

# Ancient Indian Music and the Concept of Man

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## *Introduction*

Music does not embody concepts. It cannot. Only language embodies concepts. Yet we are surely tempted to ask: How is change in musical form related to change in the concept of man from one epoch to another? Or, in other words, do changes in musical forms bear any intimate relation with changes in ideas concerning man: his nature, his place in the world, his goals?

Before we can attempt any answer to this question, a tricky problem intrudes: How are we to correlate change in musical forms with change in concepts? Can there be a yardstick that can gauge relative change with any right and fair degree of dispassion? Let me put the question in another way: Can we, on hearing a piece of music or a corpus of musical forms, have an idea of the concept of man that the music implies or assumes? The answer, I think, has to be a 'No' unless we take extra-musical factors like words that are sung or the lore surrounding music into account. Conversely, can we, on becoming familiar with the concept of man held by certain musicians, or even certain cultures or epochs, come to know the forms of music they might have created? I doubt if this is possible. Let me take an example: The Renaissance in Europe was an age when the entire spirit of the times, both in thought and art, was so profoundly influenced by classical ideals that a student who knew the general character of the Renaissance, but not its music, might expect a similar manifestation in music too. Yet Renaissance musical forms, unlike painting, sculpture and thought, show no Greek traits. They are basically different. Greek music was melodic, while Renaissance music is polyphonic and harmonic. Let us take another example that is closer to us and, therefore, more telling perhaps. Concepts of man have certainly undergone many changes in India over the last two centuries, within which time a whole new epoch has dawned. Yet, do we see a similar transformation in music? We do not. Many people, indeed, complain that music has not changed to suit the modern outlook and ethos.

Let us also look at the matter from another angle: Are profound changes in music accompanied by analogous changes in concepts and weltanschauung? Polyphony was introduced in Europe in the ninth century and, by the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, it gradually replaced the earlier monodic music. No change could be more profound in musical history. But do we perceive a similar change in the concept of man? We do not. The great change from the pagan to the Christian ethos had already taken place centuries earlier, and Europe, from the fifth to the ninth centuries, continued to create within the monodic system it had inherited. No doubt there were transformations: the introduction of new forms and a new spirit, but they were minor compared with the fundamental change that came about with polyphony. One can see no change in the European world of thought which could be associated with this basic change in music.

Now let us take an example from India. During the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries there was a change in Indian music with the introduction of the *thāta-melakartā* system which superseded the earlier *grāma-murchhanā* scheme. Accompanying this change in theory was the introduction of the *tānpūrā* as the drone.<sup>1</sup> The historical outlines of this change remain vague in comparison with what we know from Europe. This is because music-history in India is hazy in comparison with music-history in Europe. Yet the occurrence of a major change is beyond doubt. But it is difficult to think of a parallel change, during the period, in the concept of man or in the concepts held by men which can, in a relevant sense, be said to have accompanied the change in music. True, this was a period of great political upheaval when the old order was being shattered to give way to a new set-up. But the moot point is: With what, in this change, can we connect a change in music? I cannot think of any element or conjunction of elements which one can define with any certainty. Islam certainly brought with it many new movements of thought and culture and art. The influence of these on poetry, painting, architecture and social institutions is explicit enough. But the new influence hardly provides any perspective for understanding the change in music. Even the fact that there was a great infusion of new forms in the wake of the conquest does not really afford a satisfactory explanation for this change. For Islamic music is not drone-dominated. Moreover, the change that occurred was nowhere as drastic as the change from monody to polyphony. What happened can, I think, be best characterised as a rearrangement of old forms around a new fulcrum, the drone. No amount of infusion of new forms, let alone a change in *weltanschauung*, can explain this phenomenon. A greater change in *weltanschauung* occurred in Indian history with the advent of the British rule, European ideas and ideals; yet all this left music unaffected.

What I have said was intended as a brief cautionary preface to any attempt at understanding music in relation to concepts. I do not mean to deny that many major, enduring movements and currents in music can be fruitfully understood in the perspective of major movements in ideas and cultural ethos. Let me illustrate this in relation to *sāma* and some later currents in musical culture. Before I proceed I must stress the fact that we cannot really explain the *forms* which *sāma* and later music took from what we know of the Vedic and later concepts of man and his place in the world. But the lore surrounding music and the ideas held about music can certainly illuminate important aspects of Indian musical culture. It can help us understand concepts and attitudes *about* music even if it does not really explain its forms. Attitudes to music, the concepts we hold about its value and nature, create the ethos and ambience in which music is made. Understanding them is important for an understanding of the musical culture within which forms are created, cherished and preserved, if not of the forms themselves.

### *Sāma Music*

For the Vedic people, *sāma* music, like the Vedic *mantra*, was not created but revealed, *dṛṣṭa*; also, like the Vedic *mantra*, it was immutable: not a syllable could be changed in a *mantra* and not a note in the *sāma stotra*. Like the *mantra*, *sāma* was associated with *yajña*. Inherent in the Vedic concept of *yajña* was an idea of cosmic co-functioning and reciprocation: through *yajña*, gods and men enter into a relation of give and take.

The image of the cosmos that emerges from Vedic concepts is that of an organic whole consisting of discrete parts functioning reciprocally in unison. I would like in this context to relate a story from a *Brāhmaṇa* text, the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*, belonging to the *Jaiminīya śākhā* of the *Sāmaveda*.<sup>2</sup> The story concerns a dispute for supremacy among six gods: Agni, Vāyu, Ādītya, Prāṇa, Anna and Vāk. Each stakes his claims with arguments. Agni says: 'I am the mouth of the gods. And of men. To me are given the *yajñā* offerings. I distribute food to gods and men. Without me gods and men would remain without a mouth with which to feed themselves. There would be no *yajñā* offerings and consequently no food for gods and men. The whole purpose of existence will be defeated. Nothing will remain.' All gave assent to Agni's words. Without him, they all agreed, nothing would remain. Then Vāyu spoke: 'I am the *prāṇa*, the breath of life in the gods. And in men. If I go away, life, too, shall be washed away. Without me all will be defeated and nothing will remain.' All gave assent to Vāyu's words too. Without him, they agreed, nothing would remain.

The other gods argued in a similar vein till each saw the truth of the other's claim. They saw that each was dependent on the other, and without any one of them the whole would be defeated<sup>3</sup>

एकैकामेवानु स्मः । स यन्न नः सर्वासिं  
देवतानामेकाचन न स्यात् तत इदं सर्वं पराभवेत् ।

This mode of reciprocal functioning, with each part performing its innate function, was, in the Vedic view, what made the whole cosmos exist and move. The true, inherent rhythm of this movement, a rhythm which made everything fall in its proper place and season (*ṛtu*) was *ṛta*. Man was as much part of the *ṛta* as were the gods: both interdependent on each other, acting as it were, as counter-points to each other. Indeed, the Vedic conception of the cosmos readily brings to mind the image of an orchestra playing different melodies to produce a single harmony.

This conception was reflected in the performance of the *yajña* ritual too. It was a ritual performed by a group of priests with different functions, acting in unison. Part of the *ritual* in the more important *yajñā*-s was the singing of hymns to the gods. This was done by the *sāma* priests, who sang *ṛca*-s from the Rigveda to music, which (like the *ṛca*-s themselves) was revealed and transcendental. *Sāma* itself was sung by a group of three singers, the *prastotā*, the *pratīhartā*, the *udgātr*, often aided by a number of subsidiary singers, the *upagātr*-s. To each of the three main singers was assigned a different part of the five-or seven-part *sāma* structure. One of the parts was sung by two musicians separately. The finale was sung by all together.

Connected with the Vedic concept of *ṛta* was the notion of what has been termed cosmic correspondences. Everything in this world, however seemingly disparate, had an inner mystic correspondence with other things, a correspondence which is often spoken of as a relation of identity. Every part of the *yajñā* ritual had a cosmic correspondence which often also provided its *raison d'être*. Similarly, every element in the human microcosm had its correspondent in the macrocosm. The *Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka* texts are full of such correspondences. I would like to quote here an example that concerns *sāma*. A *sāma*, we have said, could be sung in seven parts; these were the seven *bhakti*-s: *hiṅkāra*; *prastāva*; *ādi* (or *pranava*); *udgītha*; *pratīhāra*; *upadrava*; and *nidhana*.

The *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* speaks of a relation of identity between these *bhakti*-s and various aspects of the cosmos. Thus each *bhakti* is said to correspond to a different quarter in space: *hiṅkāra* is the east, *prastāva* the south, *ādi* the west, *udgītha* the north, *pratihāra* is that quarter, *upadrava* is the *antarikṣa* and *nidhana* is this quarter.<sup>4</sup> Another passage says: *hiṅkāra* is Mind, *prastāva* is Speech, *udgītha* is *Prāṇa*, the life-breath, *hiṅkāra* is the Moon, *prastāva* is Fire, *udgītha* is *Āditya*, the Sun, and so on.<sup>5</sup> At another place we find: *hiṅkāra* is the season of spring, *prastāva* is summer, *udgītha* is the season of rain, *pratihāra* autumn, and *nidhana* winter.<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning in parenthesis that this ancient feeling for correspondence has echoes in our own assigning of different seasons to different *raga*-s. The idea that different musical forms could correspond to different hours of the day has also an ancient parallel, for another passage reads: *hiṅkāra* is the hour before sunrise, *prastāva* is the hour of the half-risen sun, *ādi* is the hour when cows set forth for pasture, the midday is *udgītha*, *pratihāra* is the afternoon, *upadrava* the hours of dusk when the sky becomes red, and *nidhana* the hour when the sun has set.<sup>7</sup>

The ancient Vedic concept of man and his relation to gods and the world was clearly a concept of mutuality and innate interrelationships. Given this concept, one would reasonably expect its expression in music to be in the form of polyphony. There was even the presence of group singing. And yet from all accounts and evidence, the music was monodic. Indeed, all subsequent music history in India, which avowedly begins with *sāma* is a history of monodic music. But music could quite conceivably have taken an entirely different form right from the Vedic period.

Perhaps even more than the forms of *sāma*, the Vedic *attitude* to *sāma* has played a crucial role in subsequent musical history. The Vedic regard for *sāma* shines out bright and clear from all their deliberations. It shines out even from the little we have quoted, and that, too, from a single text. *Sāma*, for the ancients, was an essential element in the ritual process and consequently an essential element in the total harmony of the world. Through *sāma* one could participate in *ṛta*.

Through it one could also attain *amṛta*, supreme immortal being. It could lead one to *brahma*, the highest truth and knowledge, and it could be the source of *rasa*, the greatest bliss. In the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*, the *gāyatra sāma* is identified with the mystic syllable 'Om', which is supreme *brahma*.<sup>8</sup> 'Om' is the foundation on which the world stands. A legend related in this *Brāhmaṇa* reports a question which Pṛthvi, son of Vena, asked of the divine *vrātya*-s: the heavens, he said in a verse, rest on Sūrya, the Sūrya on Pṛthvī and the Pṛthvī on Āpaḥ, the primal waters. On what, he asked, do these waters rest? 'Om' was the answer.<sup>9</sup> This *gāyatra sāma* is elsewhere in the *Brāhmaṇa* identified with *amṛta*:<sup>10</sup> तदेतदमृतं गायत्रम् । एतेन वै प्रजापतिरमृतत्वमगच्छत् । एतेन देवाः । एतेनर्षयः ॥ *Gāyatra* is the instrument by which the noose of death can be loosened.<sup>11</sup>

*Sāma* is, therefore, an *upāsana*: a path to ultimate realisation. Āruṇi asked Vasiṣṭha Caikitāneya as to which god he worshipped. "We worship *sāma*," was the proud answer: Agni, Pṛthvī, the primal waters (*āpaḥ*), the *antarikṣa*, the heavens, he added, were all but aspects of *sāma*.<sup>12</sup>

*Sāma*, then, was cherished with the greatest esteem that the Vedic people harboured for what they valued. One could, however, object here that *sāma*

was not prized for its music but for the *ṛk mantra*-s, the really cherished possessions of which the *sāma* music was no more than a vehicle. This was not so, for *sāma* was a revealed form in its own right, just as the *ṛca*-s. Further, in many cases, *sāma* was valued for music alone. An example is that of the *anṛca sāma*. *Anṛca sāma* was a form of *sāma* that had no *ṛk* base and was sung to meaningless syllables. A story speaks of its transcendental powers. The gods coveted heaven. But try as they might, they could not attain their goal. Frustrated, they went to Prajāpati for advice. Prajāpati told them that they could attain *svarga*, the heavenly world of light, through *anṛca sāma*. The gods, therefore, emptied the *sāma* of its *mantra* content and through it attained *svarga*.<sup>13</sup>

*Aśarīra sāma* was perhaps another name for *anṛca sāma* (for the *ṛk* has been called the *śarīra* of *sāma* in the above story). A legend, seemingly historical, tells of the great occult powers of *aśarīra sāma*. Kaupyeya Uccaiḥśravā, the king of Kurus, was a close and dear friend of the Keśī Dārbhya, the king of Panchala. Uccaiḥśravā died, leaving Dārbhya sad and sorrowful. Once, when Dārbhya had gone out hunting, he saw Uccaiḥśravā in the woods. Dārbhya tried to embrace his friend. But Uccaiḥśravā was like empty space or the insubstantial wind; he was disembodied. Dārbhya could not touch him. "What has happened to your body and form?" he asked his friend. In reply Uccaiḥśravā spoke of the *aśarīra sāma*: the power of this *sāma*, he said, had removed from him the dross of flesh and he was now a disembodied spirit. Through *aśarīra sāma*, he said, a man could attain the abode of gods. He asked Dārbhya to look for a *brāhmaṇa* who knew this *sāma*. For it was through this *sāma* that the gods themselves had become disembodied spirits. Dārbhya searched everywhere in his kingdom but found none who knew this *sāma*. Then one day he met a *brāhmaṇa* named Prātṛda Bhālla who lived in a *śmaśāna* (a cemetery). Prātṛda Bhālla was an expert in *aśarīra sāma*. The *śarīra sāma*, the *sāma* sung to *ṛca*-s, he said, was within the reach of death, but *aśarīra sāma* was *amṛta* (*atha yadaśarīram tadamṛtam*). Finally, through the power of this *sāma*, Bhālla turned Dārbhya into a disembodied god.<sup>14</sup>

The story illustrates the ancients' belief in the power of music alone in certain of its forms. Music was for them capable of becoming the path divine. It was perhaps practised in this capacity within certain esoteric circles as the association of Prātṛda Bhālla within the *śmaśāna* suggests. This suggestion is strengthened by the fact that Bhālla, according to the story, was opposed by the more 'regular' *sāma* singers of Dārbhya's kingdom. I would here like to note in passing that this legend is the earliest precursor, that I know of, of the later stories about the occult powers that certain musicians such as Tansen possessed, and similar powers inherent in certain musical forms, such as the *rāga* Dīpaka.

### *The Sanyāsī Ideal*

I have tried to stress the Vedic people's regard for music at some length because this early attitude struck deep roots in the Indian psyche and kept the impulse to music alive under certain overwhelming pressures. The attacks came from what may be called the *sanyāsī* weltanschauung that had its source in a very ancient

*muni* or *śramaṇa* tradition, but which grew to overpower the Indian mind in the epoch which produced great *sanyāsī*-s like the Buddha, Mahāvīra and a host of lesser, though cumulatively very influential, teachers. The Vedic fold itself was moved by the *sanyāsī* ideal and the older ideal of *yajñā* and *ṛta* lost its vigour and vitality. This ideal was now on the defensive and was being metamorphosed by the incorporation of new elements, many of which were quite alien to its former spirit.

Music had no place in the *sanyāsī* weltanschauung. The world in this view was nothing but misery, *duḥkha*. Man was bound to the world by desire and he was bound to suffer in an endless cycle of births as long as this bondage lasted. Liberation lay in transcending the world to *nirvāṇa* or *mokṣa*, where alone was bliss. The road to *nirvāṇa* led away from the lure of the senses and its objects which tied man to the world through desire. Every temptation that shackled man to the world was to be shunned. This included music, for music fed the sensual fire. The ban on music encompassed all music, for music was an intoxicant by nature.

In practice, however, music in some of its forms was accepted. No ideal, however austere and music-shunning, ever totally rejects music when translated into a large cultural movement. But the only function that music could rightly have was to act as a vehicle for words which expressed the *sanyāsī* experience and ideal. Music, in its pure forms, too, was certainly tolerated, for many who were moved by the *sanyāsī* ideal were, no doubt, moved by music too; but music was, in the ultimate analysis, an intruder in this world. To the Vedic people, music could be an *upāsana*, a path divine; now it was fuel for *vāsanā*, the path of eternal misery.

It is easy to see why we hear of no distinctive Buddhist or Jain music. There was no true impulse for music in the Buddhist or Jain ethos. Yet this world view had important consequences in music history. For, like the Vedic weltanschauung, the *sanyāsī* ethos, too, exercised a deep influence on the Indian mind. The presence of these two contrary attitudes was bound to produce a tension and ambivalence that has left its stamp in the history of all subsequent musical culture.

## Gāndharva

After the age of *sāma*, music found its next great creative impulse in the theistic cults of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. These cults had grown from small beginnings in the Vedic age, and had imbibed and amalgamated much from different strands of worship and thought current in the subsequent period of spiritual and intellectual ferment through which they grew. These cults claimed to embody the essence of the Vedas. This could be questioned, for there was much that was new in them, and what there was of the old was much transformed. Yet much of the Vedic spirit did abide in them, though in new garbs. Just as for the Vedic people, ritual in these cults was a vital element and music was vital for the ritual. But the ritual had much that was new in form and ethos. So had the music.

The new sacred form or corpus of music, created in the devotional atmosphere of the cults, was *gāndharva*. It was dedicated to the worship of gods, specially Shiva. *Gāndharva*, the ancient texts say, was metamorphosed from the

*sāma* gamut of forms. It was also cherished and valued in an analogous manner both as ritual and as a form spiritual. Like *sāma*, *gāndharva* was believed to be revealed music. It was created not by man but by Brahma, Lord of Creation. It was, therefore, immutable, like *sāma*. Also, like *sāma*, it could become the path divine, and lead the devotee to the presence of his deity if performed correctly and in the true spirit.

Yet the *gāndharva* form had also much that was quite distinct from *sāma*. Firstly, it was not designed for a group of singers but a single expert vocalist. Secondly, a new element, *tāla*, as a pattern of beats played along with the melody, became part of the music in *gāndharva*. Let me explain what was new in this. *Sāma* music consisted of melody alone, which was mainly vocal with perhaps accompaniment on certain kinds of *vīṇā*. This melody must surely have contained an inbuilt rhythm, perhaps even marked rhythmic cycles—since it was often set to fixed metric patterns. But it had nothing analogous to what is common today, that is, a scheme of beats rendered independently of the melody (on an instrument such as the drum or the cymbal or the *ektārā* etc.) with which the melody is synthesized. Thirdly, improvisation in some form was now introduced. This must have been extremely limited and restricted, but it was certainly a new element. Also, now we have for the first time the notion of a *rāga*. The *jāti*-s, which were *gāndharva* melodies, evince characteristics that are *rāga*-like. Indeed, they are said to have been the seed-bed of all the later *rāga* forms.

*Gāndharva* is clearly important in subsequent musical history as the form which was the fountain-head of much later developments. But it is no less important in respect to the spirit behind it and the attitude it represented towards music.

Interestingly, many medieval manuals of music, dating from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries and even later, begin with a defence of music, justifying it as an act worthy of practice. Such a defence was thought necessary by the authors of these manuals in view of the many strictures against music recorded in the law-codes: the *Smṛti*-s and the *Purāṇa*-s. The *Smṛti*-s are often very harsh in their disapproval of music and musicians, indeed of performing arts and artistes in general. Sacred functions and rituals were forbidden for persons who earned their livelihood through music, dance or theatre. The men and women of this class were considered so immoral that the *Smṛti*-s did not allow them to live within city walls in order to save the inhabitants from sinful contamination. Naturally, therefore, any respectable scholar setting out to write a serious treatise concerning music had to justify the art before proceeding to describe it in all its forms and techniques.

The reason for the puritan attitude of the *Smṛti*-s towards music may be traced to the profound influence on Indian thought of the *sanyāsī* world view. However, the concept of music as an *upāsana* was also deep-rooted, and this provided the *saṅgīta* manuals with their defence of music. The manual writers could indeed quote passages from the *Smṛti*-s and *Purāṇa*-s themselves which embodied the idea of music as the vehicle for the sacred. One oft-quoted passage was an extolment of *gāndharva* from the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, where *gāndharva* forms were noted as leading to Shiva himself. The *bhakti* movement, echoes of which continue till today, also, in its own way, adopted music as an *upāsana*: addressing God through songs, singing his names, his glory, was a major aspect

of *bhakti* worship. The Lord Himself is quoted in the *Purāṇa*-s as telling Nārada, the supreme *bhakta*: 'I live not in *Vaikuṅṭha* or the hearts of *Yogī*-s, I am where my *bhakta*-s sing.' Naturally, the music manuals found in this and similar passages are a major authoritative argument in favour of music.

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#### REFERENCES:

1. The exact date or even century when the *tānpūrā* was introduced, is still a matter of debate and conjecture. The *tānpūrā* was certainly present in the seventeenth century, as miniature paintings indicate. It may have been introduced earlier. However, even if its actual use came after the sixteenth century, the new music within which its use became so crucial and almost 'logical' was a product of the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.
  2. In what follows I rely almost exclusively on the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* for my thoughts regarding *sāma* and Vedic views in general. What I have said can, I believe, be corroborated from other sources. But I have not done so here. One reason for my exclusive attention to the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* is to project the importance of this text in music history, an importance hardly as yet noticed. My references are to the Tirupati edition of the text.
  3. *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*, 4, 8, 1-3.
  4. *Ibid.*, 1, 10, 1.
  5. *Ibid.*, 1, 11, 1.
  6. *Ibid.*, 1, 12, 1.
  7. *Ibid.*, 1, 3, 2.
  8. *Ibid.*, 1, 1, 1; 1, 11, 6; 1, 2, 2.
  9. *Ibid.*, 1, 2, 3.
  10. *Ibid.*, 3, 7, 3. "Through *Sāma* Prajāpati, gods and *ṛsi*-s attained immortality"
  11. *Ibid.*, 4, 7, 1. *Yajñā* is here identified with *puruṣā*; *puruṣā* with *udgītha*. The singing of *udgītha* loosens all the knots with which death binds the *Yajamāna*.
  12. *Ibid.*, 1, 14, 1.
  13. *Ibid.*, 1, 4, 1.
  14. *Ibid.*, 3, 6, 1 to 3, 7, 1.
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