

HINDU SPIRITUALITY IN MUSIC

“Music in India is as old as the country’s ancient religious tradition, dating back to the times of the Vedas- the scriptures from which the religious principles of the majority of the Indians are drawn....chronologically placed sometime between 4000 B.C.E. and 2000 B.C.E.” (Venugopal 450). Not only does music’s importance date back to the time of the Vedas, it was also an integral part of the Vedas contents. The Samhita, the first section of the Vedas, consists of four smaller sections, the first of which is called the *Rg Veda*. It is generally accepted as the oldest and most important text within the Samhita section and contains over one thousand hymns. The chronology of these masterpieces is difficult to determine. Some are believed to have been composed by the Aryans before they entered India, while others are written hundreds of years afterwards. The contents of the *Rg Veda* were echoed in the *Sama Veda*, another section of the Samhita, but in an altered manner that allowed the text to be chanted. The *Sama Veda* originally employed only two notes, however, that eventually increased to three, five and then seven individual *svaras* or notes (Embree 5).

Music’s involvement in Hinduism’s spiritual affairs does not stop there. According to author R. Venugopal, “All rituals in pursuit of spiritual ideals contained music as an essential part” (Venugopal 450). Venugopal also outlined instruments that could provide appropriate accompaniment for sacred music. These included both the drum and a stringed instrument called the *vina* (Venugopal 450). The hymns contained in the *Rg Veda* were often composed for the primary purpose of fulfilling specific needs within these sacred ritual services (Embree 5).

The important and revered position that music played in the country’s ancient religious tradition is also portrayed in its mythology. Here, many important gods, goddesses and celestial beings are associated with a particular dance, instrument or with some other form of music. The

God Krsna is portrayed as a great flutist, Siva and Parvati are said to be master of rhythm and dance. Sarasvati, Goddess of Learning and the Sage Narada are associated with the *vina* and Rama is considered to be one, “well versed in music” (Venugopal 451). The fact that the very gods are endowed with musical gifts displays music’s capacity to enlarge and affect one’s spirituality. It increases one’s awareness of heaven and inspires devotion and worship.

According to Venugopal, “Music was considered to be not only entertainment but also a source for one’s spiritual growth and a means for raising one’s consciousness from a merely mundane level to higher levels of contemplation.” Venugopal goes on to quote the ancient sage Yajñavalka as saying, “a person well versed in playing the instrument *Vina*, having deep knowledge of the microtones and the rhythm, reaches the heavens without any effort!” (451). It is of no wonder that music would be worthy of representation in the sacred scriptures of the Vedas and why sacred beings, such as gods and goddesses, would be associated with musical gifts.

The question of how music is able to put us in line with exalted levels of spirituality becomes evident in the fact that music, made up of melody and rhythm, is believed to be a manifestation of the cosmic order, *rta*. According to R. Sathyanarayana, “Rhythm is *rta* in the sense of a) orderly movement b) cyclic or spiral recurrence c) the principle of organization and design, which regulates the duration of tones, body movements, colours, shade, motifs, balance...and symmetrical proportions in the various arts. It is inhered in the principle of creation and creativity and is, therefore, a cosmic law” (Sathyanarayana 303-4). Order, organization, design and recurrence are the principles of rhythm that direct and mould the endless variety of rhythmic possibilities into music that is in line with the order of the cosmic law.

There is not only great room for variety within rhythm, but in all the individual elements that make up beautiful musical phrases. Melody, tempo, texture, dynamics and instrumentation are just a few examples of elements that are a necessary part of music. In order for music to be a part of *rta*, these essential elements must embody the characteristics of *rta*. According to Ainslie T. Embree, “This cosmic law was not made by the gods, although they are the guardians of it. It is reflected not only in the physical regularity of the night and day and of the seasons but also in the moral order that binds men to each other and to the gods” (Embree 9). Regularity and order are principle components of *rta*, and thus must also be reflected in music, despite its limitless capacity for diversity, surprise, and variation.

As stated above, rhythm is *rta* in its sense of cyclic or spiral recurrence, meaning a repetition of key melodic phrases and rhythms. This element of repetition is a key factor in creating regularity, unity and order within music as a whole. According to Sathyanarayana, “All form is governed by an important principle of design, viz., unity in variety. Too much rigidity in unity leads to monotony and too much variety, to Chaos” (305). Musical variation is contained and placed in line with the cosmic order through the principles of design, unity, regularity and order; however, its beauty is maintained through the principle of variety. Only within these parameters can music be in line with *rta* and raise, “one’s consciousness from a merely mundane level to higher levels of contemplation” (Venugopal 451).

The ancient sage Yajñavalka was quoted earlier as saying, “a person well versed in playing the instrument *vina*, having deep knowledge of the microtones and the rhythm, reaches the heavens without any effort!” (Venugopal 451). Attaining this level of spirituality through the vehicle of musicality is not a passive process of simply hearing beautiful sounds; it takes concentration, reverence, and meditation. This can be seen in

the approach that talented vocalists take in performing sacred music. Sushil Kumar Saxena offered insight into this approach when he wrote of the sacred nature of each individual *svara*, or note, and how each *svara* must reign in its own right, much as Brahman or Reality, reigns in his own right. He states, “Every single note must seem effective in itself; configuration, though important, is by no means enough. The best of our singers may find it difficult to meet this requirement, but if they are only a little aware of our philosophical-religious language, the vocalists may feel, in the very course of singing, a measure of the same reverence for some individual notes...as is elicited by the thought of ultimate Reality. The concept of reigning-in-its-own-right is similar in meaning to *svaprakasam* (self-luminous), an attribute that is commonly ascribed to God or Brahman” (Saxena 441).

As Saxena mentioned, this standard of allowing each individual note to shine in its own right is a challenging undertaking, even for the best of vocalists. Contemplation allows the singer time to understand the meaning and context of each *svara*, thus allowing the singer to become in tune with its relationship to Brahman. Saxena explains that a talented Indian vocalist is often found to be “lost” or absorbed when projecting certain notes, as the sound originates from within. This absorption is similar to the time spent in contemplation as it causes the vocalist to attain a “deeper attunement with the thought of the Ultimate” (Saxena 441).

The pursuit of Brahman has lead many individuals to the sweet sounds of music. Many of these beautiful sounds are found in the Vedas and were composed by ancient priests. Rituals are often performed with music as an essential ingredient in its completion. The great gods and goddesses of Indian mythology understood the spiritual nature of music and became masters of it. Within music is found the essence of Brahman, *rta* and Hindu spirituality.

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Related Readings

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Related Websites

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Related Topics for Further Investigation

- 1) The renown of composers in the late 18th century and early 19th century of Carnatic Music: Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar and Shyamasastri.
- 2) The content of the hymns found in the *Rg Veda* and *Sama Veda*.
- 3) Music used in sacred rituals, such as *mantras*.
- 4) *Rta*, the cosmic order.
- 5) Brahman.
- 6) The Hindustani style of the North
- 7) The Carnatic style of the South

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