

Chilla: The rigorous retreat of practice in Hindustani Classical Music

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ABSTRACT

This contribution provides an intrinsic overview of a rigorous musical ritual of solitary retreat known as “chilla”. Learning Hindustani Classical Music requires intense dedication, devotion and practice wherein the musician is a lifelong learner. Performing chilla by a musician is believed to be a paradigm shifting venture which reforms the persons’ music from state of naivety to a state of enlightenment. Divine interventions are also reported by musicians undergoing chilla, where they reach a state of trance and are able to unearth hidden knowledge and explore new dimensions of their music.

1. Introduction

The word “*chilla*” has originated from the Persian word “*chehel*” which means “forty” [1]. *Chilla* is a solitary retreat which is observed in different forms in several sects of the society. In Sufism, it is spiritual ritual which is observed by practitioners of Hindu and Persian traditions. In some cultures it is referred to as *Khalwa* [2]. In this ceremony the ascetic sat meditating in a circle for forty days and nights [1]. The word “*chilla*” is also represented for the forty day period after childbirth during which the mother is said to be quarantined [3]. In the Hindustani Classical Music, “*chilla*” or “*chilla katna*” is basically a ritual wherein a student completely isolates himself from the outside world and fully devotes oneself to music. Traditionally, *chilla* lasts for forty days [4] but the duration of *chilla* is subject to variation from person to person wherein people perform partial and complete *chilla*. During this period, the musicians lock themselves in a special room of isolation known as the “*chilla khana*” and avoid any contact to the outside world. The only person who is allowed to contact the person practicing *chilla* is the Guru who may give lessons or offer corrections. The details of performing *chilla* may vary from one Gharana to the other. The practitioner consumes certain foods in a very limited diet during the *chilla* which is necessary to keep the mind alert and focused. Even meeting and talking to someone is not allowed while performing *chilla*. Consumption of alcohol is strictly prohibited at this time. Under this ritual, sleeping hours are also reduced tremendously and the musicians even tie their hair to a rope attached to the ceiling to stay awake. Physical exercise in the *chilla khana* is also advised as sitting and practicing in one place for long durations may lead to various physical problems, laziness and obesity. In the modern age scenario, all the distractions such as mobile phones and other devices should completely be considered forbidden. The musician practices the instrument if he is an

instrumentalist or sings if he is a vocalist for durations as long as 15-16 hours per day. Performing *chilla* has the capacity to transform not only the music of the practitioner but his whole life. *Chilla* can be compared to an age ceremony wherein the practitioner achieves a sense of maturity from boyhood to manhood. *Chilla* is performed by musicians of almost all the prevalent Gharanas but specifically musicians of the Punjab Gharana of tabla playing perform it extensively [5].

2. Chilla: A divine experience

Chilla is believed to be a very divine experience wherein the practitioner renovates both as a musician and as a spiritual being. It is said that performing three *chillas* in a lifetime refines a musician from a stage of naivety to a stage of sheer musical bliss. Some musicians who have performed *chilla* have reported to move to a stage of trance [6]. In this state they have relived the long forgotten learning experiences and even evolved new techniques which they had strived to learn and develop in their music careers. Ustad Zakir Hussain in his book “A Life in Music” has shared of having such experiences when he performed *chilla* [7]. He has extensively explained the details of the two *chillas* which he had performed and how they changed his music and life. He performed his first *chilla* when he was about sixteen. His father and guru Ustad Allarakha Khan was touring outside the country at that time and Ustad Zakir Hussain did not seek his permission to perform the *chilla*. So he went to the shrine of saint Haji Malang and performed *chilla* for 16 days. He practiced rigorously and one day he had a very inexplicable divine visitation wherein an aged white-haired decorous looking saintly master wearing a pagdi, a long kameez & salwar taught him a rhythmic composition. The entire experience of the *chilla* for Ustad Zakir Hussain was very heavenly and he returned transformed and elated. Upon the return of his father Ustad Allarakha Khan, he was informed about the *chilla* that Ustad Zakir Hussain had performed. Ustad Allarakha Khan was initially furious about it and eventually asked Ustad Zakir Hussain about his experience. He informed about his divine visitation and played the composition which he learnt during this intervention. After hearing the composition repeatedly from Ustad Zakir Hussain, Ustad Allarakha Khan was completely shocked as he had never taught him this composition and Ustad Zakir Hussain could not know about it as well from elsewhere as it was a very old composition. He then asked him about the description of the saint who taught him this composition during the *chilla*. Hearing the description, Ustad Allarakha told Ustad Zakir Hussain that the saint’s description fits exactly with the great master Baba Malang Khan, who was one of the doyens of the Punjab Gharana.

3. Conclusions

In the end it can be concluded by saying that the musical ritual of *chilla* is a very reverend practice and holds very high esteem amongst the musicians of the Hindustani Classical Music. Sheer devotion to music over a certain period of time and isolating oneself for it requires an extreme degree of commitment and patience. It is a very arduous task and very few people have the courage

to perform it but if the practitioners focus is sincere & genuine it is believed that the masterly spirits would certainly help the practitioner to find his way out of the predicament. The person performing *chilla* can either come out totally shattered or completely enlightened depending upon the dedication, spirit, zeal and enthusiasm with which he went for this endeavor.

References:

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