

3 MUSICAL BOWS AND THE ORIGIN OF BOWING

"The first clear literary and artistic references to the bow as a means of drawing sound from stringed instruments occur at the beginning of the tenth century," concludes Werner Bachmann in his major study on *The Origins of Bowing*. "At that time the area within which bowing was practised corresponded roughly to the territories of the Islamic and Byzantine Empires. Outside these territories there is no evidence that any stringed instruments were played with the bow before A.D. 1000, either in Europe or in Eastern Asia: the theories that the bow originated in Northern Europe or India have not been confirmed by recent research." Bachmann does admit, however, that "the Indian theory . . . has not yet been factually disproved and is still the subject of discussion."¹

Today, twenty-two years after this author compiled the existing data on the development of bowed instruments up to the thirteenth century, no fundamental research in this area has emerged. The idea that the playing bow originated in India is so deeply rooted in an ancient myth, that few Indian authors seem to seriously question it. Most recently for instance, Suresh Vrat Rai remarked: "Leaving aside the shape and structure [of instruments], sculptures, wall carvings [and] paintings . . . of the 6th to 13th century provide adequate evidence testifying [to the] existence of bowed instruments."² B. C. Deva also believed that "instruments of this class can be found in sculptures and reliefs from about the 10th century A.D.", but both writers failed to provide pictorial evidence to support their claims.³

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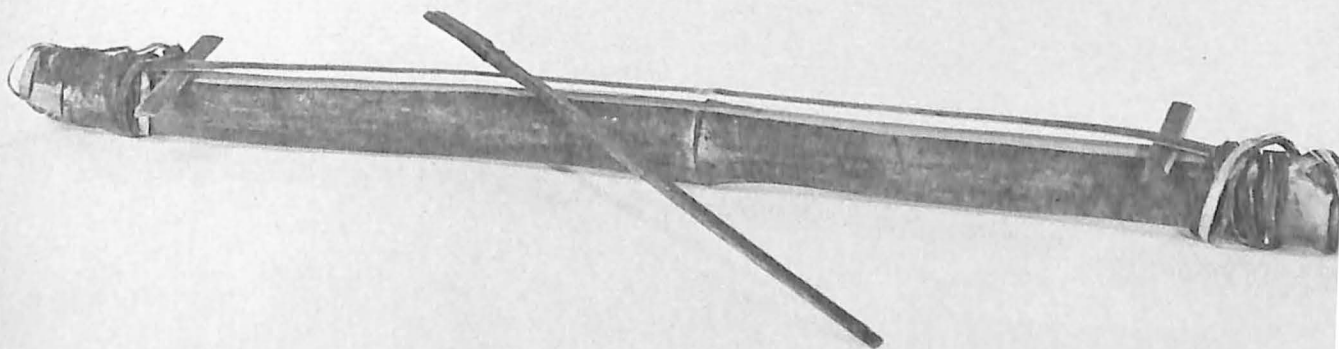
A. K. Coomaraswamy, on the other hand, observed that "no Indian *vina*, whether ancient or modern, was ever played with a bow", whilst C. Marcel-Dubois reached similar conclusions.⁴ G. H. Tarlekar also made a thorough investigation of the iconography of ancient musical instruments. In the temple sculptures of Badami and Pattadakal, however, Tarlekar recognized "the precursor of the violin-type", and in a personal communication he wrote: "There is a sculpture in the Virupaksha temple (Pattadakal, 7th-8th century A.D.) in which the playing-stick is used as a bowing-stick like that of a violin. Such a playing-stick appears also in an Ajanta sculpture in Cave No. 4 (4th-6th century A.D.). But I have not come across any *shastric* reference to bowed instruments earlier than the 11th century A.D."⁵

When I first saw these reliefs with gay-looking dwarfs (*ganas*) who sing, dance and play rod-like instruments, I was also tempted to believe that these instruments were predecessors of the fiddle. One sculpture, in particular, caught my attention: a *gana*, holding a rather long stick in his right hand, with which he seems to be rubbing a string.[33] Or does he use it as a scraping device? The position of the left hand suggests that his forefinger stops the string.⁶ Later, however, when I saw reliefs and paintings of similar instruments where the surface is clearly notched (and also the position of the left hand varies), it became evident that they were either idiochord tube zithers (made from a bamboo internodium) or scrapers.⁷[34, 35] This is also the case with another variety of rod-like instruments depicted in the temple sculptures of Belur and Halebid (12th-13th century). According to Sharangadeva, these serrated percussion instruments, called *shukti*, were made from iron or bronze and were used for indicating the divisions of the rhythm cycle.⁸

Thus, as far as medieval sculptures and paintings are concerned, we agree with Bachmann that there is no conclusive evidence supporting the view that the bow had an early origin in India. Does this settle the topic or should we continue our search in other directions? What does literature say about the bowed *ravanahasta* which, according to the oral tradition, was invented by Ravana thousands of years ago? What did it look like? Is there a relationship between the origin of the playing bow and the musical bow? In his earlier writings, Curt Sachs seems to have been in favour of such a hypothesis.⁹

3.1 *Pinaka, the bow of Shiva*

Although the origin of the musical bow "has long provoked conjecture and contention", the bow itself is generally regarded as one of the most ancient stringed instruments.¹⁰ Even the gods of music, Apollo and Shiva, under the magical spell of the twang of the bowstring, would use their powerful weapons as musical



instruments. Thus, according to the myth, the archer's bow was transformed into a musical bow and accorded a supernatural status.

In epic literature we come across Shiva as Pinakin, the bearer of the invincible bow *pinaka*, but nowhere has he been portrayed playing his bow as a musical instrument. However, the ancient *pinga*, mentioned in the *Rigveda*, may have been a musical bow, while Pinga was another name used to address the multifaceted god Shiva.¹¹ Thus, long before Shiva played the seven-stringed harp, the musical bow must have been his favourite instrument.¹² It was also the instrument played by the mythological demon king of Lanka, Ravana, who was a great devotee of Shiva and an expert in the field of music, like his master. The *Ramayana* recounts how this powerful ruler abducted Sita and challenged Rama to a fight:

He has not yet known my prowess in combat. Nor does he know of my formidable *vina* in the form of a bow, which is played with the heads of arrows, which strikes a mild note in the form of a twang of the bowstring, a moderate note in the form of cries of anguish and a high-pitched note in the form of the sound produced by the base of steel arrows, and which I shall play on in the course of a conflict . . . ¹³

It was not until the 12th century that musical bows were described in detail, and it is certainly no coincidence that these instruments, the *pinaki* and *ravanahasta vinas*, were associated with the legendary bows of Pinakin and Ravana. Nanyadeva (1094-1133) is probably the first writer to deal with them in his important treatise on music, *Bharatabhashya*.¹⁴ He was king of the northern state of Mithila and belonged to the so-called Karnata dynasty which originated in the south. It seems that he was just as interested in the northern *pinaka* as in the southern *ravanahasta*.

In his introduction to the chapter on stringed instruments, Nanyadeva relates the well-known story about Ravana, who practised asceticism for many years in order to gain the favour of the mighty Shiva. Not only did Ravana cut off nine of his own ten heads, but he also created a musical instrument, inspired by the rustling sound of a bamboo twig against a gourd (*alabu*). Thus, by stretching a nerve taken from his body along a stick cut from the forest, and tying a gourd to it, he made the *ravanahasta*, which he used to accompany the Vedic songs in praise of Shiva. It is said that Shiva was very pleased with him; deities such as Sarasvati, Kurma and Brahma, had also created *vinas* in Shiva's honour, and the *kinnaras*, who had learned the art of music from Narada, had invented the *kinnari vina*. About his own invention, Shiva says:

From the bow itself I have constructed a *vina* which is known everywhere as *saravi* or *pinaki*, while you, my son, have worshipped me with a similar instrument made from your own body, which will be known as the *ravanahasta* . . . ¹⁵

Although a description of the *ravanahasta* is not included in the only existing manuscript of *Bharatabhashya*, Nanyadeva alludes in the above passage to the fact that this instrument was closely related to the *pinaka*. The latter *vina* consisted of "two bow shapes" and the string was stopped by a piece of coconut shell worn on the forefinger of the left hand. The playing bow (*kona*) was strung with horsehair and rubbed with resin.

Musicologists after Nanyadeva also paid a great deal of attention to the musical bow. Haripala, a Gujarati king writing in the second half of the 12th century, was of the opinion: "The *pinaki vina* is undoubtedly considered the most important instrument." According to him, the bow was made of bamboo and a sinew was used for the string. The playing bow (*karmuka*) was strung with goathair which was treated with resin powder.¹⁶

A long description of the *pinaki vina* is also found in the *Sangitaratnakara* by the great musical savant from the Deccan, Sharangadeva. He refers to the playing bow as *vadana capa* and writes about the playing technique:

The *pinaki* is played in a sitting position, and the gourd is held face down between the two feet. The upper end of the instrument rests against the shoulder. The left hand, holding the stem of a small gourd, stops the string. It is played with a bow held in the right hand, the hair of which is rubbed with resin. The position of the notes is established as on the *ekatantri vina*. The higher notes are produced by going downward.¹⁷

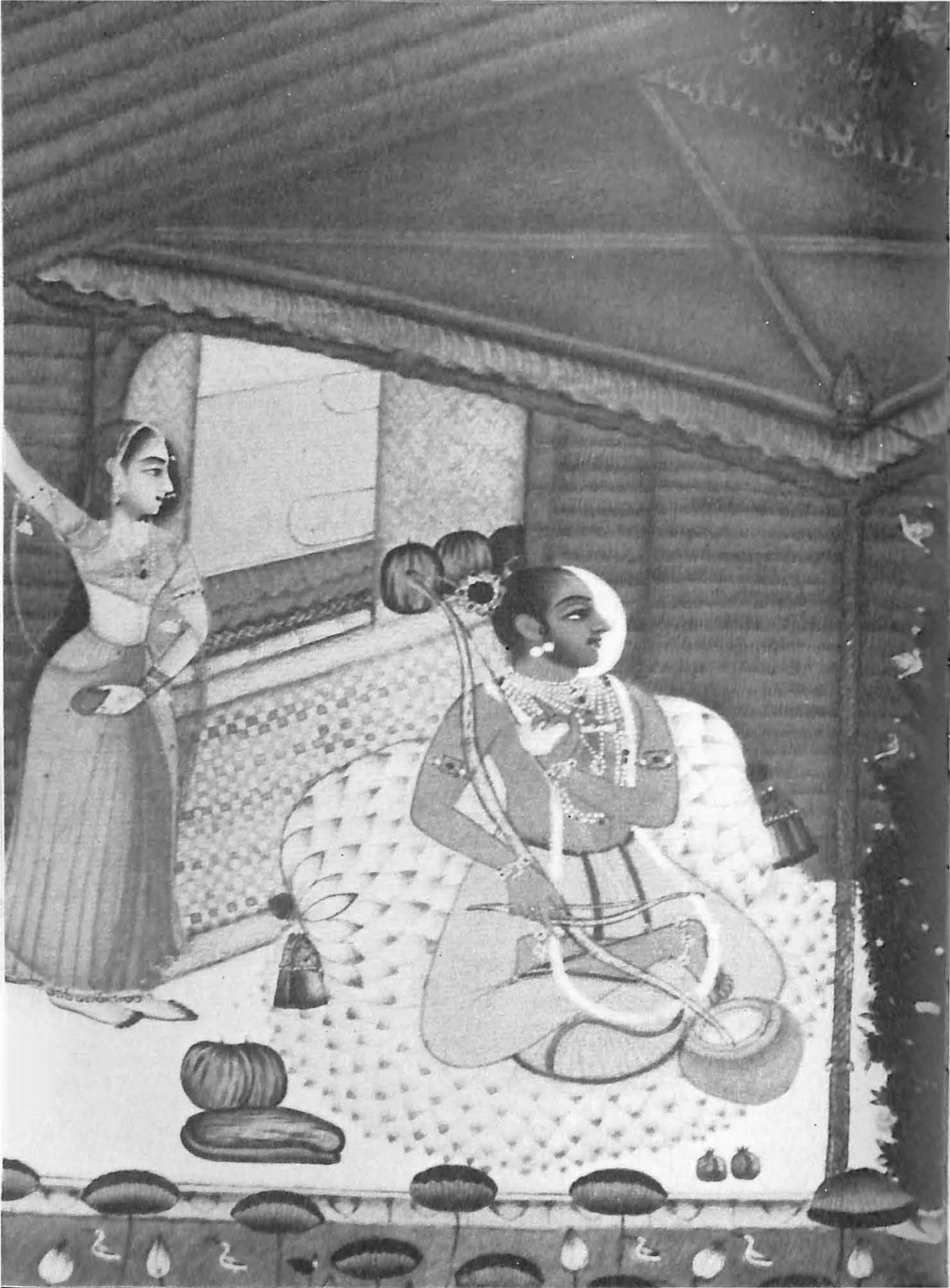
The very fact that this 13th century scholar takes credit for having invented a bowed instrument which he calls *nihshanka vina*, indicates that certain types of bowed instruments were highly respected and belonged to the realm of classical music.¹⁸ According to Vemabhupala (c. 1400), however, the *pinaki vina* was only a prominent folk instrument. Obviously he had a low opinion of such instruments because he writes: "They will not be elucidated by me since they are notorious amongst villains."¹⁹

A second gourd resonator was apparently added to this instrument by the time of Maharana Kumbha, the ruler of Mewar and author of the *Sangitaraja* (1456).²⁰ In this form, the *pinaka* is also described by Abu'l Fazl (1588-89):

The *pinak* . . . is of wood about the length of a bow and slightly bent. A string of gut is fastened to it and a hollow cup, inverted, is attached at either end. It is played like the *ghichak*, but in the left hand a small gourd is held which is used in playing.²¹

Although the *pinaka* was gradually pushed into the background, it was not totally ignored by later musicologists. Indeed, this wonderful relic of antiquity managed to survive until the beginning of the 19th century. [36] The Belgian, Francois Baltazard Solvyns (1810), was probably the last person to give a long description of the instrument, accompanied by an etching.[xi]

This is also a very singular instrument, and very different from those which we use in Europe. The form of the *pennauck* is not unlike that of the *been* of which we have just been speaking, being likewise composed of two pumpkins; but they are joined by an iron rod, and one of them is much larger, and forms consequently a wider aperture than the other: the smaller is at the bottom, the larger at [the] top. The essential difference between this instrument and the *been* is that, in the place of chords it has but one string of wire, strongly stretched. To draw out the sound, a bow like that of a bass is prest upon this chord, at the same time that another part of it is struck or rubbed with a little stick. I confess that this strange music is far from being agreeable, and can be pleasing only to the ear of an Hindoo. The *pennauck* is now as seldom heard in India



as in the other provinces of Asia; it is not even easy to find a musician who knows how to play upon it. The same may be said of the *been*. In former times both these instruments were much in vogue, and I have been assured that those who excelled in playing them were held in a certain degree of consideration, which has lasted even to our times. The masters of the *been* and the *pennauck*, being very few, are treated with great respect, and people flock round them to hear their singular music as a curiosity. They are to be heard only with the rich, as they never play for money before the public . . .²²

Unfortunately, we will never be able to find out what kind of "strange music" was played on this instrument, because, soon after Solvyns wrote these lines, the *pinaka* died out.

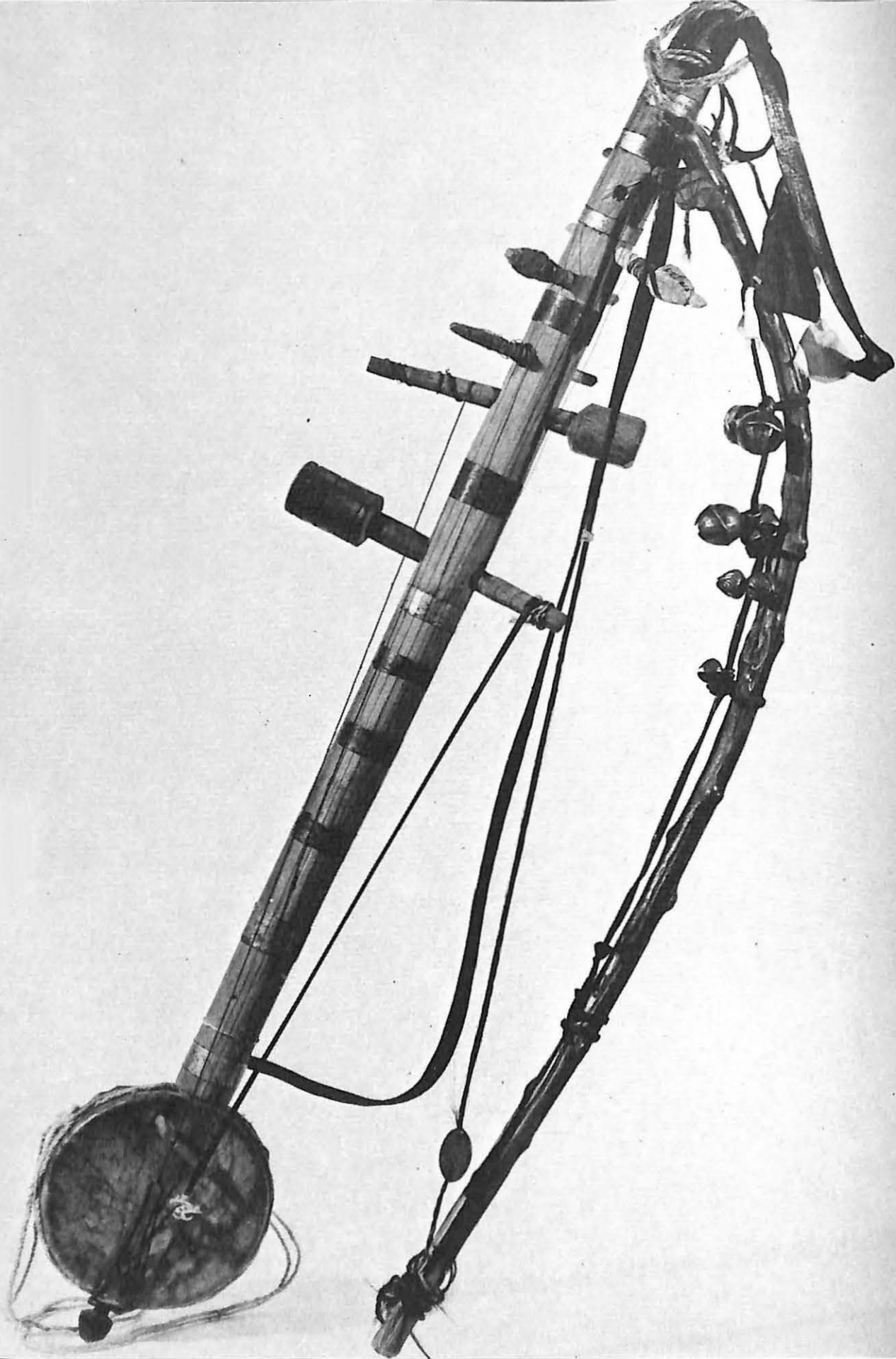
Using the detailed descriptions of Haripala and Sharangadeva, it would not be impossible to reconstruct the instrument. However, the *pinaka*, as described by H. Balfour in *The Natural History of the Musical Bow* (1899), was a simple bow without resonator and appears to have been a highly questionable reconstruction of the original instrument. It was sent to him by Raja S. M. Tagore, who, though a learned musicologist, was ill-informed about the *pinaka*.²³ Balfour, without having access to the sources available today, nonetheless came to the conclusion that, "a comparative study of the various allied types clearly points to the . . . former existence in India of a musical bow . . . with gourd-resonator."²⁴

3.2 *Ravanahasta, a musicological puzzle*

The history of the southern musical bow presents far more problems than that of its northern counterpart. Like Nanyadeva, most musicologists mention it, but so far we have not succeeded in finding a complete description of the *ravanahasta(ka)* which, according to Jaap Kunst, was also known in Java in the 10th century A.D.²⁵

The Ravana myth to which Nanyadeva referred was undoubtedly much older than the 12th century. In South India, the 7th century Shaivite saint-singers Appar Swamigal (or Tirunavukkarasar) and Tirugnanasambandar praised Ravana's musical genius and great devotion to Lord Shiva in their *Devaram* hymns. According to them, when Ravana tried to lift up Mount Kailash he was crushed under the mountain by Shiva. Ravana prostrated himself before the Lord and, in order to appease him, devised a seven-stringed harp (*ya*) strung with sinews pulled from his hand, with which he accompanied his Vedic hymns.²⁶ A similar story is told in the *Paumachariya* (c. 880 A.D.) by the Jain author Svayambhudeva. Here Ravana tried to please the Naga king Dharanendra by creating an instrument, which in Apabhramsha is called *ravanahatthaya*.²⁷ Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this instrument was plucked or bowed, nor what the instrument looked like.

In its most common form the *ravanahasta* was presumably a folk instrument which, in the words of Vemabhupala, was only played by 'beggars', and, therefore, impure and unworthy of treatment by Sanskrit musicologists.²⁸ However, there is some indication that this legendary instrument was also used in classical music, since the poetess Ramabhadrambha (early 17th century) relates that the *ravanahasta* was played by female court musicians of Tanjore.²⁹ That it was a musical bow, as suggested by Nanyadeva, is confirmed by Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1711), who describes the instrument in his chapter about the music of Malabar :



Rawanastum, which looks like a hunting bow, and has only a single length of gut as a bowstring, which is struck with a bow.³⁰

Shortly thereafter, this bowed musical bow must have become obsolete, although the term *ravanahasta* survived. It is used today in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan for a particular type of spike fiddle, which is to be found throughout India and is known by a variety of names.[37, 44] Very little is known about the age of these instruments, except that a 14th century Sufi, Shaikh Muzaffar of Bihar, refers in one of his letters to a yogi who sang religious songs to the accompaniment of a bowed *yaktara* (*ektara*).³¹ Such spike fiddles were also referred to as *kingri* (see p. 53) and figure in a number of sculptures, but so far we have not been able to date them.[38, 39]

It was this kind of *ravanahasta* which caused musicologists a great deal of confusion after Pierre Sonnerat (1782) wrote that "the *Pandarons* [*Pandaram*], a type of monk of which there are many, play to accompany themselves on a kind of violin called *ravanastron*. It was given this name because the giant Ravana, king of the island of Ceylon, invented it nearly five thousand years ago."³² [40] The Ravana legend that Sonnerat heard was the same one which Appar had sung about a thousand years earlier, but, in course of time, the *ravanahasta* had undergone a metamorphosis. The original bow that Ravana twanged in the epics first evolved into a harp, subsequently to be replaced by a simple fiddle with a straight neck.

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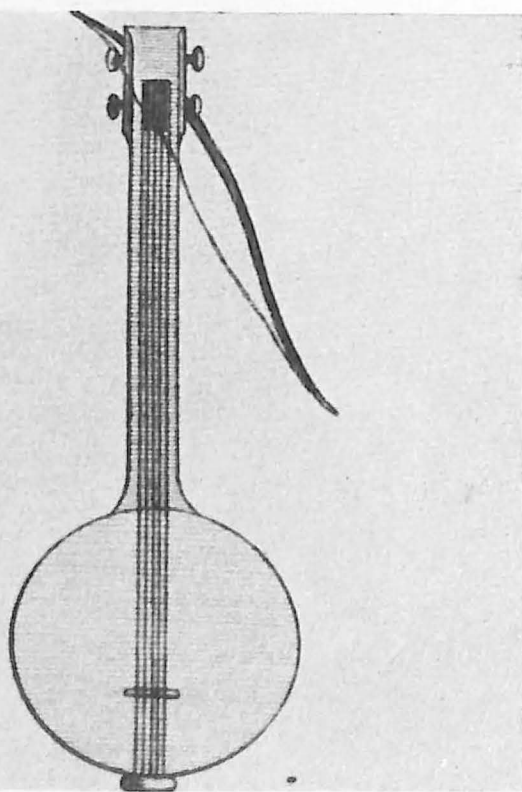
Be that as it may, the Belgian musicologist F. J. Fétis (1856) was highly impressed by the 'primitive' *ravanahasta*, which he recognized as the truly original bowed instrument. He was one of the first Western scholars who had a passion for comparative musicology and wrote extensively about Indian instruments in his *Histoire Générale de la Musique*.³³ Since Fétis had no access to original literature on Indian music, and had never been to the East, his work contains many mistakes. Nevertheless, he reached the interesting conclusion that "there is nothing in the West which has not come from the East."³⁴

His theory about the Indian origin of the bow was received with great enthusiasm. Nearly all the writers on the history of musical instruments, in general, and the violin, in particular, and even authorities such as Curt Sachs (1915) and Francis W. Galpin (1937) accepted Fétis' idea.³⁵ Sachs went so far as to create more confusion by reproducing a drawing of a hypothetical *ravanahasta* with a head in the shape of a hand!

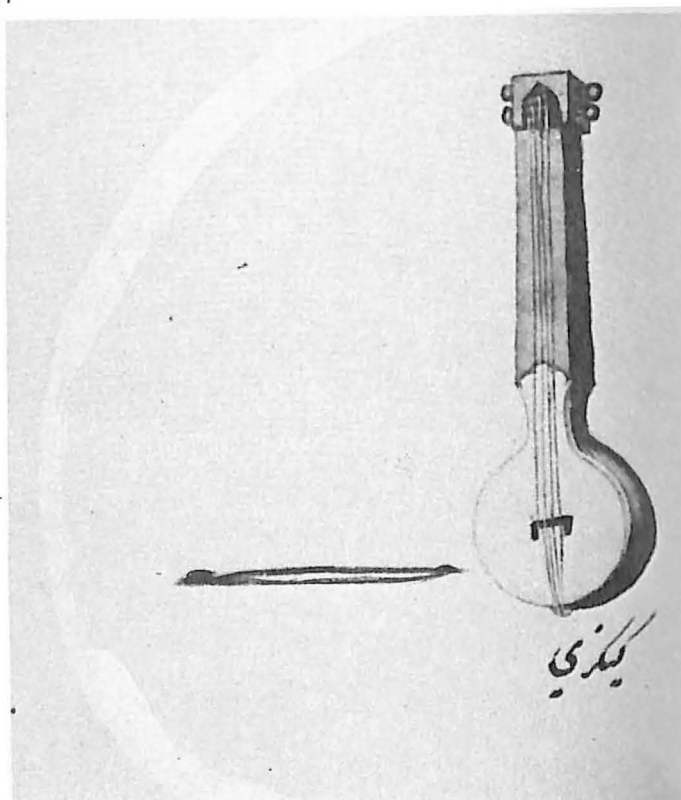
Criticism was bound to follow. It began to dawn on musicologists that the theory was based merely on a legend, and the supposition that the most primitive-looking instruments were also the most ancient. Research into the history of bowing continued, but no new historical evidence was forthcoming from India. For that reason, Sachs had to change his opinion, while Bachmann was unable to give sufficient attention to India either. Like several other scholars searching for the ancestor of the violin, he reached the conclusion that Central Asian short lutes with a 'double belly' were certainly bowed before 1000 A.D.

Besides short lutes (which will be discussed in the next chapter) there are two other families of bowed instruments in India, which should be taken into account, i.e. spike fiddles and the extinct musical bows. These instruments had a very humble beginning and were generally considered impure. Only during

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the 12th and 13th centuries does it appear that a few distinguished scholars recognized musical bows as 'classical' instruments. After that they fell into oblivion again, although the impression is widespread that, since time immemorial, bowing was widely practised as a folk art. Folk instruments were rarely depicted however, as they were neither prominent in the courts nor in the temples. For the same reason, it is also difficult to obtain written information about them, although it should be noted that until now it has only been feasible to study well-known musical treatises.³⁶

We have seen that Nanyadeva's is the first known description of the playing bow. By no means does he create the impression of introducing a recent innovation. On the contrary, he gives both the *pinaka* and *ravanahasta* a traditional status by linking them with Shiva and Ravana. Moreover, the *Bharatabhashya* is a sort of commentary on Bharata's *Natyashastra*, and deals mainly with music of the past.

Nanyadeva's contemporary, King Someshvara, also mentions bowing in his encyclopaedic work *Manasollasa* (1131), while briefly summarizing the actions which are employed in playing different instruments:

With one hand, with two hands, striking with a stick or a ball, rubbing with a bow (*dhanu agharsa*), blowing . . .³⁷

He remarks that he does not describe all the stringed instruments, because they were not all designed for entertainment. This also perhaps explains why we do not find musical bows in sculpture. Possibly the sound of these instruments was too esoteric to be used in accompanying court singers and dancers.

Finally it should be remarked that with the works of Nanyadeva, Someshvara and Haripala it is difficult to establish their authenticity, because most of the treatises of their predecessors have been lost. To our knowledge, there exists not a single work on Indian music with a complete chapter on instruments between the 2nd and 12th centuries A.D. So it is difficult to speculate about the point of origin of the playing bow in India. In any case, it is apparent that the bow was already in general use in the west (Someshvara's capital was Kalyan and Haripala ruled Gujarat), the north-east (Mithila) and the south of India, and must have been introduced prior to the 12th century.
