

Indian and Afghan Influences on Persian Musical Culture during the 18th and 19th Centuries

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Musical interaction between Iranian urban culture and the Indian subcontinent has a long history. During the 16th and 17th centuries a series of musical contacts took place between Persia and India. In this period, a number of Persian poets and musicians who were frustrated from the oppressive political and cultural policies of the Safavid rulers embarked on a pilgrimage to the Mughal court, where they found a lavish source of patronage. Among these poet-musicians one can mention Zohuri Torshizi (d. 1615), Bāqiyā Nā'ini (d. c. 1640), Nezām al-Din Ahmad Gilāni (d. 1649) and Toghra Mashhadi (d. 1667).¹

Although all these poet-musicians had remarkable contributions to the field of Indo-Persian musical writings; however, among them Bāqiyā Nā'ini was by far the most prominent figure who wrote a major treatise on this subject. He was active as a professional musician in Isfahan, Mashhad, Herat in the first half of the seventeenth century. Later on he moved to India where he served first at the temporary camp of Jahāngir (r. 1569-1627) in Ajmer and subsequently moved to the court of Shāh Jahān (r. 1628-1658), to whom he dedicated his musical treatise, *Zamzame-ye Vahdat* (The Humming of Unity).²

The content of Indo-Persian musical texts clearly indicate the fact that both Persian authors and their Indian counterparts should be regarded as pioneering scholars in comparative musicology, since in most cases they make comparisons between Persian and Indian musical systems.

Evidence shows that a number of studies have dealt with the impact of Persian musical culture on Indian music to this date, yet no single article has treated the subject the way around. Today, the classical repertoire of Persian music known as the *radif* together with vocal and instrumental compositions display influences from Indian and Afghan musical cultures. Names of *ragās* and *rāginies* can be found as modes or melody-types in the repertoire of the *radif*. A number of vocal compositions (*tasnifs*) in the song-text collections of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are also ascribed to Afghan musicians. Examining Persian historical sources on music, this paper aims at looking primarily the later Persian musical contacts with Indian and Afghan cultures and also demonstrating traces of impact on the musical life and the repertoire of the Persian court during the 18th and 19th centuries.

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¹ For further information see Massoudieh, pp. 107, 101-102, 173-177.

² See Jung, pp. 104-106.

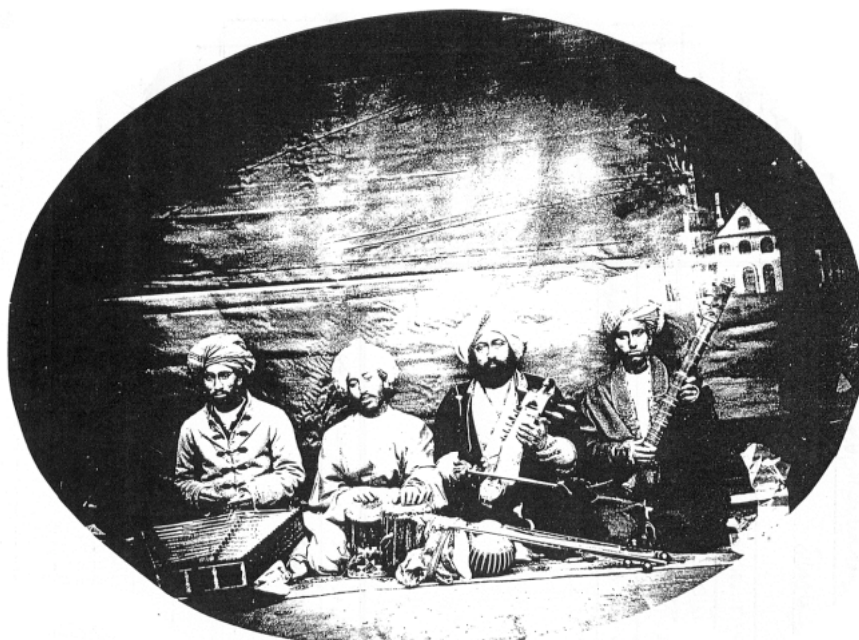
Researchers of Persian music soon realize that scattered pieces of information can be found about the movement of Indian and Afghan musicians to the Persian court in both Persian and European sources of the 17th to 19th centuries.

Jean Chardin, a French traveler and a long-time resident of Iran in the middle of the 17th century mentions a house in Isfahan whose inhabitants were Indian musicians of *Naqqāre-khāne* (kettledrum house) and makes it clear that they were brought from Qandehār by Shāh 'Abbās II (r. 1642-1666).³

We are also informed that when Nader Shāh Afshār (r. 1736-1748) invaded India in 1739 he brought to Iran among Indian artists and craftsmen, a group of entertainers (*arbāb-e tarab-e hendi*). Nader's chronicler, Mirzā Mehdi Astarābādi, states that these Indian entertainers transferred their knowledge of dance and music to Iranian performers and were eventually returned to India five years later in 1743.⁴

During the Qājār period (1785-1925) musical contact with India, Kashmir and most particularly Afghanistan increased dramatically. An Indian *santur* player is mentioned to have been at the court of Muhammad Shāh (r. 1834-1848). This Indian musician transferred his knowledge of *santur* playing to a servant of the court known as Amir Khān. The latter and subsequently his son, 'Ali Akbar Shāhi, came to be master *santur* players at the court of Nāser al-Din Shāh (r. 1848-1896).⁵

Another group of musicians who came to the Qājār court was an ensemble of four Kashmiri musicians playing the *setār*, *sārang*, *kamānche*, *tabla* and *santur*. Name of these musicians and the duration of their stays are not clear for us, but we are informed that they arrived around 1865 together with a larger group of entertainers.⁶



Kashmiri Musicians
Picture 1

³ Chardin, p. 61.

⁴ See Mirza Mehdi Astarābādi, pp. 430, 488.

⁵ Khāleqi, pp. 462-463.

⁶ Dust 'Ali Mo'ayer al-Mamālek, p. 27.

It was during the reign of Nāser al-Din Shāh that a series of conflicts also took place between the Qājār court and Dust Muhammad Khān, the governor of Herat. In 1865, Hesām al-Saltane, an uncle of Shah, was dispatched along with an army to Khorāsān to solve the problem. He set out on a campaign with Dust Muhammad Khān and finally seized the city of Herat at the end of that year. On his return, Hesām al-Saltane who was received by then the title of "the Conqueror of Herat," brought a group of Herati musicians to Tehran. These musicians later made a major development on the performance practice of the Qājār court music. The exact number of Herati musicians is not clear for us, but three of them are mentioned in court documents as follows:

1. Gholām Hossein Khān Herāti
2. Rasul Khān Herāti
3. Ja'far Khān, the son of Rasul Khān.

As it was customary for Qajar princes to have home entertainers, these musicians began their careers initially in the service of Hesām al-Saltane. However, at a later point, they seem to have joined the court musical ensemble.

The first musician, Gholām Hossein Khān was a *sārang* player. Nothing is known about him beyond the fact that he was probably superior in rank to other Herati musicians and at some occasions he joined the musicians of the Royal Household (*'Amala-ye tarab-e khāssa*). Indeed, a picture of his has survived in the Royal albums of the Golestan Palace which shows him playing along with Mirzā Abdollāh (d. 1918), Mirzā Hosseinqoli (d. 1916), Muhammad Sādeq Khān and Samā' Hozur, the four highly respected musicians of the court. The picture is taken in Siyāhpalās, one of Nāser al-Din Shāh's summer camps, in 1888.



Gholam Hossein Khan Herati and Musicians of the Royal Household

Picture 2

The second musician, Rasul Khān played both the *tār* and *robāb*. According to Ruhollāh Khāleqi, he played frequently in the presence of Nāser al-Din Shāh from whom he also received the title of "Changi".⁷

⁷ Khāleqi, p. 135.

Finally Ja'far Khān, the son of Rasul Khān began his career as a *tabla* player in a trio ensemble together with his father and Gholām Hossein Khān. Later he played the *tar* and took the position of his father at the court. When Nāser al-Din Shāh was assassinated in 1896, Ja'far Khān left the Qājār court for Istanbul, where he spent the rest of his life.



Rasul Khan Herati,
Gholam Hossein Khan Herati,
Son of Rasul Khan
Picture 3

Another Afghan musician, Shāhnavāz Khān is also mentioned to have been active at the Qājār period. It is not exactly clear what instrument he played and for how long he performed in the court. Only Darvish Khān, a master *tar*-player who was apparently in acquaintance with Shāhnavāz Khān, used to play and teach one of the latter's instrumental compositions to his students. This composition was known as the "Reng-e Shāhnavāz Khān" and some of its versions have been recorded by master musicians of the first half of the 20th century.⁸

The activity of Afghan musicians was not confined to the Qājār court. In a song-text collection we find the reference to Kabuli musicians who were active in Tehran in the 19th century. According to this source, these musicians sought refuge in the British embassy during the constitutional revolution of 1906.⁹

Likewise, Conte de Gobineau, a French diplomat who came to Iran in 1853-55 describes a banquet in Isfahan where a group of dancing boys performed in his presence. He states that one of the dances performed was called Herāti, which was accompanied by a dance tune with the same name.¹⁰ Although the performance of dancing boys has long been a popular tradition in Herat, it can not be considered an

⁸ Mashhun, p. 459.

⁹ Davami, p. 250.

¹⁰ Gobineau, p.

exclusively Afghan tradition.¹¹ Historical sources clearly show that this phenomenon existed in Iran at least as early as the 17th century.¹² However, a dance tune with the name Herāti belonged most likely to Afghan music repertoire. This dance tune seems to have been very popular in Iran in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, for two recordings of it were also produced by the Gramophone Company in 1926.¹³

Afghan Vocal Compositions

The complete repertoire of Afghan music is not known to us. However, from two collections of songs (*tasnifs*) of the early 20th century, one can infer that several songs were still known among musicians of that period as *Afghani*. Hasan Mashun, a historian of Persian music, makes a list of these songs and refers to them as being sung by Afghan musicians who came to Iran during the Qajar period. He makes a clear point that composers of these songs were unknown to the musicians of his own generation.¹⁴ From the song headings, it is clear that except for one song which was in *dastgāh navā*, all other songs were in the *dastgāh māhur*.

Apart from these songs we come across *raga* names that crept into the repertoire of the *radif* in this period. Indeed a considerable section of the *radif* in two *dastgāhs* of Māhur and Rāstpanjgāh is called the *rāk* section (*āvāz-e rāk*) which consists of four to five melody-types (*gushes*) labeled as *rāk-e hindi*, *rāk-e keshmir*, *rāk-e abdollāh* etc. Examining musical sources of the 17th century, one can hardly find indication of Indian musical terms in this period. Thus, in my opinion the *rāk* section was a later development that was added to the core of the *radif* repertoire sometime around the 19th century and most likely Afghan musicians of the Qājār court were responsible for this development. In addition to the *rāk* section, one can also find *raga* and *ragini* names that appear as *gushes* in the *radif* such as *rāmkelī*, *sārang*, and *denāseri*.

Today Iranian musicians are mostly oblivious to the Indian and Afghan influences on their music. Nor are they aware of the movement of Afghan musicians to the Qājār court. They are also reluctant to acknowledge any borrowing or adaptation from Afghan musical culture.

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¹¹ For further detail on this subject see Baily, pp. 140-145.

¹² See Matthee, 139.

¹³ Kinnear, p. 92.

¹⁴ Mashun, p. 459.

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