



(LAS 7324)

LOWER CASTE RELIGIOUS MUSIC FROM INDIA

Monks, Transvestites, Midwives, and Folksingers

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 Brahmins or priests, the Ksatriyas 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 Brahmins, 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 mingling 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 the numerous professional communities with more or less strict limits have overlapped racial differentiations. 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, the backbone and ideal 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, ornamentation and musical form of the classical ideal. 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 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 choruses with refrain, sometimes dramatized by transvestite dancers, and songs with precentor and chorus, we also hear the monotonous recitations of devotional texts by housewives or beggar-monks in the street.

TRACKS:

1. Folk - Jugglers, Dancers - Ghazal - 5:57
2. Folksingers - Bhajan - 6:03
3. Folksingers - Worksong - 10:25
4. Monk - Bhajan - 5:48
5. Saya, Vocal Folk - Bhajan - 5:12
6. Haridas - Bhajan - 7:21
7. Saya - Folk Bhajan - 2:16

NOTES ON TRACKS:

1. Folk-jugglers:2 dancers, Leader, drum players - Ghazal

This interesting group of wandering jugglers belong to the middle and lower communities of the lower castes. Sometimes invited for weddings or childbirths, they sing and dance for a whole night. Two dancers or more perform in female dresses, they repeat the melodic lines given by the leader, and interpret the text of the devotional or secular songs. Here the group sings a Muslim devotional song, accompanied by the rhythm of the drums.

2. Folksingers (Harijans from Chittupur)Bhajan

Near Benares lies the village Chittupur where Harijans, the former untouchables, live on a low social plane as Riksa drivers or peasants. The musicality of this village has become well-known, and the repertoire ranges from Bhajans with classical poems from the 15th to 18th Century to Folk-bhajans with devotional text, to improvised songs. The instruments are Dhaolak-drum, metal-sticks, and harmonium. The text of this Bhajan is from Kabir, the famous sage-pet of the 15th Century.

3. Folksingers (Harijans from Chittupur) - worksong

After work in the evening or while working in the house or in the field these villagers improvise melodies and texts and integrate both serious devotional aspects and humorous remarks of what is going on in village life. The admirable enthusiasm of their singing and playing shows nothing of the desolate circumstances under which they live.

4. Monk (Kabir) (temple of Benares) - Bhajan

It is difficult to classify the monks into castes, as anyone can take up a religious life free of property and worldly affairs. The Kabir temple of Benares, named after the great sage-poet Kabir accomodates men of different middle and lower castes. As Kabir has left a great collection of Bhajans these songs are performed in the praise of God who has no shape-no name, as Kabir announces in his “nirguua” aspect of devotion. The only accompanying instrument is a small drum Kanjudi.

5. Saya, vocal, sister-in-law, dholak - Folk-bhajan

Though only rarely will a woman play the heavy drum Dholak, here is the sister-in-law of Saya, who also holds a special position in her community. While in the Bhajan of the rainy season the simple rhythm of the Dholak gives an impression of what is said in the text about hanging clouds and thunderstorm here it accompanies the intense praise of the God Rama.

6. Haridas, vocal and dotara - Bhajan

While the monks of an asrama, or hermitage (or temple) live in quite acceptable surroundings, the wandering monks or Sadus face a hard life, although it is by their own will. In praise of God, they sing and accept whatever people will give to eat. As Haridas, beggar-monks from the lower castes of Bangla Desh, say it often happens that not a single grain is in the beggar-cup when at dawn he stops singing. But he doesn't complain because he knows about the poverty of the people. He wandered from Calcutta to Benares (400 miles) by foot to see the holy banks of the river Ganga. In his youth he

learned a lot of Bhajans in Hindi and Bengali which now help him to survive. Among the beggar-monks we find the greatest idealists of the religious scene, with humble, gentle natures and smiling faces.

7. Saya, vocal, dholak - Folk-bhajan

This woman from the village Pahlia, near Sarnath, belongs to the low castes of midwives. Because of her good voice she is often invited to weddings to sing her devotional songs. Her strong personality and humble devotion to God makes her different from other women of her cast. The midwives (often expert in curing diseases) have to be present during birth and cut the umbilical cord; but they are not allowed to touch anything in the house and have to leave immediately after their work. Here Saya sings a melancholic Bhajan of the rainy season.

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 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”.



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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

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