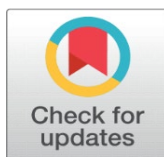
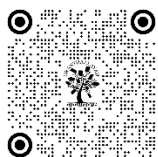


HARMONIES OF ANTIQUITY: EXPLORING THE VEDIC SYMPHONY OF MUSIC AND DANCE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Music, a cherished aspect of the cultural fabric of ancient Bharatvarsha (India), flourished as one of the prominent Vedic arts. Believed to have originated from the Gandharva Veda, music was integral to the lives of the people for countless generations, signifying their advanced understanding of melody and rhythm. This art form, foundational to the Sama Veda for chanting mantras, boasts an unparalleled legacy, enriched with intricate Ragas and Ragnis that often elude the untrained ear.

Keywords: Music, Vedic, Arts, Bharatvarsha, Samveda, Gandharva Veda

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE VEDIC SYMPHONY: MUSIC AND DANCE IN ANCIENT INDIA

With the progression of other developments, Vedic arts emerged, and music has been a cherished element among the people of Bharatvarsha (ancient India) for countless centuries. This vast knowledge is believed to have been originally imparted to humanity through the Gandharva Veda. The variety and complexity of music, along with the rigorous study of numerous instruments, underscore their advancements in this art form.

Music in Bharatvarsha has been known and understood since ancient times and was foundational to the Sama Veda for chanting mantras. While the Gandharva Veda, which focused on music, has been lost, the rich legacy of musical knowledge endures. The multitude of Ragas and Ragnis is vast, with their subtle distinctions often imperceptible to the untrained ear.

1.2. VEDIC INSTRUMENTS AND MUSICAL HERITAGE

Traditional Indian instruments like the veena, tabla, sarod, and sitar highlight the sophistication of this art. Crafted with precision and requiring years of mastery, these instruments accompanied the sacred chants and songs that defined Vedic rituals. Alain Danielou, a renowned historian, emphasized the ancient Hindus' mastery of sound theory, evident in the musical hymns of the Rig Veda and the Sama Veda's refined chanting system.

Alain Danielou, a French historian and the head of the UNESCO Institute for Comparative Musicology, presented his theory on the development of Indian music in the publication "Northern Indian Music." According to Danielou, ancient Hindus (Vedic Indians) were well-versed in the theory of sound, its metaphysics, and its physics. The hymns of the Rig Veda provide the earliest examples of words set to music, and by the time of the Sama Veda, a sophisticated system of chanting had been established. By the era of the Yajur Veda, various professional musicians had emerged, including lute players, drummers, flute players, and conch blowers. Music was thus cultivated in India from very early times, as evidenced by the appearance of the seven notes, sa (shadja), re (rishabha), ga (gandhara), ma (madhyama), pa (panchama), dha (dhaivata), and ni (nishada), in the Sama Veda in their current order.

2. MUSIC AS A LEGACY

Sir William Hunter, in "The Indian Empire," also shed light on the advanced nature of the Vedic music system. He stated that a regular system of notation had been developed before the age of Panini, with the seven notes identified by their initial letters. This notation passed from Vedic Brahmins through the Persians to Arabia and was later introduced into European music by Guido d'Arezzo in the early 11th century. However, Hindu music experienced a period of stagnation under the rule of the Muhammadans, who banned music and dancing, forcing practitioners to hide. Many Hindu musicians converted to Islam during Akbar's rule to continue their craft, giving rise to Muslim Gharanas. Thus, the Vedic system of music persisted, albeit under the guise of an Islamic contribution.

Anne C. Wilson, in "A Short History of the Hindu System of Music," summarized the significance of the Vedic music system, noting that it is the world's oldest written music science. This system's primary purpose was to maintain the proper pronunciation of Vedic texts through chanting, achieved using musical notes with varying meters. The Sama Veda, in particular, focused on music and introduced the system of seven notes, called saptak, which became the backbone of both Indian and Western music. Sarjerao Ramrao Gcharge-Deshmukh, in his book "Ramayana: A Fact or Fiction?" explained the similarities and differences between the Indian and Western systems. In both, the first note of the saptak is repeated at the end, but in Indian tradition, the repeated note is not counted, making it a group of seven notes versus eight in Western music.

The Indian sapta-svaras (seven notes) are: Sa Ri Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa.

The Western octave is: Do Re Me Fa So La Ti Do.

While the Indian system is based on a saptak, it uses an octave by dividing a saptak (eight notes) into two groups of four each. Ragas, based on saptakas, derive from 72 parent thhats (scales), which include all seven notes, while a raga does not necessarily include all of them. In a thhat, the seven notes are divided into two groups, starting with achal svara, a constant note that cannot be interchangeably used as a soft (komal) or sharp (teevra) note. The Indian thhats, equivalent to the Western octave, are made of two groups of four notes. The 72 thhats are created using combinations of the notes with the achal svara rule.

In conclusion, all Vedic literature is essentially poetry supported by an elaborate system of music with rules and meters suitable for different emotions. Thus, in Indian tradition, literature and music are inseparable. Although every region has its poetic legacy, few match the antiquity of Indian literature and music. Western music is divided into half tones, while Indian music includes quarter tones. Moreover, male ragas have 36 associated female ragnis, which differ in a softer and more feminine manner. Additional ragnis vary from the main ragas and are often assigned to specific times of day or seasons to evoke particular moods and feelings.

Six principal raagas are as follows:

- 1) Hindol, evoking the sweetness and freshness of spring.
- 2) Shree Raag, invoking the calmness and silence of the evening.
- 3) Megh Malhar, bringing the mood of an approaching thunderstorm and rain.
- 4) Deepak, now extinct, once called to light the lamps of approaching death.
- 5) Bhairavi, popular and evoking the freshness of dawn and the caroling of birds.
- 6) Malkosh, producing a feeling of gentle stimulation.

3. DANCE AS A DIVINE EXPRESSION

Vedic dance transcended entertainment, serving as a medium to express divine principles and cosmic rhythms. Lord Shiva, revered as Nataraja, symbolizes this connection, performing a cosmic dance to dissolve illusion and guide souls toward liberation. Nataraja is worshiped as the king of dancers. Shiva's dance symbolizes the rhythm of cosmic energy that pervades the universe and the destruction of illusion, offering souls the chance to attain liberation (moksha).

Traditional Indian dance is deeply spiritual and often features prominently in religious rituals, holy days, and festivals. Vedic dance dates back to prehistoric times, with Bharata Muni composing his "Natya Shastra," a treatise on drama and dance, over 2000 years ago. Some scholars believe he lived in the 5th century BCE. His text describes how Lord Brahma, the secondary engineer of universal creation, introduced dance and drama to humanity millions of years ago, shortly after the Earth was formed.

Ranjani Saigal elaborates on this origin: "The gods and goddesses requested Lord Brahma to create a Veda that would be easy for the common man to understand, especially in Kali-yuga. In response, Lord Brahma created the Panchama-Veda, or Natya Veda, an essence of the four main Vedas. He took pathya (words) from the Rig Veda, abhinaya (expressive elements) from the Yajur Veda, geeth (music and chant) from the Sama Veda, and rasa (emotional essence) from the Atharva Veda to form the Natya Veda. Brahma handed this to the sage Bharata, who then wrote the Natyashastra. Bharata, along with Gandharvas (celestial musicians) and Apsaras (heavenly dancers), performed natya, nritya, and nritya before Lord Shiva, solidifying the text as the authoritative guide on classical Indian dance techniques, especially Bharatnatyam and Odissi."

Today, Vedic or Indian dance has evolved into various disciplined traditions and styles. Families often ensure their daughters spend several years mastering these arts. Dance involves precise postures, facial and hand gestures (mudras), movements, and footwork, all synchronized to music to convey specific meanings, moods, and stories. Many South Indian temples, like those in Chidambaram, are known for their 108 sculpted dance poses.

Dance forms derived from the Natyashastra include Bharatnatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi, Mohiniattam, Krishna Attam, Bhagavata Mela, and Manipuri. These styles narrate stories from epics such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, Krishna-lila from the Bhagavata Purana, and other Puranas. Other dance dramas include Dashavatara in Maharashtra and Yakshagana in Karnataka.

In these dance forms, movements, music, and expressions (hastas and mudras) convey various moods like anger (krodha), envy (matsara), greed (lobha), lust (kata), and ego (mada). When performed according to spiritual standards, akin to yoga, dancers can invoke high spiritual states, unifying their inner selves with God. This can transform the environment, allowing the audience to experience divine presence and spiritual upliftment.

Considering the spiritual purpose of these dances, they are often performed on special holy days during festivals, at temples for the deity's pleasure, and for audiences. Thus, dance is both an art form and a form of worship.

Ancient Indian classical dance significantly influenced nearby regions, such as Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia. Today, this ancient art enjoys widespread appreciation and a prominent place on the international stage.

4. THEATRICAL EVOLUTION OF DANCE

Dance evolved into theater and drama as far back as the times of the Rig Veda. Bharatamuni is credited with preserving and presenting the text for dance and drama, although he himself admitted to not knowing how long ago it

all began. Tradition holds that the origins of drama trace back to Lord Brahma. Brahma's work was quite complex, and Bharatamuni simplified and systematically made it more accessible to the masses. The Natyashastra encompasses all modes of emotional expression in speech, gestures, movements, and intonations in actions. Renowned dramatists include Kalidasa, the playwright of the Gupta court in Ujjain, and Bhavabhuti. Thus, the art of dance and drama has always been integral to the spiritual path of Vedic culture.

5. THE ARTISTIC VISION OF VEDIC CULTURE

Vedic art transcends mere aesthetics, acting as a spiritual gateway to higher truths. Paintings and sculptures from this era embody divine energies, designed to inspire meditation and transcendence. The Ajanta cave murals, with their vibrant colors and intricate lines, exemplify this sacred artistry, earning admiration from global scholars and artists. It was always used to bring us to a higher purpose of existence and awareness. In this way, it was always sacred and beheld the sacred. Still today it is used to allow others to enter into a transcendental experience. It may also present the devotional objects of our meditation.

Vedic paintings or symbols are unique in that they can convey the same spiritual energy, vibration, and insight they represent. Through the meditation and devotional mood of the artist, the art becomes a manifestation of higher reality. In this way, the painting or symbol serves as a doorway to the spiritual essence within.

These artworks function like windows into the spiritual world. Through this window, we can experience what is called darshan of the Divine or divinities, God, or His associates. Darshan is not merely seeing the Divine; it is also an exchange of seeing and being seen by the Divine.

Thus, the art or the deity transcends mundane materials such as paint, paper, stone, or metal. It becomes completely spiritual, allowing the deity to reveal Himself or Herself. The truth of spiritual reality can pierce through the darkness of material energy and illuminate our consciousness.

In Vedic art, every element has significance, from postures and gestures to colors, instruments, and weapons. Each conveys a principle or purpose that often needs to be explained to those unfamiliar with the symbolism. Understanding the deeper meaning of the artwork enhances its depth for those who can perceive it, making it more suitable for meditation and contemplation.

British researcher Mr. Griffith praised the artists of the Ajanta cave paintings, stating, "The artists who did the paintings in Ajanta were the topmost people in the world of creations. Even the straight vertical lines drawn with easy brush-strokes on the walls of Ajanta are amazing. But when one looks at the lines drawn parallel to the horizon and the curves sees the similarity and wonders at the thousand complexities of creation, it is felt that this is nothing short of a miracle."

The Ajanta cave painters used a blend of indigo and varnish, often combining up to 14 natural plant-derived colors to achieve the desired shade. This use of such paints predates their use in Europe.

To this day, the unique art and paintings of Indian culture continue to captivate the world with their vibrant colors, intricate details, evocative moods, and the pastimes they illustrate.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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