

The Muse as Co-Creator: Rani Mrignayani and the Evolution of the Gwalior Dhrupad Tradition

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Abstract

This research flips the old story about Rani Mrignayani. She wasn't just a muse, quietly inspiring from the sidelines – she helped shape the Gwalior musical renaissance right alongside the others. By weaving in Gurjar folk styles, especially her bold changes to Raga Gujari Todi, she broke through the stiff traditions of the royal court. That move sparked the evolution of Dhrupad. In the end, the shift in North Indian classical music – its move toward a more flexible, everyday language – came straight out of this creative partnership between the Queen, Raja Man Singh, and the composer Baiju Bawra.

Keywords: Dhrupad, prabandha, raga gujari todi, braj bhasha, todi thaata, gauhar bani, khayal

INTRODUCTION: THE CULTURAL RENAISSANCE OF THE TOMAR COURT

For a long time, the story of Indian classical music has pretty much focused on men – those famous Nayaks, Gandharvas, and Ustads – while women mostly get cast as background figures, the ones who support or inspire but don't really shape the music themselves. But if you dig into the history of the Gwalior court around the late 1400s, things get a lot more interesting. The old idea of women just watching from the sidelines doesn't really fit. Take Rani Mrignayani, for example. She wasn't just Man Singh Tomar's beautiful ninth queen, sitting quietly while others made history. She brought her own Gurjar musical roots into the mix and, working alongside others, helped push Indian music away from the strict old Sanskrit Prabandha style and into the more spontaneous, homegrown world of Dhrupad. So, she wasn't simply a muse – she was a creator, right there at the heart of the action [1].

North India in the late 1400s was going through big changes. The Delhi Sultanate was breaking apart, and with that chaos came opportunity – suddenly, local rulers could shape their own cultures and flex their political muscle. One of the standouts was the Tomar dynasty in Gwalior. Raja Man Singh, who ruled from 1486 to 1516, didn't just hold off the powerful Lodi Sultans; he turned his court into a hotbed of musical creativity that left its mark on Hindustani music for generations [2].

This was when classical theory and folk traditions really started to mix. You could see it, almost in real time, in the lives of the people at court – especially in the union of Man Singh, a Rajput king, and Mrignayani, a Gurjar queen. Their partnership wasn't just political or romantic; it was a living example of how two very different worlds could come together to create something entirely new.

This report dives deep into the era, showing how the so-called "Gwalior innovations" – things like using everyday language in lyrics (padas), creating Gujari versions of big ragas, and loosening up the strict Prabandha meter – came straight from a real mix of influences. Here, the Muse wasn't just some abstract idea; it played an active, creative role. Looking at the Man Kutuhla treatise, the way ragas

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like Gujari Todi were built, and the politics of the Tomar court, you can see how Mrignayani's folk style blended with Man Singh's scholarly approach. That mix set up the Gwalior tradition as the true starting point – the Gangotri – of North Indian classical music [3].

The Geopolitical and Cultural Context

If you really want to grasp how big the Gwalior revolution was, you've got to look at the wild politics of medieval India. The Tomar kingdom sat awkwardly between two powerful Islamic sultanates: the Lodis up in Delhi and the Khiljis down in Malwa. That wasn't exactly a cozy spot. So, instead of just relying on armies, Raja Man Singh Tomar leaned hard into culture. He didn't just beef up Gwalior Fort as a fortress – it became a safe haven for artists and musicians [4].

Gwalior Fort was famous for a reason. Babur, the Mughal emperor, once called it “the pearl among the fortresses of Hind.” But it wasn't just about walls and cannons. Inside, the old Sanskrit texts on music – stuff that was getting pretty obscure and out of touch – met the lively music of the streets. Musicians showed up from everywhere: Sufi mystics, temple singers, you name it. They all flocked to Gwalior, chasing patronage and bringing their own styles. That mix turned the fort into a creative hotspot, buzzing with new ideas and sounds [5].

The Theoretical Framework: Marga vs. Desi

To understand how music grew in Gwalior, you have to look at it through this old Indian lens: Marga and Desi. Marga Sangeet, the “classical” path, was all about the Vedas and the Natya Shastra. People saw it as something almost sacred – a way to reach salvation. It came with all these strict rules, full of Sanskrit, set meters, grammar, and so on. By the 1400s, though, the old Prabandha forms tied to Marga started to feel stiff and outdated. Regular folks could barely connect with them [6].

Desi Sangeet, on the other hand, was something else entirely. This was the music of the land – the stuff people actually sang, shaped by where they lived and who they were. It changed from place to place, from one caste to another. It felt alive.

What's really striking about Gwalior is that its court didn't see these two styles as enemies. Thanks to Man Singh's deep scholarship and Mrignayani's everyday musical roots, the court began to raise Desi music up, putting it on the same level as Marga. They didn't just stumble into this. The Raja actually had it written down in a major work, Man Kutuhal. By bringing Desi into the fold, the court gave real value to folk music, to rural and pastoral traditions. Rani Mrignayani embodied all of that right in the royal court [7].

RAJA MAN SINGH TOMAR: THE WARRIOR-MUSICOLOGIST

Raja Man Singh Tomar ruled from 1486 to 1516, and he's really the classic example of a philosopher-king in India. Sure, a lot of history books talk about his battles with the Lodi dynasty, but that's not what people remember most. What really set him apart was his passion for music and his drive to reform it. He didn't just support artists from the sidelines – he got involved, created music himself, and actually helped shape and define the rules that still guide Indian music today.

The Crisis of Classical Music

When Man Singh took the throne, North Indian classical music was in trouble. The main style back then, Prabandha, felt distant and out of touch. It was all in Sanskrit – a language hardly anyone spoke anymore, not even the elite at court. On top of that, Prabandha stuck to strict meters that boxed in the music, making it stiff and focused more on words than on melody [8].

Man Singh saw the problem right away. If music was going to survive and really matter at court, people had to actually understand it. So, he did something bold: he swapped out the old Sanskrit verses for new ones in Braj Bhasha, the everyday language around Gwalior and Mathura. Suddenly, songs felt closer to home, more alive. But this change in language needed a change in music, too. Braj Bhasha,

with its softer sounds, called for something looser than Prabandha but still more polished than rustic folk tunes. Out of this mix, the courtly form of Dhruvapada – what we now call Dhrupad – was born [9].

The Man Kutuhal Treatise

You can really see Man Singh's hand in Indian music history through his treatise, Man Kutuhal – literally, "Curiosity of the Mind." He didn't just dream it up himself; he got a council of musicologists together and had them put it all down. The result? A real milestone for Indian musicology.

What makes Man Kutuhal stand out? First, it broke the old Sanskrit tradition. Earlier works like the Sangita Ratnakara were written in Sanskrit, so only scholars could follow them. Man Singh had this one done in Hindi, so working musicians – who weren't all Sanskrit experts – could finally get the theory too [10].

Second, the treatise took the scattered world of regional melodies and organized them. It grouped these melodies into a system of Ragas and Raginis, so people finally had a standard repertoire to work from.

And third, Man Kutuhal wasn't stuck in the past. It brought in fresh melodic ideas, including those from Muslim musicians, blending Hindu and Persian influences into the same tradition.

The book made such waves that nearly two hundred years later, under Aurangzeb, the nobleman Faqirullah translated it into Persian as Rag Darpana, or "Mirror of Ragas." This helped keep the Gwalior school's ideas alive. Faqirullah even spells out how Raja Man Singh called together assemblies of Nayaks – master musicians – to settle debates about raga grammar. Thanks to these gatherings, North Indian classical music finally got some agreed rules [11].

The Sangeet Vidyapeeth

Man Singh didn't stop at theories. He set up the Sangeet Vidyapeeth, the School of Music in Gwalior. This was more than just a spot for performances – it was a real conservatory, where students learned through the tough Guru-Shishya tradition. The place drew in masters like Bakshu, Bhanu, and even the young Tansen. They built up what we now call the "Gwalior style" – training singers to use powerful, open voices (Akar) that could fill the fort's stone courtyards, no microphones needed.

RANI MRIGNAYANI: THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE MUSE

Man Singh gave Gwalior music its structure and support, but Rani Mrignayani brought its heart. To really see what she did, you have to look past the romantic stories and dig into the real history and sociology behind her.

Deconstructing the Legend

The stories go like this: Raja Man Singh goes hunting and finds a village girl named Ninni (later called Mrignayani) wrestling two buffaloes – or sometimes hunting one – barehanded. Impressed, he asks her to marry him. She agrees, but only if she gets her own palace (the Gujari Mahal), her own water supply – brought all the way from her village river (the Rai) – and the right to join him in war and on hunts [12].

It's a great story, but it does some social work too. It justifies the king's marriage to a lower-caste woman by making her seem almost superhuman. But if you look past the heroic tales, you see her roots – she was a Gurjar.

The Gurjar Musical Aesthetics

The Gurjars were a farming, herding, and warrior community with a deep tradition of folk music. Unlike the classical music of the temples, Gurjar songs were practical, joyful, and tied to the rhythms of nature.

Their singing style was made for the open fields – loud, with long, flowing notes (meend), so the sound would carry to the cattle or other herders. This is a lot like the Gauhar Bani style of Dhrupad, known for its spacious feel and sweeping melodies [13].

Musically, Gurjar folk tunes often used six- or five-note scales (hexatonic or pentatonic), sometimes skipping the perfect fifth (Pancham) or using subtle versions of the second (Rishabh) and sixth (Dhaivat) to stir up feelings of longing and separation (Viraha).

Rhythmically, their music pulsed with the seasons and farm life – full of energy and drive, unlike the more rigid Prabandha style.

Mrignayani took these “Desi” (folk) sounds and brought them into the “Marga” (classical) world of the court. She didn’t just absorb classical training – she brought new music with her.

The Gujar Mahal: A Counter-Court of Culture

Even the layout of Gwalior Fort tells this story. Man Singh built the grand Man Mandir for his administration and Rajput queens. For Mrignayani, he built the Gujar Mahal at the base of the fort – a place of her own, and a space for a different kind of culture [14].

Gujari Mahal turned into a real hub for musicians who wanted to experiment and push boundaries, far from the stiff atmosphere of the main court. People say even famous names like Baiju Bawra would drop by the Queen’s palace to trade musical ideas. The palace itself, with its open courtyards and those echoing underground chambers, created the perfect space for shaping the Dhrupad style. The sound there carried both the weight of a cave and the freedom of the open air – just what Dhrupad needed.

THE MUSICOLOGY OF CO-CREATION: THE "GUJARI" INNOVATIONS

If you want real proof that Rani Mrignayani shaped the music of Gwalior, just look at the ragas that carry her name: Gujar Todi, Mangal Gujar, and Bahul Gujar. These aren’t just empty tributes. Dig into their structure and you’ll find a clear blend of classical technique with Gurjar folk flavor. She didn’t just borrow the name – she stitched her world into the music [15].

Raga Gujar Todi: A Structural Analysis

Gujari Todi – people often just call it Gurjari – stands out as a true example of subtractive synthesis. It sits in the Todi Thaata family, but there’s a twist. One key change sets it apart and gives the raga its own mood and energy. It’s not just a variation; it’s a bold move that shifts how the music feels, both in your head and in your gut (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative analysis of raga miyan ki todi and raga gujari todi.

Feature	Raga Miyan Ki Todi (Classical Standard)	Raga Gujar Todi (The Innovation)
Thaat (Parent Scale)	Todi	Todi
Jati (Classification)	Sampurna-Sampurna (Heptatonic)	Shadav-Shadav (Hexatonic)
Arohana (Ascent)	S r g M P d N S'	S r g M d N S'
Avarohana (Descent)	S' N d P M g r S	S' N d M g r S
Varjit Swara (Omitted Note)	None	Pancham (Pa)
Vadi (Dominant Note)	Dhaivat (d) / Gandhar (g)	Dhaivat (d)
Samvadi (Sub-dominant Note)	Gandhar (g) / Rishabh (r)	Rishabh (r)
Mood (Rasa)	Solemn, Majestic, Devotional	Pensive, Longing (<i>Viraha</i>), Pathos (<i>Karuna</i>)
Psycho-acoustic Effect	Grounded, stable due to the presence of Pa	Unstable, searching, yearning due to absence of Pa

Here’s what makes Gujar Todi stand out: it leaves out the Pancham (Pa) – that perfect fifth note. Now, in Indian music, Pa is more than just a note. It’s where the music settles. It’s stable, solid, and

feels like coming home. But when you take it away, suddenly the ground shifts. The raga gets this restless, unsettled vibe. Everything hangs on the push and pull between Tivra Madhyam (the sharp fourth) and Komal Dhaivat (the flat sixth). There's no place to land, and you feel that tension all the way through [16].

This change does a couple of interesting things. First, there's the folk connection. Lots of folk tunes skip the fifth note – sometimes it makes harmonizing easier, sometimes it just fits the voices of everyday singers. When Gwalior's composers built Gujari Todi, they borrowed that folk trick and dropped it into the strict, classical world of Todi. The result? You still get all the weight and seriousness of Todi, but it's got this haunting, earthy feeling, almost like a tribal song drifting across the fields.

Then there's the name – Mrignayani, “The Doe-Eyed One.” Listen to the raga and you'll notice it never really settles. It circles around Komal Rishabh and Komal Dhaivat, never finding that calm spot Pa usually gives. It's a restless kind of beauty, always searching, just like a deer in the wild. The music isn't just named for the queen – it actually captures something about her spirit, her connection to nature, and that sense of longing that runs through the whole raga [17].

Bahaduri Todi and Hybridization

The Gwalior court didn't just stick to old traditions – they kept experimenting. Bahaduri Todi is a great example: a complicated hybrid that mixes Todi with flavors from folk ragas like Desi Todi. This wasn't random invention. The Gwalior musicians had a real method: hybridization. Instead of making new ragas from scratch, they took classical “Marga” ragas and grafted on folk or “Desi” elements. It was like they blended wild branches onto sturdy old trunks, creating something both fresh and rooted. This approach ended up shaping how North Indian classical music evolved [18].

THE EVOLUTION OF FORM: FROM PRABANDHA TO DHRUPAD

These new musical ideas needed a way out into the world, and that's where the shift from Prabandha to Dhrupad comes in. This wasn't just about changing a style – it was a change in how musicians thought about performance.

The Decline of Prabandha

Before the 15th century, Prabandha ruled the scene. It was heavy on Sanskrit text, and the melody had to squeeze around the rules of poetry. Honestly, it felt stiff. When the Bhakti movement started sweeping through North India, people wanted something more heartfelt – a direct connection to the divine. Prabandha, with its cool, intellectual vibe, just didn't cut it anymore.

The Architecture of Dhrupad

So, Raja Man Singh and his court got to work. They shaped Dhrupad (Dhruva-Pada) into something new. The name means “fixed text,” but the form itself created space for both lyrics and melody to shine. The Gwalior court settled on a four-part structure for Dhrupad, almost like building a temple with four pillars:

- *Sthayi*: The base – lays out the raga's main character in the lower and middle octaves.
- *Antara*: Climbs up to the higher notes, showing off the raga's sparkle.
- *Sanchari*: Roams through all three octaves, exploring every nuance.
- *Abhog*: Wraps things up, bringing the musical journey full circle and often signing off with the composer's name.

This structure was solid enough for classical rules but flexible enough for new lyrics and folk melodies – the kind Mrignayani championed.

The Language of Braj Bhasha

Switching to Braj Bhasha changed everything. Suddenly, the music spoke in the language of the people, Krishna, and Mrignayani herself. It made room for Shringar Rasa – songs about love and

longing – right at the heart of classical music. Lyrics stopped being just dry praise for gods or kings. Now, they painted pictures of seasons (Barahmasa), heartache (Viraha), and Krishna's playful romance with Radha. The new ragas, like Gujari Todi, fit this mood perfectly.

THE TRIANGLE OF GENIUS: MAN SINGH, BAIJU, AND TANSEN

At Gwalior, things didn't just happen by chance. The court was alive with big personalities – geniuses who clashed, inspired, and pushed each other. At the center were Baiju Bawra and Tansen, each representing a different side of the Gwalior tradition.

Baiju Bawra: The Queen's Musician

Baiju Bawra – "Baiju the Mad" – is half legend, half fact, but he's a key character. Stories and records place him in the same era as Tansen, working closely with the Chanderi and Gwalior courts, especially with Rani Mrignayani.

Where Tansen was the perfect court musician, Baiju was more of a wanderer, an ascetic who played for the divine – and maybe for the Queen. People say Baiju taught music to Mrignayani. That matters. If she brought folk songs into the palace, Baiju was the one who spun them into classical gold. His style was wild, emotional, and full of raw spiritual power – exactly what the "Desi" tradition needed to breathe new life into the court's music.

Tansen: The Systematiser

Tansen – born Ramtanu Pandey near Gwalior – is the school's most famous graduate. He trained first at Man Singh's own music academy, then with Swami Haridas, who also shared the Gwalior spirit. If Baiju was the wild poet, Tansen was the architect. He brought order, discipline, and polish. The Ain-i-Akbari says Tansen took Gwalior music to Emperor Akbar's court, turning it into the Mughal Empire's official sound.

Tansen came up with Miyan Ki Todi almost as a reply to Gujari Todi. He brought back the classical Pancham, shaping a version of the raga that fit the serious mood of the Mughal court – pretty different from the tender, yearning feel you get from the Gujari side.

The "Bani" System

During the Gwalior period, the different Banis, or styles, of Dhrupad really took shape. Gauhar Bani, which people often link to Gwalior and Tansen's followers, stands out for its slow, grand, almost winding melodic lines – it feels royal. But you can still hear the open-air Gurjar singing in there, especially in all those Gamaks and the way singers need strong breath control to hold those long notes. These techniques mattered whether you were performing in a palace or out in the fields.

THE TEXTUAL LEGACY: FROM MAN KUTUHAL TO RAG DARPANA

The Gwalior court didn't just leave its musical breakthroughs to chance or fading memory. They wrote everything down, carefully and deliberately, so their work survived long after the Tomar dynasty fell.

The Act of Translation

Ordering Man Kutuhal to be written in Hindi wasn't just a scholarly move – it was bold, almost rebellious. It pushed back against Sanskrit's monopoly and said, "Look, our language can handle serious theory too." Later, when the Mughals took over Gwalior, they didn't toss this knowledge aside. They translated it instead. Faqirullah's Rag Darpana, the Persian version of Man Kutuhal, became the go-to music text for the Mughal courts.

This chain of books and translations shows the "Gwalior School" wasn't just a loose collection of ideas. It was a system, all laid out and organized. It gave names to new ragas, set up fresh ways of singing Dhrupad, and shifted the focus to music that moved you, not just music that played by the rules.

Democratization of Knowledge

By taking music theory from Sanskrit to Hindi, and then into Persian, Gwalior's musicians opened the doors wide. Suddenly, knowledge wasn't locked up for just one group. Hindu and Muslim musicians could talk and create in the same musical language. This shared foundation is what kept Hindustani classical music alive through centuries of political chaos. It's the reason the tradition didn't splinter but stayed whole.

LEGACY AND MODERN SURVIVAL: THE GWALIOR GHARANA

Lodi invaders and then the Mughals took Gwalior, but they couldn't kill its music. The tradition scattered – musicians like Tansen found new patrons in other courts, carrying Gwalior's revolutionary spirit wherever they went. But the beating heart of the tradition stayed alive in Gwalior itself, slowly transforming into what we now know as the Gwalior Gharana of Khayal.

The Transition to Khayal

Back in Man Singh's day, Dhrupad was king. Today, though, the Gwalior Gharana stands out as the oldest Khayal tradition. Yet, you can still hear Dhrupad's influence everywhere – especially in the so-called "Ashtanga Gayaki," or eight-limbed style. There's a fullness, a grandeur, a discipline that hasn't faded with time.

- *Legacy of Repertoire:* Modern Gwalior singers still bring to life Gujarati Todi, sticking to the precise details laid down in the 1400s. You'll often hear them start a Khayal concert with a Dhrupad-style alaap, tipping their hats to the past.
- *Pedagogical Continuity:* The way teachers trained students in Man Singh's music academy likely shaped the Guru-Shishya tradition – the backbone of the Gharana system, even through the colonial years.

The Living Raga

If you want proof of Rani Mrignayani's lasting impact, just listen to a contemporary performance of Raga Gujarati Todi. Every time masters like Bhimsen Joshi or Shivkumar Sharma play it – leaving out the Pancham to summon that deep, yearning mood – they're echoing a choice made five hundred years ago in Gwalior. The raga still rules the morning hours, and its feeling of longing (Viraha) hits just as hard today as it did back in the halls of Gujarati Mahal (Table 2).

Table 2. Timeline of the gwalior musical evolution.

Period	Key figures	Key developments	Impact
1486–1516	Raja Man Singh, Rani Mrignayani	Commissioning of Man Kutuhal; Construction of Gujarati Mahal; Rise of Dhrupad	Establishment of Gwalior as the cultural capital; Synthesis of Folk (Gurjar) and Classical (Marga)
1500s	Baiju Bawra, Swami Haridas	Spiritualization of Dhrupad; Refinement of "Gujarati" ragas	Integration of Bhakti movement into court music
1556–1605	Tansen, Akbar	Migration of Gwalior musicians to Mughal Court; Creation of Miyan Ki Todi	Gwalior style becomes the "National Music" of India; Dhrupad reaches its zenith
1660s	Faqirullah	Translation of Man Kutuhal to Rag Darpana	Preservation of Gwalior theory in Persian; Standardization of Raga grammar
19th Century	Haddu Khan, Hassu Khan	Formalization of Gwalior Gharana	Evolution of Dhrupad into Khayal while retaining original aesthetics

CONCLUSION: CO-CREATION AS HISTORICAL FACT

The story of Rani Mrignayani and Raja Man Singh Tomar turns the old "Great Man" idea about Indian classical music on its head. Gwalior's Dhrupad tradition didn't just drop from the top, handed down by a king, and it wasn't the brainchild of some lone male genius like Tansen, either. What really happened was more like a meeting in the middle – a mix where different worlds collided and created something new together.

Rani Mrignayani sparked this whole transformation. She brought Desi influences right into the royal court. Suddenly, the folk styles and sounds of the Gurjar community had a place inside the Man Mandir palace. That shift – using local language, rhythms, and tunes – breathed new life into the old, stiff Marga tradition. What used to be the strict, formal Prabandha style turned into Dhrupad, which is much more open and expressive.

The Man Kutuhla treatise put all these changes into words and rules, while the Gujaragi ragas are what's left for our ears – living proof of that creative moment. When we recognize Mrignayani as a true co-creator, we do more than just give credit to a woman lost in history. We get a much clearer picture of how Indian classical music really grew – not in the quiet of some scholar's study, but in the messy, lively mix of the royal court and everyday life. The walls of Gwalior Fort might not say a word, but the sound of Gujaragi Todi – with its haunting gaps and longing notes – still carries her voice through the history of Indian music.

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