Indian Music in the Persian Collections: the Jawāhir al-Mūsīqīt-i Muḥammadī


The dancer sinks into a deep plié, both heels raised with her toes planted on the ground, her shins at a distance of one hand span above the floor, both shoulders parallel with her knees, and the thumb and forefinger of each hand completing the circle of the hamsāsyā hand gesture, the “wild-goose beak”, as she demonstrates the third of three ād-sanj positions. As the dancers who follow her show more taxonomically, this scene is straight out of the Saṅgītaratnākara, the greatest Sanskrit music treatise of the second millennium CE, which the Kashmiri pandit Śārṅgadeva wrote for the Yadava king Śiṅghana (r.1210-47) at his court of Devagiri, now Daulatabad, in the Deccan. Śārṅgadeva’s work was considered seminally important in both North and South Indian musical traditions in the 16th century when this dancer was painted – a mārga (universal) treatise for all times and places. Yet the page across which she dances is also rooted in a particular desh (region): the text is Dakhni and in Arabic script, betraying its regional roots in the Muslim Deccan; and the dancer is indisputably trained in South Indian traditions. Not for her the flowing ankle-length robes and pajamas and cypress-like stance of her counterparts at the Mughal court. Bare-legged and sharply angled, she wears a short wide skirt like Baz Bahadur’s Mandu dancers, forced to perform in captivity for Akbar in 1561; and the longer skirts of her sisters in subsequent paintings are pulled up between their legs like trousers, in a manner reminiscent of today’s Bharatanatyam dancers. Both costumes are designed to accommodate legs bent wide in

The third type of the ād-sanj position. Or. 12,857, f. 171r.

The first and second of the “single hand” gestures as established in the Saṅgītaratnākara: patāka (“flag”) and tripatāka (“three-finger flag”). Or. 12,857, f. 174v.
plié – still the iconic basic posture of South Indian dance today.

She may be dancing her way through a Sanskritic taxonomy of mudrās and maṇḍalas (hand gestures and body postures), but her male companion is dressed in visibly Persianate robes and is sporting the tight conical turban characteristic of the 16th-century Muslim Deccan, specifically the ‘Adil Shahi court of Bijapur. His presence is not justified by the text and he is therefore slightly more difficult to interpret: is the rod in his right hand indicative of authority, perhaps of instruction? That he is apparently exemplifying the haṃsāsya gesture to the dancer – a gesture that was itself used to signify “instruction” – certainly underlines that impression. Is he, perhaps, the dancer’s instructor? If so, is that not a little intriguing: a courtier embracing the Persianate styles of the ‘Adil Shahi court teaching the universal way of the Sanskrit treatises to someone trained in the regional dance forms of the South? The multilinguality of the codex that yields this image, too, is as complicated as the painting’s cultural khichrī: choice morsels of Dakhni scattered through a weighty Persian dish poached in a Sanskrit reduction and seasoned with judicious pinches of Sufi-infused Arabic. Added to which there is confusion over its date: the paintings have the unmistakable savour of the court of ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah c.1570 – but the codex’s Persian dedication is to his great-nephew, Muhammad ‘Adil Shah (r.1626-56). How might we make sense of this work?

For the past few years, I and my team on the European Research Council project “Musical Transitions to European Colonialism in the Eastern Indian Ocean” have been compiling information about all the major texts we can find on North Indian art music and dance produced c. 1600–1900 in Sanskrit, Persian, Brajbhasha, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and English. Of all the libraries and archives we have consulted, the British Library possesses by far the largest and richest collection of materials on North Indian music yet found. These include literally hundreds of paintings of the melodic modes of North Indian classical music – the male rāgas and female rāginīs – as heroes, heroines, jogis and deities, alone or collated together into sets called “garlands of rāgas” or rāgamālās. The rāgamālā paintings that form the centrepiece of Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim bin Shaikh Farid Ansari al-Qadiri Jaunpuri’s masterwork, the Jawāhir al-Mūsiqāt-i Muḥammadī, are quite possibly the Library’s oldest.

The Jawāhir al-Mūsiqāt-i Muḥammadī, the “jewels/essences of music belonging to Muhammad”, is not the British Library’s most beautiful Indian musical manuscript; its 48 miniatures have been deemed a crude, if charming, footnote to the productions of ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah (r. 1558-80) and its calligraphy is somewhat slapdash. But it is undoubtedly one of the Library’s rarest – this is the only known copy – and one of its most important, for several reasons. Firstly, the largely Persian codex contains within it the earliest known Dakhni work on music theory, c.1570, predating the famed Kitāb-i Nauras of Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah (r. 1580-1626) by several decades. This, when placed in wider geographical context, testifies to a significant

Bangālī, the third rāginī of Rag Bhairav. Or. 12,857, f. 76r.
vernacularisation of Sanskrit music theory in the 16th century, preceding its recodification in Persian under the Mughals by nearly a century. Until now, the Jawāhir has only really passed under the eyes of art historians, whose firm dating of the miniatures to 1570s Bijapur has been confounded by the “perplexing dedicatory note on fol. 4a to Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah”, who came to power more than 50 years later. A close examination of the codex reveals what I think is the likely process of this unique work’s construction:

1) Firstly, in c. 1570 an anonymous author prepared a densely illustrated Dakhni translation of the 13th-century Saṅgītaratnākara probably for ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah of Bijapur, but with the replacement of its rāga chapter with a much newer iconic rāgamālā. All the miniatures have passages of Dakhni prose on the reverse. These do not correspond to the painting on the front, but to the next painting in the section. By using digital images of the folios, it is possible to reconstruct large portions of the original treatise, including the whole of the section on the seven notes of the scale (swara), two-thirds of the rāgamālā, and the whole of the section on the “single hand” gestures in dance. The swara and dance sections are patently a literal translation of the corresponding subchapters of the classic Sanskrit work of music theory, the Saṅgītaratnākara.

A number of other noteworthy vernacular music treatises made their appearance in the 16th century: e.g. a miniature Awadhi verse treatise inserted into Qutban’s Sufi romance the Mṛgāvatī (1503); a Braj rāgamālā called the Mānakutūhala, traditionally attributed to Raja Man Singh of Gwalior (d. 1516); and a Marathi translation of the Saṅgītaratnākara with paintings of very similar style and date to the Jawāhir. The production of a substantial Dakhni recension of the Saṅgītaratnākara thus confirms a growing picture of a vernacularising 16th century in north and central India’s independent courts.
2) Around 1630 or so, Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim, a Qadiri Sufi whose family hailed originally from Jaunpur in the north, split the Dakhni treatise apart and reused its paintings in a more elaborate and refined Persian translation for Muhammad ‘Adil Shah, with a Sufi preface and six chapters: the origins of sound; the musical scale, with unique paintings of the swaras personified like rāgas; the rāgas and rāginīs; two chapters on the rhythmic system (tāla); and dance. This essentially forms the manuscript we have now. Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim calls the work he is translating the Kitāb-i Sangīt, the “Book of Music”.17 This designation may refer to the Saṅgītaratnākara itself; the more traditional sections compare almost exactly. However passages for which we have the Dakhni recension are also followed very closely, though with key interpolations from the Islamic sciences (more of which later). Sticking my neck out I would suggest Kitāb-i Sangīt refers to the Dakhni text. Even what remains indicates its textual portions were originally much more extensive.

3) At some point comparatively early in its long history, through wear and tear the manuscript lost its colophon, and the first few pages became so degraded that a second headpiece was reused to replace the original – you can see where the previous text was cut out – and the first few pages were retranscribed on newer paper.

4) Finally, by the time the codex was bound in its current form, what is now the third folio ended up bound out of place (folio four runs on from folio two), and several pages in the middle – all the rāg-rāginī illustrations for Rags Shri and Dipak and the beginning of the fourth chapter – had sadly gone missing.18
The Jawḥīr is thus a multilingual palimpsest of three treatises layered up like an onion: a translation of the 13th-century Sanskrit Saṅgītaratnākara into 16th-century Dakhni, which was split apart and its paintings reused to form the central thread of a more elaborate and aspirational 17th-century Persian translation.

A major reason this work is of great importance to music and cultural history is Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim’s systematic integration of ideas from the Islamicate sciences about the power of sound and its effects in human affairs into a work of Indic musicology. We already know from work done on the great astrological treatise written in Persian for ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah, the Nujum al-‘ulūm (1570) – whose paintings are used to date the Jawḥīr’s – that ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah, and later Ibrahim, freely mixed Hindu and Muslim symbology and theories of supernatural power, including those associated with music, and incorporated them into their courtly ideologies.19 Although Muhammad is sometimes characterised as more narrowly orthodox, this generous attitude remains primary in Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim’s vision. Strikingly, with respect to music’s origin myths and explanations of its power to regulate the universe, he treats the philosophies of “‘Arabia, ‘Ajam and Hind” as effectively equal in truth value.20

More important, though, is his systematic appropriation of the Indian rāgas into the Greco-Islamicate system of humoral medicine known as Unani tībb. Every rāga and rāginī in the Indic system is supposed to have a specific effect on the listener’s psychological state, their physical wellbeing, or indeed on the wider natural world. Rāginī Dhanashri, for example, is supposed to evoke feelings of loss and longing caused by the absent beloved. Rāg Megh, one of the six main rāgas, has the power to bring the monsoon rains; the coming of the rains is furthermore associated with the joy of union with the beloved. In Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim’s rāgamālā he systematically attributes the essential emotional flavour of every rāga to one of the four elements of Islamicate natural sciences – fire, earth, air and water. He furthermore describes the effect of each of the four kinds of rāga on the physical and mental state of the listener in terms borrowed from Sufi teaching and ethical literature (akhlāq): fiery rāgas ignite passionate love (‘ishq) in the listener’s heart; earthy rāgas enlighten the listener with the mystical knowledge (‘ifrān) of their true selves; airy rāgas overwhelm the listener with longing for the absent beloved (fīrāq); and watery rāgas annihilate the listener in union (wisal) with the great Existence.21

The iconography of rāgamālā paintings is supposed to intensify and enrich the rāgas’ affective associations using visual and imaginative rather than aural means. The c.1570 rāgamālā paintings of the Jawḥir belong to a time when rāga-rāginī sets were clearly not yet standardised. Although it uses the same six rāgas as the contemporaneous “Painters system” – Bhairav, Hindol, Megh, Malkausik, Shri and Dipak – I have not before encountered its particular configuration of rāginīs. In addition, the classic iconography we
are accustomed to was clearly not yet settled. Some rāgas had already acquired their standard form. Rag Megh, for example, is of course watery in essence, and listening to it engenders loving union; singing this rāga may cause clouds to gather in the heavens or rain to fall, powerful lightening to strike and frogs to start croaking. In the rāgamālā text and painting Megh is depicted as a dark-skinned lord dressed in green and riding a black buck, with the monsoon rainclouds gathering above his head and two pied cuckoos in the background. Ragini Dhanashri, on the other hand, is not depicted in her now customary form: a woman consumed with longing, gazing at a painting of her absent beloved as she is consoled by her girlfriends. The mood of viraha or firāq is nonetheless sustained in the Jawāhir pictorially by Dhanashri’s loose dishevelled hair, her chin resting disconsolately on her hand as she sits on a bed waiting for her lover’s return. And Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim makes it explicit in the Persian text: Dhanashri is an airy rāginī, and thus listening to her overwhelms the listener with longing.

In this way the rāgas and their rich aesthetic and affective powers are here recruited to the service of Sufi devotion and appropriated as medicinal and supernatural formulae, thus giving excellent grounds for a Muslim ruler like Muhammad ‘Adil Shah to use the rāgas in regulating and maintaining order in the body politic. It is important to note that the elemental associations of the Jawāhir rāga descriptions are not in the Dakhni text. Their relation to the paintings is thus an early- to mid-17th-century interpretation, undertaken in a more Persianate universe. I thus want to speculate in conclusion about the impact this text, and perhaps other Bijapuri treatises like it, now lost, had on the Mughal recodification of śastric music theory in Persian during the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir (1658-1707).

The evidence is circumstantial, but cumulative and therefore tantalising. The first Mughal formulation of saṅgītasāstra in Persian is Abul Fazl’s chapter on saṅgīt in the Ā‘īn-i Akbarī (1593), whose structure he based on the Saṅgītaratnākara but with significant interpolations. In his definition of the terms mārga (universal music that “is in every country the same”) and deśī (regional music), he stated that the masters of the revered mārga style “are numerous in the Dekhan”. This wasn’t in fact true. But like him the 17th-century Mughal theorists all venerated the south, and most particularly the Deccan, as the arbiter of authority in Indian music. Political and cultural emissaries were sent on a regular basis between the Mughal and Bijapur courts from the time of ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah, and in the first decades of the 17th century the two powers came into direct conflict, and then more peaceful accommodation, over the collapse of the Nizam Shahi state of Ahmadnagar. Akbar and Jahangir certainly knew of Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah’s prowess as a musician, musicologist and song writer; Jahangir even made note of Ibrahim’s famous song collection, the Kitāb-i naurus, in his memoir, and welcomed one of his musicians to the Mughal court.
Ibrahim in turn was fascinated by the great musician Tansen and the quality of the relationship Akbar had with him.28

What, then, of Muhammad ‘Adil Shah (r.1626-56) and his connections with his exact Mughal contemporary Shah Jahan (r.1627-57) and his Deccan viceroy Aurangzeb, the future emperor ‘Alamgir? Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim portrays Muhammad as a great lover of music, it apparently being the most prized science for discussion in his assemblies at Bijapur29 – and to my knowledge, the Jawāhir is the earliest extant full-scale Persian treatise on Indian musicology of the Mughal period. Why write it in Persian rather than Dakhni? We know that the miniature paintings of Muhammad’s reign draw to an unprecedented extent on Mughal inspiration, which included importing Mughal artists into his atelier.30 Did Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim’s choice to write a great treatise in Persian for Muhammad similarly reflect his patron’s aspirations to Mughal recognition, in a subject in which Bijapur was already renowned as the authority? Conversely, what impact did the Jawāhir’s unapologetic mixing of Indic musical science with Islamicate natural and esoteric sciences and mystical and ethical teaching have on the explosion of music theory and its canonisation in Persian at ‘Alamgir’s court in the 1660s and 70s? It is intriguing that the first full-scale Indian music treatise in Persian for a Mughal emperor – Qazi Hasan’s Mufti ṣ-al-sarīd (1663-4) – was a written in Daulatabad for ‘Alamgir, and has many similar features.31 More importantly, the humoral explanation of the rāgās’ potency is fundamental to several treatises written at ‘Alamgir’s court itself, including the 1698 Shams al-Aṣwāt by the emperor’s chief musician Ras Baras Khan, Tansen’s great-great--grandson.32

We do not have enough evidence yet to say definitively that Mughal music connoisseurs and intellectuals were inspired to translate Indian music theory into Persian by what they saw coming out of Bijapur. What we can say is that Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim’s masterpiece, the Jawāhir al-mūsiqāt-i Muḥammadī, is a precious landmark of Indian musicology: the earliest known musicological work in Dakhni, and the earliest full-scale Persian work on Indian music from the Mughal period that is still extant. Yet the Jawāhir is just one of hundreds of Indian musical treasures held in the British Library’s collections.

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3 Shaikh ‘Abdul Karim bin Shaikh Farid Ansari al-Qadiri Jaunpuri, Jawāhir al-mūsiqāt-i Muḥammadī (British Library, Or. 12,857), ff. 170r-1r. Ād-sanj appears to be a distortion of the Sanskrit term, asamyukta, for the “single hands” section that follows, but at the moment it’s not clear where the three subpostures come from.
4 Sāṅgadeva, Sangītaratnākara, S S Sastrī, ed. (Madras: 1943), vol. i, pp. ix-x.
5 e.g. Celebration of the wedding of Maham Anaga’s son; Victoria & Albert Museum Akbarnāma (IS.2:8-1896).
6 Dancers as spoils of Akbar’s victory over Baz Bahadur; ibid (IS.2:16-1896).
7 In Indian cuisine, a rich stew of rice and lentils. For the comandeering of khichṛ to describe cultural and religious mixing in early-modern India, see M E Aitken, “Parataxis and the practice of reuse,” Archives of Asian art 59 (2009), 81-103, pp. 82, 97-100.
9 Michell & Zebrowski, op. cit.
The British Library copy of the *Ghunyat al-munya* is often cited as unique, but there is at least one other: Corpus Christi College Cambridge owns a copy (Cambridge University Library, Corpus no. 884).


Michell & Zebrowski, op. cit.


Mānakutūhala (Oriental Institute, Central Library, Baroda, acc. no. 2125).


e.g. Jawāhir, f. 69v.

Where the English pencil folio numbering (followed for citations here) goes from 123v to 124r, the oldest Persian numbering skips from 141 to 177, and suddenly, from a description of Shri Rag, we find ourselves in the middle of a sentence describing the Sanskritic notation system for poetical and musical metre.


Jawāhir, f. 5v.

ibid, ff. 66v-8r.

ibid, ff. 111r-12v; ff. 71r-123v.

A lovely contemporaneous Deccani painting of Dhanashri in very similar style to the Jawāhir shows her in her classic form but, in an intriguing connection to the Jawāhir swara paintings, seated above a large, centrally-placed peacock labelled in Dakhni “starting note saḍj” (Lallgarh Palace Collection, Bikaner). Dhanashri’s starting note is indeed saḍj in the Jawāhir, f. 99r.

Jawāhir, ff. 99r-100r.


Joshi, op. cit.

Jawāhir, f. 5r.


It is a translation with an extended Sufic preface and commentary of a hitherto unknown Sanskrit or vernacular rāgamālā known as Bhāratasangīta; Brown, op cit., pp. 64-6.

Ras Baras Khan Kalawant, *Shams al-Āswāt* (British Library, I O Islamic 1746), ff. 18v-20r.