

Interactions with Musicians at Home and Abroad

An excerpt from Rustom Bharucha's book *Rajasthan--An Oral History: Conversations with Komal Kothari* (Penguin India, New Delhi).

Komalda, you're obviously concerned that when musicians from underprivileged groups like the Langas and Manganiyars go abroad and earn a lot of money, there are possible tensions that can emerge through such trips. These musicians are not just being separated from their families, but from their patrons as well. So their traditional source of livelihood can be seriously affected. But tell me, how do you actually deal with the discrepancies of money, of those foreign-returned musicians who've acquired new wealth, and of those who stay behind and continue to survive on a pittance. After all, the moment you internationalize the folk, you're dealing with another economy.

Yes, on the one hand, there is the question of economy, but on the other hand the important thing is that, when you select a musician, his other colleagues should be clear that you're not trying to favour him. It's on the basis of his quality and capability as a musician that he gets selected. I would say that this is one area in which I have never been questioned by any of the musicians. No one can claim that I have favoured any one particular musician over the others. When they assemble in my house before any programme, I tell them very clearly, 'All right, you play the *kamaycha*, can you play me such-and-such piece? And if you cannot play the things that I'm requesting, then how can I help you? You have to learn these pieces, work hard at them, and then only will you be able to say why I don't want to select you. It's through your expertise alone that you get selected. So, if your playing is good, then there should be no problem, but if you cannot play your instrument properly, or you don't know how to tune it, then how can I help you? I am sending you to a foreign country where people are aware of these basic things. In India, if you go for any tourist programme, nobody will ask if your *kamaycha* or *dholak* is properly tuned or not-- they don't know left from right. But when you come to me for any foreign programme, then I have to check everything.'

In this way, I talk to the musicians and reason with them. And nobody in all these years has ever accused me of favouritism. The musicians know that if there is an alternative musician available for any programme, then I will select this musician over someone else who has already had an opportunity to perform. Once a musician has participated in a programme for a particular year, then I will not include him in any other programme for the remainder of that year. I won't, and I don't need to, because there are so many other musicians who are capable of playing well. So by spacing out the selection of the musicians, I think it has become clear to them that sooner or later they will all get a chance to perform.

Besides, I've never worked in an institutional framework, in the sense that I've never directed any one particular group of musicians on a permanent basis. It would have been very easy for me to select twenty top musicians and identify them as Rupayan Sansthan artists, and go on representing these twenty performers for all shows. But I've never done anything like this, and the musicians know that I won't do such a thing. For each programme we assemble a number of singers and musicians, and this grouping could be very different for the next programme. Sometimes this constant changing of the group creates problems for us, but we do our best to make the finest selection for each assignment. Of course, we don't need to have long rehearsals with the musicians. Whatever they do comes naturally from their own context, and we merely select the items for each programme and give it a particular structure.

I'm interested to know more about how folk musicians adapt to living conditions in foreign countries, as in Europe. After all, they don't just play music in these countries—they live there, at times for weeks and even months on end. For example, it seems that on the Zingaro tour in France that the Rajasthani musicians insisted on cooking for themselves. They rarely ate French food.. Could you reflect on some of the perceptions of the musicians to foreign cultures when they travel abroad?

In terms of food, they will never eat anything that they have not seen or eaten before. They will not even experiment at any level. In this regard, I'm reminded of my grandchildren, Tosh and Tejal, who are ready to eat something different only if they have seen it on television. Otherwise, they are not likely to eat anything that they can't identify. The musicians are no different. In the 1980s, when we first went to Europe, they never raised

the issue of halal, even though they are all Muslim. But later, there were rumblings in the group. After that I said, 'All right, I'm taking a group to Germany. Those of you who insist on halal, I will not be able to take you with me. I want you to eat well when you're abroad, and if you don't accept their food, there will be a problem.' At that time nobody raised any questions. But now they all insist on halal, which is difficult to locate, even though it is available. Of course, one doesn't know whether it's truly halal or not, but that is what is believed.

So, definitely, food has always posed a problem. Living indoors in hotels and apartments and keeping the rooms clean has posed another problem. In the early days, before they got used to travelling, their rooms would invariably be in a mess. I would have to enter each room and tell the musicians how to use the wash basins and toilets, going into details not only of flushing the toilet after use, but of cleaning the bowl regularly. Sometimes they listened to what I was saying, and at other times, they continued doing their own thing.

But a few things have struck me as being quite extraordinary. We travel constantly on our tours, maybe 20-25 kilometers every day, from Paris to small towns, and so on. Yet, despite this constant travel and long distances, I find that the musicians never lose their way. The routes are like maps drawn in their minds. So we fall back on the musicians for directions when we get lost. They have extremely sharp observations of landmarks on the road, and can remember any route without any problem.

Another remarkable thing is how, after one or two trips abroad, they have become very keenly aware of foreign currencies. So, what's happening to the pound, the euro, the yen, the moment they check into the hotel from the airport--within an hour or so, you can be sure that they know the value of the foreign currency in relation to the Indian rupee. Exchange rates pose no problems whatsoever. Most of the time, I would have to depend on them for making my own monetary calculations. Economically, they are very canny.

But when all is said and done, it's very hard to penetrate their social shell, not unlike their music, which is also hard to crack. While listening to them play a particular piece, I can tell them, 'Why don't you try this out? You can do this as well,' and maybe, in my presence, they will do what I say, but there's no guarantee that they will repeat what I, or someone

else, may have suggested. To get through to them in the first phase of our interaction was very difficult. They relate to their music on their own terms. But one thing should be pointed out here—whenever or wherever they perform, even if there is a very renowned musician in the audience, they never lose their confidence.

No stage nerves?

I tell you, nothing. Whether they are singing in their village or in the Paris Opera House or in the Kremlin, it makes no difference to them whatsoever. Nothing seems to change for them; they are not tense about the performance or anything like that. They just do what they have to do in the best manner possible. And they always shine when they have an audience. Earlier, and sometimes even today, if I am not on the stage introducing the pieces, I generally ask the organizers to give me a seat where the musicians can see me. And I tell them to forget about the entire theatre in which 2,000 people could be seated and sing only for me. Anyway, so strong is their performance instinct that the moment they start singing, they are able to identify four or five or six people in the theatre who seem particularly receptive to their music. And from that moment onwards, their eyes are always fixed on these individuals in the audience, whose response they elicit in very perceptible ways. And as the performance proceeds, the musicians never fail to capture the spirit of the entire audience through their interaction.

Tell me, do you have any rituals that you perform backstage before a show? I'm aware, of course, that folk performance traditions are very different from classical forms like Bharata Natyam, which have fairly elaborate pre-performance rituals. But, regardless of what one performs, there's a little more anxiety when one travels abroad, where one may not know the audience at all. So there may be a greater need for reassurance through rituals, though as you're saying, the folk musicians have no stage nerves whatsoever. Nonetheless, is there anything like a warm-up before they go on stage?

No. However, I've noticed that they've begun to do certain things that they never did earlier on. On entering the stage they will now touch the ground, and before starting the programme, they will greet everybody accompanying them, and then formally greet the

audience, before beginning to sing. This kind of etiquette they have developed for themselves over the years, and to my mind, it looks a bit awkward.

They never did these things earlier?

No, never. They've picked these things up from watching classical musicians, and dancers in particular, who have elaborate rituals. I would say that this trend began around the 1980s.

What about costume? I know it's important to you that they look dignified.

Nowadays, it has become difficult to insist on the dress of the younger men, who tend to wear trousers and shirt, or sometimes a suit, or kurta pyjama. But the older members of the group continue to wear their traditional clothes—the same clothes that they wear in everyday life, except that they would be more carefully washed and ironed. That's the only difference. I used to tell the musicians quite candidly that in order to 'sell' them [i.e. their performances], they needed to wear their own clothes, because that gave them more 'character'. But today the younger boys, they wear what they want... The behavioural patterns have changed; earlier, they behaved like ordinary Manganiyars, now they have become *kalakars* (artists).

How have the folk musicians learned to deal with technology? As you yourself have indicated, when you first started your research in the 1960s, they were afraid to be recorded. So a tremendous shift seems to have taken place in their attitude.

They have no problems whatsoever with the microphone today. Nor are they camera conscious. In fact, they like to be photographed. They are not tense about these situations, but perfectly relaxed.

Let me now lead to a somewhat harder question: How much do the musicians 'take in' of a foreign place? I'm not just thinking about their concerts as such, where they seem to have no problem in striking a rapport with the audience. I'm thinking about the larger social interactions abroad. How do these interactions affect them when they get back home?

What I've observed over the years is that when I first used to go their villages and stay with them, they cared very little about matters relating to hygiene, whether this involved drinking water, or blankets or quilts or pillows. Their living conditions were filthy. It was hard for me to sleep in their homes in those days. But now I find that they are very conscious about hygienic matters, perhaps not always for themselves, but certainly for their guests. So in more recent years, when I have gone to their places, I have been struck by how clean and neat everything is. So, at this level, there has been some change in their social customs and attitudes.

In music, what they tend to do these days is to focus on things that are playful, and which do not present any particular musical challenge to them--the popular things that they have come to realize through enthusiastic audience responses. So today we find them singing songs where they want the entire audience to clap together. They can go on clapping like this for hours on end. They have come to realize that the text of these songs doesn't really matter.

Has the text suffered in the process of all the international exposure of the folk singers?

Yes. We have lost many nuances from the text of the songs. The musicians have also come to realize that improvisations go down very well with their audience. So today they are beginning to develop all kinds of clichés. Even after ten minutes of a song, you will find these clichés appearing. But the musicians feel that they get appreciated because of these clichés. So, at one level, it could be said that they are becoming slaves of these clichés. And that is not a good way to render music.

I would like to shift the discussion into a somewhat difficult area that is not generally discussed in academic work on the performing arts—the breakdown in human relationships among performers. In one of our earlier conversations, you mentioned that a rather serious feud is taking place between the families of two musicians whom you have worked with. Could we address this feud without mentioning the real names of the parties involved?

What strikes me is that these musicians, who could be fighting together in real life, can also sit together on the same stage and create beautiful music. How does this happen?

You are right, when they sing there is no problem. You could never once feel that Abdul and Bashir--[all names addressed in this section have been changed]--are incapable of sitting together in real life because of the family feud that divides them. Bashir's daughter was betrothed at a very young age to the son of Ismail, the elder brother of Abdul's father-in-law. So there is no direct conflict between Abdul and Bashir as such—the feud exists because of larger family connections. Now, it so happened that Ismail's son turned out to be mentally retarded in his teenage years, so naturally Bashir wanted to withdraw from the earlier promise that his daughter would be married to him. But, in withdrawing from this pact, he was also disobeying community rules. In this situation, Abdul has no other option but to oppose Bashir, because his own in-law's family is directly involved. To make matters even more complicated, Bashir has now arranged the marriage of his daughter in another family, and this has increased the rift between his family and that of Abdul. They cannot even sit together and eat from the same plate.

Are they living in the same village?

No, in separate villages, but the entire communities of these villages are now involved in the feud. Once it became clear that Ismail's son could not be married to the girl, since she had already been married off to someone else, then Ismail's community began to put pressure on Bashir to find an appropriate girl for Ismail's retarded son. So, Bashir then arranged for one of his relatives to give her daughter to this boy in marriage, and in exchange he would reimburse all marriage expenses. Now, this girl is only ten years old, and the boy is now around twenty-one years old, and still mentally retarded. Now the problem is: should this woman give her daughter in marriage to this boy? This is a very hard situation.

Indeed, on hearing about this feud, one is almost thrust back into another time.

But this is the scenario in the rural areas of Rajasthan today. There are all kinds of stories in the newspapers today. In one such story, a Bishnoi girl was actually married, not just betrothed, when she was only one year old. Then, later on, her father decided to get his

daughter married to another person. When this marriage took place, the family of the former bridegroom kidnapped this girl and kept her in custody in Ahmedabad for many months, raping her and abusing her in all kinds of ways. Finally, when the police rescued her, she was found to be pregnant. An abortion was forcibly done on this girl, and now she has gone back to her father's place. Now, the basic problem as I see it is that she was married at the age of one, and for her father to subscribe to this can only be regarded as one of the greatest sins. Such incidents are not uncommon in the rural areas of Rajasthan. What is worse is that they are endorsed by communities at large.

Coming back to the world of performance, how do we deal with these warring factions, when people in everyday life are not capable of sharing the same space? Would Abdul and Basir talk to each other during the tour? Did you notice any changes in their attitudes to each other?

There was very little communication between them. Sometimes no participation at all in common activities. But the feud continues. For example, I would very much like to send Baharul, who is Bashir's younger brother, along with Ismail for a programme in Pune. But Ismail is not ready to accept Baharul, even though they are brothers-in-law in real life. If I send Baharul for the programme, then Ismail will drop out. Baharul, on the other hand, doesn't mind accompanying Ismail, but there's a stalemate.

All of this sounds very complicated to me. It seems to me that even when the folk musicians get internationalized, after getting their passports, and visas, and tickets, in order to perform in different international forums and festivals, and even while acknowledging that certain things do change in their lives when they return home—for example, you mentioned their more hygienic living conditions—the point is that certain things don't seem to change at all.

Exactly. Their lives remain deeply rooted in the family. They are so deeply rooted, I cannot begin to tell you. I would regard most Langas and Manganiyars as hen-pecked husbands. It is their wives who govern them. They cannot govern their wives. And the relationship with their children is so acute and so intimate, it's impossible to think of any change in that bond. It's so firmly intact.

Has there been any intermarriage outside of these communities?

No, it's not possible to even think of it.

So, then, what does 'internationalization' really mean in this very local context? If we get past the obvious mechanics of travel and foreign trips, in what ways has this exposure to the outer world shifted the consciousness of the musicians?

I tell you their shell remains so strong that it's still very hard to penetrate.

Finally, getting back to some of the more difficult moments in your encounters with traditional musicians, would you care to share that very tragic incident involving the musician Shafi? What exactly happened?

Shafi was part of a later group that participated in the Zingaro tour in Europe. In Belgium, he had teamed up with Multan as his room-mate because they came from neighbouring villages. Since Shafi was very young, Multan could afford to boss him around. So while Multan took a nap, Shafi would cook and attend to the other chores. Before going to the performance one night, it appears that they had used the gas stove, but it had not been shut properly. After their performance, which finished around 9.30 p.m., Shafi rushed back to his quarters to prepare dinner. Multan was following him. It appears that as soon as Shafi opened the door to his room, he switched on the light, and there was an electric spark, followed by an explosion. The room was full of gas and he was severely burned. Multan was also injured in the explosion, but Shafi died after being treated for almost a week at the NATO hospital in Brussels, one of the most highly equipped hospitals in the world for all kinds of burn injuries.

One of the members in the group brought back Shafi's body to India. He was accompanied by the manager of the Zingaro company. The body had been very well preserved. The hard part—the very hard part-- was to break the news to the family, which I had to do. For a few days after the accident, Shafi continued to live. So during that time, I had informed them that an accident had taken place, nothing more. The NATO hospital staff did their best to save Shafi's life, but he couldn't survive. When the report came, elaborating on the details of his death, it said that though Shafi was only 22 years old, his inner biological system was

that of 50-60 year old man. On the surface, he looked so healthy and strong, but his body was obviously a lot weaker than we had thought. Understandably, the group was terribly shocked at first, but the show went on. The other musicians didn't need any persuasion in this matter.

I've noticed among my contacts with groups like the Langas and Manganiyars that they don't respond to death, as we do, like a tragedy or trauma. They seem to accept it a lot more readily. This was true of Shafi's family when the body was brought back to the village. Nor did they expect anything from us. But here one has to mention the extraordinary care and generosity of the Zingaro company. For a long time, Shafi's wife was supported by the company on a regular basis. In my own way, I have helped to sustain this relationship.

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It's hard to enter the narrative at this point, but after narrating Shafi's death, Komalda is silent for a while and it's obvious that we've come to the end of our session. As I see it, this very poignant episode indicates the many levels at which intercultural exchanges can be deepened through any number of obstacles—in this particular case, the death of a young performer. If this inflection of 'friendship' in the larger contested terrain of intercultural practice seems sentimental, let me add a story from Komalda's biography that, sadly, got erased during one of our recording sessions. If I fall back here on my own memory of his recollection of this story, I trust that some of it will come alive in my description.

During one of his trips to the United States with the musicians, there was a break in the schedule of the tour, and the entire company including Komalda, were all put up in an unlikely 'dharamshala' (rest-house): an old folk's home. This accommodation was justified on the grounds that it was temporary and inexpensive. Undeniably, it must have been strange not only for the Rajasthani musicians to be living in such a place, but for these old Americans, many of them frail and disabled, to see these tall, bearded and mustachioed men, dressed in kurtas, dhotis and colourful turbans, sharing their space. Obviously, neither the musicians nor the old folk shared the same language, so there was no possibility of communication beyond a few greetings, and inevitably, little gestures of support—like the musicians picking up bags for the old people, or opening the doors for them. When the time

came for the musicians to leave, they decided that they would sing for their hosts in an improvised concert. What followed was something 'unprecedented' in Komalda's experience.

Barely a few songs into the concert, held informally in the living room of the old folks' home, Komalda recalls—and I recall him telling me this with great intensity, sadness, and wonder—that there was a peculiar kind of whimpering that began to be heard among the old people. Gradually, this became crying, and eventually sobbing. It was not possible either to ignore this reaction or to continue with the songs. The musicians stopped singing. Of their own accord the old people got up from their seats and went forward to the musicians whom they embraced, one by one. 'It was something unbelievable', as Komalda recalled it.

Representing this exchange of emotions from what I remember of Komalda sharing the story, I am reminded of the levels of intimacy and pain that can be shared in intercultural encounters. Komalda's interactions with musicians did not merely illuminate the world of music; it revealed the human connections that can be sparked through music, both at home and abroad.