

## The Gundecha Brothers: New Shoots of the Dagar *Dhrupad* Tradition

SHANTHA BENEGAL

For centuries *dhrupad*, the ancient and stately genre of North India, had been nurtured in the refined atmosphere of the princely courts. With Indian Independence in 1947 and the changing of the old order *dhrupad* was thrown to the mercy of less discerning audiences. A style of singing and playing that was austere, and which demanded considerable listening acuity and patience from its audience, *dhrupad* could have vanished had it not been for the Dagar family's determination to uphold their Dagar *bani* tradition. Thus, of the four original *bani* (or *vani*, i.e., "schools" of *dhrupad* – Gaudhari, Khandari, Nauhari, and Dagar) only one style survived the metamorphosis into a relatively lighter *khayal* tradition (e.g., the style of the Agra *gharana* [family-based musical tradition] of *khayal* is derived from the Nauhari *bani*).

With missionary zeal, members of the Dagar family have performed worldwide, recorded, taught extensively, and actively participated in *dhrupad* conferences all over India. At one such conference, the Dagar Saptak,<sup>1</sup> held in Calcutta in 1987, it became apparent that *dhrupad* was putting out new shoots. Appearing on the stage with the senior Dagers was a new generation of *dhrupad* aspirants – both from within and outside the Dagar family. Among them was Ramakant Gundecha, who gave able support to his *guru* Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar.

On a recent tour of the United States, Ramakant and his brother Umakant Gundecha performed together on over twenty stages for SPICMACAY,<sup>2</sup> speaking to student audiences through their music. Performing with them were their brother Akhilesh on *pakhawaj* [barrel-shaped drum used to accompany *dhrupad*], and their sister Sangita on *tanpura*. Seattle was an unscheduled stop, since they wanted to meet with the many students of the late Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar living in the city. Older brother to Zia Fariduddin Dagar, Zia Mohiuddin Dagar had also taught the Gundechas.

The following is a transcript of informal conversations between Umakant, Ramakant, Annie Penta, Matt Rice, Jeff Lewis, and myself during the four days they spent in Seattle. The one important thread that emerges from these conversations is that *dhrupad* is no longer endangered. Its vitality is demonstrated not only by the appearance of vibrant new talent, but also by the recent enrichment of its repertoire.

*At one time there were four dhrupad banis: Gaudhari, Khandari, Nauhari, and Dagar. Why did Dagar bani alone survive?*

**RAMAKANT:** That's because each of the *banis* evolved into a *khayal gayaki* [singing style] as audience tastes changed. The Nauhari *bani* became Agra; the Gaudhari became Atrauli, and so on. The Dagers did not change their *bani* into a *khayal gayaki*. But there are many more *dhrupadiyas* [dhrupad singers] than was previously believed. Recent *dhrupad* festivals have presented the Bihar *dhrupadiyas* of Darbhanga, and the wonderful Azgari Bai. And recently, a cassette has been released of a Pakistani *dhrupad bani* called Talawandi.

*There have been many students trained by Zia Mohiuddin, Fariduddin and the other Dagers: Ritwick Sanyal, Chandreshkhar Narangrikar, Pushparaj Koshti, Alok and Ashoka Nandi, Vijay Kichlu, and so on. Nobody but you has yet made a name in dhrupad. To what do you attribute your success?*

**UMAKANT:** Luck. Success does not always follow talent. We were lucky on two counts. We were fortunate to receive very good *talim* [instruction, knowledge]. So many *ustads* hold back their knowledge. Why do you think the Agra *gharana* for example has had so many followers? The Agra *ustads* gave very freely, and therefore the Agra *gayaki* has enjoyed great popularity. We were very lucky to have such teachers as Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, whom we call "Bade Ustad" ["Big Ustad"], and Zia Fariduddin Dagar, whom we call "Chote Ustad" ["Little Ustad"]. They taught us with open hearts, gave us everything freely.

*Do you come from a family of musicians?*

**UMAKANT:** No. Our father was a Professor of Law in Ujjain. But he wholeheartedly backed our decision to study music. He even changed his job and got one in Bhopal when we received a Government of Madhya Pradesh Scholarship to study *dhrupad* at the Dhrupad Kendra [the Dhrupad Centre]. Chote Ustad was and still is the director of the Kendra. We studied according to the *guru-shishya parampara* [the traditional master-disciple relationship] from 1981 to 1985. We used to be with Chote Ustadji from 4:00am to 10:00pm, and then go upstairs to our rooms only to sleep. Ustad not only taught us, but listened to our *riaz* [practice]. Most of our *talim* was from Chote Ustad, but the finishing came from Bade Ustad who used to come every month to guide us.

*Did you begin from scratch at the Dhrupad Kendra?*

**UMAKANT:** No. We both went to Bhopal after earning a Masters degree in music at Madhav Music College in Ujjain. In fact, Ramakant and I were working in jobs. We had to leave our jobs. Apart from my parents and immediate family, everybody else was dead against our quitting our careers and going into such a hazardous profession, especially such an esoteric music as *dhrupad*. When we went to Chote Ustad we were barely over twenty. I am thirty-four now. Even now, both Ramakant and I are employed in the Bharat Bhavan [a centre for the arts] in Bhopal. However, we enjoy a great deal of freedom at Bharat Bhavan. Now at last it is beginning to look as if some time we will be able to concentrate totally on being professional musicians.



Dhiraj Chawda

Zia Mohiuddin Dagar

*I have observed from your cassettes that while you sing Dagar bani, you have not imitated the voices of the Dagar.*

**UMAKANT:** Yes, we believe that it is important not to imitate voices. Take the style of your teachers. But the voice must be your own; that is what expresses your own individuality.

*I read that you have composed some new dhrupads [vocal compositions] based on Nirala's poetry [Nirala is the pen name of poet Suryakant Tripathi].*

**RAMAKANT:** Yes, we feel that for *dhrupad* to stay alive and well we should compose. They must have been writing about our Rag Sohini *dhrupad*.

(Ramakant and Umakant sing)

Taak kamasinavaari  
Taak kama sinavaari  
Taak kama sina vaari  
Sinavaari, sinavaari

Taa kakamasi navaari  
Taak kamasi navaari  
Taak kamasina vaari  
Kamasina kamasinavaari

Iraavani samaka kaat  
Iraavani sama kakaat  
Iraavani nisama kakaat  
Sama kakaat sinavaari  
Taak kamasinavaari...

UMAKANT: Nirala's poem is written in the style of the poetry of the absurd. The words are written just like *dhrupad upaj* [improvisation]. Although they mean nothing, they sound nice. One literary person refused to accept that Nirala could write nonsense. But you listen to it. It is like a *tarana* [vocal genre using "nonsense" syllables and spoken drum sounds]: the words sound beautiful, almost meaningful, but they are in fact nonsense. After we composed this a *kathak* dancer asked our permission to use it for dance.

*How did you hear about this poetry?*

UMAKANT: Through the Bharat Bhavan where we both work we have made many good poet friends. Through them we are constantly exposed to poetry. In a note to this poem, Nirala wrote that the poem was to be sung in *dhrupad* style in *shul tal* [a ten-beat cycle]. He has actually written it using *bol bant* [word play] and *lay bant* [syncopation]. So we set it to Rag Sohini in *shul*. Nirala not only knew about the *tal* [metric cycle] but he knew the difference between *shul* and *sadra* [another ten-beat cycle] and specified *shul*!

*Dhrupad must be an ideal form for the setting of poetry. Sahitya [the lyric] is very important in dhrupad: there seem to be more words in dhrupad compositions than in khayal compositions for instance.*

RAMAKANT: *Sahitya* is not as important as *swar* [notes] and *lay* [time]. But you are right, in *dhrupad* the *sahitya* is usually of a higher poetic order than in *khayal*.

*Have you ever composed the lyrics as well?*

UMAKANT: Yes, once when a local TV station was inaugurating a dance conference we were asked to compose an invocation to Ganesha [the Elephant-headed god of wisdom]. We attempted to write both the words and the melody. We have not done this since.

*(Note: Annie and I were the recipients of some rare gems of the Dagar bani repertoire. The Gundechas wanted to hear these, so we sang the dhrupad "Ek samay radhika" in Rag Jaijaiwanti.<sup>3</sup>)*

UMAKANT: This a *shuddh* [pure] *bani dhrupad*, Chote Ustad said. There were several types of *geeti* [singing styles that preceded *dhrupad*]. Dagar *bani* is said to have developed from *sadharani*. It combines all the other *geetis*.<sup>4</sup>

What geetis do “Tero bala pratap” (Rag Todi) and “Shubh mahurat” (Rag Suha) belong to?

UMAKANT: You cannot say this is a *shuddh* composition and this is a *bhinna* composition. In Dagar *bani* all the *geetis* are there. *Gaudi geeti* has more *gamak* [wide shaking of the note]. *Vegaswara* is heard in the *andolan* [slow oscillation] of South Indian music. *Vega* means “fast”. Another shorter name for *vegaswara* is *vesar*. It has very fast *gamaks*. *Bhinna* is the *geeti* that jumps octaves. The compositions are usually range over three octaves.

(Note: Annie and I then sing the “Tero bala pratap” [“Great is your power”] in shul tal.)

RAMAKANT: You sing it in *jalad* [fast]. We sing it slow like this... [demonstrates...]

UMAKANT: We sing it both ways: *madhya* [medium speed] and *jalad*. We learned “Shubh mahurat” in both tempos. But in the film *Dhrupad*<sup>5</sup> [Bade Ustad sings it slow with a *shuddh re* [natural second of the scale]. He said it was *shatu-shruti rishabh* [a microtone between the second and the flattened third].

Do you think we were taught compositions a little faster than you because of our shorter breath?

UMAKANT: That is possible, a good teacher adjusts to the students’ abilities and potential.

Which geeti would it be in slow tempo? Sadharani? Is it the tempo that makes it sadharani or another geeti?

UMAKANT: Actually Ustad didn’t emphasize theory. All this is from our readings for our Masters degree. Only one time did Chote Ustad say this is a *sadharani geeti*. That was for “Ek samay radhika”.

In your dhrupad you do more of jor layakari [rhythmic play in the pulsatile section of the improvisation] and tans [rapid sequences of notes]. Did you have to do a lot of riaz in paltas [exercises in note sequences]?

UMAKANT: When we used to live with our ustad in the Dhrupad Kendra, every morning we would do *palta riaz* from 4:00 am for five or six hours:

DSNS, NRSR, SNSR, SDRG ...and so on.

Do you use the paltas in your singing?

UMAKANT: The *paltas* are only for practice. In actual performance we don’t use the

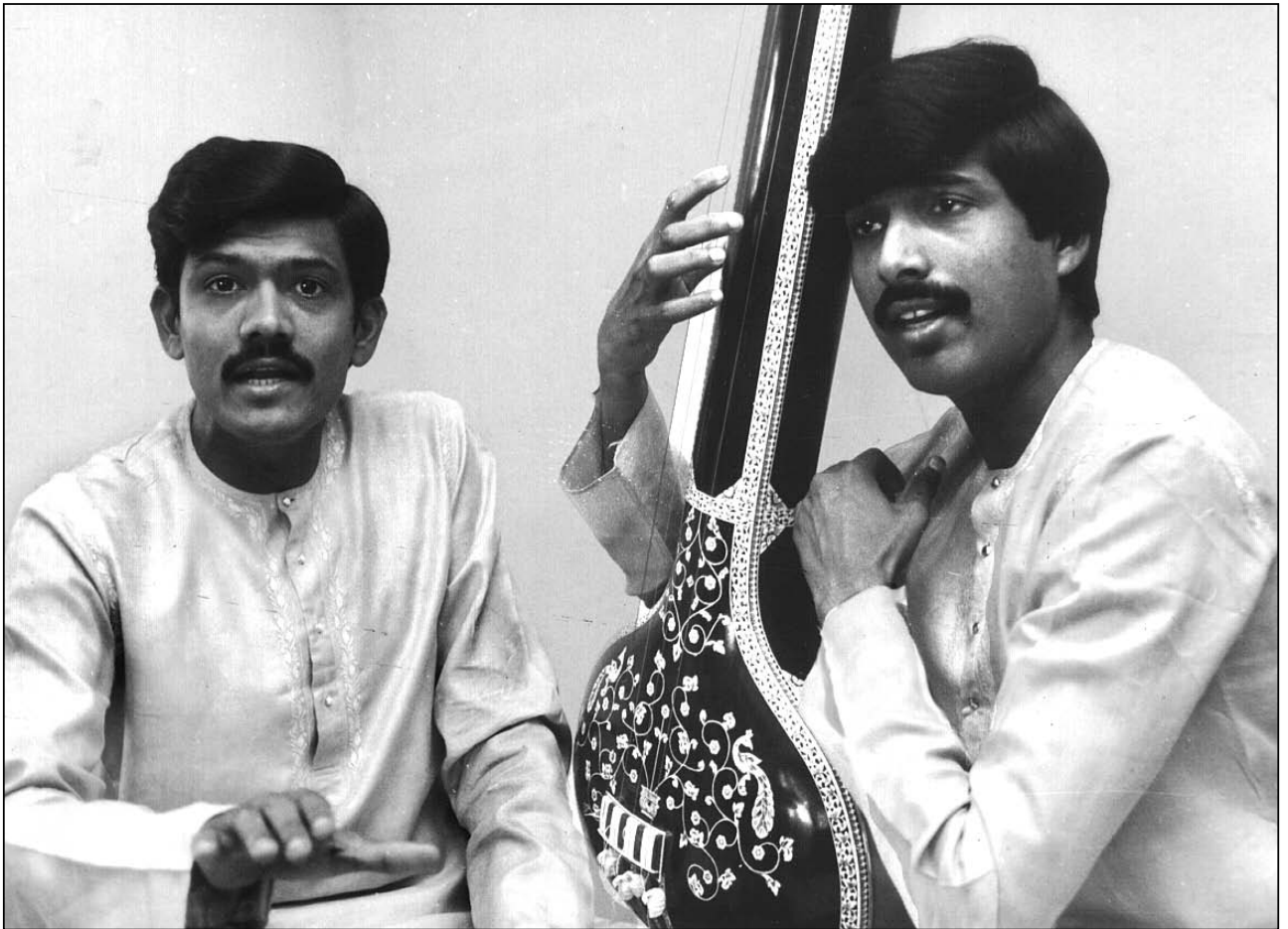
*paltas*. No fixed patterns. You have to improvise. Bade Ustad taught a wonderful *palta*. I'll do it in Rag Todi:

S r g M	S N d P
r g M P	N d P M
g M P d	d P M g
M P d N	P M g r
P d N S	M g r S

...and so on. We practiced it for note perfection for six months or more.

*Sometimes, I wonder why we were blessed with a teacher like Dagar Sahib who was so generous. What was the purpose?*

RAMAKANT: Some collect stamps, some collect money. You collect compositions.



Bhalu Mondhe/Ghanashyam Sharma.

Umakant and Ramakant Gundecha (with tanpura).

UMAKANT: You are the storekeepers. We can learn the compositions from you and spread them. Besides, Bade Ustad taught each person in a different way. I think he saw that you were good at remembering compositions and so he taught you many. We don't remember the compositions as well, so we write them in a notebook and look at them before we sing.

*Returning to Nirala's absurd poetry, how did you come to set this to dhrupad? Did someone suggest it?*

UMAKANT: Nobody suggested it. One good thing about working in Bharat Bhavan is that all kinds of artists come there: poets, dancers, writers, playwrights, artists. We have a group of friends and colleagues who are poets. They suggested that we compose new *dhrupads*. We found Nirala's poetry very inspiring.

*Has he written many poems like that?*

UMAKANT: There are shelves and shelves of poetry written by him. We have set many of his poems to *dhrupad*. For example, there is this in Rag Shankara

Toote sakal bandh	(Free from the bondage of being a bud
Kalike disha gyan	The flower opens and spreads its fragrance
Gat ho bahe gandh	In every direction.)

*Did you set it to Rag Shankara because of its meaning? Is it about Shiva?*

UMAKANT: Yes. We selected *Shankara* because of its meaning, but is not about Shiva. It is about knowledge, self knowledge. The poet wants to say that when the *atma* [soul] meets the *paramatma* [supreme spirit], it experiences a new world.

*Did Bade Ustad hear these new compositions?*

UMAKANT: Oh yes. All the compositions we showed to Bade Ustad. He not only liked them but he made suggestions on how to refine them.

*It makes it such a contemporary art form! You seem to like shul tal. Are all the Nirala poems set to shul tal?*

UMAKANT: No, we have also composed a *dhrupad* in Rag Yaman in *chautal* [twelve-beat cycle].

Neel nayan, neel palak	(Blue eyes, blue eyelids
Neel badan, neel jhalak.	Blue figure, blue sheen.)

*You have also composed dhrupads based on medieval and Vedic poetry have you not?*

UMAKANT: Yes. In 1988-89 there was a World Poetry Festival arranged by Bharat Bhavan. Its logo was the sun. We were asked to compose for its opening ceremony on television. We selected a hymn to Surya, the Sun God, from the Rig Veda. We went to a *pandit* to learn the correct way to recite the Rig Veda passages. Then we composed it in Rag Shuddh Kalyan.<sup>6</sup>

*How did you figure out the rhythm?*

UMAKANT: We composed it in the rhythm of the Vedic chant but changed its *rag*, keeping to the rule however of staying within three notes at a time.

*Was Bade Ustad there at the time?*

RAMAKANT: Yes, in fact he corrected it. He would teach us by singing sometimes, playing the *veena* sometimes.

UMAKANT: In earlier times, there was a title, *nayak*, given to someone who could write poetry, compose music, as well as perform music.

*Are there any nayaks left?*

UMAKANT: Yes! In *khayal* there are many *nayaks*. I don't know if there are any in *dhrupad*.

*Does anybody else in dhrupad experiment with contemporary feelings? It seems logical that this should be so. Hasn't there been a long stretch of time when no one has done this? In the Dagar family don't they only sing traditional compositions?*

UMAKANT: I have heard Aminuddin sing a *dhrupad* which he composed on a poem by Kabir. It was a *dhamar* [composition in a fourteen-beat cycle]. It is new. Zahiruddin and Faiyazuddin Dagar also sang a *dhrupad* they composed from a Kabir poem for the same poetry festival in Bhopal for which we composed the Vedic chants.

*Kabir was a Sufi?*

UMAKANT: Kabir was a *nastik* [agnostic, secular].

*He didn't pay attention to Hindu and Muslim differences. Do you think the nature of compositions will change, from being either Muslim or Hindu to more secular?*

**UMAKANT:** Definitely! When *dhrupad* was being sung in temples all the compositions were addressed to God just as in Carnatic music. They were not supposed to be sung for public entertainment. Because of this the tradition has come down to the Muslim *dhrupadiyas* who were originally Hindus. They still sing Hindu *dhrupads*. But there are some *dhrupads* addressed to Moinuddin Auliya Chishti and others. If you know the structure of a *rag* and a *dhrupad*, you can set any poetry to it – Tulsidas, Nirala, or Kabir. When *dhrupad* came to the courts many were composed to the King to promote his fame! The *dhrupad* we sang earlier, “Tero bala pratap”, was composed for the Emperor Akbar.

*Now that there are no longer princely courts, no more dhrupads are composed for Kings?*

**UMAKANT:** True, but now *dhrupads* can be composed on other subjects such as nature, the seasons, the environment. Ultimately *dhrupads* reflect the *shanta ras* [the mood of peace].

*I had never heard that Aminuddin composed or that Faiyazuddin and Zahiruddin did. I thought they always sang old compositions. So, I am very excited. It makes new life for dhrupad.*

**UMAKANT:** We think old compositions are very valuable, but at the same time, why not compose on new poetry? We can, and we should.



Avinash Pasariha

*Zahiruddin and Faiyazuddin Dagar*

*Are dhrupad compositions preserved mostly in the minds of musicians or have they been written in manuals?*

**UMAKANT:** Both. We also compose old *dhrupads* by composers such as Haridasa and Tansen. Nobody knows what were the real compositions. But the poetry is beautiful. These *dhrupads* are in the books. We re-compose them.

*How do you re-compose?*

**UMAKANT:** We make them contemporary. The poetry is very valuable. It should not go into the garbage. We can't say that since we don't know the music for these compositions we therefore mustn't sing them, allowing them to get lost.

*Which poets have you used in your compositions?*

**UMAKANT:** Tulsidas, Keshav Das, Padmakar, Nirala, and of course Kabir. There is a Kabir poem that we set to Rag Bhairavi, also in *shul tal*:

Hama Saba manyi	(I am in everyone
Sakal hama manyi	And everyone is in me
Hama hai tero	I am you
Hama hai tero	You are not another
Doosara nahin	My influece
Teen loka men	Embraces three worlds
Hamara pasara	Your entries and exits
Ava-gaman saba	Are all a part
Khel hamara	of my game.)

## Notes

- 1 *Saptak* means a "collection of seven" and commonly refers to the seven notes of an octave or, as here, a group of seven people. In 1987 there were seven Dagers actively performing: Aminuddin, Fahimuddin, Zia Mohiuddin (d.1990), Zia Fariduddin, Zaheeruddin (d.1994), Faiyazuddin (d.1989), and Saeeduddin. Since then Wasifuddin and Bahauddin have begun to perform.
- 2 SPICMACAY: Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music And Culture Amongst Youth.
- 3 Sung by the Gundechas on Rhythm House Classic cassette, Gundecha Bandhu, Volume 1.
- 4 In the *Sangitaratnakara* [treatise on music written c. 1240] five types of *geetis* are named: *shuddh* [pure], where notes are sung in natural sequence and have an aesthetically pleasing quality; *bhinna* [skip], where notes are sung in zig-zag sequences; *gaudi* (Bengali), notes are sung with luxurious embellishments, sometimes in three different registers; *vegaswara* [rapid notes]; *sadharani* [plain], an amalgam of the other four.
- 5 A film by Mani Kaul on Zia Mohiuddin Dagar and Zia Fariduddin Dagar.
- 6 Umakant and Ramakant are Jains not Hindus. They claim no religious bias. In this they follow in the steps of the late Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, a Muslim, who had set verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

***Shantha Benegal*** is a publicist for the School of Music at the University of Washington, Seattle. She was trained to sing dhrupad in jugalbandi [duet] with Annie Penta by the late Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, beenkar, on periodic visits to Seattle from 1975 to 1987.