

TANTRIC AND CULT DANCES OF ASSAM

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Assam has a distinct tradition of dance and music. The great Chinese traveller Hiuen-tsang, who visited Assam in the seventh century A.D., was entertained almost every day with dances. In the Kamarupa copper plate inscription of King Vanamalavaraman of Kamarupa (9th Century, A.D.) the boats trembling on the waves of Brahmaputra are likened to dancing women agitated at the approach of men dancers. In the Bargaon inscription of Ratnapala, another king of Kamarupa, tributes are paid to *Natesvara Sakara*, the Master of Dances, always exhibiting *tandava*. In *Kalika Purana*, an *Upapurana* written in Kamarupa in the 11th or 12th century, there are profuse references to a number of dances connected with different rituals. According to Prof. Indu Shekhar 'Tantrik and mantric symbols must have served as a basis of gesture-language used on the native stage, which of course, was later developed by the addition of instinctive signs'.¹

Assam has also been known as the greatest seat of the Tantric faith in India. The land is extolled as one where *sakta* Tantricism was fully established. The temple of Kamakhya on the Nilachala Hill, about three miles from present day Gauhati, is still the centre of *sakta* worship in the country. The temple is regarded as belonging to Goddess Kamakhya, who represents the procreative aspect of nature. This and similar other local cults which prevailed in the region even before Aryanisation have found expression in many of the popular dance forms like *Nati* or *Devadasi* dance, *Deodhai*, *Oja-pali* dance in a few forms, *Satriya* and *Bihu* dance.

The *Nati* or *Devadasi* dance flourished in Saivite and Vaishnavite temples of Assam, as such they are said to have been connected with the cults of Vishnu and Siva. But this dance form has almost become extinct now as it is no longer performed in the temples. It exists only in the memories of some old artists. Attempts have been made to revive it by some performing artists who have learnt it from the old artists as a dance-form connected with the dancing tradition of Assam. This institution particularly flourished in the Siva temples of Biswanath Ghat, Dergaon and Dubi. There is historical evi-

dence in support of the fact that this institution existed in some of the temples of Assam. Three *Natis* were taken away from Biswanath Ghat temple by one Satrajit Barua of Decca, an officer of the invading Mughal forces of Aurangzeb.²

The *Natis* used to remain unmarried throughout their lives. However, they lived with their parents and attended the temple services at regular intervals. In course of time, some unpleasant tales were associated with this profession and as a result the *Natis* were looked down upon by some sections of society.³ Probably because of the stigma attached to the profession the artists in course of time felt discouraged in carrying it on and finally it became completely extinct.

The dance was performed twice at the hours of noontide *puja* and evening *arti*. The dances were performed outside the temples on the occasion of Pausha and Chaitra *samkrantis* and Durga Puja. The costume of the *Nati* consisted of three pieces of clean white cloth; a skirt tied to the waist, a long *riha* wound very tightly round the upper part of the body, a thin veil for the head. Ornaments of gold and silver were used profusely. The dance depicts devotion to, and worship of the god of the temple, his *Snana*, *Prasadhana*, dressing, etc. The different basic patterns of the dance have many things in common with the *Sattriya* School of dance.

Deodhani and *Deodhai* dance have been very predominantly connected with the *tantric* aspect of Hinduism. These two dances are performed as part of the orgies connected with *tantric puja*. In the *Deodhani* dance the dancer is said to be inspired by a power by which she is able to foretell what is going to happen in the village or to the village folk in future. *Deodhani* and *Deodhai* dance are connected with the culture of the Bodo-Kachari, the original inhabitants of the state. *Deodhai*, the male oracle, and *Deodhani*, the female oracle, as priestly dances are essential at the time of Bathow worship and the national Kheray festival. According to some scholars, *deodhani* must have served as the precursor to the *Sutradhara*, a key character of Sankaradeva's dramas. But Prof. Hem Barua⁴ does not think so. According to him, *Oja-pali* dance must have been the stimulus for the production of art-theatre.

Oja-pali dances usually accompany the choral singing that is organised on the occasion of the worship of the serpent Goddess Manasa. As such, this kind of dance is associated with the cult of Snake worship. According to Dr. M. Neog 'The mudras of Assam's *Oja-pali* dance may have derived from some *tantric* text like the *Kalika Purana*'.⁵ But these Choral singers also sing songs adapted from the Assamese version of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and some *Puranas*. The first type of *Oja-pali* is called *Suknami*, derived from Sukavi Narayana, the author of *Padma-Purana*, a *manasa* narrative in Assamese verse. The latter type of songs are known as *Vyahar git*, meaning

songs of Vyasa, the author of *Mahabharata*. The Choral-singing of that type is called *Vyahgowa Oja-pali*.

The leader of the *Oja pali* is called *Oja* (leader) and other supporting singers of the chorus are called *pali*. There is a chief among the *palis* who is called *Daina pali*. The *Oja* leads the Chorus, sets the refrain for the *Palis* to repeat it with the marking of time with their feet and the striking of the cymbals with their hands. He also executes dance movements along with gestures of the hands. Many of the dance movements described in the ancient *natya* treatises are still to be seen in this style of dance.

According to Prof. Hem Barua the technique of the *Oja-pali* dances contain most of the primary requisites of the theatre. "The *Oja-pali* dances served as the rock on which the infra-structure of Vaishnava drama was partially built".⁶

The *Suknami Oja-pali* dancers believe that their art was first brought on earth by Arjuna in the role of Brihannala from Indra's heaven. It was introduced to both Hindus and Muslims by Darangi Raja (The King of Darrang) Visvasinha. There are villages in the Darrange district of Assam like Maraigao where Muslim *Suknani Ojas* once lived. Another such village is Kaliapara where Muslim *Kaliya* (pipes) players once lived.

The *Satriya* school of dance is chiefly connected with the cult of Krishna. The great saint poet Sankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.) of Assam established a few *satras*, a sort of monasteries, for the propagation of the tenets of Vainavism and in these *satras* this school of dancing flourished. The great Master introduced a new dramatic device known as *Ankiya Nat*. Most of the *Arkiya Nats* are based on the Krishna theme and in these dramas there is an abundant use of this form of dance. The *Sutradhara* who plays the principal role Sankardeva's *Ankiya Nat*, dances displaying the different *hastas* to signify the subject matter of the verses he recites such as *nandisloka*. His dance starts with a slow tempo, but gradually it gathers momentum. The *Sutradhara* wears a white dress, a turban fitted with silvery ribbon strips, a longsleeved *jama*, and a fluffy skirt tied at the waist with a waist-band. He puts on bangles, a lace with a drum-like golden bead in the middle, dangling ear ornaments of gold and brass anklets.

There are some other forms of *Satriya* dance such as *Geosai-pravesar Nach* (dance depicting the entrance of Lord Krishna with the Gopis), *Gopi pravesar Nach* (the dance portraying the entrance of Gopis of Vraja), *Rasar Nach* (Ras dance of Lord Krishna and the Milkmaids of Vraja), *Jhunura* dance, *Chali-Nach*, *Bahar-Nach*, *Manchok* (depicting the pangs of Gopis at their separation from Krishna), *Yudhar Nach*. These dance forms are more-or-less connected with the cult of Krishna. One particular characteristic of

Assam's *rasa dance* as envisaged by Sankardeva is the absence of Radha as the central figure of the dance circle, although her name appears.

Bihu dances are mainly connected with nature, heralding its different changes, which is so bountiful in Assam. But apart from this the *Bihu* dances are connected with the fertility cult, meant for the welfare of men, animals and crops. Sociologically it was meant to regulate sexual relationships by adding to itself the colouring of a sort of religion. The old beliefs have almost died out and the dance with its sexual characteristics has tended to get modified, but the songs which constituted a language of the heart and a means of expressing the joys of springtime have survived. There are certain *Bihu* songs in which the red *riha* (girl's breast cloth) or bamboo tree is used as a symbol of ripeness for young girls. According to Prof. Hem Barua "all this is connected in a symbolic way with the procreative urge of the earth or of woman".⁷ The vermilion mark in the parting of a girl's hair is a sex symbol; the fact of her maturity and capacity to receive and hold. The *Bihu* dancing girls make abundant use of this vermilion in their make-up.

Bihu, though now recognised as a national festival of Assam, has been enriched by the contributions of Mongoloid and other non-Aryan races of the State. As such many elements of non-Aryan cultures have found expression in these dance forms.

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5. M. Neog, *Sattriya Dances of Assam and their rhythms*.
6. Hem Barua, *Assamese Literature*.
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Introduction

The problem of the origin of music cannot be taken as a question of absolute beginnings. It is a matter of finding out, historically, the first known existence of music and studying systematically the conditions basic to the manifestations of music.

A comparative examination of historical and systematic evidence affords a natural and logical if not a strictly scientific solution to a problem, which like many other problems of origins, does not lend itself to a definite answer.

This article will deal, (with the available evidence from Vedas, Scriptures in Music and texts) on the origin and development of Music.

Can you imagine a world without sound? Sarangadeva in his *Sangita Ratnakara*¹ said that the world is dependent on sound. He arrives at this logical conclusion by stating that *nada* or sound gave rise to *varna* or articulated sound which in its turn, gave rise to words and words created language. And the entire activity of the world is through language. Hence, the world is dependent on sound.

According to our ancient scriptures, the two main divisions of sound are *ahatha* and *anahatha*. *Ahatha* is the sound that is heard and *anahatha* is the sound that is not heard. A sound which is not heard? Yes. Our ancient grammarians and philosophers have described *anahatha* as the sound which has a finer form prior to its being audible. *Anahatha*, they say, is the pure sound which is the material cause of the Universe. The poet² is only echoing them when he says "Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter". Narada in his *Sangita Makharanda*³ says "Sages, saints and even *devas*, having controlled their mind and concentrated on the *anahatha*, get the rest they require and attain salvation".

The ultrasonics⁴ that we hear about in science are perhaps the nearest examples, which can give us an idea about the sound that exists without being heard.

Ahatha the sound that is heard, created the entire music of the world, through the medium of notes. Like any other form of art, the music of the world owes its origin to nature. Music was in nature, long prior to man-made music, like the brilliant colours of flowers and feathers were there long before the art of painting.

All sounds that are produced on this earth have a definite pitch. In musical sounds the pitch is clear and perceptible. But in other sounds the pitch is not so easily perceptible. Without natural music, man-made music would not have come into existence at all. Man's instinct has always been to imitate or conquer nature. It is because of this endless struggle that several inventions and innovations in various realms of knowledge have taken place.

Talking about the origin of music it would be interesting to quote Anton Ehrenzweig one of the celebrated phoneticians here. He said, "It is not unreasonable to speculate that speech and music should have descended from a common origin in a primitive language which was neither speaking nor singing, but something of both. Later this primeval language would have split into two different branches; music would have retained its articulation mainly by pitch or scale and duration or rhythm, while language chose its articulation mainly by tone colour or vowels and consonants."⁵

Music of the world according to our ancient texts is traced from *archika*... single note, *gathika*... double note...*samika* triple note, *svaran-thara*... four notes, *oudava*, five notes...*shadava*, ...six notes and *sampurna*... all the seven notes. Music of the world did pass through all the seven stages.

Tracing the history of music we can presume that organised music of the world was confined within four notes. The Vedic chant of ancient India contained three notes *udatta*, *anudatta* and *svarita* with an occasional effort to a fourth.

The European system of music owes its origin to the Greeks. The very word music was borrowed from Greek. The Lyre is one of the oldest instruments. Orpheus of Greek mythology, is famed for having played the lyre to enchant both mortals and immortals alike. This simple instrument is unfretted, having four strings and hence restricted to four notes only.⁶ The words written to accompany the lyre, known as lyrics, were also composed to four notes.

Music of the world, at this stage, was an art that had essentially a spiritual basis; regarded as a means of approach to the ultimate reality whose

knowledge is bliss. Indian scriptures refer to this as *marga* music. *Marga* means path, but in this context it means, that which is classical.⁷

From this stage, the full fledged seven-note scale might have been arrived at by reciting or playing the notes with different *adhara sruti* or tonic notes.

Let us take Vedic recitation for example. Taking the notes as *ni sa* and *ri* if the same recitation is recited or played from *madhyama sruti* the resultant notes are *ga*, *ma* and *pa* (*sadharana gandhara*, *suddha*, *madhyama* and *panchama*) which are the thirds of *ni sa ri*. If the same notes are played or recited from *panchama sruti* the notes resulting are *ma*, *pa* and *dha* (*suddha madhyamam*, *panchamam* and *Chatrusru ti dhaivatam*) which are the fifths of *ni Sa ri*. Thus the resultant notes from *madhyama Sruti* and *panchama sruti* are concordants or *samvadis* of the basic *ni sa ri*. When you put together these notes, the resultant scale will have apart from *shadjama* and *panchama*, *chatussruti rishabham*, *sadharana gandharan*, *suddha madhyamam*, *chatussruti dhaivatam* and *kaisiki nishadam*. This is the *kharaaharapria raga*.

So it is not without reason to presume that the seven notes might have been arrived at accidentally, through harmony. Let us assume one group reciting Veda at a particular *sruti*. Suppose they are joined by another group reciting the same verses but (accidentally) in *madhyama sruti*; the resultant harmony, which should have been so pleasing to them should have attracted them to probe into the notes that have produced this effect. After the notes are separated, it would have been an easy task for them to complete an octave and arrive at the basic scale.

The same would have been the case with the oldest Greek scale "The Greater Perfect System". Like all other Greek scales this is a descending scale starting from the note *a'*. The basis of this scale is the tetrachord (four strings, presumable of lyre) of a succession of four descending notes forming a two octave descending scale from *a'* to *B* with the addition of low *A*.

a' g' f' e' d' c' b a g f e d c B A.

Now that the seven notes of an octave were achieved, the search for the new scales began. The Universal method known as Modal Shift of Tonic or *graha bheda* was employed. In this process the basic note of an octave is shifted to another note and an octave is completed with the new note as the basic one. From the redistributions of note intervals, new scales emerge.

After the four-note stage, the music of our world came to be known as *desi sangitam*. *Desi* or *ethnic* music, varied from *desa* to *desa* or region to region, depending upon the taste of the people there.

Indian Music exploited modal shift of tonic to the maximum and today Indian music has the richest variety of scales. European system of music stopped with limited application of this process, since it developed on the lines of harmony.

While melody is a sequence of single notes which produce musical phrases, song or tune, harmony is the sounding of two or more notes simultaneously which pleases the ear. The notes which produce this effect are known as concordant notes. In Indian music *vadi swaras* in combination with *samvadi swaras* produce harmony. The *tribhinna gamaka* is an example of harmony.

Panini, one of the greatest Vedic grammarians, in his *siksha* describes Vedic *swaras* as :-

Udatto Nishada Gandharou

Anudatta Rishabha Dhaivatou

Svarita Prabhuvahyethe Shadjama Madhyama Panchamaha:

This is an obvious definition of fifths among the seven notes. "*Svarita prabhavyahethe shadjama, madhyama, panchama*" gives the clue for the birth of seven notes from the Vedic *saGika* referred to earlier in this article. *Svarita* is usually referred to as the basic note for Vedic recitation.⁸

In European music, harmony is offered openly, ready blended. But in Indian music harmony comes concealed, to be discovered and realised by the listener. While the first set of notes that are sounded still resound in the mind's chamber the second phrase of notes flows in, to complement the first ones in a perfect harmony. There are ample examples that could be offered in support of this theory. Most of the Thyagaraja *kirtanas*, which have successfully stood the test of time are very good examples. The harmonic and contrapuntal devices used are so consistent that they cannot be brushed aside as freaks. The late Umayalpuram brothers Krishna Bhagavathar and Sundara Bhagavathar, inspite of their extensive knowledge of *swara* singing and *niraval* used to sing only Thyagaraja (their *guru's*) *kirtanas* without *alapana*, *swara kalpana* or their own embellishments or the so-called improvements. The purpose behind this should have been to keep intact the tradition involved in these *kirtanas*, and hand them down to the next generation. Again the established *paddati* or tradition of singing the first "*sangati*" of the *kirtana* before the start of *anupallavi* strengthens this view on harmony. Certain established *sancharas* in *ragas* will also illustrate this theory. The following are only a few examples:

Pallavi of Chakkani Rajamargamu:

/; ; ; R g R S.....

Anupallavi of Chakkani Rajamargamu:

/; ; ; D n D P..... (Fifths of first set)

Pallavi of Tolinenu (Kokiladhwani):

; ; ; s R, G, m/D ; ;

Anupallavi swaras

; ; ; m N, D, d/S; ; (concordants)

The last phrases of *muktayiswaram* in *Bhairavi Varnam* (*Viribhoni*)

Ś ; ; N D P Second set is the perfect fifths of first,
P ; ; M G R Third set perfect concordants of the
S ; ; R N D second.

The popular phrase in *Bhairavi alapana*

G ; ; r (S mGm r) (Fifths)

N ; ; d (M sNs d)

G ; ; r (S mGm r)

Dharbari; N S R G ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ;

G M P D ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ;

N S R G ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; m r s D ; ; ; ;

n m p G ; ; ; ;

m r s D ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; N ; ; ; R ; ; ;

S ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ;

Lu-Tsu-Chun-Chiu, the oldest book on Chinese music written around 3rd century B.C., contains details about the Chinese system of fifths. By the same time the Greek music was getting organised under the Pythagorean system of music devised by the father of Greek music, Pythagoras. The reference to harmony in the Vedas probably can be treated as the earliest. The ancient scale of Chinese music which dates back to 2697 B.C., when Emperor Huang Ti ruled China is essentially *Audava* or Pentatonic. Later on during the end of the 12th century, under the Chou dynasty, two more notes were added to complete the seven notes of an octave namely, *Huan-Chung*, *Tai-Tsu*, *Ku-Hsi*, *Chung-Lu*, *Lin-Chung*, *Nan-Lu* and *Ying-Chung*.

The scales that are used by various systems of music sound entirely different from each other because of the differences in the approach and the texture of the musical instruments. Structure of the musical instruments varied from country to country due to the availability of new materials. Listening habits and environmental conditions for music concerts varied according to the climatic conditions of the respective country. In a South Indian temple procession *nageswaram* concerts start late in the night and continue till the early hours of next morning. The artistes including the percussionists stand and perform and the audience listens to them for hours together, standing. The South Indian climate permits such an environment for listening while in the Western countries music concerts are mostly confined to concert halls and theatres. Probably this is one of the reasons why Indian music does not have bass instruments compared to its western counterpart. The "*Thimiri nayanam*" is a high pitched, loud instrument which could be

heard distinctly from a long distance. The *veenas* played in concerts, upto three decades ago, were tuned in the range of G to B with high tension strings. The male vocalists sang at a pitch (basic pitch) of F and even G! The voice culture which contained practice of *akara gamakas* etc. were all done at the peak volume, keeping in view the distance between the listener in the last row and the performer himself. The modulations were proportionate to the initial volume taken—something comparable to the stage whisper. It should not be mistaken that volume and audibility are the only criteria of this process. A certain amount of depth is achieved by this technique which is quite essential for Indian music. Now a days electronics are played a great role in improving the tonal qualities of the instruments.

It is well known that folk music of the different parts of the world sound similar and were also responsible for the development of modern music.

Rhythm forms an inseparable part of life not to speak of music. Human beings develop a sense of rhythm more by instinct than by cultivation. Primitive music which is essentially rhythm-oriented, can mysteriously awaken instincts, more elemental than those appealed to by any other form of primitive art. Rhythm instruments were also used for communication at the early stages; a language was developed on rhythm. Early rhythm instruments did not have a perceptible pitch. But, in the later stages, rhythm instruments were constructed in such a way as to give a definite pitch. We have an endless variety of rhythm instruments in the world. They vary from a simple tonal stick to sophisticated well developed rhythm instruments of today. Rhythm is a unit measure of time; it cannot be different in different systems of music.

But the development of rhythm in Indian music is phenomenal. For an Indian percussionist, the field of *laya* offers wide scope for improvisation... from simple arithmetic to complicated higher mathematics!

While the early scriptural music of the world followed rigid rules of *lakshana*, the *desi* or ethnic music depended upon the religious historic and geographical backgrounds. *Desi* or ethnic music adjusted itself from country to country to suit the tastes of the people there.

The musical systems of the world were all developed from the same methods and materials, whether it is

Sa Ri Ga Ma Pa Da Ni or

Do re me fa so la ti or

Huan-chung, Tai-tsu, Ku-Hsi, Chung-lu, Lin-ching, Nan-lu,

Ying-chung....

They are one and the same; it is only the super-structure of these systems that vary and diverge to conceal the truth about the universality of music.

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2. John Keats, *English poet*.
3. Narada in his *Sangitamakharanda* said:
 "Anahatho Hathaschaiva sa Nado dvididho mathaha"
 "Akasa Sambhavo Nado yaha sonahatha sangyathaha"
 "Thasmin Anahathe Nade Viramam prapya Devathaha;
 Yoginopi Mahathmanastha Danahatha Sangnyake
 Mano nikshipya Samyanthi Muktim Prayathamanasaha".
4. Ultrasonic is a sound which is beyond human audibility since its frequency range is more than 20,000, vibrations per second.
5. B. Chaitanya Deva, *Psycho Acoustics of Music and Speech* (Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision & Hearing-Anton Ehrenzweig)
6. "The early Greek lyre had four strings and was confined to four notes only Herbert Spencer *Origin and Function of Music*.
7. The word *Marga* is derived from *Mryg* meaning "to seek or search after" but in this context it means "that which is classical"—Kunhi Rajah's commentary on "Sangita-ratnakara".
8. P. Sambamoorthy, *History of Indian Music*.
9. "Harmony in Western music is comparatively of a recent origin. It was only around 15th & 16th century, it got organised under Monteverdi. It is an accepted fact that the orientals tried harmony, exhausted it and finally discarded it." But the Author's theory is that the Orientals have not discarded harmony—far from it. They have evolved a superior sophisticated type of harmony which had thrown into the background the ready blended, open type harmony.
 "It should be equally known that India's instrumental music possesses a number of harmonic and contrapuntal devices which no good player fails to demonstrate after the main theme is fully established. Therefore, the difference between European music and Indian music is not a matter of melody versus harmony but one of emphasis.
The Story of Indian Music, by C. Goswamy.
10. Panini's *Siksha*.

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