Qawwal Bachche (literally, children of Qawwals), originated in the Delhi court of the Afghan Lodi Sultan Alauddin Khalji (1296–1312).<sup>56</sup> According to a mid-nineteenth century chronicle:

The Qawwal Bachche trace their origins to the famous musician of this court, Amir Khusrau who originated a new style of syncretic Indian and Persian based music which drew on the Qaul and Qaulbana of the Islamic tradition. The singers of this style are known as Qawwals and also Khayaliyas.<sup>57</sup>

The Qawwal Bachche are patrilineal or musical descendants of this legacy.

During the fourteenth century, Qawwals were also involved in secular based art music and were one of four esteemed classes of singers in the musical assemblies of the Muslim aristocracy. In the *Ghunyatu'l Munya* they are documented as singers of secular musical genres, accompanied by dance. Importantly, in such gatherings women singers also had important places amongst the Qawwals.<sup>58</sup> Qawwals were also noted to have been instrumentalists who accompanied dance: 'When the Qawwals took up their instruments, the mirth provokers began with their dance.'<sup>59</sup> In translating and annotating the above chronicle, Sarmadee adds considerably to our understanding of these musicians in and around Delhi:

the Qawwals of Delhi town, and the Qawwals attached to the Khanqah (a hermitage) were highly well-informed persons in the science of music. They were perfectly at ease with some of the regional folk songs and on ceremonial occasions, led the dance-bands on public thoroughfares ... [T]hey were at times bracketed, in matters of social recognition, with the theologians, scholars, astronomers, physicians and ministers of the mosque.<sup>60</sup>

Chronicles of the Mughal courts, *Ain-I-Akbari* of Abu'l Fazl and *Rag Darpana* of Faqirullah, list Qawwals among the leading court musicians of the time. They also have a strong association with the regional court of Jaunpur and the post-Mughal successor courts of Shi'a Lucknow and Hindu Gwalior where they have played a central role in the development of the instruments, genres, styles and performance practice of contemporary Hindustani music.

From this brief discussion it becomes apparent that the term Qawwal denoted a range of musicians and a diversity of musical practices. It referred to the hereditary Mirasis of the Quraishis, it denoted the devotional singers at the Dargahs and Khanqahs of Sufi saints, it was a term for vocalists and instrumentalists at secular gatherings of Muslim aristocracy which also involved dance, and from the fourteenth century it also denoted regarded court musicians of status in many Muslim and Hindu courts.

### Conclusion: Gharanedar Musicians and Mirasis

This discussion has explored the diverse and highly stratified universe of hereditary musicians and some of the distinct and also overlapping domains in which they were enmeshed. The

<sup>56</sup> Prajnanananda, *A Historical Study of Indian Music* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981) 186.

<sup>57</sup> Imam, 'Melody through the Centuries' 14.

<sup>58</sup> Sarmadee, ed., *Ghunyatu'l Munya* 127ff.

<sup>59</sup> From the *Tarikh-Firuzshahi-I-Afif*, AMU MS. Farsiyya-Akhbar no. 37, Af.188, quoted in Sarmadee, ed., *Ghunyatu'l Munya* 128, fn. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Sarmadee, ed., *Ghunyatu'l Munya* xxxiv.

cultural configuration and patronage structures of the village, religious institution and court was intrinsically linked to its own set of concerns and historical trajectories. Nonetheless, each of these was affected in one way or another when a major disjuncture in political hegemony occurred. The succession of such disjunctures in North India from pre-Muslim to colonial times generated a progression of court cultures and administrative practices. It is the rolling over from one hegemonic power to another, such as occurred from the Rajputs Rajas to Afghan Sultans, to the Mughal Emperors, the Shia Nawabs of Lucknow to the British that had led to technical and musical terms circulating in new ways and contexts and acquiring new applications and meanings. It was in the progression through these hegemonies that by the late nineteenth century, the terms *Dhadhi*, *Kalawant*, *Mirasi* and *Qawwal* had all acquired multiple significations.

It was in this time also that the new system of *gharanas* emerged out of this enormously complex regionalised pre-modern social fabric in the colonial cities. *Gharanas* can be portrayed as an adaptive response by musicians and their urbanised audiences to the modernity pervading the institutions and patronage structures that were quickly developing in Mumbai, Calcutta and Delhi. Neuman has noted that: 'aside from providing a social organization of specialized knowledge, *gharanas* provided a socio-musical identity for musicians ... [who] were exposed to a wider and more diverse and anonymous public; the name of a *gharana* did not leave the musician similarly anonymous.'<sup>61</sup> The *gharana* was the social interface between urbanised middle classes and institutions in colonial cities and pre-modern performance practices.

*Gharanas* initially formed around the *khandans* (lineages) and *biradaris* (fraternities) from within each of these communities. For example links are recognised between the Khyal vocal *Gharanas* of Agra and *Kalawants*, between the Gwalior *Gharana* and *Qawwals*, and between the Kirana *Gharana* and *Dhadhis* and so on. The same observation is also true of some instrumental *gharanas*. While the individual family lineages are remembered in the formalised genealogies of *gharanas*, the wider community to which they belonged is generally not. Pre-modern significations were not relevant to the modernist and nationalist concerns of the urbanised patron groups of the colonial cities at that time and, largely because of this situation, the connection between hereditary castes of musicians and *gharanas* is still not a major concern today.

Instead, what mostly clearly emerged in the modern cities in the twentieth century is the clear opposition between musicians belonging to a *gharana* (*gharanedar kalakaron*) and *mirasis*. The primary difference between them was clearly a matter of musical function and not of ethnicity or caste. Once acknowledged as a bona fide member of a *gharana*, a musician was understood to be a soloist specialising in a particular style of vocal or instrumental music. The *mirasi*, by contrast, was clearly placed at the other end of the spectrum. They were accompanists who, because of their unsavoury links to prostitutes in the past, were stigmatised by the conservative urban middle classes. With the spread of the *gharana* system in the cities, the complex social fabric of hereditary musicians, with its troublesome multiple significations, was collapsed into a simple oppositional singularity of *gharanedar* and *mirasi* musicians.

This discussion alerts us to two important matters. First, as has been noted elsewhere in a different context, terms like those discussed here are not rigid ethnic categories but are fluid

---

<sup>61</sup> Neuman, *Life of Music in North India* 169.

significations open to repeated accommodation.<sup>62</sup> Second, the importance of context in the definition and interpretation of pre-modern terms for musicians and the care that is necessary in interpreting exactly what they signify can not be underestimated. This is notwithstanding their widespread use and often misleading interpretations in the literature.

The problematic issue is that nowadays when a *gharana* is said to have a Dhadhi heritage, on the face of it we cannot be sure exactly which signification of the term is being referred to, and this also holds true for Kalawants and Qawwals. Be this as it may, this situation has not been aided by both gharanedar and mirasi musicians being regarded by the urbanised Western educated elite in the early twentieth century as illiterate and ignorant obstacles to both the unfolding of modernity and also perhaps more importantly to their nationalist efforts.<sup>63</sup>

Nowadays, the ancestry of the majority of contemporary professional musicians is far removed from these hereditary castes and communities. Nevertheless, gharanas have helped contemporary performers and audiences alike connect to this traditional past through their repertoires, oral histories and legendary figures. But this is a past that was filtered and nostalgic, re-imagined and tempered firstly by modernity and secondly by efforts to construct a nationalist narrative aimed at post-colonial Independence. While these two meta-narratives framed the representation of Hindustani music throughout most of the twentieth century, the sway that they had has receded over the last decade or more. Perhaps this presents us with an opportunity to reflect further on the formation of gharanas. In this respect two fundamental questions come to mind. Firstly, what was the exact nature of the social and cultural connection that existed between hereditary communities of musicians and the various gharanas? Secondly, can musical and stylistic differences between gharanas be imputed to the distinct differences in social and cultural heritage between Dhadhis, Qawwals and Kalawants?

It is interesting to note that the viability of gharanas has been increasingly called into question of late.<sup>64</sup> Such contemplation has coincided with the growing dominance of local corporate sponsorship and the opportunities presented by the globalisation of Hindustani music. This situation has prompted new types of relationships to be constructed between contemporary patrons and their clients, who may now reside anywhere in the world. These changes have also coincided with an interesting period in musical development. Experimentation with the mixing of the once distinct musical styles of different gharanas has produced some interesting innovations in performance and has created consequences for the transmission of musical knowledge. Along with the remarkable expansion of the mass media in the last two decades, these changes in patronage structures and musical identity have also begun to prompt an alternate mode of social grouping. This has notably occurred primarily around mass media celebrities. This shift is a significant modification of the gharana system that at times is also portrayed as a fundamental challenge to it.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> J.J.L. Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire c. 1710-1780* (New Delhi: OUP, 1999) 170.

<sup>63</sup> See Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*, (New York, OUP, 2005); Dard A. Neuman, *A House of Music: The Hindustani Musician and the Crafting of Tradition*, PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2004.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Bimalendu Mukherjee and Sunil Kothari, eds, *Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty-Five Years* (Kolkata: Anamika Kala Sangam, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Vidhyadhar Vyas, 'The Decline of Gharanas,' *Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts*, ed. Mukherjee and Kothari, 11–18.

It seems timely now to critically reflect on the roots of gharanas in pre-modernity with the aim of better understanding the long term consequences of changes currently underway. In an age of historical revisionism and fundamentalist violence which has also touched the lives of professional musicians in India, it seems timely to look at this past in more critical detail.