

# THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF INDIAN MUSIC

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Before I express myself on the subject in view, I would like to offer my apologies to the erudite scholars for whom it is but natural, because of their intellectual excellence, to take delight in dwelling upon the minute technicalities of the scientific structure of artistic practice and its philosophical background. Indeed it is difficult to accommodate a critical attitude in a creative frame of mind that is inspired in its search for the sublime more by intuition than by analytical intellectualisation and purely objective judgment. My approach to the subject is rather that of a performing artist than that of a scholar-critic, and my viewpoint is naturally conditioned by the limitations of my approach.

That music gives delight, and to use a much more comprehensive Indian word *ananda*, is almost axiomatic. While this may seem rather an elementary fact about music, the source of that delight or the musical instinct is by no means elementary. It is in fact one of the primary puzzles of consciousness and science. What is it that causes the sound waves when they strike the ear to produce 'volleys of nerve impulses to flow up into the brain' thereby resulting in a pleasurable sensation? More than that how is it that we are able to make sense out of these 'volleys of nerve impulses' so that we emerge from engulfment in the orderly presentation of sound stimuli as if we have lived through the instinctive life of the emotions? We have a part answer, I suppose in that the physical nature of sound has been well explored; but the phenomenon of music as an expressive, communicative agency still remains one of nature's supreme mysteries.

Certain phases of human activity may seem simple and straightforward on the surface but which when carefully studied confront us with

manifold problems and paradoxes. The less we think about them, the more we think we know about them; the more we think about them, the less we realise we know about them.

Music is like life and just as inscrutable. Just as people discuss life and its multifarious aspects without revealing what it exactly is, likewise music also is often the subject of talk by many but they find it like life, a baffling mystery.

Now in the context of the present, prevalent state of enormous scientific achievement on the one hand and the tremendous interest in and enquiry into the phenomenon of music that is evident here and in the West, on the other, if we look back and retrace our steps about a couple of thousand years ago, we may perhaps be amazed at the profundity of perception and understanding of our ancients. Their perception, was, of course, through keen intuitive insight. And hence our music, like our Vedanta philosophy of the Upanishads and other Yogas was essentially a process of withdrawal from without and going within. Hence music has always been looked upon as an intimate path toward God and spiritual salvation.

But spiritual ultimately though it is, our great ancestors were fired with unquenchable curiosity about the nature of musical sounds and the way to systematise them. Our music, the origin of which is attributed to the Vedas, is said to have begun with three *swaras*, subsequently developed to five and then to seven forming the *saptaka*.

As early as the 1st century B.C., perhaps the remotest in the history of the musical systems of the world, when there were no scientific means of placing notes at fixed intervals, it was Bharata Muni, who first by analysis of the *gramas* or scales explained those intervals through the analysis of the *srutis*. He employed the *Sarana Chatustaya* method.

Bharata Muni may be considered to be the greatest scholar, seer of and contributor to Indian music to-date. Our music, with all its myriad modifications down the centuries is all the result of his magnificent research and gift.

After establishing the various frequencies of the *swaras*, Bharata Muni discovered the *Murchhana* system. By a system of tonic-shift, which is in a way the *Murchhana* system, he presented an exhaustive series of *swaras* that could be used in music. In his time, the *Komala Rishabha* and the *Komala Dhaivata* had not been located and nominated, but they certainly occurred in some of the *Murchhanas*. Bharata, therefore, claimed that there could hardly be any melodic music in the world which could not be comprehended in these *Murchhanas*; because by a modal-shift, one could get all the musical notes that are possible within the compass of the

octave. This was only possible through the modal-shifts that the *Murchhanas* of Bharata gave; so his claim seems justified.

### Instrumental Music

So far, we have considered very briefly the intellectual aspect of Indian music. Hence also, as in the case when the intellectual aspect was being dealt with, the great unfailing reservoir of information regarding the condition of instrumental music in our country a couple of thousand years ago is again from Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra*. As early as the 1st century B.C., we had a number of evolved instruments which were classified by Bharata under the following four heads: 1. *Tata*, 2. *Sushira*, 3. *Avanadha* or *Ananddha* and 4 *Ghana* i.e. stringed, wind, membranophonic, audio-phonetic. There are no instruments in the world which cannot be subsumed under the above heads. This gives an exhaustive classification of all the types of instruments.

Bharata mentions a number of instruments like the *Eka Tantri Veena*, *Vipanchi Veena*, *Matakokila Veena* etc., among the stringed instruments; *Vanshi* or the flute among wind; *Mridanga*, *Dardura Panava* etc., among the membranophonic instruments and *Tala* in the *ghana* variety. What may be a matter of interest is that the conception of the instrumental ensemble had not only taken place in Bharata's time but it had also attained a sophisticated and highly systematised standard. Bharata uses the word "*Kutupa*" for instrumental ensemble meaning thereby a well-worked out arrangement of instruments. Bharata describes in his *Natyasastra* the manner in which the *Tala*, the *Sushira* (wind) and the *Avanadha* (membranophonic) instruments ought to be arranged on the stage and their relative distance from each other. And he has given a detailed description of ensemble music on melodic lines when no system of music in the world had thought of such a thing. He mentions the *Anga Veena* and the *Pratyanga Veena* or the main *veena* and a number of other *veen*as that were to be played in a complementary manner. The same order applied to the percussion instruments as well. There are numerous *prabhandas* or compositions for vocal and also instrumental music. The instrumental music compositions were known as *vadya-prabandhas*. Bharata has given copious examples of such compositions for various instruments. To have an idea of the maturity of instrumental music in our country, Sarangadeva, who follows him closely, has given, in his *Sangita Ratnakara* nearly forty seven different compositions to be played on *Pataha* which perhaps resembled the present day *Dholak*. There were several types of compositions. *Gita* and *Sushkakshara Gita*; under *Gita* there were seven types: *Mudraka*, *Aparantaka*, *Ulloppayaka*, *Prakari*, *Uvenaka*, *Rovindaka* and *Rattar*. In the compositions without words one finds the following varieties; *Vakrapani*, *Sankhotana*, *Parighatana*, *Margasarita*, *Lilakrita* etc. All these were set in different *chanda*'s or metres. It was therefore necessary in those days for a musician to be well-versed in poetic metres also.

**Spiritual Aspect**

Yajnavalkya, the great law giver says:

*Vinavadanatatvajrah Srutijativisaradah  
Talajnyaschaprayasena Mokshamargam nigachhati.*

"One who knows the principles of playing the *veena*, one who is an expert in *sruti*, *jati* etc., and has a mastery of *tala* attains to *moksha* without any effort.

*Sangita Darpana*, Page 6, Sl. 32.

As the above *sloka* states, music in our country right from the beginning has been very intimately connected with spiritual pursuit. It is one of the most dynamic expressions of man's inner-most being, not only his personality but also the unfoldment of his entire surging aesthetic passion within; with the result that, the expression attains an extraordinary creative status and the artist and his expression of art become one indivisible experience. Then virtuosity becomes merely the vehicle for the realisation of aesthetic beatitude that the artist experiences. Every note he sings or plays is creative i.e. which is unpremeditated and utterly new. It is a state of deconceptualized egolessness.

The terms used in our music like *nada*, *swara*, *sruti* etc., have their deep mystical significance also; although their connotations in respect of music are quite different. But it may not be incongruous to state that the coincidence of the same terms in our mysticism and music is more than fortuitous and is perhaps an indication of the latent dynamic content of the outward manifestation of musical notes.

The Hindu view of music treats it as a form of *yoga* and identifies aesthetic emotion with the transcendental delight of self-knowledge. The entire approach of the Hindus towards art, be it architecture, painting or music was one of inward integration, similar to the objective of *yoga* which insisted on mental concentration carried so far as to transcend the distinction between the subject and object and thus realising harmony or unity of consciousness. In music also true creative expression is synonymous with the same spontaneous dissolution of the duality of subject and object.

Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, the great savant and indefatigable advocate of Vedic thought, especially its art and philosophy, quotes Sankaracharya's commentary on the *Brahma Sutras* when the *acharya* draws the analogy of the practice of art and craft to that of *Samprajnata* or *yoga*. Also the concept of prayer for achieving perfection in one's art through divine intimation in dreams, in the *Agni Purana* (Patanjali's *Yoga*

*Sutra* Nos. 1 and 38) indicate the anticipation of modern views that associate myth and dream and art as essentially a similar phenomenon representing the dramatisation of man's innermost hopes and fears. Sukracharya advocates 'the practice of visualization' in art to be identical with that of worship. Just as the worshipper uses the *dhyana mantram* which facilitates his forming a mental picture of the deity as described in the *mantram* and to which he addresses all his prayer, so does the artist follow similar prescriptions and 'proceeds to represent the mental picture' in the form of note patterns and figures of *ragas*. But the essence of all the practice was, 'setting aside the transformations of the thinking principle'; fusion of the subject-object, and the crystal clarity of expression. One finds a similar approach to art in certain European aesthetics also. Goethe is said to have perceived that, "he who attains to the vision of beauty is from himself set free." Riciotto Canudo remarks that "the secret of all art is self-forgetfulness." Laurence Binyon says that "we too should make ourselves empty, that the great soul of the Universe may fill us with Bliss." Behmen says: "It is nought indeed but thine own hearing and willing that do hinder thee so that thou does not see and hear God." Hindu art which includes music, always envisaged art as 'accessible to the concentrated and one-pointed mind without the intervention of the senses.'

*Sangita Ratnakara* (page 14, Vol. I Adyar edition) defines both *Marga Sangita* and *Desi Sangita*. *Marga Sangita*, it says, is that which is *Margita* i.e. the way that was shown by Brahma and other divine beings and which was put into use by Bharata and other great musicians, when it was performed in the audience of the Divine Sankara and is said always to lead towards prosperity and divine bliss. The Hindu ideal in music from the term *nodopasena* used often, shows that it was a form of *yoga* (unity) to put the human en rapport with the divine.

### Social Aspect

In the days gone by more than 15 centuries ago, music was an indispensable, integral part of the very fabric of Hindu social life. No ceremony was performed, no function took place without the prelude or accompaniment of some form of music. Right from *Ramayana* one finds references in plenty about the prominent role of music in Hindu life. In the *Ayodhya-kanda* (71st *Sarga*, 29th *Sloka*), Valmiki describes the amazement of Bharata when he was brought from his mother's place to Ayodhya soon after he demise of Dasarata in the following exclamation: 'how is it that Ayodhya is quiet, a city that always used to resound with the music of *veena*, *bheri* etc.? It is indeed very ominous.'

Bharata Muni says in his *Natyasastra* that *gita* is the *saiya* (bed) of *nataka*. *Nataka* or drama was the main source of entertainment for the people. There were no other distractions like the cinemas, radio or the

television. In fact the word *nagarika* denoting a cultural citizen was applied to only those who could either perform or appreciate music and poetry.

Every aspect of social life was intricately interwoven with music. There were the *sutas*, *magadhas* and *kusilavas*; a hereditary, professional class of wandering minstrels who recited the heroic exploits of the various kings of the epics and other kingdoms then in existence in our country in the form of verses or ballads set to attractive tunes easily assimilable by the people. It may not be inappropriate to infer that the two great Hindu epics were also the result of the nucleus created by the songs from such minstrels. Even today some remnants of this tradition of minstrel songs are available in the *Charanas* and *Bhatas* of Rajasthan, a band of walking gazeteers who recite the genealogies and exploits of all the various kings.

Vatsyayana in his *Kama Sutra*, a book attributed to the 5th century has given a detailed description of the life of an average, ordinary citizen. He says that apart from his daily routine of physical labour, he had in his house, *veena*, a set of colours and a shelf of books. In the evening he invariably went to the Saraswati Mandir, an institution which was invariably present in every city worth the name in those days and attended the meetings of the *Vidagdha goshti* — a kind of art ensemble of both artists and *rasikas* where critical discussions took place on poetics, literature music etc., followed by actual performances. This institution in those days served as an excellent source for scouting talent. Today with all our technological advance and so called highly improved social conditions, we have not found it possible to form an artists' guild in our country, whereas we find that so many centuries ago, Hindu Society's very significant wing was this *Vidigdha Goshti* (*Kamasutra Adhikar I, adhyaya IV*). There were what were known as *Samajas*, a technical term meaning a social gathering wherein people met to enjoy a picnic and have music and dance. It was a very common feature in ancient India. Subsequently when there were signs that these gatherings were tending towards mere revelry, Emperor Asoka forbade them in his edicts.

But all this is of the past. While it may be of psychological comfort and pride that the Hindu can claim such an enviable hoary heritage, it must nevertheless be realised that the present society, with its multifarious fissiparous, dissipating distractions has little chance of a really integrated growth if it does not revitalise its spiritual force and translate it into its daily life. Music is a tremendous force in the achievement of this end. It is more potent than religion or precepts of philosophies; because, it operates on both the mind and heart through suggestions. Because music has rhythm and harmony, they find their way to the inward places of the soul, on which they fasten, imparting grace and making the soul of him who is rightly educated, graceful.

Aristotle says that any kind of emotion could be produced by melody and rhythm. Therefore by music, man becomes accustomed to feeling the right emotions; and so music has the power to form character, and the various kinds of music based on different *ragas*, instruments and styles may be distinguished by their effects on character — in the direction of hope, self-control, abandonment, enthusiasm etc.

“As above, so below” — likewise musical vibrations may be perceived only on the physical plane but its influence on the psyche is inscrutable, but nonetheless the basis of our character.

Therefore, to summarise, if man is to survive as a human being delivered from the threat of being transformed into an automaton in the present stupendously technological and industrial environment, he must immediately galvanize his energy toward something that is not merely mechanical and physical but something that enlivens the mind and elevates the spirit. For this there is no better medium than music which both directly affects our superficial senses and our deep inner sensibilities, thereby facilitating the efflorescence of real culture which is synonymous in its truest sense with self-denial. Music is a universal language; it knows no barriers of caste, creed, community or nation. It is the vibrant dynamic language of the emotions and emotions are practically the same the world over. Hence music would undoubtedly serve as annihilator of attrition between human beings, as an unchallengeable cementing force of man and in addition most significantly lead him upward, toward celestial ecstasy and divine communion.

One of the practical ways of inculcating music into the social fabric of today is through the introduction of music and other fine arts in our educational institutions right from the kindergarten upto college; and also the formation of an artists' guild which would both help promote art as well as the artist; progressive reduction of sensual music; revival of our folk lore and organisation of music concerts by the various state Governments, by sending the musicians of their States to other states where they have not been heard. This would act as both patronage and propagation of the art and the artists. Then perhaps one may hope for creative fusion of the intellectual and spiritual aspect of our great music into our social fabric.

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