

The Impact of Regional Dialects on the Linguistic Structure of Hindustani Classical Bandishes

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Abstract: *The Hindustani classical bandish represents a unique confluence of musical and linguistic expression. While considerable scholarship has addressed the melodic and rhythmic dimensions of these compositions, the influence of regional dialects on their linguistic structure remains underexplored. This paper investigates how Braj Bhasha, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, and other regional dialects have shaped the phonetic, morphological, and syntactic fabric of bandishes across various gharanas (musical lineages). Drawing on textual analysis of traditional compositions and scholarly commentaries, this study argues that dialect choice is not merely a matter of regional provenance but a deliberate aesthetic strategy that enhances melodic flexibility, emotional expression, and raga compatibility. The paper further examines how contemporary composers have expanded the dialectal palette, signaling an evolving relationship between linguistic regionalism and Hindustani classical tradition.*

Keywords: Hindustani Classical Music, Bandish, Regional Dialects, Braj Bhasha, Awadhi

I. INTRODUCTION

The bandish—a fixed, melodic composition set in a specific raga and accompanied by tabla or pakhawaj—constitutes the literary backbone of Hindustani vocal music. Unlike the metrically free alap, the bandish provides a structured framework within which the performer improvises, returning repeatedly to its melodic phrases as reference points. As scholar Daniel Neuman observes, "For musicians the bandish was not reducible to individual notes of fixed significance but was rather an aesthetic weaving of a raga's main phrases that could be reupholstered in different and unique ways".

What makes the bandish particularly fascinating from a linguistic perspective is its dual nature: it is simultaneously a fixed text and a vehicle for improvisation. The lyrics, while often minimal, carry specific phonetic, morphological, and semantic properties that interact with the musical structure. As one authoritative study notes, "short songs in dialects of Hindi are the basis for improvisation in all the genres of North Indian classical vocal music," constituting "a central pillar of North Indian culture, spreading well beyond the geographic frontiers of Hindi itself".

This paper examines how regional dialects—particularly Braj Bhasha, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Rajasthani—have impacted the linguistic structure of bandishes. Rather than treating dialect as mere local color, I argue that dialect choice fundamentally shapes the phonetic affordances, morphological flexibility, and aesthetic character of these compositions, making certain dialects more "musically suitable" than others for specific ragas and performance contexts.

II. THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF HINDUSTANI BANDISHES

2.1 Primary Dialects in Traditional Bandishes

Khyal bandishes, which form the core of modern Hindustani vocal performance, are typically composed in a range of North Indian dialects. According to comprehensive analyses of traditional song-texts, Braj Bhasha (a dialect of Western Hindi) predominates, followed by Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Rajasthani/Marwari, and occasionally Punjabi and Khadi Boli. A significant study of recorded khyal performances from the twentieth century confirms this linguistic diversity, noting

that bandishes "cover diverse topics, such as romantic or divine love, praise of kings or gods, the seasons, dawn and dusk, and the pranks of Krishna".

The predominance of Braj Bhasha is historically rooted in the medieval Krishna bhakti movement. As documented in research on Haveli Sangeet (temple music), the Ashtachhap poets of the sixteenth century composed their devotional verses in Braj Bhasha, establishing a poetic-musical lineage that directly influenced khyal composition. Beyond this historical contingency, however, Braj Bhasha possesses intrinsic phonetic properties that make it exceptionally suited to musical setting—a point to which we shall return.

2.2 The Status of Dialect vs. Standardized Hindi

It is significant that standard, literary Hindi (Khadi Boli) plays a relatively minor role in traditional bandish composition. This stands in marked contrast to other North Indian literary-musical forms. The preference for regional dialects reflects a deliberate aesthetic choice: dialects offer phonetic resources—softer consonants, flexible vowel endings, and nasalized inflections—that standardized Hindi, with its more Sanskritized consonant clusters (e.g., "priya" vs. "piya"), lacks.

As one musicologist notes, "About sixteen different dialects and sub-dialects of Hindi are in use in North India with Braj being prevalent in Agra and Mathura; Malwi in Indore, Dewas and Bhopal; Khadi Boli in Delhi, Meerut and Kanpur; Mewati and Rajasthani... Awadhi in Allahabad and Lucknow; and Bhojpuri in Banaras". This dialectal map correlates closely with the geographical distribution of major gharanas, suggesting that regional musical lineages developed in dialogue with local linguistic practices.

III. PHONETIC AND MORPHOLOGICAL IMPACTS ON MUSICAL STRUCTURE

3.1 The Soft Consonant Phenomenon

The most significant impact of regional dialects on bandish structure operates at the phonetic level. Braj Bhasha, in particular, is characterized by the absence or softening of conjunct consonants (consonant clusters) that are common in Sanskrit-derived vocabulary. A striking example cited in the literature concerns the word "priya" (beloved): "the Braj Bhasha has a number of alternatives without the opening consonant cluster"—namely "piya," "piyu," and "piyarawa".

This phonetic property has direct musical consequences. In the melismatic singing style characteristic of khyal, where a single syllable may be extended across multiple notes (taans), hard consonant clusters impede vocal fluidity. Soft, open syllables allow for smoother transitions between pitches and facilitate the characteristic meend (glide) that defines Hindustani ornamentation. The literature notes that Braj is "most suited for emotive expression due to its presumed lack of joint consonants and abundance of soft / sweet sounding melodic words which have a certain flexible lyrical quality to them".

3.2 Vowel Modifications and Nasalization

Regional dialects introduce systematic vowel modifications that enhance musical flexibility. The Braj suffix "-ya" (as in "namandi-ya," "bati-ya," "ghughari-ya") adds rhythmic syllables that can be aligned with tabla bols or used to extend melodic phrases. Similarly, the Bhojpuri lateral approximant "-l" sound (as in "bhaiiva," "bhailo," "gaila") and the nasalizations characteristic of Braj (e.g., "chaand," "jhanjhariya," "kankariya") provide phonetic resources that standard Hindi lacks.

These features matter because bandish lyrics, while semantically meaningful, also function as "carriers of notes." As Sharadananda Sinha argues, "In Khayal the use of words is rather for their form than for their meaning. Music requires words of different sizes, shapes, pronunciations and durations. These help the articulation of the musical notes". The morphological flexibility of dialects—the ability to add suffixes, alter vowel endings, or substitute softer consonants—creates a larger inventory of "verbal shapes" for the composer to deploy.

3.3 Case Study: Braj Alternatives to Sanskritic Vocabulary

A systematic comparison illustrates the phonetic advantages of Braj. The table below presents examples documented in traditional bandish analysis:

Sanskrit/Hindi	Brj Bhasha Equivalent	Linguistic Feature
kshan	chhin	Elimination of consonant cluster
hrday	hiyara	Softening, added vowel
varsha	barkha	Aspiration, vowel change
shri	siri	Simplification of consonant
sneh	neh	Reduction of cluster
grahak	gahak	Elimination of conjunct
raat	rain	Nasalization
shakun	shagun	Voicing, simplification

Each Brj form is phonetically "lighter"—requiring less articulatory effort while offering greater sustain on vowel sounds. In a musical context where sustained vowels carry melodic content, this property is invaluable.

IV. DIALECTAL VARIATION ACROSS GHARANAS

4.1 Gwalior Gharana: Brj Centricity

The Gwalior gharana, considered the fountainhead of khyal singing, is characterized by its "bandish-centric" approach. According to detailed analysis, "Gwalior musicians boast of a huge repertoire of 'gharanedaan' bandish-s in every raag set to different taal-s". This repertoire is overwhelmingly composed in Brj Bhasha and its close relative, Malwi (the dialect of the Malwa region). The Gwalior aesthetic prioritizes clarity of the bandish structure, and Brj's phonetic properties align well with this emphasis.

4.2 Regional Affiliations of Other Gharanas

Other gharanas show distinct dialectal preferences that reflect their geographical origins:

Agra Gharana: Known for its emphasis on laya-taal (rhythmic) aspects, compositions often employ Bhojpuri and Awadhi elements

Jaipur-Atrauli: Rajasthani and Marwari features are prominent

Patiala Gharana: Punjabi-inflected Brj appears frequently

Kirana Gharana: While focused on swara (pitch) purity, compositions draw on a range of Western Hindi dialects

The influence of individual composer-poets (vaggeyakars) has also shaped dialectal preferences. The legendary Sadarang (Niyamat Khan), credited with formalizing khyal in the eighteenth century, composed primarily in Brj and Urdu.

4.3 Kumar Gandharva and the Malwi Experiment

One of the most striking examples of dialectal impact comes from the twentieth-century maestro Kumar Gandharva, who made the Malwi dialect "the center-piece of his poetic expression". Malwi, spoken in the Malwa region of Madhya

Pradesh, possesses distinctive phonetic features—including characteristic vowel endings and rhythmic accentuations—that Gandharva exploited to create what scholars describe as a "circularity or rotating resonance" in his bandishes.

This case is particularly instructive because Gandharva was not himself a native Malwi speaker; his adoption of the dialect was a conscious artistic choice, demonstrating that dialect selection operates as a compositional resource rather than mere autobiography. His disciples, including Meera Rao, Mukul Shivputra, Satyasheel Deshpande, and Madhup Mudgal, have extended this dialectal experimentation: Rao showing "affinity for the Awadhi-Bundeli dialect," Mukul ji choosing Sanskrit, and Mudgal using "Braj at times infused with Punjabi".

V. FUNCTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF DIALECT CHOICE

5.1 Lyrical Meaning vs. Musical Form

A fundamental tension in bandish aesthetics concerns the relative importance of lyrical meaning versus musical structure. In dhrupad (the older form), poetry follows strict metrical rules (chhand), and the integrity of the poetic text is paramount. In khyal, by contrast, "the domination of poetry is greatly reduced and words give up their function of expressing the absolute meaning, reducing themselves to being only a factor of the 'meaning of music'".

This shift has profound implications for dialect choice. When meaning is secondary, phonetic and rhythmic properties become primary. Dialects that offer greater morphological flexibility—more variants of word endings, more options for syllable count, more possibilities for nasalization—are therefore privileged. As one authority notes, "The verse or song-text of a khayal is not bound by the rules of poetry, i.e., the number of syllables, matra-s or gana-s, and hence it usually does not follow a strict metric rhythm".

5.2 Raga Compatibility

Certain dialects are perceived as better suited to particular ragas based on their emotional associations (rasa). Braj, with its associations of Krishna devotion and shringara (romantic love), is considered appropriate for ragas evoking these moods. Rajasthani dialects, with their heroic and desert associations, may be preferred for ragas with veera (heroic) rasa. This semiotic dimension of dialect choice, though difficult to systematize, is widely acknowledged by practitioners.

5.3 Bol-Based Improvisation

The phonetic properties of dialects directly enable specific forms of improvisation. In bol-baant (rhythmic improvisation using words) and bol-taans (fast melodic passages on syllables), the consonant-vowel structure of dialect words determines what rhythmic patterns are possible. Words with open vowels and soft consonants allow for smoother taans; words with hard stops create articulated, percussive effects. The dialectal repertoire thus expands the improvisational vocabulary available to the performer.

VI. CONTEMPORARY TRENDS AND THE FUTURE OF DIALECTAL DIVERSITY

6.1 Expansion Beyond Traditional Dialects

Contemporary composers have significantly expanded the dialectal palette of bandish composition. As documented in research on modern vaggeyakars, themes have moved "out from the age-old themes" to encompass "contemporaneous experiences and observations". This thematic expansion has been accompanied by linguistic diversification: some composers use "literary and colloquial Hindi," others Sanskrit, others continue to innovate with regional dialects.

However, not all experiments have succeeded. Scholarly sources note that "attempts were made to compose bandish-s in regional languages of India like Marathi and Bengali but they did not succeed much". The reasons for this differential success merit further investigation but likely relate to the phonetic compatibility of these languages with Hindustani vocal techniques.

6.2 The Challenge of Standardization

The increasing institutionalization of Hindustani music education poses potential challenges to dialectal diversity. As notation systems standardize and teaching moves from hereditary guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) relationships to institutional settings, there is pressure toward linguistic uniformity. Yet as one scholar argues, "It is very essential for a vocalist to have a fundamental knowledge of the diction and phonetics of Hindi as well as other dialects of Hindi. A flawless and meaningful pronunciation will obviously add to the poetic and emotive fervour of the bandish".

6.3 Preservation and Innovation

The dialectal heritage of bandishes exists in a delicate balance between preservation and innovation. While traditional bandishes in Braj, Awadhi, and Rajasthani must be preserved as historical artifacts, living tradition requires continued innovation. The examples of Kumar Gandharva and his disciples demonstrate that dialectal experimentation can be fruitful when grounded in deep understanding of both linguistic and musical structures.

VII. CONCLUSION

The impact of regional dialects on the linguistic structure of Hindustani classical bandishes is neither superficial nor merely historical. Dialect choice operates at the most fundamental levels of musical composition: phonetic properties determine what melodic ornaments are possible; morphological flexibility shapes rhythmic possibilities; and lexical associations contribute to emotional expression (*rasa*).

Braj Bhasha's predominance in traditional repertoire is not accidental but reflects genuine phonetic advantages—the absence of hard consonant clusters, the abundance of open vowels, and the flexibility of morphological derivation. Yet other dialects have made essential contributions, and contemporary composers continue to expand the linguistic palette.

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