

Dear Dr Adam Ockelford,

I am now returned from India & am subsequently gathering my thoughts & reflecting upon the newly learnt material.

I believe that I have gained a deeper understanding on the subject of Dhrupad Alap in the Dagar gharana style of playing on rudra vina & especially in relation to the voice.

My time spent with Bahauddin Dagar clarified many points that were previously grey areas to me. He is a very generous & creative teacher with a learned but open mind.

As a student & player of the rudra vina, I have always suspected that the influence of the rudra vina on the vocal style of Dhrupad was far greater than had been previously understood. Bahauddin agreed, and said that it was at least 50% influence. I would state it even further. The voice of the rudra vina has such a long sustained note that it can almost match the breath of the human voice. Many of the characteristic melodic devices and ornaments employed by Dhrupad vocalists can be directly found to have originated from the mind of the human hand as it contemplates its way through the process of the ragas Alap, Jor and jhala. This can be demonstrated for example in the ten Laksanas.

A Laksana is a melodic device employed at appropriate stages of the raga, and is an important and necessary ingredient that every Dhrupad vocalist and musician is obliged to include in his or her performance. The aim when playing the raga alap is to take as much time as possible to slowly and serenely unfold the spirit of the raga, thus revealing its devotional image. It's a skill that takes years to develop.

In terms of raga knowledge, I studied raga Asavri, a very old and important raga. It has the same scale as ragas Bhairavi and Bilaskhani Tori, but with a different chalan (way of the raga), so one has to learn to understand the difference in order to maintain the image of the raga.

I also spent time with one of the Dagar's senior vocal students, Lakhan Lal Sahu.

I am firstly a student of the instrumental tradition, but with keen awareness of the vocal aspect. I asked Lakhan if we could also work on raga Asavri, so I could get a feel of the vocal as well as the instrumental expression of the raga. In the vocal style of Dhrupad they employ what is known as Nom Tom syllables, such as Ti Te Ta Re Ra Na. These syllables are said to have come from an ancient Hindu prayer and are used by the singer in a very abstract way to develop the raga alap. I found it easier following voice from voice, but following instrument from voice was somewhat frustrating. Lakhan being just a vocalist failed to understand how the mechanics of especially the left hand of the instrumentalist has to rethink the phrase to the frets of the instrument.

In playing most fretted Indian instruments, the technique of pulling or deflecting the string sideways (meend) to achieve an entire phrase is an integral aspect of the music. It can also be a complex combination of a slide, a hammer and a meend pull. Thus proving that it is easier for the singer to copy the phrase from the vina or sitar than vice versa. Demonstrating also that it would be perfectly in order to teach vocal Dhrupad from the rudra vina. This was, of course, an integral part the Dagar Dhrupad tradition.

I was particularly fortunate during my first week in Mumbai to discover in an instrument shop a very old style of sitar known as Kachua (tortoise) sitar. I made no hesitation in acquiring it for my collection. It proved absolutely perfect for my daily practice while in India. This style of sitar fell out of use during the 1940s at a time when sitarists such as Ravi Shankar and Vilayat Khan were beginning to favour the C sharp tuning instead of the older B flat pitch. The Kachua sitar was undoubtedly tuned in B flat, as the larger and rounder soundboard as well as the flatter cut of the gourd lends itself to a lower tuning, and the playing of alap. It simply doesn't work as well in C sharp.

This discovery fell perfectly in line with my interests in the older styles. When I took it to Bahauddin, he got very excited, asking where I had found such a rare piece and was there another one in the shop! When he played it, he played in a totally different way to the usual sitar style, hitting the chikari drone strings with his right hand little finger (vina style) rather than with the mizrab (metal plectrum used in sitar playing) on the fore finger, as in modern sitar style.

When I finally moved on to Delhi to visit Debu Chaudhuri, Gerry Farrell's former teacher, he also got very excited, telling me that his very first sitar was in fact a Kachua sitar. His elder brother bought it for him in 1941 for 35 rupees! (Second hand) So an unexpected & fortuitous connection had been made.

I visited the National Museum of Delhi to examine the collection of old instruments, especially the rudra vinas and the rare sursringar. Amongst the collection was one old kachua sitar dated 1920; it was indeed very much like the one I had found in Mumbai, also with no tarab (sympathetic) strings.

So all in all I do feel that the trip has brought positive results along the ever winding path of learning. As Deb Chaudhuri said, 'One lifetime is not enough to learn this music' and that's an Indian speaking!

Kindest regards
sincerely
Christopher Doddridge