

Chapter 1

A brief Introduction to Indian music

The music of India is one of the oldest unbroken musical traditions in the world. The origins of this system go back to the Vedas. Many different legends have grown up concerning the origins and development of Indian classical music. Such legends show the importance that music has to Indian culture.

Modern historical and cultural research has also given a good perspective on the field, showing that Indian music has developed within a very complex interaction between different peoples of different races and cultures. It appears that the ethnic diversity of present day India has been there from the earliest of times.

The basis for Indian music is *sangeet*. *Sangeet* is a combination of three artforms: vocal music, instrumental music and dance. Although these three artforms were originally derived from the single field of stagecraft (see [section 1.3](#)), today these three forms have differentiated into complex and highly refined individual artforms.

The present system of Indian music is based upon two important pillars: *rāga* (or *rāg*) and *tāla* (or *tāl*). *Rāga* is the melodic form while *tāla* is the rhythmic. *Rāga* may be roughly equated with the Western term “mode” or “scale”. There is a system of seven notes which are arranged in a means not unlike Western scales. However when a westerner looks closely he sees that it is quite different what he is familiar with (see more in [section 1.6](#)).

Tāla (rhythmic forms) are also quite developed. Many common rhythmic patterns exist. They revolve around repeating patterns of beats. *Tāla* is equivalent to the Western concept of rhythm. Most pieces of Indian music, whether a long improvisation or a devotional song,

have a rhythmic structure, i.e. a plan of organized beats that the players use as a foundation. Most of Siddha Yoga music is composed in simple groups of six, eight, nine, twelve, or sixteen beats. But given its ancient and divine origins, one should not be surprised to learn that the Indian system of rhythm frequently uses such sophisticated and complex patterns in groups of seven, ten, or fourteen.

The interpretation of *rāg* and *tāl* is not the same all over India. Today there are two major traditions, or systems, of music. There is the North Indian (see [section 1.7](#)), and the South Indian tradition (see [section 1.8](#)). The North Indian tradition is known as *Hindustani sangeet* and the south Indian is called *Carnatic sangeet*. Both systems are fundamentally similar but differ in nomenclature and performance practice. In Siddha Yoga music is followed the *Hindustani* system.

Many musical instruments are peculiar to India. The most famous are the sitar and tabla. However there are many more that the average person may not be familiar with. All of this makes up the complex and exciting field of Indian classical music. Its understanding easily consumes an entire lifetime.

1.1 Mythological origins

By looking at mythology one can really see the significance that Indian music (*sangeet*) has to Indian society. This is illustrated in the story concerning its origin. In the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, which is the oldest surviving text on stagecraft in the world (circa 2nd century B.C.), the author Bharata writes:

Once, a long time ago, during the transitional period between two Ages it so happened that people took to uncivilised ways, were ruled by lust and greed, behaved in angry and jealous ways with each other and not only gods but demons, evil spirits, yakshas and and such like others swarmed over the earth. Seeing this plight, Indra and other gods approached god Brahma and requested him to give the people a toy (Kridaniyaka), but one which could not only be seen but heard and this should turn out a diversion (so that people gave up their bad ways)

Although it was decided to give the celestial art of *sangeet* to mankind, a suitable human had to be found who was capable of receiving this gift. *Sangeet* had always been in the realm of the demigods (*gāndharva*). A super-human of superior spiritual ability was required to convey this celestial artform to the world of man. It fell upon the great sage Narada to be the first mortal recipient of this divine art. Through Narada, we are indebted for the presence of classical music.

1.2 Historical development

There are many important events in the history of Indian music. These milestones show the development of musical thought from early history to the present day.

1.2.1 The early history

The early history of Indian music may be explained by the Indo-European theory. According to this theory, there was a culture, or group of cultures who were so successful that they spread throughout Europe and parts of Asia. Although no one knows where they came from, present thought tends to place their origins somewhere in Eurasia, either north of the Black sea or north of the Caspian. Within this family there are several major groups. Indo-Aryan is a group which has special significance for India because this is the language and culture which generated the Vedas and other classical texts of ancient India.

The classical music of India is said to have its roots in this culture. The connection between Indo-European expansion and Indian music may be seen in mythology. Mythology refers to music being brought to the people of India from a place of celestial beings. This mythical land (*Gāndharva Desh*) is usually equated with heaven. However, some are of the opinion that this mythical land could actually be Kandahar in what is the modern Afghanistan. Therefore, the myths of music being given to the world by the celestial beings (*gāndharva*) may actually represent a cultural connection with this ancient Indo-Aryan homeland.

Further evidence may be seen in musical structure. In the first few centuries B.C.,

Indian music was based upon seven modes (scales). It is probably no coincidence that Greek music was also based upon seven modes. Furthermore, the Indian scales follow the same process of modulation that was found in ancient Greek music.

The link to Sanskrit is another strong indication of Indo–European roots. Many of the earliest texts were written in Sanskrit. It is also generally believed that classical music is derived from the Samaveda (a part of the Vedas).

The nature of music in prehistoric India may be obscure but the picture begins to become clear in the first few centuries B.C.. Bharata’s *Nāṭya Śāstra* (circa 200 B.C.), provides a detailed account of stagecraft in that period. Here we find mention of seven *shuddha jāti* (pure modes) and eleven mixed *jātis* (modal forms not produced by simple modulation). There is also a very detailed discussion of the musical instruments of the time.

The first millennium provides us with several texts which show the evolution of Indian music. The *Brihaddeshi* written by Matanga (circa 700 A.D.) is very important. It is in this work that we first find the word “rag” mentioned. Another important text is the *Sangeet Ratnakar* by Sharangdev. This work, written around the thirteenth century, gives extensive commentaries about numerous musical styles that existed at that time.

1.2.2 The contribution of Amir Khusru

Perhaps one of the most significant milestones in the development of Indian music was the life of Amir Khusru (born circa 1253, died 1325). He was a poet–musician who served at the court of Sultan Allaudin Khilji (1296–1316).

There is a tendency among Indians to attribute the development of almost everything to him. He is erroneously referred to as the inventor of instruments like the *sitar* and *tabla* and of numerous musical forms which did not develop until many centuries after his death.

Although the extent of his contribution to Indian music is more legendary than factual, he nevertheless symbolizes a crucial turning point in the development of Indian music. Amir Khusru is an icon representing a growing Persian influence on the music. This influence was felt to a greater extent in the North than in the South. The consequence of this differing degree of influence ultimately resulted in the bifurcation of Indian music into two distinct

systems: the *Hindustani sangeet* of the North (see section 1.7), and the *Carnatic sangeet* of the South (see section 1.8).

1.2.3 The contribution of Tansen

The musical career of Tansen is another landmark in the development of Indian music. He is significant because he symbolizes the maturing of the north Indian system as a distinct entity from south Indian music.



Figure 1.1: Tansen (16th century)

Tansen is considered to be one of the greatest musicians that ever lived. He was the court musician of the famous Mogul Emperor Akbar (16th century). He was so highly valued in the court that he was called one of the “Nine Jewels” in his court. It is in the period of Tansen that the famous catalogue of musical instruments known as *Ain-i-Akbari*, was compiled by Abul Fazi for the Emperor Akbar.

The details of Tansen’s life are incomplete. He was born in a Hindu community and had his musical training under his guru Swami Haridas. He then went to the court of the Raja Ram Baghela, a great patron of the arts. From there he migrated to the court of Akbar.

It is said that Tansen could work miracles with his singing. This is called *nada siddhi* in Sanskrit. He is supposed to have acquired such supernatural abilities through the devotion

for his guru. It is said that on occasion he could create rain by singing the monsoon *rāga Megh Malhar*. It is also said that he could create fire by singing *rāga Dipak*.

Many *rāgas* are ascribed to Tansen. Such as *Mian ki Malhar*, *Mian ki Todi* and *Darbari Kanada* are the most famous. Today the followers of his style are said to belong to the *Senia Gharana* (see more on *gharanas*, music traditions, in [section 6.3](#)).

1.2.4 The last two centuries

The eighteenth century marks the birth of many of the musical forms that we think of today. *Dādrā*, *kheyal*, *thumri* and a host of other forms are traceable to this period.

The early part of the 20th century brings the most recent revolution in north Indian music. This is provided by two people: V. N. Bhatkhande and V. D. Paluskar. These two men revolutionized the concept of Indian music. Paluskar is responsible for the introduction of the first music colleges while Bhatkhande is responsible for the introduction of an organized system which reflects current performance practice. Both men are also responsible for the development and popularization of a modern musical notation.

1.3 The *Sangeet*: vocal music, instrumental music and dance

Sangeet is a word which doesn't really translate into English. In its most general sense it is considered synonymous with the term "music"; however it is actually a threefold artform of vocal music, instrumental music, and dance.

Since classical dance is also a component, it is not strictly synonymous to the Western term "music". There is a historical reason why *sangeet* is composed of these three artforms. In the Vedic and post Vedic period it was customary to perform mythological dramas. These dramas used dancers to mime the story, instrumentalist to play the musical accompaniment, and vocalist to tell and sing the story.

There is a standard terminology whenever one wishes to be specific. Dance is referred to as *nritya*, vocal is referred to as *gāyaki*, and instrumental is known as *vadhya sangeet*.



Figure 1.2: The statue of a dancer

1.4 The traditional pedagogy of music

Classical music in India is considered more than mere entertainment; it is a moral and spiritual redeemer. Therefore, the divine qualities inherent in the artform imply certain prerequisites; key among them are *guru*, *vinaya* and *sadhana*, i.e. teacher, humility, and discipline.

The music guru, or teacher, is the most important prerequisite in traditional musical pedagogy. Music is said to be a *guru mukha-vidhya* (i.e., knowledge which must come from a teacher). This is considered the highest form of knowledge. Traditional pedagogy is based upon the transfer of knowledge from the teacher (*guru*) to the disciple (*shishya*) in an unbroken tradition (*parampara*). The tradition of *guru-shishya-parampara* extends back countless millennia.

The second prerequisite is *vinaya* (humility). This also reflects the divine origins of the artform. Classical music is said to be a worship that involves both the listener and the artist alike. Any negative emotions such as arrogance (*abhimana*) becomes an impediment. This is

an impediment from both the divine aspect as well as a matter of simple pedagogy (e.g., "If one thinks he already knows everything, then what is there to learn?")

The final prerequisite for a student of classical music is *sadhana*, or discipline and practice. The divine origins of the artform require that the student "be prepared" to be a recipient of this knowledge.

1.5 Aesthetics and the nine moods

The music of India presents a main difference with respect to the Western music: Indian music is melodic only. When we hear Indian music, we hear a melody played against a drone, (usually given by a stringed instrument known as *tamboura*, see [fig. 1.3](#)) which is tuned to a tonic (or home key) that never shifts throughout the piece, no matter how long it is. This is quite different from what can be heard in a Western music piece; a melody played against a moving series of accompanying chords with the possibility of the home key shifting several times. The concept of a fixed key in Indian music gives the music a focus in a way that allows the listener and player to immerse themselves deeply in the feeling of the one key. It also means that the interest and excitement of the music will be generated by the melody, rhythm, or words, not the underlying harmonies or modulating keys.



Figure 1.3: The *tamboura* – the instrument giving the drone

In Indian musical thought it is said that every note represents a different emotion or feeling, so when some notes are grouped together in a specific way, a correspondig association

is conjured up. The ancient scriptures describe nine fundamental emotions from which all complex emotions may be produced. Just as all hues may be produced by mixing the three primary colours, so too, all emotions are said to be derived from these principal emotions. They are called *nava rasa* and are shown in table 1.1 below. These emotions form the aesthetic foundation for sangeet.

<i>Shringar</i>	Love
<i>Hasya</i>	Comic
<i>Karuna</i>	Sadness
<i>Raudra</i>	Furious
<i>Veera</i>	Heroic
<i>Bhayanak</i>	Terrible
<i>Vibhats</i>	Disgusting
<i>Adbhuta</i>	Wonderment
<i>Shanta</i>	Peace

Table 1.1: The Nine Moods (*Nava Rasa*)

Music requires an acoustic vehicle to convey these emotions. This acoustic vehicle is known as *rāga*. *Rāga* may be thought of as the melodic foundation upon which classical Indian music is based. During the last few centuries it was customary to anthropomorphize the raga in the form of *gāndharvas* (demigods) and *apsaras* (celestial nymphs).

The divine quality of music contained in the system of *rāgas* is perhaps best illustrated in *nad siddhi*. This is the ability to perform miracles by singing or playing certain *rāgas*. The most famous miracle-working musician was Tansen (see section 1.2.3).

1.6 Fundamental concepts associated to *Rāga*

The *rāga* is the most important concept that anyone involved in listening or playing Indian music should understand. The Hindi/Urdu word “rāg” is derived from the Sanskrit *rāga* which means “colour”, or “passion”. It is linked to the Sanskrit word *ranj* which means “to colour”. Therefore *rāga* may be thought of as an acoustic method of colouring the mind and

the heart of the listener with an emotion. There are hundreds of *rāgas* in *Hindustani* and *Carnatic* music, each with particular connotations such as steadfastness, devotion, majesty, stillness, etc.

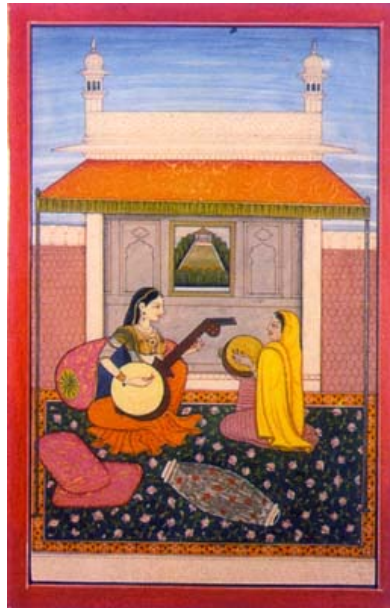


Figure 1.4: A *Ragmala* painting depicting a *Ragini*

This is fine as a general concept but what is it musically? It is not a tune, melody, scale, mode, or any concept for which an English word exists. It is instead a combination of different characteristics which define the *rāg*. It is important to understand that a *rāga* is not exactly a scale, for there are different *rāgas* that have the same scale. What differentiates one from the other is the way the notes are used.

The characteristics of a *rāga* are:

- There must be the notes of the *rāg*. They are called the *swar*. This concept is similar to the Western solfege.
- There must also be a modal structure. This is called *that* in North Indian music and *mela* in *Carnatic* music.
- There is also the *jāti*, i.e. is the number of notes used in the *rāg*.

- There must also be the ascending and descending structure. This is called *arohana* / *avarohana*.
- Another characteristic is that the various notes do not have the same level of significance. Some are important and others less so. The important notes are called *vadi* (or King) and *samavadi* (or Queen).
- There are often characteristic movements to the rag. This is called either *pakad* or *swarup*.

In addition to the main characteristics of *rāg*, there are some other less important ones. For instance *rāgas* have traditionally been attributed to particular times of the day. They have also been anthropomorphized into families of male and female *rāgs*: *rāga*, *ragini* (see fig. 1.4), *putra rāga*, etc.

Over the centuries *rāga* have been ascribed to certain demigods. A natural consequence of such anthropomorphism is that there be a familial relationship between them. Therefore, in the past few centuries there arose a complicated system of *rāgs* (male *rāgs*), *raginis* (female *rāgs*), *putra rāgs* (sons of *rags*), etc. This was the basis for a system of classification before the advent of modern musicology. Today the *that*, i.e. the indian system of modes, is the basis for the modern classification of *rāga* (see more in [appendix A](#)).

1.7 The north Indian system of music – *Hindustani Sangeet*

The north Indian system of music is known as *Hindustani Sangeet*. It covers an area that extends roughly from Bangladesh through northern and central India into Pakistan and as far as Afghanistan. The usual interpretation states that the *Hindustani* system may be thought of as a mixture of traditional Hindu musical concepts and Persian performance practice.

The advent of Islamic rule over northern India caused the musicians to seek patronage in the courts of the new rulers. These rulers, often of foreign extraction, had strong cultural and religious sentiments focused outside of India; yet they lived in, and administered kingdoms

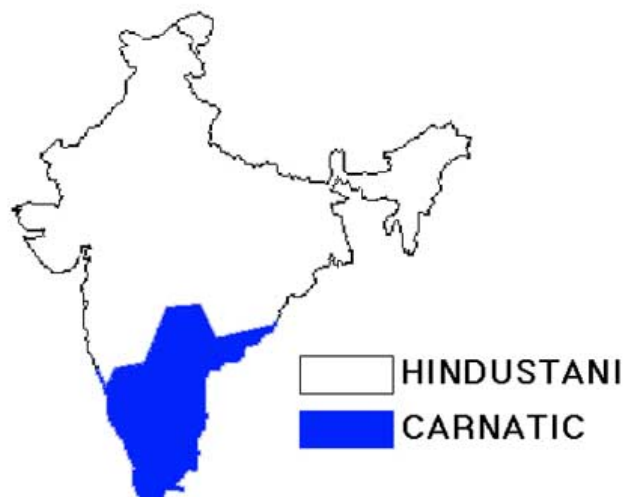


Figure 1.5: The geography of musical styles in India

which retained their traditional Hindu culture. Several centuries of this arrangement caused the Hindu music to absorb musical influences from the Islamic world, primarily greater Persia.

There are a number of musical instruments that we associate with *Hindustani Sangeet*. The most famous is the *sitar* and *tabla*. Other less well known instruments are the *sarod*, *sarangi* and a host of others. Some of the major vocal forms associated with *Hindustani Sangeet* are the *kheyal*, *gazal*, and *thumri*. Other styles which are also important are the *dhrupad*, *dhammar*, and *tarana*. This is just a small sampling for there are many other vocal styles.

Most of the concepts mentioned here and in next chapters are from the *Hindustani sangeet* since this is the system adopted in Siddha Yoga music.



Figure 1.6: A *veena* player

1.8 The south Indian system of music – *Carnatic Sangeet* (an outline)

Carnatic Sangeet, or also *Karnatik Sangit*, is the south Indian system of music. It has a rich history and a very sophisticated theoretical system. South Indian performers and composers have, gained a world class reputation by singing and playing instruments such as *veena* (*vina*), *gottuvadyam*, *violin*, and *mridangam*.

In the West, *Carnatic Sangeet* is not as well known as *Hindustani Sangeet* (north Indian music). Whenever Westerners think of Indian music, they immediately think of Ravi Shankar and the *sitar*. Although South Indian music is extremely sophisticated, there has not emerged an artist with the widespread recognition that North Indians, like Ravi Shankar, have been able to generate.

Carnatic Sangeet is found in the south Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Carnatica. These states are known for their strong presentation of Dravidian culture.

Purandardas (1480-1564) is considered to be the father of *Carnatic Sangeet*. He is given credit for the codification of the method of education, and is also credited with several thousand songs.

Venkat Mukhi Swami (17th century) is the grand theorist of Carnatic music. He was the one who developed the *melakarta system*. This is the system for classifying south Indian *rāgs*.

Carnatic music really acquired its present form in the 18th century. It was during this period that the so-called “trinity” of Carnatic music, Thyagaraja, Shamashastry, and Muthuswami Dikshitar composed their famous compositions. In addition to the “trinity”, numerous other musicians and composers enriched this tradition.

Carnatic music has a very highly developed theoretical system. It is based upon a complex system of *rāgam* (*rāg*) and *thālam* (*tāl*). These describe the intricacies of the melodic and rhythmic forms respectively.

The melodic foundation is the *rāgam* (*rāg*). *Rāgam* is basically the scale. Similarly to the north Indian system, the seven notes of the scale are *Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni*. However, unlike a simple scale there are certain melodic restrictions and obligations. Each *ragam* has a particular way that it moves from note to note.

The *rāgams* are categorised into various modes. These are referred to as *mela*, and there are 72 in number. The *mela* are conceptually similar to the *that* of North Indian music (see more in [appendix A](#)). There is however, a major difference. South Indian scales allow chromatic forms that are not allowed in *Hindustani sangeet*. For instance it is perfectly acceptable for the first three notes (i.e., *Sa, Ri, Ga*), to all be roughly one semitone apart. It is these permissible forms which allow there to be so many *mela*.

The *thalam* (*tāl*) is the rhythmic foundation to the system. The south Indian *tāls* are defined by a system of clapping and waving, while this is much less important in the north. North Indian musicians define their *tāla* by their *theke* (combinations of *bols*, or syllables, or strokes).

Nomenclature is one of the biggest differences between North and South Indian music. It is normal for a particular *rāga* or *tāla* to be called one thing in the North and something totally different in the South. It is also common for the same name to be applied to very different *rāga* and *tāla*. It is these differences in nomenclature that have made any theoretical reconciliation difficult.

Vocal music forms the basis of South Indian music. Although there is a rich instrumental tradition that uses *Saraswati vina*, *venu* and *violin*, they revolve around instrumental renditions of vocal forms.

There are a number of sections to the Carnatic performance. *Varanam* is a form used to begin many south Indian performances. The word *varanam* literal means a description and this section is used to unfold the various important features of the *rāgam*. The *kritis* are fixed compositions in the *rāg*. They have well identified composers and do not allow much scope for variation. However such compositions are often preceded by *alapana*. The *alapana* offers a way to unfold the *rāgam* to the audience, and at the same time, allow the artist considerable scope for improvisation. The *niraval* and the *kalpana swara* also provide opportunities to improvise. Another common structure are the *rāgam*, *thanam*, and, *pallavi*.

South Indian performances are based upon three major sections. These are the *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, and *charanam*.

The rich tradition of South Indian music is one of the worlds gems. The high performance standards and the well organised theoretical foundation put it on par with anything that world has seen, either East or West.

1.9 Relationship between *Hindustani* and *Carnatic Sangeet*

The reasons for the differentiation between North and South Indian music are not clear. The generally held belief is that North Indian music evolved along different lines due to an increased exposure to the Islamic world. This results from nearly 800 years of Islamic rule over northern India.

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that this answer is a gross over-simplification. For instance, the state of Kerala in southern India has an extremely large Muslim population, but virtually no identification with north Indian music. By the same token, the Islamic influence over Orissa (north) was negligible, yet the artistic forms are clearly identifiable as Hindustani. Although there is a poor correlation between the geographical distribution of

Hindus / Muslims and the two musical systems, there is an almost exact correlation between the Indo-European / Dravidian cultures and the two musical systems.