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## The History And Art Of Thumri Music

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**Abstract:** *Thumri*, North India's emotive semi-classical vocal form, has undergone remarkable evolution while preserving its core of spontaneous expression. Emerging from 18th century court traditions, it developed through distinct phases - from dance-oriented *Bandish-ki-Thumri* to the more lyrical *Bol-Banao-ki-Thumri*, each reflecting changing cultural contexts. The genre flourished through three primary regional styles: the devotional *Purab ang* of Banaras, the *Kathak*-influenced Lucknow style, and the vibrant Punjabi *ang* blending *Tappa's* vitality. Legendary artists like Siddheshwari Devi, Begum Akhtar and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan shaped its journey from courtesan art to concert stage. Today, while maintaining its improvisational soul, *Thumri* continues to transform - modern artists reinterpret its possibilities while folk-rooted variations like *Kajri* and *Chaiti* keep regional flavours alive. This living tradition exemplifies how Indian classical music balances preservation with innovation, its various forms serving as musical milestones in an ongoing journey of artistic reinvention.

**Keywords:** *Thumri*, *Bandish-Ki-Thumri*, *Bol-Banao-Ki Thumri*, *Purab Ang*, Wajid Ali Shah

*Thumri*, a beloved genre of North Indian semi-classical music, is celebrated for its emotive themes and delicate expression of *shringar* (romantic or devotional love). Rooted in classical traditions, it artfully blends the sophistication of *raga* music with the spontaneity of folk melodies. Unlike strict classical forms, *Thumri* allows musicians to explore emotions beyond rigid structural constraints, embracing poetic freedom. This unique balance positions it as a bridge between classical and folk traditions.

Though once dismissed as "light" or less serious, *Thumri* carries a legacy of profound artistry. While references to it date back to pre-17th-century texts, the genre truly flourished in the 18th–20th centuries. Initially met with scepticism, it gradually earned its rightful place in Indian classical music through the dedication of visionary musicians, the passion of connoisseurs, and the patronage of royal courts. Today, it has transformed into a respected and cherished tradition.

### The Origins of *Thumri*: Different Theories

The exact origin of *Thumri* is still debated among scholars, but there are many interesting theories about how it began. Some believe the word "*Thumri*" comes from the Hindi word "*Thumakna*" (meaning a graceful, rhythmic movement). Others have found references to *Thumri* in ancient texts and historical records. Here are some key theories:

1. **Ancient Roots** – Thakur Jaidev Singh and Dr. Rita Gangopadhyay mention that the "*Harivansh Purana*" (written around 200 AD) describes something similar to *Thumri* as "*Chalitam Nrityasahitam*" (a dance-song style).<sup>i</sup>
2. **Chalikya Nrityanatya** – Some scholars believe *Thumri* evolved from this ancient performing art.<sup>ii</sup>
3. **Raja Man Singh Tomar** – Many credit the 15th-century king of Gwalior as the creator of *Thumri*, suggesting the name comes from "**Tomar**".<sup>iii</sup>
4. **Mughal-Era References** – In "*Tuhfat-ul-Hind*" (1670), Mirza Khan calls *Thumri* a popular folk song in the Doab region (between Ganga and Yamuna) and lists it as one of the five *raginis* of *Raga Shree*. He also links it to other folk styles, such as *Kajri*, *Chaiti*, and *Birha*.<sup>iv</sup>

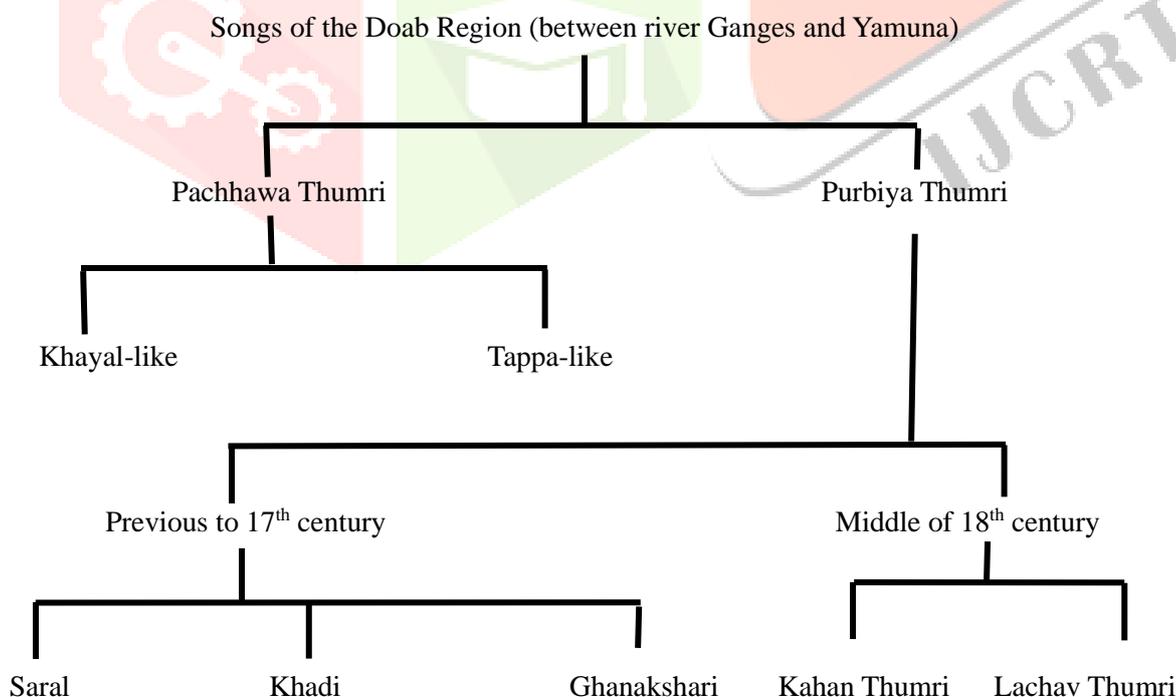
5. **Another Name** – "*Baroa*" – Fakirullah's "*Ragdarpan*" suggests *Thumri* was also known as "*Baroa*" or "*Barua*".<sup>v</sup>
6. **Pre-Sadaranga *Thumri*** – The book "*Sangit Ragakalpdrum*" (1946) includes *Thumri* samples by poets like Khayal Khushal and Premrang, proving it existed even before Niamat Shah *Sadaranga* (a famous 18th-century musician).<sup>vi</sup>
7. **Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's Influence** – Though *Thumri* was already known, the *Nawab* of Oudh (19th century) helped popularize it by giving it a new elegance and making it a courtly art form.

While *Thumri*'s exact beginnings remain unclear, it likely evolved from a blend of ancient dance songs, folk traditions, and royal patronage. Over time, it evolved into the beautiful semi-classical form we know today.

### The Evolution and Regional Variations of *Thumri*

The *Thumri* we know today bears little resemblance to its original form, having undergone significant transformation over time. This semi-classical genre first emerged in the Doab region between the Ganges and Yamuna rivers before branching into two distinct regional styles: *Purab-Ki-Thumri* and *Pachhav-Ki-Thumri*.

1. ***Purab-ki-Thumri; Purbi Thumri* or *Purab-ki-Thumri*** has developed in the east of the Yamuna River in the Mathura-Vrindavan region. It is considered the standard form when referencing "*Thumri*". It maintains the traditional lyrical and emotive qualities of classical *Thumri*.
2. ***Pachhav-ki-Thumri; Pachhav-ki-Thumri* or *Punjabi Thumri*** has evolved in the west of the Yamuna River in the Punjab region. It incorporates the fast-paced, rhythmic elements of *Tappa* style, featuring more elaborate vocal ornamentation and improvisation. It has distinguished itself significantly from the original *Thumri* tradition. The Punjabi variation gained prominence through the artistry of legendary vocalists like *Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan* and *Ustad Barkat Ali Khan*, who masterfully blended its vibrant *Tappa* influences with classical *Thumri* elements. This regional diversification highlights *Thumri*'s remarkable adaptability and capacity for artistic innovation while maintaining its fundamental expressive character.



## The Evolution of *Thumri*: From Dance Accompaniment to Classical Art Form

*Thumri* has undergone a fascinating transformation throughout its history. Before *Nawab* Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh, three primary forms existed: *Saral*, *Khadi*, and *Ghanakshari*. The *Nawab's* court later introduced two innovative styles—*Kahan Thumri* and *Lachav Thumri*—which evolved into the two dominant forms we know today: *Bandish-ki-Thumri* (composition-based) and *Bol-Banao Thumri* (improvisation-driven).

Originally, *Thumri* served as musical accompaniment for *Kathak* dance in the Indo-Gangetic region. Every *Thumri* composed before the 17th century was designed specifically for dance performances. Its melodic structure and lyrical content were deeply intertwined with *Kathak's* expressive movements. However, by the late 18th century, *Thumri* emerged as an independent vocal genre, gaining equal stature with *Kathak*. The *Bandish-ki-Thumri* style, in particular, became the cornerstone of this newly elevated art form.

The term *Bandish* refers to a structured musical composition, where the poetic lyrics hold central importance. It was primarily designed to accompany *Kathak* performances, its adaptable rhythms complemented intricate dance movements while its poetic lyrics - blending different regional dialects - showcased remarkable linguistic artistry. *Thumri* primarily used the *Brajbuli* dialect, which incorporated various regional pronunciations of *Hindi*, including *Bhojpuri*, *Awadhi*, *Mirzapuri*, and *Dingal* — alongside *Khadi Boli* and *Urdu*. To enhance its lyrical beauty, folk-inspired poetic embellishments were employed, such as transforming 'Pani' (water) into 'Paniya' and 'Piya' (beloved) into 'Piharwa'. Regional expressions like *Jaihaan*, *Gaihaan*, *Jaibe*, *Khaibe* etc. further enriched its vocabulary.

Structurally, these compositions typically featured two or three verses (*Sthayi* and *Antara*) and were particularly designed to complement dance performances. Their rhythms—mostly set in *Ektal*, *Teental*, or *Jhapatal* (occasionally composed in talas like *Addha*, *Sitarkhani*, *Deepchandi* etc.) — ranged from medium to fast tempos to suit *Kathak's* dynamic movements. A defining feature was *Bol-Banao*, where lyrics and rhythm were creatively varied to advance the narrative. The musical presentation involved delicate rhythmic phrasing (*Layakari*), swift melodic *Taans*, and expressive ornamentation (*Meend*, *Gamak* etc.). *Bandish-ki-Thumri*, characterized by its exquisite blend of light, melodious ragas (primarily from *Sankeerna Jaati*) like *Khamaj*, *Desh*, *Tilak Kamod*, *Gara*, *Jhinjhoti*, *Kafi*, *Zila*, *Tilang*, *Bihari* etc., represented the pinnacle of semi-classical music during its golden era in the 18th-19th century. This sophisticated art form nurtured under *Nawab* Wajid Ali Shah's patronage in Lucknow and got incredibly popularized with the advent of gramophone recordings, favouring shorter formats. Some iconic *Thumris* composed by *Kathak* maestro *Pandit* Bindadin Maharaj, like "Na Manungi, Na Manungi", "Hatho Jao Re Na Bolo", "Dekho Ri Na Mane Shyam," "Koyelia Kook Sunawe" etc., beautifully wove together romantic, devotional, and folk-inspired themes, are still performed by musicians these days. Although initially thriving, the genre gradually absorbed *Khayal's* improvisational techniques, ultimately blending so completely with contemporary forms that its distinct identity became indistinguishable.



### *Nawab* Wajid Ali Shah: The Architect of *Thumri's* Golden Age – 19<sup>th</sup> Century:

The reign of *Nawab* Wajid Ali Shah (1847-1887) marked a transformative era in the evolution of *Thumri*, elevating it to unprecedented artistic heights. A visionary patron and accomplished composer (under the *Takhallus/* pen name *Akhtar Piya*), he cultivated a cultural renaissance in Lucknow's court—often likened to a real-life *Arabian Nights*—where *Thumri* and *Kathak* flourished as interdependent arts. His innovative approach blended Hindu and Muslim musical traditions seamlessly, with grand festivals like *Ras*, *Yogiya Mela*, and *Indar Sabha* serving as platforms for experimentation.

Even after his exile to Kolkata's *Metiabruz* (1856-1887), his court remained a vibrant hub for *Thumri*, as documented in *Hutom Pyanchar Nakshya*. Legendary artists—including *Pandit* Bindadin Maharaj, *Ustad* Sadiq Ali Khan, *Mirzawala Qadar* (*Kadarpiya*), *Bhaiya Ganpat Rao*, *Khurshid Ali Khan*, *Pyar Khan*, *Haider Jaan*—refined the genre, infusing it with technical sophistication while preserving its emotive core. *Saras Piya*, *Kale Khan Mathurawale*, *Nazar Piya Rampurwale*, *Chand Piya* were great composers of his court. The

Nawab's own compositions, such as the iconic " *Babul Mora Naihar Chuto Jay*", " *Jab Chod Chale Lucknow Nagari*", " *Fulwali Kanth*", " *Milwe Ko Jiya Mora Chahe*" showcased his mastery of *Thumri*. He often used colloquial *Awadhi* dialects and *Brajbhasha*, making *Thumri* accessible yet profound.

A famous *bandish* based on *raga Bhairavi* composed by him, is -

Babul Mora, Naihar Chuto Hi Jaye..

Char Kahar Mil Mori Dulia Sajabe,

Mora Apna Begana Chuto Jaye ||

Angana To Parbat Bhai, Aur Dehri Bhai Bides

Jaye Babul Ghar Apni, Main Chali Piya Ke Desh ||

"Oh Father! My childhood home slips away/Four bearers lift my palanquin" - encapsulating the universal human experience of separation and transition. On the surface, a bride's bittersweet departure from her paternal home, the composition transforms into the *Nawab's* heartbreak after British forces (the "four bearers") exiled him from Lucknow in 1856, while ascending to a philosophical meditation on impermanence where the soul's palanquin journeys through worldly illusions toward transcendence. This multilayered masterpiece demonstrates how *Thumri*, through its folk-inspired vernacular and emotive flexibility, could elevate specific historical trauma into timeless poetry.

The development of *Thumri* was deeply intertwined with the shifting sociopolitical landscape of 19th-century North India, flourishing under *Nawab* Wajid Ali Shah's patronage when Lucknow stood as a dazzling cultural capital - "was quite as Arabian nights as I meant it to be".<sup>vii</sup> described by Emily Eden, sister of Governor General Lord Auckland. But his exile to Calcutta in 1857 triggered a cultural migration that saw Banaras emerge as the new artistic epicenter. This transitional period birthed the innovative new *Thumri* style called as *Bol-Banao-Ki Thumri* through the pioneering work of musicians like Jagdip Mishra, Bhaiya Saheb Ganpat Rao (1852-1920) and Maizuddin Khan, who adapted the form to its new environment by emphasizing lyrical improvisation (*Bol Banao*) over the dance-oriented *Bandish-Ki-Thumri* of Lucknow. The genre's evolution from Wajid Ali Shah's courtly compositions to Banaras' more verbally intricate style mirrors the broader transition of Indian classical arts from aristocratic sponsorship to broader public engagement following the decline of princely states.

From the late 19th to early 20th century, *Bol-Banao Thumri* emerged as the dominant style, overshadowing other forms with its emphasis on lyrical improvisation and emotional expression. According to Peter Manuel "By about 1920 the popularity of the bandish thumri had been eclipsed by that of the emerging bol banao thumri, and the traditional Lucknow style became truly extinct with the death, in 1944, of its last great exponent, *Baba Nasir Khan* of the *Delhi gharana*."<sup>viii</sup>

### ***Bol-Banao Thumri: The Art of Emotional Storytelling of 20<sup>th</sup> century:***

Derived from the words *Bol* (word) and *Banao* (to make), *Bol-Banao Thumri* is an expressive style where emotions take center stage through lyrical improvisation. Unlike the structured *Bandish-ki-Thumri*, it relies on minimal lyrics—often just two lines divided into *Sthayi* and *Antara*—allowing singers to explore nuanced interpretations of the same phrase through vocal dramatization. The themes revolve around Krishna's *Leela*, the playful exchanges of *Nayak-Nayika* (hero-heroine), or seasonal celebrations like *Holi* and monsoon, all rendered in the rustic charm of *Brajbuli* and *Bhojpuri*-infused Hindi, enriched with folk idioms.

The essence of *Bol-Banao* lies in its emotional fluidity. As scholar Peter Manuel notes, "A good thumri is 'incomplete'—it leaves space for the singer to expand the *raga* through evocative wordplay."<sup>ix</sup> For instance, a simple line like " *Kaun Gali Gayo Shyam*" transforms through melodic elaboration (*Raga Vistar*) and subtle vocal ornamentation, conveying longing, suspicion, or playful teasing. Sung

predominantly from a female perspective—often as Radha or a lovelorn heroine—the lyrics oscillate between union (*Milan*), separation (*Viraha*), and the divine romance of Radha-Krishna.

Musically, the style thrives on spontaneity. Accompanied by the harmonium or sarangi, which mirror the singer's delicate phrasing, and the *Tabla's* responsive rhythms, *Bol-Banao* prioritizes *Abhinaya* (dramatic expression) over rigid composition. This adaptability made it the dominant *Thumri* form by the early 20th century, resonating with audiences seeking both classical sophistication and heartfelt storytelling.

The 20th century witnessed *Thumri's* remarkable transformation from a courtly tradition to a mainstream musical art form, largely propelled by the advent of recording technology and public performances. The Gramophone Company played a pivotal role in this transition, bringing *Thumri* to mass audiences through records, with legendary artists like Gauhar Jan becoming the voice of this revolution by popularizing *Thumri* in its most expressive form. From the 1920s onward, *Thumri* transitioned from intimate *Baithaks* to the concert stage<sup>x</sup>, shedding its earlier associations with 'nach girls' and '*Baijis*' to emerge as a respected classical genre. This period also saw male musicians, previously confined to *Khayal*, embracing *Thumri*, with maestros like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Abdul Karim Khan, and Barkat Ali Khan elevating its musical sophistication while retaining its emotional depth.

The stylistic evolution of *Thumri* during this era was significant—artists expanded its scope by blending *raga*, rhythm, and intonation with dramatic *abhinaya* (expression), while also incorporating folk elements like *Dadra*, *Chaiti*, *Hori*, and *Kajri* into their repertoire. Singers such as Siddheshwari Devi, Rasoolan Bai, and Begum Akhtar refined the form, emphasizing both poetic nuance and melodic intricacy. As Peter Manuel observed, *Thumri* gradually lost its earlier sensuous connotations, transforming into an abstract, aesthetically refined art form. This shift not only broadened its appeal but also secured its place in the pantheon of Indian classical music, ensuring its survival and continued innovation in modern times.

### **Thumri Styles: Schools of Expressive Singing**

*Thumri* evolved into distinct regional styles, with *Purab-ki-Thumri* and *Pachhao-ki-Thumri* being the earliest forms. As *Thumri* traditionally prioritized expressive flexibility over institutionalized schools or Gharanas, *Thumri's* regional variations are known as different **Ang** (Singing styles). Over time, three major *Angs* have emerged as the most influential: *Banaras Ang*, *Lucknow Ang* and *Patiala Ang*. Beyond these, smaller traditions exist in **Gaya, Oudh, and Mirzapur**, each with unique stylistic flavors. A style represents not just a fixed tradition but a living, evolving practice, where musicians innovate through personal artistry.

#### **a. Banaras Ang: The Soul of Spiritual Expression**

The Benares tradition epitomizes the *Purab Ang*, where *Thumri* becomes a medium for devotional yearning. Rooted in Varanasi's spiritual ethos, this style weaves the Radha-Krishna lore into its poetic core. Unlike other styles, it adheres closely to the *raga's* framework, with minimal borrowing from allied *ragas*. The melodic expansion (*Raga Vistar*) unfolds through subtle *gamaks* (ornamentations) and *meends* (glides), mirroring the introspective flow of the Ganges. Performances culminate in the signature *Benarsi laggi-ladi*—a traditional rhythmic flourish on the tabla. Siddheshwari Devi, Rasoolan Bai, Mahadev Prasad Mishra, Girija Devi, Chhannulal Mishra and many more are the leading exponents of this genre.

#### **b. Lucknow Ang: The Courtly Elegance**

Steeped in *Nawabi* sophistication, Lucknow's *Thumri* reflects the grandeur of *Kathak* tradition. Designed to enchant royal audiences, it prioritizes attractive rhythmicity and melodic embellishments. The *Bandish-ki-Thumri* dominates here, with compositions structured like miniature dramas. The style's hallmark is its duality: sensuous yet restrained, technically precise yet emotionally fluid. Begum Akhtar and *Pandit Birju Maharaj* are two legendary names of this legacy.

#### **c. Patiala Ang: Pachhav ki Thumri**

The Patiala style, infused with *Tappa's* fiery energy, redefines *Thumri* as a virtuosic art. Here, ragas bend freely—often borrowing some other *raga's* sparkle—mirroring Punjab's syncretic culture. The *bols* (words) tumble in rapid *taans*, while *gamak* oscillations evoke the rugged charm of *Hir-Ranjha* ballads. Unlike Banaras' meditative depth, Patiala thrills with zig-zag phrasing and rhythmic

surprises, often climaxing in *sargam* cascades. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan (who blended it with *Khayal's* grandeur), Barkat Ali Khan, Munwar Ali Khan, Ajoy Chakraborty, Jagdish Prasad are the most important names of this tradition.

Musicians often describe *Thumri* as "*sung poetry*"—a spontaneous creation where the artist's inner artistry and musical intuition merge into pure emotional expression. Once nurtured in the courts by *tawaifs* (courtesans), this exquisite form has transcended its origins to emerge as a revered abstract art, celebrated for its lyrical depth and melodic grace. No longer confined by its past associations, *Thumri* now enjoys recognition as a sophisticated and deeply expressive genre, balancing classical rigor with accessible charm. Its themes—love, separation, devotion, and the playful nuances of Radha-Krishna lore—continue to resonate, transcending time and cultural shifts. Today, a new generation of musicians is reinvigorating *Thumri*, blending traditional nuances with contemporary sensibilities to ensure its relevance in a globalized musical landscape. Yet, at its core, *Thumri* remains what it has always been—a heartfelt conversation between the singer and the listener, an improvisational play of melody and emotion.

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