



(LAS 7323)

MIDDLE CASTE RELIGIOUS MUSIC FROM INDIA

Musicians, Dancers, Prostitutes, and Actors

Recorded by Rosina Schlenker

MUSIC IN THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM:

The history of Indian culture is determined by the caste system which gradually developed since the invasion of the Aryans, the “nobly-born.” In the beginning the castes were based on racial differences. Therefore, the Indian term for caste is Varna, i.e. color, meaning various shades from the fair complexion of the Aryan emperors to the black skin of the aborigines, and including the bias about physiognomic, physical and intellectual assessments. As we know from the Vedic and epic time, originally there were four main castes: the Brahmans or priests, the Ksartiyas or warriors, the Vaisyas or merchants, and the Sudras or servants. Later the Harijans or Parias, i.e. the untouchables, joined the spiritual background of the castes, especially influenced by the Samkya-yoga, the belief in reincarnation by Karma or fate. Doing good deeds in this life will bring a rebirth in a better position, or caste. Still, pressure exerted by the Brahmans, on the other caste members, during the subsequent dynasties and invasions by other nations, couldn't prevent the splintering of the four castes into hundreds of sub-castes or varieties according to localities and minglings with foreign people. Nowadays we find about three thousand castes with different customs, names and traditions. (The easiest way of identification goes by the name of the caste member.)

Meanwhile racial differentiations have been overlapped by the numerous professional communities with more or less strict limits. As the modern Indian state shows a transitional period from the old caste system to a new social structure; in the matter of musical tradition we may simply classify into upper, middle, and lower castes, of which each is again divided into a higher, middle and lower social standard.

THE MIDDLE CASTES:

The Middle Castes are the actual center of the Indian music culture, represented by highly developed and refined classical ragas and talas. Originally the Brahmans played only temple music, but for 50 years some of them have broken through barriers and become famous artists, and the backbone and ideas of almost all other music traditions. The huge number of middle castes is derived from the Ksatriyas and Vaisyas, and their music, if not classical itself, is determined by melodic patterns, ornamentations and musical form of the classical ideas. These characteristics are very strong in the religious vocal music. But the more we go down the scale of society in the middle castes, the more we find new music and dance traditions which only in some aspects deal with classical music. Here religious music is not only characterized by simpler melodic and rhythmic patterns but also enriched by long poems as texts for the devotional songs. Sometimes the songs are interpreted by dance, which again takes patterns of the northern classical Kathak-dance, while retaining its own tradition. While the middle castes consists of Ksatriyas and Vaisyas, the lower castes are formed by the Sudras and - as a result of Mahatma Gandhi's struggle for integration- by the Harijans, once the untouchables. Especially in the lower castes we find great poverty among the simple workmen, servants and peasants. Their music shows simple melodies and rhythms. Their music is determined by the rhythm of their work and by rather simple melodies, partly accompanied by dance. This applies for work songs and religious songs.

Whereas in the middle castes we find more solo performances; in the lower castes the chorus dominates and represents the unity of the communities. Beside chorus with refrain, sometimes dramatized by transvestite dancers, and songs with presenter and chorus, we also hear the monotonous recitations of devotional texts by housewives of beggar-monks in the street.

TRACKS:

1. Mahadeo Misra - 9:53
2. Purabi Dutta - 4:21
3. Muni Devi - 7:20
4. Log Nath Misra - 5:15
5. Log Nath Misra - 8:21
6. Purabi Dutta - 4:34
7. Purabi Dutta - 2:15

NOTES ON TRACKS:

1. Mahadeo Misra, vocal with tabla and sarangi-Bhajan

The name of this famous old artist of Benares discloses his membership to the Kathak cast. As Benares belongs to the state Uttar Pradesh we find sometimes the “misras” as one of the subdivisions of the Brahmans, but this differs according to the locality and profession, M. Misra is now 72 years old and still invited for performances. He has developed a specially lovely and softly-articulated singing style. He is well known for his Bhajan interpretations of the Kathak tradition. Bhajans are devotional songs with texts from the poet saints of the 14th through 18th century but the melodies have undergone changes and need not necessarily have originated then.

2. Purabi Dutta, vocal, with tabla and manjira Hindi-Bhajan

P. Dutta is well known as a Nazrul singer in Calcutta but sings modern Bengali songs, folk-songs, and Muslim religious songs, i.e. Ghazals, or Hindi-Bhajan as well. As her name indicates she belongs to the Kayastha caste, i.e. the caste of writers, which probably originates in the Vaisya caste. Traditionally, this important Bengal cast is represented by very intelligent and well-educated people. Although born in this cast, P. Dutta and her family live free from caste rules and ancient conventions. Her father was a brilliant tappa-singer and composer of many bhajans like the one here recorded.

3. Muni Devi, vocal with tabla, sarangi Ghazal

She belongs to the Kathak caste, originally the caste of storytellers in the North but developed to a great community of musicians and dancers. Here we find many Muslim members beside Hindus. M. Devi is one of the last living courtesans. Educated like the Geishas in Japan, the courtesans in Lakhnau, Delhi or Benares were famous for their dancing, vocal and literary arts presented in the Dance-houses. With the invasion of the films, the intimate atmosphere for music and dance, for relaxation and education disappeared, and the courtesans, as well as their accompanying musicians, became impoverished and mostly had no other choice than simple prostitution. M. Devi explains that there is no more succession in her line. On rare occasions she dances and sings for guests, exhibiting the last brilliant vestiges of a music tradition now replaced by trivial film music.

4. Log Nath Misra, dance and vocal Omakar Nath Misra, dance and vocal Isvara Lal Misra, tabla Hindi-Bhajan

Both dancers and the tabla-ji belong to the Kathak cast in Benares. The soloists represent a special dance-vocal tradition which has become very rare because it is endangered by the film invasion like the dance-houses of the courtesans. In this tradition men wear female dresses and dance in the classical Kathak-style which stresses the rhythm of the feet. The classical Kathak dance has two aspects: the abstract dance with the brilliant footwork, and the “sloka,” i.e. poems which deal mostly with the love affairs between the divine lovers Krishna and Radha. If a melody for such a poem is known as a separated song we call it a Bhajan of the Krishna-Lia (-play)

5. Log Nath Misra, Omkar Nath Misra Isvara Lal Misra Sloka

As urgent prerequisite for the Kasha-dance (of Muslim origin and named after the dancers of the Kasha cast) is a splendid table player. Isvara Lal Misra is a young and talented player from Benares who has already visited the United States. He is famous for his deft, soft, and musical hand. In the sloka or bhajan-part of the Kathak dance of the artists do less footwork but sing the text and show, in stylized gestures and miming, the content.

6. Purabi Dutta, vocal with tabla and manjira Ghazal

While bhajans are religious songs of the Hindus, the Ghazals are those of the Muslims. Typical for Ghazal songs in Urdu-language is the change between composed melody and recited-like interpretation of the text. Many of the Ghazals have been transplanted in other languages such as this ghazal of P. Dutta in Bengali.

7. Purabi Dutta, vocal with tabla and manjira Nazrul

The Nazrul songs, named after their composer Nazrul, are close to folk songs and therefore differ in their motives. Among a lot of love songs, we find some with devotional appeals such as this one.

DR. ROSINA SCHLENKER

Dr. Rosina Schlenker comes from Cologne, Germany where her training in ethnomusicology culminated in the specialization in Asian music, particularly India, and also Egypt. In 1973 she made her first exploratory expedition to Calcutta, financed by the University of Cologne, and recorded Bhairavi music in all classical styles. Her work on West German Radio produced a series on oriental music. In 1977 her second exploratory research in India dealt with religious music (bhajan) of different social classes in Uttar Pradesh, Province, especially in Benares, Mirzapur, and in Calcutta. She currently devotes herself to "pantomime in Asian dance theater."

ORIGINALLY RELEASED IN 1975, THIS RELEASE IS NOW PART OF THE LYRICHORD ARCHIVE SERIES.



THE LYRICHORD ARCHIVE SERIES

PO Box 1977 Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10011 Ph: 212 404 8290 Fax: 212 404 8291
email: nick@lyrichord.com Web: www.lyrichord.com

© and (P) Lyrichord Discs Inc. These texts (including images) are published under copyright by Lyrichord Discs Inc. All rights are reserved.
The texts, and the music associated, with them, may only be republished, duplicated or sold, with written permission from Lyrichord Discs Inc.