

Paramparā, Pedagogy and Performance:
Reading Spaces in the ‘Dhrupad Gurukul’, Palaspé

Ajinkya Shenava

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Abstract

‘When I close my eyes and begin to sing, there is only darkness... slowly, light comes, then the beginnings of colour.’

- Ustad Ziā Fariduddin Dagar (Ganesh 2005)¹

Representing the 19th generation of musicians² in the “Dāgar *gharāna*”, Ustād Ziā Farīduddīn Dāgar often talks of the deep mystical light, the intense *bhāv* or *ras* which is associated with a musical form like dhrupad. It is this intensity, this complete surrender – this conversation between silence and unblemished sound – which drew me to the universe of dhrupad and the Dāgar style of singing dhrupad. As a form of music dhrupad is often construed as inhabiting an exclusive, pristine, almost “pure” position in popular musicological circles. It is considered to be one of the oldest forms of Indian classical music. A deeply meditative form – I would look at dhrupad as a music which seeks to bind the listener and performer in an exploration of sound that transcends the realm of mere entertainment. It is often overshadowed (in “popular” music appreciation circles and urban spaces) by other genres of music such as khyāl, thumri or ghazal.

In this paper I intend to understand how a ‘tradition’ is formed through pedagogy – how ideas of continuity, change and knowledge transfer are addressed during the student’s period of learning in the *guru shishya*³ style of teaching that the ‘Bombay Dāgars’ practice. I intend to

¹ The Hindu: Magazine / People : Nuances of the Notes (2005) **The Hindu: Magazine / People : Nuances of the Notes** [Internet] Available from:

<<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mag/2005/02/20/stories/2005022000070500.htm>> [Accessed on January 15 2010]

² While the veracity of this claim cannot be proved or disproved – it is often ‘verified’ by many anecdotes of the myths that have formed this tradition. I use this assertion only to make a claim on history and continuity (that is often implied when one refers to the Dagers and also Dhrupad in general).

³ Literally ‘teacher-disciple’ or ‘teacher-student’.

understand through an ethnographic exploration the nuances of the learning process and the particularities of the relationship that forms between the *guru* and the *shishya*. I approach this by carefully studying the space of the manifestation of this phenomenon – the gurukul at Panvel and the metaphorical community space that forms around the ‘Chembur Dāgars’. The idea of a “sacred space” of learning, pedagogy and performance, the articulation of narratives of tradition and the exploration of arts learning as an affective experience is something that this paper looks at.

Through a description and analysis of my own experiences as a student in this community and also through interactions with other students and performers – I attempt to understand the object of this kind of education. This is a question of intention, of purpose – of understanding how a student is *made* through his period of *talīm*⁴. It has implications for the wider notion of art and continuity, and also of arts education in a broadly non formal space.

Keywords

Dhrupad, Dagar, pedagogy, tradition, ethnography, music, learning, community of practice.

⁴ Period of education, training, the *vidya* or knowledge that a student receives through his learning period with a teacher.

Prologue⁵

It is 4:30 am.

The trucks low through the thick of a village's sleepy oblivion. Somewhere, a *chai-walla* starts to wash his vessels. The clank of his kettle dissolves noiselessly into the tired rattle of bus tyres and bumpers coughing through the dusty highway. Hidden away on the side of the road is a small cluster of houses lost in the limbo between Mumbai cityscream and the undisturbed solace of Palaspé village⁶. The dim darklight of a morning taking *angdāi*⁷ falls lazily on a dilapidated board that says 'Dhrupad Gurukul'.

The 'D' hangs half lit like the symptom of a bygone era. The same old debates circling around the romance of a lost time and the preservation of an art come to one's mind.

Scratching away at the surface of the profound music that is practised here, these irrelevant speculations are quickly forgotten as one approaches the *gurukul*.

The air is still. The slow, elegant ripples of the *tānpurā*⁸ foreground a deep male voice falling steadily down the well of the *saptak*⁹ and resting gently on the *kharaj shadja*¹⁰. A student is

5 Written one morning at the Dhrupad *Gurukul*, Palaspé

6 A village on the outskirts of Mumbai, in Panvel.

7 Stretching

8 A stringed instrument which is used by vocalists and instrumentalists for accompaniment during performance and practice. The rhythmic plucking of the four strings of the *tānpurā* produces a melodious resonating drone that provides a base background pitch for the performing artist. The way it is tuned often has deep associations with the *rāg* that is being performed. For any practitioner of North Indian classical music, it is an integral part of the performance. This is often played by a senior student during performances.

9 An 'octave' in Indian classical music.

10 The low or bass *Sā* (the first musical note corresponding to 'Do' in the Western scale) in the musical octave in the lower *saptak* – the *kharaj saptak*. *kharaj sādhanā*, *kharaj bharna* or *kharaj ka riyāzh* or simply *kharaj* is also the name given to the practice of this lower note, or the notes in the *kharaj saptak*.

doing his *riyāzh*¹¹. Used to the unusual ways of the Dāgars and their *shishyas* (students) by now, the dogs lie quietly listening. They snicker to themselves as the student falls asleep and his note slips like a taut rope suddenly snapped mid sigh, dangling aimlessly. His *guru* (teacher) is not there to watch him as he surreptitiously tries to catch a few winks.

Indeed, the *guru* is not always there to watch. The *shishya* is one immersed in the *māhaul*¹² of the *gurukul* ; sometimes even a mere spectator in the *mehfil*¹³ – but a silent and watchful one. He can choose whether he wants to flow in the current of his guru’s passionate surrender, or he can get caught in the foliage of uncertainty, unable to move.

The “*Guru Shishya paramparā*”¹⁴, as a mode of education, is not simple. Learning is slow and measured. The student is ever alert, and the teacher, omniscient. He is doused in supreme indifference and timely wisdom.

And music is a Gift.

11 Music practice.

12 Loosely translated to mean ‘atmosphere’ or environment.

13 A social gathering. This is usually associated with a “cultural” sharing of music or poetry.

14 A simple (but inadequate) translation of this phrase would be “teacher student tradition”.

This paper looks critically at the articulation of spatiality, performance, pedagogy and tradition in a unique educational setting that is distinct from other formal, institutionalised systems of “schooling”. The fact that I am a practitioner affects the content, orientation and style of my research. I am a *shishya* in the reinvention of the *guru shishya paramparā* practised by a community of musicians coalescing around the “Chembur Dāgars”¹⁵. I learn at the *Dhrupad Gurukul*, Palaspé, Mumbai that was run by *Ustād Ziā Farīduddīn Dāgar*¹⁶ (hereafter *Ustād*¹⁷) and *Ustād Bahauddīn Dāgar* (hereafter Dada). We practice dhrupad, a musical form that inhabits a pristine, “ancient”, even distinctly “traditional” space in the canvas of Indian classical music. Less disposed to popularity and the whims of the commercial circuit, dhrupad inhabits an exclusive space of musical performance and dissemination. It is as a meditative, deeply introspective form, as opposed to being geared primarily towards entertainment. In this context, the Dāgars are arguably the most popular *gharānā*¹⁸ of musicians that has preserved and passed on this art for generations. As a *shishya* of this *paramparā*, I try to understand it as a constantly evolving space of learning and

15 The dhrupad community in Mumbai found articulation and grew primarily through the efforts of *Ustād Ziā Mohiuddīn Dāgar* and *Ustād Ziā Farīduddīn Dāgar* and their students. After the two brothers settled in Mumbai, their house in Chembur became a centre of sorts for the community that formed around them, consisting of students and music enthusiasts (before the *gurukul* was built and for some time after that as well). This branch of the Dāgar family of musicians thus fondly came to be called the “Chembur Dāgars”. It is this community that I try to understand through the course of this narrative.

¹⁶ *Ustād* passed away on 8th May 2011. The *Dhrupad Gurukul* hasn’t been the same ever since. We are still reeling from this enormous loss.

¹⁷ *Ustād* is also referred to as *Choté Ustād*. His older brother *Ustād Zia Mohiuddīn Dagar* was fondly referred to as *Badé Ustād*. *Ustād*. In this paper, I will refer to my gurus and most other music practitioners in the way I would refer to them as a *shishya* of this tradition, and of this community. Doing otherwise brings in a false sense of informality and detachment.

¹⁸ The term denotes a community of musicians, often marked by a familial line of transference, who preserve and practice a kind of music that has distinct stylistic characteristics different from other “gharānās”.

performance, through the mundane as well as the mystic.

Māhaul

The *gurukul* recreates a setting wherein teaching and learning happens almost incidentally, and art enters the lives of students merely because they are situated in a certain kind of atmosphere or environment – the *māhaul* of the *gurukul*. The *gurukul* is a space where the artistic blends with the everyday. The gurus and their students slowly oscillate between functional reality and the transformative experience that is *dhrupad*. In the *gurukul*, one could find the deep sonority of the *rudra vīnā* strings making way for a Jet Li action movie (*Ustād* loves watching foreign (South Indian) action movies); a student's *riyāzh* drowned by an animated conversation taking place (over a cup of tea and Shibhu's¹⁹ steaming pav vada) about the ills of the UPA government. The *gurukul* becomes a site of dual tendencies – a strange mix of the contemporary and the timeless.

At one level, my relationship with Dada (my guru) is intimate because of the fact that I reconcile the different personas that he takes on²⁰. I see him in his everyday guise when he is playing videogames or when he is playing with his daughter, but also when he is one with his instrument on stage. The relationship between these contrasting manifestations is what foregrounds the idea of a *māhaul*. It underscores the notion of a spatial dynamics within the *gurukul* in the context of a close physical proximity between the teacher and the student (and the larger community and family) and also, the role they play in the effectiveness of the period of *tālīm*²¹. In lieu of this, I would like to map the *gurukul* space and also try and understand, against this backdrop, notions of performance, the reformulated idea of the

¹⁹ Shibhu is the cook, handyman and person who takes care of the *gurukul* and everyone who comes there. He stays there along with his wife, who assists him in the household duties and his young son.

²⁰ Or with *Ustād*, the dual personas of the action-film-loving-food-gardening-connoisseur and the *sangīth sādhak* immersed in his music with little care for the material world.

²¹ Education, training.

“classroom” of music, the creation of a “sacred space”, and the relocation of learning to spaces other than the conventional classroom space. My contention is that all these ideas take on the garb of a living consciousness in the *gurukul* .

How does one locate the pedagogic moments within this dynamic space? What is it that transforms this space (both metaphorical and physical) into one which is looked upon with respect and awe? How can we understand the dual relationship between the actors who mould a space and are in turn moulded by that space? How is the teaching space constructed as “sacred”? Like the theatrical stage which transforms into something else during a performance, there is a quality that physically affects the way in which the actors in that space perform and the ways in which their bodies interact. Dada describes this as the “*vāthāvaran*” that the full time student could take complete advantage of:

The advantage of such a system is that there were some things which cannot flourish at home – the proper atmosphere wouldn’t be there. But in the *gurukul*, the “*vāthāvaran*” of music remained for 24 hours a day.²²

A beginner student talked to me about how the atmosphere at his home was never conducive to learning and *riyāzh*. For him, physically being in the *gurukul* was the only way he could learn. This atmosphere of music was maintained by different students constantly doing *riyāzh* during different times of the day, various conversations between the students and/or teacher which often revolved around music, the *guru* dismantling, repairing or working on his instrument etc. The sound of the *tānpurā* or the *pakhāwaj* constantly echoed in the *gurukul* . Marianne explains the *māhaul* in the context of her *tālīm*:

In the weekends, everybody was always singing and learning, and working and performing. There was always a *baithak*, I think. Everybody would be *doing* [italics

²² From an Interview with Dada at the *gurukul*.

mine] something. So that's where I learnt. *Ustād* teaching the "big ones" or Uday²³ was teaching others or Bablu [Dada] was playing.²⁴

The *māhaul* is what makes the physical space of the community of practice conducive for situated learning. The access that a learner – even a newcomer (Marianne was a newcomer at the time) – has to the resources of the community as well as opportunities for learning comes to define the mood and atmosphere of the space. It is created primarily through the practice of music and the young learner participates in these activities willingly.

An interesting thing about Marianne's observation is the way in which the *paramparā* manifests through the *māhaul*. At once we can see how three generations of practitioners come together in a single space. Each practitioner has a role and a purpose within the community. The *guru* (*Ustād*) teaches the senior students, while the old timer (Uday Dada) takes on the role of a master to the newcomer, and the instrumentalist's (Dada's) embodiment of practice becomes a pedagogic moment for the youngest batch of learners. The space itself becomes a dynamic entity – constantly changing with the social actors who "perform" in it.

Any given space has a character which one absorbs almost corporeally. In the context of the *gurukul* at Palaspé, the actors within this space simultaneously mould, create, and adhere to the idea of what this space represents. It is in a constant state of becoming. At one level, this is associated with a process of myth making that revolves around the very notion of *paramparā* and how a "traditional *gurukul*" should be. This is a subtle way in which discourses about the *paramparā* enter the present manifestation of the *gurukul* space, and

²³ Uday Bhawalkar is a senior student of *Ustād* and *Badé Ustād*. He is one of the most popular vocal exponents of *dhrupad* today. He started learning *dhrupad* with the first batch of students who were accepted in the *Dhrupad Kendra*, Bhopal and subsequently learnt from the two *Ustāds* at the *gurukul*. He still comes regularly to the *gurukul* for events like *Guru Poornima* and *Dussehra* etc.

²⁴ From an interview with Marianne at the *gurukul*.

serve as a counterpoint to the everyday life of the actors in that space. The myths often become an ideal which we must aspire towards.

For instance, Mataji²⁵ would talk of how, earlier, at the Dāgars' households, people would remain standing in the guru's presence unless they were expressly told to sit. Even the students' habits of (sitting with your legs spread out) before the *guru* would not be entertained. Of course, at one level, the feudal, patriarchal undertones of these assertions are easily apparent. Some of these ideas might have been used in the assertion of a more conservative environment as "traditional", in an attempt to ensure discipline. As students, however, we understand that that kind of "discipline" may not be necessary now.

Ustād's relationship with his students dictates the kind of "respect" he expects from them. He may not particularly care if I sit "casually" before him. The respect should manifest in other ways, not through these conventional demands of a patriarchal family structure. This respect is seen through my (or any other *shishya's*) commitment to my music. The narratives of discipline and rigid mores however, do consciously affect the way in which the *shishyas'* bodies are inscribed upon the space. The imprint of the past remains on the student's mind and while the austerity is not directly mirrored in our actions, it does sometimes shape the way our bodies respond to the space. This is, in essence how the body is implicated within the discourse of *paramparā* and the space acquires a character.

This is further articulated through physical spatial markers, through performance, through conversations and anecdotes which form the heart of the *paramparā* etc. The *māhaul*, on the surface, is simply a question of what is happening and how bodies interact in a physical space, but at a deeper, more unconscious level it forms the substratum for the *shishya's tālīm*

²⁵ Dada's mother is fondly called "Mataji" in the *gurukul*.

and the guru's practice – the community's practice. It has implications on questions of temporality, affect, the learning experience and the idea of *paramparā* itself.

The Sacred Space

Using the notion of *māhaul* as a starting point, I would like to introduce another idea that I believe connects the various themes that intersect to infuse a physical space with character – the idea of a “sacred space”. The sacred, over here, is not directly connected to the religious (while the religious might be a part of it at times). It implies an affective impulse to a space, which instils it with an attitude of respect, reverence and awe. It makes the music a thing – an entity which lives and breathes in the air. The impulse is both physical and deeply emotional at the same time. This corporeal nature – the material, almost tangible “feel” – is essential to the idea of performance and learning. It operates, at once, on several subterranean levels of sensation that work in ways that cannot be easily articulated.

Performing the Sacred

The idea of the sacred space addresses the question of the artist's approach to his work, and by extension the pedagogue's attitude towards music, and teaching and learning. The artist's relationship with his art can be placed within the theorisation of the sacred space. Let me try and explain this idea with an ethnographic account of a particular significant moment in my learning experience with Dada:

While I touched *Ustād*'s feet as a mark of respect, initially, I did not do the same for Dada. This was because when I began to learn music in Bangalore, I never saw the students over there touching his feet unlike his students at the *gurukul*. When he

would stay in his Chembur house, at times, I would stay at his house till late and we would discuss music not only like a teacher and a student but as two music enthusiasts. Then one day I heard him play *Rāg Multāni* at a concert. I had never heard anything like it before. I quietly went up to him, didn't say anything - smiled and touched his feet. It did not feel like a formality. It was natural.

For me the moment is important. The touching of his feet was a symbolic gesture, not in the way the ritual was historically and socially articulated. It was spontaneous, but at the same time, a natural consequence of his mesmerising performance. It signified a particular kind of sensibility before the art. It talked of our humility before the art form. I say our humility because my reaction was an affective response both to his own mastery of the art form in my eyes, as well as the respect he accorded the musical space when he was performing. Even he bowed before the art.²⁶

The attitude that my *guru* embodied through performance is read by me as one of humility and reverence for the music itself – the art that he sets up through his practice. The *Multāni* that he played must be viewed in the context of its origin²⁷ – of the *Paramparā*, of the tradition as it manifests today in a different set of historical and cultural conditions. When the student or *guru* is working with his art (Lines, 2005) – a process is occurring that is an actual illustration of the *paramparā*. He is connecting different temporalities through his practice. This view of art also betrays a “theological” kind of language which is seen in the way that the “work” is deified in the *gurukul*. My gurus often refer to music using such theological metaphors (“This is Saraswati, it won't come so easily”). In fact, *Ustād* looks at his art as

²⁶ From my field notes.

²⁷ In a Heideggerian sense.

religious practice. He says that he is not performing for an audience; his is a music that is for the self and its liberation, and above all for a higher audience:

I was massaging *Ustād* 's back as we watched television. An image of a temple on TV started a train of thought in *Ustād* 's mind about the practice of dhrupad in temples. Irritated with the question of religion as a legitimised, organised activity in this way, *Ustād* started telling me it made no difference – “it’s all nonsense”. He said. He favoured one’s personal relationship with god or with the sacred. His music was the medium: “Sing to the deity inside you”²⁸

Rituals also foreground the idea of the sacred – one must bathe before touching the instrument, no footwear is allowed in the music room or near the instruments, the very act of touching the feet of the guru, not disturbing a student when he’s doing his *riyāzh*. In fact, *Ustād* or Dada’s persona is built around the aura created during performance. This idea is illustrated most clearly during the *baithaks* or cultural events that take place in the *gurukul* . It is during these ritual performances that the various social actors of the community come together. The listeners, senior students, performers and music enthusiasts, who are close to the family, come to the *gurukul* during various festivals. The mundane everyday space of the *gurukul* transforms into a space where one gets a sense of an inherited, and constantly evolving tradition – where rituals, conventions and interactions constantly modify the way the actors view the art itself, and also themselves as a community.

The *gurukul* also becomes the space of assessment for younger students at these times. The gurus and the senior students often discuss the student’s performance. The various students learning at the *gurukul* come together and see how each has progressed. A similar sort of

²⁸ From my field notes.

assessment takes place through the students' discussions of informal performances as well. During *baithaks*, the students are "exhibited" to others who have not seen the growth and trajectory of their music. For them this is a kind of informal "exam".

A great deal of excitement is also generated in the eagerness of younger students to meet and converse with senior students and performers who might not come to the *gurukul* regularly. For me, a musical performance in the *gurukul* is a significant moment that marks a temporary suspension of space and time. As students we waited for unexpected, spontaneous, listening sessions, and treasured them:

In the afternoon we were wondering where Dada was. I told Atul²⁹ that he was upstairs playing/practising the *vīnā*. Atul asked me whether Dada had expressly forbidden us to sit and listen – and when I said no, we decided to go and sit outside quietly letting him practise. We did not go inside and disturb him. Whenever Dada picked up the *vīnā* or *Ustād* sat down to sing, the air would almost be as if one was sitting quietly at a temple absorbing the "religious" atmosphere of the place. The nervousness and anticipation was also part of the experience. Even though we went away after a while and afternoon time is siesta time in the *gurukul*, when I later asked Dada whether he was playing *Patdeep*. He gave a vague reply and changed the topic. He wouldn't reveal the *rāg*...³⁰

²⁹ I have changed the names of those students currently learning at the *gurukul*, who feature in ethnographic anecdotes, to preserve anonymity.

³⁰ From My field notes.

Dada's playing or *Ustād's* singing in the *gurukul* was a musical event – even an incidental pedagogical moment. The air of enigma and sacredness that surrounded it never dissolved. The sacred space manifested merely as a result of the guru's practice.

The Sacred as Anecdote

The artist's respect for the art is embodied in his practice. The student or observer who is present with him at the time is therefore participating in the practice as a learner:

We were sitting in the music room. Dada was playing Shankarā. I sat quietly and listened to him. The *ālāp* he was playing was beautiful and he seemed to be doing some interesting things with the *rishabh* (Ré) which I did not completely understand. After some time, he played a composition that I had not heard. It was not “*Pratham aadi shiv shakti*” (a *bandish* (musical composition – a literary text put to music) that I loved and was familiar with). It was a beautiful composition – a slow one. Dada did not often play *bandish*, but when he did, they sometimes had stories attached to them. This particular composition described the beauty of a woman, comparing her eyes to a deer's eyes etc. Dada told me that his great, great grandfather was asked by his patron, the monarch, to compose a *bandhish* for the queen. Dada's great, great grandfather composed this tune for Saraswati, and gave it to the king telling him it was for his queen!

Here, as the story of the history of this composition unfolds before me, the sacred space manifests as a pedagogic moment not only teaching me about the intricacies of Shankarā, but also about the tradition of musicians and how they made their music.

There were many such stories which Dada and *Ustād* liked telling the students. All of these referred to the sacred or the value that was invested in the art of these musicians. One such anecdote described Bandé Ali Khān's devotion as a *Krishnabhakth*³¹, He would play at a temple every day for the Krishna moorthy in the inner sanctum. One day a new *Brāhmin* came to the temple and subsequently forbade Bandé Ali Khān to play at the temple because he was a Muslim. Furious, Bandé Ali Khān went away. He came back the same night and played the *rudra vīnā* throughout the night behind the temple. After that he went to the river, had a bath and came to see the deity one last time. The door was locked, and when the Brahmin opened it, he saw with astonishment that the deity had turned towards the back wall of the temple. Bandé Ali Khān said "You keep this stone, I will take *Krishnaji* along with me"³²

Another story about the marriage of *Ustād*'s great grandfather Zākiruddīn Khān Dāgar and his brother Allahbandé Khan to Bandé Ali Khān's daughters was a familiar one that was often repeated in the *gurukul*. The illustrious *bīnkār* (*vīnā* player) set up a *swayamvar* stating that he would give his daughters' hands in marriage to anyone who could sing with him on his *vīnā*. Zākirudin Khān Dāgar and his brother took up the challenge and sang dhrupad while Bandé Ali Khan played the *vīnā*. Delighted with their musical prowess, Bandé Ali Khān wed his daughters to the two brothers – Umrao was married to Zākiruddīn Khan Dāgar.³³

³¹ A devotee of the Hindu God Krishnā.

³² Personal interaction with Dada.

³³ Personal interaction with Dada. Sanyal and Widdess (2004; 117) also refer to this story. Dada's account talks only about Zākiruddīn's marriage with Umrao. Sanyal and Widdess quote the same story from a source (The Dagar Heritage) that is an anonymous "outline of the history of the Dāgar gharānā". The source talks of the marriage of both to Bandé Ali Khān's two daughters. There is a possible attribution of this source by Sanyal and Widdess to Ustād Amīnuddīn Dāgar. It is interesting that Ustād Amīnuddīn Dāgar's version talks about Allahbandé Khansaab (he is a direct descendant of Allahbandé Khān, who is his grandfather) while Dada's

Other anecdotes showed the value accorded to the music and foregrounded the manifestation of the sacred. There was a story Dada related about how Zākiruddīn Khān had left his vīnā unattended one day as he had to attend to some other urgent work. After Zākiruddīn Khānsaab came back he found that the vīnā was perfectly “set” – the *purdāhs* (frets) were in place, the *jowari*³⁴ was done and the sound was exquisite, with the strings perfectly in tune. His wife, Umrao, who was also a *bīnkār*, had done this. She admonished him, saying that it was inauspicious to keep the divine instrument in this haphazard fashion.³⁵

My favourite story was about a great khyāl singer’s daughter who married into the Dāgar family: “His daughter had married into our family. As a dowry they taught us 300 compositions and assured us that they would never sing these again”³⁶ Dada talked of the enormity of that dowry, what it meant to stop singing 300 *khyāl* compositions. This was how the family of the *khyāl* singer “invested” in the Dāgar *gharānā*.

An Israeli student of *Badé Ustād* and *Ustād*, Dvir Itzakhi relates an anecdote about the vīnā player, Allah Bandé (Itzakhi, 2004; 60) that I have also heard Dada narrate. Allah Bandé was a Sufi mystic and had lived the life of a recluse in the forest for 10 years. The king had heard stories about this great musician and asked him to come and play for him at the court. Allah Bandé refused as he lived a recluse’s life. However, the king sent his soldiers to bring him in

version excludes him, perhaps unconsciously (Dada is a direct descendant of Zākiruddīn Khān, who is his great grandfather). It is a subtle comment of the politics of lineage and the importance given to blood lines even within the family.

³⁴ A way of filing the bridge (often made out of ivory) of the vīnā, sitār or surbahār (even other string instruments) to obtain the particular timbre and tone of sound and resonance that the instrumentalist is looking for. Badé Ustād is said to have been very skilled at the *jowāri* of his instruments that led to the unique tone and the improvisations he made with the physical form of the vīnā.

³⁵ Personal interaction with Dada.

³⁶ Ibid.

by force. Having brought him to the court, the king asked him to play for him. The great *bīnkār*'s music was so intense, that after a few minutes, the king cried out “Stop the music, I am going crazy! If you will not stop the music I will get crazy!” Allah Bandé stopped. The king quietly told him that he had a gift for the great musician and had his servants bring out a *vīnā* made out of gold and inlaid with diamonds and precious stones. As the king presented it to him, Allah Bandé took one look at it, spat on the golden instrument and left the court.

What many of these anecdotes do is infuse the music with value through the *gharānā* – the familial component of the *paramparā*. I am not trying to talk about the authenticity or the “truth” of these stories. I am more interested in how they prop up the spectre of this tradition for the young student. I am also attempting to illustrate the aura of the sacred that pervades these myths. Many of these stories feature characters and family members who found a mystic path through intense, passionate engagement with their art. Interestingly many of these personas are rebels, fakirs or Sufis who did not fit neatly into the mould of organised religion, or socially prescribed mores and norms. The underlying thread is that their music transcended all these material trappings and occupied a different kind of sacred space in itself.

The Music Room as a Sacred Space – Performance, Learning and Teaching

The sacred manifests even when one looks merely at the “music room” in the *gurukul* as a spatial cross section – a prism that refracts the cultural, pedagogic and social relations within the community of practice; a direct embodiment of *paramparā*. Most of the music sessions and classes take place in the music room. It is this room which also has the students doing their *riyāzh* at different times of the day. The room itself is closed off by a glass door with curtains. Against one wall, there are several *tānpurās* on a raised platform which doubles up

as an informal stage during *baithaks*. The other wall has photos of the ancestors who were famous musicians (many of whom form the crux of the stories we are told in the *gurukul*) and a scroll which has the family tree of the *Dāgars* tracing the musical line from the present until *Baba Gopāl Dās Pandéy*. On the other side there is a cupboard which houses the *rudra vīnās* and the *sitār* played by *Dada*, other students, or earlier, by *Badé Ustād*. There are also photos of *Badé Ustād* on the wall on this side. In one corner next to the *tānpurās* is a *moorthy* (statuette or figurine) of the goddess *Saraswati* in a small shrine. The *diya* (lamp) for the *moorthy* in the music room is lit everyday by a student of the *guruku*³⁷ or the cook. Usually, no one is allowed to enter the room with food or footwear. In fact, when students sleep in the room they try to sleep so that their feet don't point towards either the instruments or the framed photographs of the ancestors.

Photographs of the ancestors are garlanded during festivals like *Guru Poornimā*, *Dussehra* etc. An elaborate *poojā* is performed and the idol is garlanded by our gurus. This is also done on *Badé Ustād's* birthday – the students pay respect to his *samādhi* (mausoleum). I believe that all these factors contribute in making the learning and performative space of the music room sacred. The statement “not in the music room” or “not near the instruments” is heard several times in the *gurukul* for activities like children playing, or students doing “*āwārā*”³⁸

³⁷ Interestingly this is most often done by a female rather than a male student.

³⁸ The notion of “*āwārā*” meant that the student was not doing anything fruitful, which in this context implied a furthering of the student's practice and knowledge of music. The idea of *āwārā* as a loafer, a tramp-like figure was pitched as the diametrical opposite to the dedicated student who paid constant, unflinching attention to his work. It was also the vocabulary applied by an admonishing parent to a wayward son in need of guidance and anchoring in a conventional patriarchal family setup. For instance, one can immediately think of a number of movies where the good-for-nothing son (who might often be engaged in womanising, gambling, drinking etc.) is called an *āwārā*. This idea in its broadest sense might often be applied playfully to students whose stay at the *gurukul* was not regular.

activities not directly related to music. The sacred, here, is defined by exclusion, by what pollutes, by what it is not.

This space goes far beyond the space of the conventional classroom. When a student does *riyāzh* or sings along with *Ustād* in the room the awareness of the frames of the ancestors almost works like a panopticon of tradition. As a student I have often been aware of these photographs watching me, as it were, do my *riyāzh*. As I see the many faces in the photographs, stories recounted about their lives and what their contributions were towards the trajectory of the art form, often came back to me. Students would discuss between themselves the role of each of these ancestors. They almost served as a conscience – no slacking off in front of the ancestors’ eyes! The music room was too sacred a space to “fool around”. The *shishya* becomes aware that even the act of performance or *riyāzh* alone in the music room (or even with the *guru* and other *shishyas*) under the watchful gaze of the illustrious *Dagārs* who went before us, is deeply associated with the notion of *paramparā*. This becomes a practice that is the living manifestation of tradition. Dvir Itzakhi talks of how the sacred manifested for him in the music room:

Ustād left me alone in the music room. I sang and suddenly felt I was not alone. The Sufis and saints were looking at me from the walls. The long notes of the scale went deeper and deeper. The vibrations in the room were intense. I understood. This music was a wordless prayer (Itzakhi, 2004: 9)

Dvir’s account further deploys this act as mystical practice. The “prayer” is legitimised by the weight of history and *paramparā*. The sacred space exists through these almost mythic associations with historical continuity, which form the “foundational” basis for a *shishya*’s understanding of tradition. As Eliot would have it, this is the actual manifestation of the student’s awareness of “the pastness of the past” and “of its presence” (Eliot, 1921). This is

what makes the *shishya* “acutely conscious of his place in time” (ibid). The *shishya* sees the vast web of familial connections, musical affiliations and historical pedagogic relationships before him – in fact, one could even argue that the *shishya* performing is a crystallisation of all of these, a “product of tradition” who, through his practice, makes it legitimate, while attempting to move forward in newer directions. Dada’s reply to the oft repeated assertion that “dhrupad is a dying art” further props up the position of the individual *shishya* before the canvas of tradition: “Even if I have only one student who plays the *vīnā* or sings in this style, then the tradition is not dying”.³⁹

The question of *paramparā* also manifests in more direct ways:

Today, in the afternoon, after lunch. Dada decided to remove a couple of photos from the wall and rearrange the arrangement of photographs. I did not initially understand what was going on. As we spoke about this later in the evening I understood that it was an act of choosing who one would claim as instrumental to the present form the music took in the *gurukul*. It was a means of honouring those who were particularly important to this branch of the Dāgars. This was an important lesson for the student who had to be aware of these complexities of the subtle or outright battles of lineage, musical ancestry and especially style, which took place even within the family.⁴⁰

It is in the music room that the most important discussions on music and the nature of the Dāgar *paramparā* take place. When old and new *shishyas* meet, the room is used by them to discuss music and to sing, perform and do their *riyāzh*. Even students share specific anecdotes associated with the room which mythologises the space. An ethnographic narrative about a performance during a *baithak* will make this idea clearer:

³⁹ I have heard this sentiment repeated in different ways before me (and to me), several times.

⁴⁰ From my field notes.

After Uday Dada performed, Milind dada⁴¹ was almost in tears. He said that the performance reminded him of the time when *Badé Ustād* had taught Uday dada the same rāg that he performed. It was raining then and the rāg was Miyā Malhār. The current had gone off, but *Badé Ustād* kept singing while Uday dada and Milind dada listened (and learnt). “It was in this very room!” he exclaimed, suddenly overcome by nostalgia.⁴²

Spatially the music room at some level also breaks the schism between the teacher and the student. In *Ustād’s* room as well as in the hall, the student might sit at a lower level than that of the teacher. However, in the music room the teacher often physically comes down to the level of the student. This is a space (along with the guru’s room) where the *shishya* is allowed to experiment under the guidance of the guru, and possibly even question his ideas. The *guru shishya* learning process and relationship exists strongest in this space. The fact that senior students often come and sit in this room during baithaks, rather than the hall, sets a precedent and an example for younger students.

The music room is also extremely important in blurring the line between performance and learning. I have always observed that *Ustād’s* and Dada’s performances are more innovative, in terms of pushing the boundaries of form and newer registers of musical exploration, when they are amongst the stalwarts – the senior shishyas. It is often the place where *Ustād* teaches his senior most students. The idea of the “purity of dhrupad” purportedly remains intact in this room (or if it doesn’t then it can be questioned and engaged with critically here). Singing

⁴¹ Milind Dada learnt dhrupad from *Badé Ustād* and *Ustād* at the *gurukul* and also at the Chembur house. He is not a professional performer but a music enthusiast and singer. He is a veritable khazāna (treasure) of musical knowledge, experience, and a character with a great sense of humour.

⁴² From my field notes.

(or playing an instrument) in the *gurukul* and particularly in the music room was a special activity exclusive to the practitioners from this *paramparā*.

Performance became a way of teaching the student. The very act of sitting with the *tānpurā* strumming in the background sets up the space around the performer as a space of musical immersion. The student who is a witness to this act is unconsciously implicated as the learner. He must, however, make the transition from a listener to an active participant by engaging with the music at the level of retaining what he has listened to. The blurring of the line between pedagogy and performance can be seen in Uday dada's account of the way "classes" took place during his period of *tālīm*:

As soon as I entered Palaspé ... *Badé Ustād* would call me from wherever he was sitting. I would do pranām, and then wash my hands and feet. Then he would say "Go bring out the *tānpurā*"... Then he would teach. And similarly even with *Choté Ustād* if he was in the mood - "Yes son, bring out the *tānpurā*"- this happened many times. The things I got at that time are indescribable; because, at that time, the *Ustād* , or guru, he is not the *guru* - he becomes a note, or a melody, he becomes a rāg. And that is the truth of this.⁴³

The mystical undertone running through Uday dada's observes that the *guru* transformed into something else while singing (in a teaching situation). As a student he tried to become part of the performance of the guru. He made the transition from listener to learner. This subtle transition often takes place unconsciously in the student's mind:

One morning after breakfast we were just sitting in the hall and chatting, when Dada came down suddenly from his room and said, "What is happening? Come sit in the

⁴³ From an interview with Uday dada at his residence.

Music room”. We asked no questions and quietly went into the music room. Dada removed his rudra vīnā and began to play. I sat down at the *tānpurā* and listened. Hearing Dada play was always a big treat. My feet began to pain after a while but I continued to play the *tānpurā*. Towards the middle of the performance, *Ustād* came out and sat down – he listened to Dada and then asked him if he was playing Bilāskhāni Todi and then told him some phrases to play with and improvise. As I listened I realised that this pedagogic interaction between the two teachers was an important part of our *tālīm* as well.⁴⁴

There have been many such exchanges between *Ustād* and Dada. In fact, I believe that the most meaningful and sublime music emerges when the *guru* is trying to teach his shishya. It is during these moments that the *guru* explores the borders of his own understanding while trying to stretch the student as far as he can, to show him new worlds of exploration, and, to free his mind.

As a shishya, I would try to retain these exchanges in my mind (not always consciously). It was an almost intuitive act for every student. To recollect them when they were relevant to our own musical practice was a skill that we developed as *shishyas*. In the *gurukul* guru-shishya interactions took on diverse forms, often punctuated with performance and music making. An ethnographic incident further illustrates these intersecting themes that form the learning experience of the student:

There were several *tānpurās* on the mat in the music room around Majid Bhāi who had come to the *gurukul* to ‘service’ the tanpurās. He was doing the jowari of a *tānpurā*, and Dada was sitting down and strumming a *tānpurā* next to him. There were other students who had come to the *gurukul* to also get their *tānpurās* in tune

⁴⁴ From my field notes.

and checked – the jowari, new strings etc. They were sitting around him, and talking and joking. Dada was in a good mood and was humming something. He started lightly singing some *Multāni ālāp* and suddenly stopped and turned to a *shishya* and said: I still remember clearly - when my father was teaching Uday dada those phrases of *Multāni*. I remember clearly”⁴⁵

His eyes were shining as he remembered his father taking a class with Uday dada and teaching him those few phrases – a window into *Rāg Multāni*. He then sang those phrases and explained briefly the ‘feel’ of *Rāg Multāni* – the blood that coursed in the veins of those phrases crafted by *Badé Ustād*. For a few moments we stopped joking around and listened to him rapt and eager to hear more. Majid bhāi interrupted and said something about the bridge on one of the *tānpurās* he was filing. Dada turned towards him, and the conversation veered elsewhere.³⁹

This incident is important for several reasons. Many things that are simultaneously taking place during this interaction shape not only the *shishya*’s learning experience but even the *māhaul* of the *gurukul*. Dada’s recollection, if viewed in the context of the tradition, is actually a metaphor that bridges two temporalities together. It links two learning experiences, while, at the same time, becoming a pedagogic moment in itself. At one level, Dada, as a youngster, and the son of *Badé Ustād*, would constantly be a witness to such lessons. He often reiterates that *Badé Ustād* did not call him and make him sit before him and learn things in a mechanical way. Like so many other students, his learning took place merely as a function of “being there”. He learnt with others rather than in isolation with his father in dismembered didactic exercises. He reaffirms the importance of listening to other students practicing or singing with one’s guru. If you stay at the *gurukul*, this is inevitable. His

⁴⁵ From my field notes.

subsequent claim of how close *Multāni* had become to his heart (a “favourite” in some sense – a *rāg* he enjoyed and one that had become “his own”) is a further testimony to this idea.

At another level, this incident is a pedagogic experience in itself for us shishyas sitting around dada. It is a chance “lesson”. While singing the phrases that *Badé Ustād* taught Uday dada, he is letting us get a glimpse of those phrases (for retention) in the same way that he did. Most importantly, this also throws light upon the formation of the sacred space. The tableaux that I describe is an embodiment of the *māhaul*, where music lives its sublime life side by side with the everyday. In the middle of Majid bhāi’s tools and the sprawled students and *tānpurās* (in various stages of being dismantled and being put together), for a few moments, there is a magical suspension of space and time, as the *guru* relates his own experience of learning a *rāg*. We listen because he is talking about music. We listen also because we are interested in how he learnt. We listen because we wanted to know about *Multāni*. We listen, because what he sings is so beautiful that we cannot help ourselves.

The Guru’s Room

Like the music room, it is important to study the guru’s space critically as well. The guru’s room is open to students from 4:30 (or whatever time students might come in to do *kharaj* which must be done before sunrise) in the morning to 11:30 or 12:00 at night (and even later at times). I have made chai for *Ustād* and sat in his room early in the morning at 6:00 after my *kharaj* several times. I have had discussions with *Ustād* about the nation state, the sorry state of “commercial classical music”, the *gharānā* system – and all this while we watched *Kill Bill*, *Mahadev*⁴⁶ or a Chiranjeevi starrer, in his room. There are constantly students in

⁴⁶ A popular mythological television series about the Hindu god Shivā.

this room and it is as if the only time *Ustād* gets for himself is when he goes for a bath, or is sleeping. Also, his moving out of his room and into the music room becomes doubly significant in the context of the student who is learning. The spaces are constructed such that often the level of *Ustād*'s movement away from the music room implies the level of the student's progress in music. If *Ustād* just sits in his room during a student's *riyāzh*, it might mean that the student is less senior than the one during whose *riyāzh* *Ustād* sits outside in the main hall. Alternatively if the student is asked to come into the room then it might imply the student's level of accomplishment or seniority – sometimes even the teacher's level of intimacy with the student. But there is no hard and fast rule in this regard.

When a student does *riyāzh* in the guru's room, it is an important event in his *tālīm*. It is almost like a class (which in itself is an event treasured by the student) – the guru's attention is on the shishya's singing, and he can correct and guide his practice as it is happening. The student's continued presence in the guru's room also means that he gets great periods of time when he can influence the ways in which the student can start to think about issues of music and life. The idea of “moral education” can be understood in the context of the student's close proximity with the guru, in his space. The student watches and discusses what the teacher experiences along with him.

However other forms of control and surveillance also come to being in this space. There is a need, on the guru's part to constantly know the shishya's whereabouts. It might even become a space for power relations to play themselves out. The fact that *Ustād*'s room is at the front of the house means that he can see whenever a student goes in or out. In my ethnography there is an incident where Atul warns me about being in *Ustād*'s locus of vision while we were going up to play chess – an activity which he might have disapproved of.

The *shishya* thus has to negotiate various forces through the course of his *tālīm*. The social dimension of learning does not exist despite the cognitive; it consciously affects the process of learning. The proximity that is a mainstay of this tradition reveals at its heart an attitude which the student must develop through his years of association with the *guru* and the community of practice. It is not acquired easily.

I see two subtly conflicting threads emerging in the context of this attitude of a *shishya* before the *guru*, the community and the *paramparā*; a conflict mirrored even in my own observations and analyses of the setting – being in awe and being critical. It is a tricky terrain that both the *shishya* (and the researcher) must negotiate. The careful journey through these two sensibilities addresses what is learnt. Sudhir Kakar puts it beautifully in his novel of a young scholar writing a treatise on his *guru* Vatsyayana’s magnum opus, the Kama Sutra:

“He made me realise the difference between the student and the scholar. The optimal conditions for learning arise when the student fully opens his mind to knowledge and his heart to the teacher. A scholar needs to close both, just a little. Learning demands the greatest possible identification of the student with his subject and his teacher whereas scholarship demands some distance, a critical rather than a reverential attitude towards received knowledge” (Kakar, 2002; 225).

Bio-note

I am passionate about music, especially dhrupad. Nothing gives me more pleasure than listening to, or singing *ālāp*. During my years at Centre for Learning, Bangalore, I discovered my love for literature and theatre. I also learned over here to *question everything*. I enjoy poetry; and fiction of all kinds. One of the earliest ambitions I remember having (apart from being a road-roller driver and a cricketer) is to win the Nobel Prize in literature. When I was at Xavier's, I added film to the list of things that I love; and at the SMCS, I discovered how you convert things you love into "research". This paper is a product of this peculiar kind of engagement with an art form and a community that I love.

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Uday Bhawalkar at his residence in Pune, Maharashtra.

Ustād Bahāuddin Dāgar at the Dhrupad Gurukul, Palaspé and at a student's residence in
Bangalore, Karnataka.

Milind Nafday at his residence in Pune, Maharashtra.

Marianne Svasek at the Dhrupad Gurukul, Palaspé.