

Bagpipes in India

Why are some musical instruments so readily adopted by other cultures? In the case of the violin the reasons are probably clear. Its rapid spread at all levels of society and throughout all parts of Europe soon after its invention in northern Italy in the sixteenth century, and its ready adoption by local musicians in the Orient and Latin America after contact with Europeans (especially the Portuguese), must surely be because of its suitability for so many different styles of music and its superiority over other existing string instruments. It serves superbly well though, for the lively dance rhythms of Eastern Europe in the hands of Gypsy musicians, or in contrast, playing an accompanying - shadowing role - in the serious raga improvisations of classical Indian music.

(One should not forget however that in the 16th and 17th centuries the church and state in Italy had great political and cultural influence throughout Europe and that by the time European powers began trading with and colonising cultures to the south the instrument was in great use throughout Europe for classical and folk music traditions.)

The case of the Scottish bagpipes is a little similar in that it travelled around the world in the van of European imperialism. It is perhaps harder to find musical reasons for its popularity outside Scotland. One could explain its widespread adoption in the Indian sub-continent by pointing to its three drones: for the drone is known to be an essential element in the music of India and other middle eastern countries. But the restricted melodic range of the Highland bagpipe (a mere octave and one note) and the difficulty one experiences in attempting to flex its pitches in the way that Indian musicians would like, seem to be obvious disadvantages.

One of the reasons for its popularity

(there are an estimated 300 pipe bands in India alone) must be that Highland bagpipes with their tall drones and trailing tartan banners form striking adornments to any outdoor ceremonial. The awe-inspiring volume of sound produced by pipe bands must be another good reason. The 1986 Republic Day march-past in New Delhi featured a number of regimental pipe bands and several school bands also. Paradoxically the drones in most of these instruments remained silent - they



served as spectacle only and it often proved difficult to hear the sound of any drone as the pipers and drummers marched by. In that land of climatic extremes getting the chanter reed to sound well is enough of a problem for pipers without the struggle to get drone reeds sounding properly.

The Scottish instrument seems to have been in use in India since the mid 18th century when the Highland regiments serving the East India Company brought pipers with them. Of its early history there we know little save that the instrument must have made quite an impression on the local inhabitants who were not slow to begin using them.

Ingenious craftsmen soon learned to make them. In the historical account included in Angus MacKay's "Collection of Piobaireachd" (1838) there is mention that Lady D'Oyly (née Ross), a niece of MacLeod the chieftain of the Hebridean island of Raasay, had a set of pipes made in India after a Scottish pattern and sent back to Scotland as a present to MacLeod's official piper, John MacKay. Today in the street called Jali Kothi in Meerut, a small industrial town north of Delhi, numerous small go-downs are busy as family firms compete with the larger instrument factory in the same street (Nadir Ali and Sons) turning out sets of pipes and practice chanters by the hundred each month. And in neighbouring Pakistan, Sialkot is the home of the largest Highland bagpipe making industry in the world, its output surpassing the combined output of all the bagpipe makers in Scotland and North America.

The use of the Scottish bagpipe is no longer confined to bands however, for throughout northern India one finds the instrument adopted into small semi-professional ensembles which are hired to provide music for wedding marches and other outdoor ceremonies. At first no doubt such pipers were often retired soldiers or policemen who found a useful way of supplementing any retirement pension and in early days their repertory must have been Scottish tunes they had learned during their service.

A brief account in Lady Wilson's Letters from India written in 1886 gives us some idea of how such a process might have begun:-

While we were having a romp in the evening with Jack after his bath, we heard to our amusement, the familiar sounds of the bagpipes proceed from the temple enclosure, the player, so Akbar informed us, an Indian soldier at home on leave. You can imagine how incongruous to the occasion the



'Pibroch of Dohal Dhu' sounded, followed by 'up wi the bonnets o' Bonnie Dundee'. (p.174)

Interestingly, bagpipes in India seem to be frequently associated with temples and religious ceremonies. I visited Dhani Ram, an old piper living in the tiny village of Jageshwar in the Kumaon foothills of the Himalayas and found that he and his drummer companion Curwar Ram were the musician-priests at the village temple, one of the oldest temples in India. He had an engagement the day after I met him, some ten kilometres away in a neighbouring valley, to play at a wedding and he and his two drummers would start their duties by accompanying the bridegroom on his march to the home of his bride-to-be. The march, as I learned later, is often a noisy affair with local folk airs to the accompaniment of several drummers. But Dhani Ram also had local versions of several Scottish tunes in his repertory. He and his friends commented that the bagpipes was preferable to the traditional shehnai (shawm) for it was easier to play while walking over rough terrain and looked good too.

AN INDIGENOUS BAGPIPE

The great Highland bagpipes is however, not the only bagpipes found in India. In northern Rajasthan and adjacent provinces there is a little

known instrument with probably a very much longer history than that of the Scottish pipes. This bagpipe called variously *mashaq* ('bag'), *mashaq bin* ('bag instrument') or *pungi* is, as far as one can tell, only played by temple bhopas serving the deity Bhairav. The bag is made from the whole skin of a female goat and is fitted with a double chanter, rather like the double chanters of the better known mouth-blown gourd-pipes played by the ubiquitous snake charmers and by Manganiyari caste musicians of Rajasthan who also call their instrument *pungi* or *murti*.

These indigenous bagpipes are used in association with beliefs and practices surrounding the deity Bhairav, one of the more powerful and potentially malignant manifestations of Shiva. They are not common. During research in northern Rajasthan early in 1986 I met only two pairs of musician-priests using such instruments. A father and son were bhopas at the temple of Tolayar, a desert village near the small town of Sri Dungargarh. The other pair lived at Alwar 160 kilometres south-west of Delhi. The musical role of these bagpipes is to accompany the chanting of epic tales and religious songs connected with night-wake ceremonies and other rituals. Such usage for bagpipes is also uncommon, though it might explain why early iconography of bagpipes in south-eastern Europe from the middle ages on so often depicts pipers with their blowpipes at one side rather than in their mouths.

The Rajasthani musicians, having fully inflated the large bag at the beginning would then sing in turn with one pausing every half-minute or so to refill the bag with 8 or 9 puffs. The style of singing bore remarkable resemblances to the style used for Vedic chant - one of the oldest documented singing traditions in the world.

Among other qualities the epics were impressive for their great

length: one tale, that of Dulha Darhi (Dulha the robber - a Rajput of noble blood who earned a reputation like that of the English Robin Hood) was recorded for five or six hours a day over a period of four days.

Anyone acquainted with the great volume of sound produced by Scottish Highland chanters might wonder at the use of bagpipes for accompanying singing. But the chanters for the Indian pipes are much quieter in sound, because of their parallel bores and single beating (as opposed to double) reeds. As a support to the voice and a means of ensuring musical continuity while the singers paused to rest their voices and recall their next lines, these bagpipes function very like the gusle, the small fiddles that the famed epic singers of south-eastern Europe traditionally used to accompany their singing.

This type of bagpipes (with a double chanter) is distributed across a wide band of territory stretching from as far west as Algeria and Malta, across the eastern Mediterranean, throughout the Arabic middle east, Iran and the southern republics of the USSR into Pakistan. Its heartland would appear to be the Arab world, and northern India seems to be the easternmost point to which this instrument has travelled. But its origins, the reasons for its travels and its comparative rarity today remain tantalising questions for music historians.

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