

## The Unique Wholesomeness of Indian Music

- P.P.Kanthan.

All over the world and since immemorial times, people have sought a sense of well being that comes out of perfect spiritual, mental, emotional and bodily health. An ancient Sanskrit adage says, “Survey Janah Sukhino Bhavantu,” which means let all people be happy. The British philosopher Locke once said, “A sound mind in a sound body is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world.” This indeed represents the general perception of individual happiness. But the ancient Indian seers delved deeper into human consciousness and found that there was a third dimension, namely the spiritual, which alone brought true bliss to humans.

Pathanjali’s Yoga Sutras emphasized the Ashtanga Yoga, comprising Hatha Yoga (Yama or restraint, Niyama or austerity, Asana or postures and Pranayama or breath control) and Raja Yoga, comprising Pratyahara or withdrawal of the senses, Dharana or concentration, Dhyana or Meditation, the final stage being “Samadhi,” or union with the Supreme Consciousness, resulting in a state of ultimate bliss. Yoga is a holistic system aimed at bringing about individual bodily, mental and emotional well being, leading to social harmony, contentment and peace. Mr. B.K.S. Iyengar’s comprehensive definition of Yoga is significant in this context: “Yoga is the rhythm of the body, the melody of the mind and the harmony of the soul, creating the symphony of life.” Similarly, there has been a hoary tradition in India of music as a holistic therapy for human ills, with emphasis on the spiritual dimension. As the body’s natural rhythm is tuned to the rhythm of music and the mind is tuned to the melody of music, harmony and peace of the soul result. That is why Indian classical music is often referred to as “Nada Yoga”.

The basis for this concept has been “Nada” or sweet sound. An ancient Sanskrit couplet says that well before the world was created, there was Nada, which was the ultimate source of all creation. It is amazing that this concept, just like many of the ancient Vedic concepts, has got corroboration in modern science. The “String Theory” postulates that the vibrations of the ultimate particles called quarks, which comprise the nuclei of atoms, are the source of all energy. The traditional idea was that air, which floated from the skies, created the sound “ss”, which, when combined with the earliest alphabet known, namely “aa”, created the sound “Sa”. With the note “Sa” as the basis, other notes “Ri”, “Ga”, “Ma”, “Pa”, “Dha” and “Ni” were created to make a rainbow of seven “Swaras”. It is significant that mankind alone is gifted with the ability to sing all of the seven Swaras, while some of the animals and birds have the ability to utter just one or two Swaras. Basically, we hear the note “Sa” in the call of the peacock, “ri” in the bellowing of the bull, “Ga” in the bleat of the goat, “Ma” in the cry of the heron, “Pa” in the cooing of the cuckoo, “Dha” in the neighing of the horse, and “Ni” in the trumpeting of the elephant.

According to Sri Saranga Deva’s Sangeetha Rathnakara, there are two types of Nada, (i) Anahatha Nada, created by nature e.g. rainwater falling or the gurgling sounds made by a running stream or wind rustling through a bamboo forest; (ii) Ahatha Nada, created by humans, through voice or by playing any instrument. The latter kind of Nada has to be created in tune with “Sruti” or the melodic principle for being called Nada. When Nada is created through the human voice, the fire burning in our stomachs called “Pranaagni” joins with the air we breathe in, goes through the navel, the heart, the neck and the head and becomes Nada when expressed through the mouth using the tongue and the nose. This has been mentioned by composer Saint Thyagaraja as “Nabhi Hrith

Khanta Rasana Nasadulayantho” in his song in Raga Jaganmohini on the need to worship the Sapta Swaras.

Jyothisha Sastra mentions that the “Navagrahas” or the nine planets have likings for specific Swaras. The Swara “Sa” appeals to Surya, “Ri” to Budha, “Ga” to Sani, “Ma” to Sukra, “Pa” to Chandra, “Dha” to Angaraka, and “Ni” to Guru or Brhaspathi. From this, it should follow that singing songs based on Ragas which involve the seven Swaras, should please all the Navagrahas. Muthuswamy Dikshitar’s Navagraha Krithis on the nine planets describe the planets and their beneficiary effects. Harikesanallur Muttiah Bhagavathar also composed songs on Surya, Chandra, Angaraka, Budha, Guru, Sukra, and Sani. Saint Purandara Dasa’s song “Sakalagraha Bala Neene” in Raga Atana mentions that Lord Vishnu himself determines the effect of the Navagrahas. Mooka Sankara’s Mooka Panchasathi mentions that all the benefits attributed to the Navagrahas are actually conferred by Goddess Devi, at whose feet the Navagrahas fall and pray. Thirugnana Sambandar’s “Thiru Kolaru Pathikam” says that since he has Lord Shiva in his heart, the Navagraha Devatas will only do good to him and other devotees of Lord Shiva.

The four Vedas – Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva – are believed to be vibrations in space, synthesized by sage Veda Vyasa about 5000 years ago. The source of Indian music is Sama Veda, which has all the seven Swaras. The Vedas have specified tonal emphasis with appropriate variations, which must be followed for imbibing the full effect of Vedic chanting. They stress the need for proper intonation, accent, swara, pitch, amplitude of sound and time measure. Veda mantras have to be chanted in a specified cadence and rhythm. If this is done, the very listening to the Vedic chanting creates a tremendous beneficial effect on one’s mental and bodily health. More important, by connecting us to a higher level of consciousness,

they provide us a harmony of mind, body and soul, and therefore inner peace. Vedic chanting puts the listener directly in touch with the universal source of energy. The Gayatri Mantra is a prayer to that one illuminating source, to nourish all our faculties. This source powers the intellect, which controls the mind, which in turn control the senses, which are ultimately canalized in the right direction, enabling us to think right, speak right, and do right. An ancient Vedic prayer says, “Aa No Bhadrah Kratavo Yanthu Vishwathah,” meaning, “Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions.”

To optimize the effect of Nada, there should be “Sruti Suddha” and “Swara Suddha”. In addition, there should be Bhakti. As an example of lyric steeped in Bhakthi, we may refer to Saint Purandara Dasa’s words “Neene Gati Enthu Nambitha Dasana Mele Innu Daya Bharathe”. Nada is taken as a path to attain the ultimate reality Brahman, hence the term “Nada Brahman”. The song in Raga Kalyana Vasantham sung by Saint Thyagaraja starting with the words “Nadaloludai Brahmanandamandave” emphasizes the link between Nada and Brahman by pointing out that if one is deeply immersed in Nada, the experience will be “Brahmananda,” i.e., the ultimate bliss.

Sage Yagnavalkya pronounced that “One who knows Sruti (melody), Jati (rhythm) and Tala (Beats), easily attains salvation”. The traditional emphasis, therefore, has been on music as a vehicle for spiritual salvation. The Chandogyopanishad enjoins on all to do “Udgithopasana”, meditating on the mystic symbol of Brahman i.e., “OM”, to the accompaniment of Veena, considered the most ancient Indian musical instrument. This is to be done during Brahmamuhurta, i.e., from three hours to one and a half hours before sunrise, for perfect health of body, mind and spirit. It is important to chant “OM” in the proper way, dwelling on every Swara from “Sa” to “Upper Sa.” That is the way prescribed to receive the vast

cosmic energy through the Sahasrara Chakra at the top of the head and converting such energy into Prana or life energy. This is because, according to the cosmic wisdom of our ancient seers, OM represents the sum total of the matter and energy of the entire universe, the three constituent sounds 'A' 'U' 'M' symbolizing Brahma the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver and Rudra, the Destroyer. These sounds merge, one with the next, until a lingering half sound 'M' is heard, which reverberates in the cosmos and merges into the cosmic silence of Nada Brahman.

The close association of the Veena with Goddess Saraswati, the Flute with Lord Krishna, Mahaveena with Narada, Yazh with Thumburu, Mridangam with Mahavishnu, Khanjira with Mahalakshmi and Maddala with Nandi etc, has helped to foster the age-old bond between this pristine music and the Divine. In fact, in ancient times, when a Rishi recited Yogamantras, his wife invariably accompanied him on the Veena. Composer Muthuswami Dikshitar has referred to Goddess Meenakshi as "Veenagana Dasagamakakriye", the creator of ten kinds of gamakas (which represent modes of vibratory travel between swaras). Adi Sankara also, in his Meenakshi Pancharatnam describes the Goddess as 'Veena Venu Mridanga Vadya Rasika'.

The bewildering variety of musical instruments handed down to us down the ages bears testimony to the amazing musical skills of our ancients, their knowledge about the place of sound in music and their ability to produce perfect musical instruments. In fact their knowledge of music extended to architecture as well. The sangeetha mandapas in many temples such as the Vittala Temple in Hampi and Nellaiappar Temple in Tirunelveli and palaces such as the Thirumalai Naicker Mahal in Madurai make us wonder at the granite musical pillars which, when struck, produce perfect swaras Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha and Ni. A modern construction of such pillars is

found in the grand musical hall of Sri Ganapathy Satchitananda Swamy's Ashram in Mysore. The latest innovation is a Tambura-shaped 'Dhyanamandira' constructed at Rudrapatna, Karnataka, as a place to worship Saptaswara Devatas.

Music is universal, as it has a universal appeal. William Shakespeare wrote that those "not moved by the concord of sweet sounds" were fit for "treasons, stratagems and spoils". The power of music was tellingly described by poet William Congreve thus:

"Music hath charms to soothe a savage beast,  
To soften rocks or bend a knotted oak."

The comment by the famous Western violinist Yehudi Menuhin on Indian music is very interesting in this context. In his book "the Unfinished Journey", he says that the purpose of Indian music is "to make one sensitive to the Infinite within one, to unite one's breath with the breath of space, one's vibrations with the vibrations of the cosmos". James D'Angelo, American musician and composer says "There is a sense of wonder at what the combination of sounds which we call "music" can do to expand the emotions and heighten awareness ..... to be transported to other worlds, experiencing moments of pure ecstasy".

Music promotes a sense of well-being and happiness in humans as well as in animals. An ancient Sanskrit line says: "Sisurvethi Pasurvethi Vethi Ganarasam Phanihi" (The child knows music, the animal knows music and the hooded serpent knows music). Here the word "knows" signifies "being receptive to music". Cattle, for example, are known to yield more milk when they listen to music. The famous scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose established that even plants have life and recent experiments have shown that they are moved by music:

the crop yield has been shown to have been better and of better quality if music has been played.

Certain miraculous effects have been known to be caused by certain ragas sung by noble souls with intense devotion, e.g. rain was brought to parched lands by Sri Muthuswami Dikshitar when he sang the composition “Aanandaamruthaakarshini” in Raga Amruthavarshini. Tansen, a leading court musician in Akbar’s court, similarly brought rains by singing Rag Megh Malhar and lighted candles by singing Rag Deepak.

Specific emotions are also supposed to be induced by individual ragas. By way of examples, among Carnatic ragas, Raga Anandabhairavi is known to reduce high blood pressure. This is mentioned in a manuscript titled “Raga Chikitsa” originally found in the Saraswati Mahal library in Tanjore (now Thanjavur), which dealt with the various ragas that could be used for curing specific ailments. Raga Subhapantuvarali is also supposed to have the same effect. Ragas Syama and Sindhubhairavi are supposed to provide a sense of peace and tranquility; Behag, Kamas, Huseini, Sahana, and Reethigowla are supposed to promote Sringara or a romantic mood; Saveri and Nadanamakriya, a sense of compassion; Neelambari and Yedukulakhamboji, rendered in a slow tempo, are reported to induce sleep; Hamsadhwani is said to relieve depression; and Madhyamavati is known to create a sense of joy. Certain ragas have hightened effects if sung at particular times of the day. For example, Bowli, Bupalam, Mohanam and Bilahari are usually sung in the mornings, while Kalyani, Sahana and Vasantha are generally sung in the evenings.

Among Hindustani classical ragas, it is believed that Kafi evokes a cool, soothing emotion; Poorya Dhanasri stabilizes the mind; Mishra Mand is refreshing; Bageshri induces a feeling of

calmness; Bhupali reduces high blood pressure; Bahar relieves insomnia and Chandrakauns is helpful for heart ailments.

In order to have the full effect of the music, faith in the power of the music is required, in the artiste as well as in the listeners, with proper rapport between them. The music should be listened to with the heart for enjoyment, rather than with the intellect for analysis. And the listening should not be on an empty stomach. The setting should be right, if possible in sylvan surroundings with the opportunity of communion with nature.

Scientifically, it is known that specifically structured sounds such as in a raga stimulate the brain cells. The characteristic pattern of notes in every raga evoke a specific emotion, because the raga vibrates at a certain energy level, depending upon (a) its swaras, (b) its Arohana and Avarohana (the ascent and the descent of the swaras in the scale), (c) its Jeeva Swaras, which are emphasized while singing or playing the raga and (d) the kind of Gamakas and ornamentations used. Music is also known to stimulate the pituitary gland, the primary gland in the endocrine system. Repeatedly listening to the right raga produces sound vibrations which, passing through auditory nerves (which have the most connections in the body), produce contractions and relaxations in specific muscles, nerves and chakras linked to the affected part. The contraction occurs when the musical impulse is received; the relaxation occurs between two impulses. During the contraction, blood is squeezed out of the affected part and during the relaxation, blood from the neighboring parts flows in. These blood flows release appropriate energy flows to the affected part, which help the healing process. Music having rhythms close to the average beats of the heart (70 to 75 per minute) is known to have a sobering and soothing effect. Rhythms lower than the average beats produce a positive suspense and those above the level, a positive excitement, and the overall effect is wholesome.



It is well known that a mellow music in the background helps concentration in studies. It is also known to reduce fatigue at work, as evidenced by farm workers, boatmen and load pullers singing happily in unison while working. By bringing the vibrations of our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions to ideal, balanced, levels, music boosts the natural calming and healing processes of our body-senses-mind-intellect-spirit complex.

Music Therapy is well established in the West as a profession, with notable successes, but here the use of music is mainly to treat handicapped persons and children with autism, learning or communication difficulties or emotional or behavioral problems such as aggressive behavior, the goal generally being improved social communication and social acceptability. The emphasis on harmony in the Western music and on melody in the Indian music may have contributed to this difference in approach.

The definition of raga is 'Ranjayathi ithi ragaha' i.e., the combination of the swaras or notes comprising the raga should be pleasing to the ears. Raga-based music indeed opens the body and the mind, in fact the entire personality, to the cosmic healing forces, leading to higher mental concentration and emotional peace, better physical health and all round efficiency. And the ultimate reward is indeed the spiritual growth that music helps.

Note on Author:

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