

## AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF HOW THE ESRAJ IS LISTED AS A STRING INSTRUMENT AND OUTLINING THE CURRENT STATUS THROUGH ITS ORIGIN

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### Abstract

Being an Esraj scholar, It is very important to understand how the instrument esraj has been categorized in the string instrument category. As it is known to every music aspirant in the field of Esraj, there are four categories of musical instruments since old times. In the modern era, The Esraj can be listed under a bowing category of chordophones. The instrument Esraj has gone through a long way to behold that position in the categorization of Musical Instruments. And the Origin of the instrument Esraj is quite argumentative according to the musical traces. However, it has been given a comparative conclusion about the instrument's origin. Through this article, it is to be analyzed in-depth of how the Esraj is listed as a string instrument and outlines its current status through its origin. This article has been written by tracing some authentic music sources like texts, encyclopedias, and interviews of distinguished persons in Music.

**Keywords:** Esraj, String-Instrument, Santiniketan, Origin of Esraj, Ashuranjani

### INTRODUCTION

This presentation there will be in two parts, in the first part, it is going to discuss comparatively the categorization of the instrument Esraj according to the ancient texts and the modern methodology. And in the second part, has given the current status of the instrument also some historical facts about the origination of the Instrument Esraj in brief. With the analytical comparison of the history of the instrument Esraj, its origin and to make the awareness of the current position of the instrument Esraj in Hindustani Classical Music.

### STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Esraj has been categorized as a string instrument in the Indian Music instrument classification for ages. But in the modern era, it can be listed more precisely. Because in the category of string instruments there are various types. Plucked, Bowed, Struck, etc. Among them, the Esraj is a bowed instrument. The question is, what are the facts about how the esraj is being kept in the category of a string instrument, and what were the causes behind this and to find out some historical facts about its origin to get aware about its present status.

## DATA COLLECTION

This paper is written by collecting primary data which are authentic information from existing pillars and experts of Esraj. According to their instruction, We have gone through several secondary data such as musical texts and collected valuable information about the instrument categorization, and also browsed Britannica and oxford encyclopedia of the music of India.

## EVALUATE AND JUSTIFY THE AREA AND LIMITATION

Interviewing the expert and followup their suggested routes is the best way to get aware of the categorization and the current status of the instrument Esraj. The way I choose is the most suitable to approach and contribute new knowledge to understanding the subject.

## ANALYSIS OF THE FACTS HOW THE ESRAJ BECAME IN THE CATEGORY OF BOWED STRING INSTRUMENT

Before it begins to discover the instrument Esraj, it needs to know some facts about the instrument classification. According to the text of some distinguished scholars' hypothesis, the precursor of the bowing instruments is the instrument 'Pinaki' which is used to be performed by Lord Shiva. We can easily think of the antiquity of our bowed instrument by looking at the "Pinak" instrument in the hands of Lord Mahadev. The archer "Ravana" also proves that this instrument was in use in India in the Tretayuga, that is, about five or six thousand years before today. Pinak - Veena, Ravana, Amriti, and other musical instruments are known to have been the property of Indian Hindus as evidenced by their shape and judgment by European scholars. It would not be unreasonable to think that this "penna or penak" instrument might be a variant of our ancient pinaki harp. Pinaki is instrument in the discovery of various archery instruments such as the Sarengi, Esraj, etc. of today.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Esraj is a bowing instrument, it would be categorized as a type of *Veena* according to the classification of the "*Tata vadya*" in old text. In Gita Vadyam it is explained furtherly about two types of Veena that exist. They are the *Achal Thaat veena* and *Sachal Thaat Veena*. The vinas which have immovable frets are called *Achal Thaat Veena*. And the Vina which is made with moveable frets was called *Sachal Thaat Veena*;: Elaborately, Another name for *Achal Veena* is *Dhruvveena*. The conventional *Mahati veena* immovable frets. Because there is no need to drag the frets of this instrument to make the note sharp or flatten. Twenty-two frets are kept in it from the Tivra Ma of a lower octave to Suddh Ga of Tar Saptak. Many

<sup>1</sup> Ghosh, Geet-Vadyam, 168

Ghosh, Lakshmi Narayan (1975), Geet-Vadyam, page - 165, Calcutta: Pratap Narayan Ghosh, B. Com., 123/1-A Shishir Bhaduri Sarani (Maniktala Street), Kolkata- 700006.

people called it *chal veena* which is also the *Sachal Veena* tied with only 16 frets . If there are 22 frets in the Sitar is called *Achal Thaat Veena* and if there are 16 frets is also called *Sachal Thaat Veena*. At that time another name for the 'Thaat' was the 'parda' because the Thaat is created from the calculation of the frets. Adjusting the frets accordingly required notes while applying the flatten and sharpen tones of in any instrument, would be the categorizing factor whether it is *Chal Veena* or *Achal Thaat Veena*. At the time of Bharata, there were two types of Veenas, both were in seven by seven frets. In one of them, seven strings were tuned in seven pure tones (the strings which were not raised or lowered) were called *Achalveena* or *Dhruveena*. The seven strings of the other instrument were tuned in flatten and sharp notes and the second was called the *Chalveena*. At present, *chal* or *Achalveena* is determined by the position of the fret<sup>1</sup> (Ghosh, 1975, P. 165)

In the early 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC there were four main categories of musical instruments that have been identified by the Indian Musicologist. They were 'Tata Vadya, Sushir Vadya, Avanaddha vadhya, and Ghana Vadhya. Following facts may be the evidence to convince that there were four types of instruments. Indians recognized four types of instruments as early as the 1st century BC: stringed instruments, wind instruments, percussion instruments of wood and metal, and percussion instruments with skin heads (such as drums).<sup>2</sup> (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1768). It is estimated that at least 500 instruments are known for use in classical folk and tribal music. As mentioned earlier, these are generally classified as string instruments, covered instruments or drums, and solid instruments. These correspond to the Western chordophones, aerophones, membranophones and idiophones"<sup>3</sup> (Deva, 1980)

According to the further classification of music instrument this classification has been reconsidered with the manner of made and manner of sound production: Music instruments are classified in many different ways depending on the point of view, time, and location. These differing approaches consider factors like shape, construction, material composition, physical state, etc.<sup>3</sup>

So the string instruments having 5 sub categories such as bows, harps, lutes, lyres, and zithers, Chordophones are instruments in which a stretched, vibrating string produces the initial sound. There are five basic types: bows, harps, lutes, lyres, and zithers. Stringed instruments are referred to as chordophones when a precise, acoustically

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1Ghosh, Lakshmi Narayan (1975), *Geet-Vadyam*, page - 165, Calcutta: Pratap Narayan Ghosh, B. Com., 123/1-A Shishir Bhaduri Sarani (Maniktala Street), Kolkata- 700006.

2 Encyclopedia Britannica. (1768). Retrieved 02 23, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/art/musical-instrument/Classification-of-instruments>

3 Deva, B. (1980). *An Introduction to Indian Music*. New Delhi: Indian Council for cultural relations.

based description is needed”<sup>1</sup> (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1768). According to these facts the instrument Esraj can be classified under the sub category of string instruments called bows or bowing instruments of chordophone.

## **ANALYZING HISTORICAL FACTS ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF ESRAJ**

According to Geet-Vadyam, there are four controversies about the origination of Esraj. An eminent musician named Ram Prasanna Bandyopadhyay has mentioned in his music text which is called “Esraj Taranga” that the instrument Esraj is invented by a Sarangi Player named is Nabibux who was a native of Kashidam. (Ghosh, 1975, P. 169) And the 2<sup>nd</sup> view is that there was another musician called Ishwari Raj who was the inventor of this instrument Esraj (Ghosh, 1975, P.- 169) According to the rumor that the name of this instrument is derived because of the musician’s name which is Iswari Maharaj or ‘Ishvari Raj’ to *Israj* or ‘*Esraj*’ (Ghosh, 1975, P. 169)

This musician who used to live in Kashidam, at Gaya originated from Panjab. According to another argument, it is said that Bihari Ji and Lakshman Das Ji who were the students of Ishwari Raj invented the Instrument Esraj and dedicated this instrument to his Guru’s name, (Ghosh, 1975, P. 169)

According to another view, in Gita Vadyam, it is mentioned that the emperor Aurangzeb, had invented this instrument before he was becoming an anti-musical. According to that information, the age of this instrument is not more than 300 years old. But because of the lack of information, it cannot be counted as a fact. The late Suresh Chandra Chakraborty wrote in the 2nd volume of Bharat Kosh published by Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, there also mentioned that Emperor Aurangzeb invented the instrument Esraj before he became anti-musician. As such it can be assumed that the birth of the instrument is three hundred years. And there is nothing authentic here either. The name would have been some what believable, even if it had the names of Akbar Badshah or Tasya's great-grandson Dara or Suja. The name of Aurangzeb is not considered very probable to us. Samples of some musical performances must have been found in his inner-city during the time of Aurangzeb. There are instances of some of his sons practicing music but there is no trace of his own interest in the subject. Therefore, it is not convincible for us to believe in such a legend as there is no evidence<sup>2</sup> (Ghosh, 1975, P. 169)

1 Encyclopedia Britannica. (1768). Retrieved 02 23, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/art/musical-instrument/Classification-of-instruments>

2 Chakraborti, L. S. (n.d.). Esraj. Bharat Kosh, Second Chapter.

According to another opinion, Muslim musicians believes that the word Esraj comes from ‘*Ayen-Sin-Re-Ayen-Jim*’. ‘E’ comes from 1<sup>st</sup> *Ayen* ‘S’ comes from ‘*Sin*’, R comes from ‘*re*’ ‘A’ comes from the 2<sup>nd</sup> ‘*Ayen*’ and J comes from ‘*Jim*’. The meaning of the phrase ‘*Ayen-Sin-Re-Ayen-Jim*’ is to bring up the light or lighting up a candle or Deep to eliminate the darkness. And also the phrase has been described by them as this instrument ignites fire in the minds of human beings hence named as Esraj .<sup>1</sup>

According to another view, the word Esraj is derived from the Urdu word “*Siraj*”. The meaning of this word is lamp.(Ghosh, 1975, P. 171) Late. Kshetra Mohan Goswami named this instrument as ‘*Asuranjani*’. The reason behind that name is, this instrument has the capability to bring joyfulness to the human mind at the earliest its sound is propagated. ‘*Asutos*’ word is a synonym to lord Shiva. In this manner *Asuranjani* word can be derived as, maker of joy of lord Shiva, (Ghosh, 1975, P. 171)

According to some other views this instrument originated from Arab. This information can be found by tracing the new Oxford History of Music, which has been mentioned that “the Dilruba and the Esraj are of persian origin”<sup>2</sup> But the latter scholars of music do not take this as granted because if it originated from Persia then there should be a mention about Esraj in the text of ‘*Kitab Al Kafi Fil Msiqi*’ by hussain ebon jaila who was a famous western author in Arab or neither is it mentioned in any other book from the Middle east.<sup>3</sup>

Among some other views, the Esraj was invented by mixing up the structure of sitar and Sarangi. However, it can be identified as the newest version of Ravanahattha. Even from the beginning it was used as an accompaniment instrument by the time it has become a major solo instrument in the field of Indian music. According to the Hindu era of Indian music, this instrument has been discriminated against by some musical texts as it was invented by mixing up two major instruments and by measuring its age and the authentication of its inventor. And one of the major reasons was to be neglected because there was a lack of talented musicians to perform Esraj skillfully to get the attraction of the ears of the audiences. (Ghosh, 1975, P. 172) Some musicians from Gaya have gained the name and fame by playing this instrument and have established in Kolkata in those days. And this instrument has been popularised in Kolkata by some of the masters of Bishnupur Gharana. Not even in West Bengal but also in Bangladesh this instrument can be found commonly in some educated or Aristocratic families. (Ghosh, 1975, P.- 172-173)

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1 (Ghosh, 1975, P. 171)

2Wells, Egon the new Oxford History of Music, Page number 225

3 (Ghosh, 1975, P.- 171)

After tracing the history of Indian music at the time of the colonial period it has been found that the music which was practiced in Darbar has come to the end because those musicians had to go to Baiji's place to continue their occupation for the survival of their life. The instrument Sarangi and the players have been discriminated against by the general audience because of this reason. At that time the audience used to judge it as a Taboo in the field of Indian music. It is said that some musicians of that time who are educated and literate, invented the Esraj to fulfill the space of the Sarangi.(Ghosh, 1975, P.- 173)

That could be the turning point of the rising and getting popularity of the instrument Esraj among the audience because some musicians started to perform this instrument to accompany Indian classical music as well as playing solo events. And it has become one of the major reasons to get popular this instrument in aristocratic families and apart from that it had become a trend to accompany with the trending music culture of West Bengal. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore also preferred this instrument to accompany with his songs instead of harmonium.<sup>1</sup>

"Ashu Ranjani Tatva" the book it's all about the Esraj written by the late great musician Ksheshtra Mohan Goswami has mention in his text and named "*Esrar*" instead of Esraj. And the name *Esrar* has been used by one of great musician in Bishnupur named Ramprasanna Bandyopadhyay on his musical text "Esrar Taranga". One more musician Surendranath Bandopadhyay has mentioned the name Esrar in his text as "Esrar Mukhul".

Nityananda Adhikari who is an instrument maker, and an Esraj Player has mentioned the meaning of Esraj in his text with reference of old texts of Bishnupur Gharana given by his guru Surendranath Bandyopadhyay, as 'Es' means sweet and 'Rar' Dhvani. Surendra Nath Bandopadhyay used to believe that the name Esrar comes from Urdu or which is the mother tongue of Persia. But the tracing of the dictionary of Urdu, this word cannot be found. But according to the references of Professor Mr. Siddiq and the professor Tayyab M.A , there is a word in the local communicative language of Urdu called Esrar. The meaning of this word is "mystery". After analyzing these facts it is impossible to ignore the word esrar and it should be given the right respect.<sup>2</sup>

According to O.Goswami, it has been mentioned in his text " the story of Indian music" that in the era of the Mughal emperor women used to sing classical music but they cannot be accompanied by Sarangi players as well as other musicians as they are

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1 (Ghosh, 1975, P.173)

2 Ghosh, 1975, P. 174

male. The instrument Sarangi is difficult to play by women because it can harm the nail and the finger. It is said that to overcome this problem they have invented the Esraj with the influence of Sarangi and sitar.

“Esraj and Dilruba are both Muslim innovations from sarangi. During the Muslim rule when the women in the harem started to sing, they could not be accompanied by the sarangi players who were mostly men. Women could not take to the sarangi as it was not only a difficult instrument but also spoils the beauty of the nails. ...” (Goswami)

Hundred years ago Esraj was a prestigious instrument among Gaya, Benaras, and Bombe & Bishnupur of Bengal. During the time the Sarangi was the running accompaniment instrument with Khyal Singers, Tappa, and Thumri. The Esraj is also used to play an important role as well as Sarangi. But at that time Sarangi and Violin have become solo instruments making the Esraj kept behind. Advantages and the disadvantages of each instrument might be the cause for it.

At that time in India, Gaya Gharana held the highest popularity and quality of playing Esraj. Hanuman Das Singh is the pioneer of this Gharana. His disciples were Kanailal Dhendi, Shital Mukhopadhyay & Ram Sebak Mishra. Chandrika Prasad Dubey took lessons from Kanailal Dhendi. Jogendralal Gangopadhyay & Kalidas Pal all are eminent Esraj players. They are all from Gaya Gharana. Hal Gamak, Hal Tan, Chhut Tan were some specializations of this Gharana. Kalidas Pal, a disciple of Kanailal Dhendi of Gaya Gharana also took lessons from Basat Khan, Mohomad Ali from Shenja Gharana. Mohammad Ali, Amir Khan, Ali Mohammad Khan were some famous musicians in Shenja Gharana. The famous musicians Brojendra Kishor Roy Choudhuri, Gauri Pal (Bangladesh) took lessons from Abdul Khan & Amir Khan of Shenja Gharana.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the position of Bishnupur bagged 2<sup>nd</sup> to Gaya Gharana, the priority in contributions and pioneers on Esraj goes to Bishnupur Gharana. The consequences of Dhrupad in Bishnupur might be a huge reason for these consequences. The first Esraj player of this Gharana was Ram Kesab Bhattacharya (1809-1850) in the short tenure of his lifetime he contributed a lot to Hindustani Classical Music. After him, Ram Prasanna Bandyopadhyay and Surendranath Bandyopadhyay, two brothers became famous among music lovers. They took lessons of Esraj from His father Anantalal Bandyopadhyay. It is said that Ram Prasanna was a genius in every aspect. He was the author of “Sangeet Manjaree” and among his disciples, famous Esraj Players were Ashesh Chandra Bandyopadhyay & Gourhari Kabiraj.

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1 (Gosh, Dr.Pradip Kumar,Hindusthani Sangiter Gharanar Kramavikash p.28)

Esraj was the familiar instrument in the Tagore family of Santiniketan, Dinendranath Tagore used to play Esraj with Brahma Sangit & Rabindra Sangit as well. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore has preferred to accompany this instrument with his songs. He began Santiniketan Brahmacharya Ashram and expressed his emotions through composing tunes to his songs with the accompaniment of the melodious sound of Esraj.

At that time Rabindranath Tagore came to know about Aresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay of Bishnupur Gharana, and appointed him as an Adhyapak in Santiniketan, not only for Hindustani classical vocal music but also accompanying Esraj with Rabindra Sangit. Development of Esraj in Santiniketan started at the time of the arrival of Esraj player Aresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay in 1937.

Then he began to teach Esraj as a subject in Santiniketan Ashram. By that time, the Santiniketan Ashram had been developed up to the university level. Bhim Rao Sastri, Vinayak Masoji, Dharendra Krishna Dev Barman, Sailaja Ranjan Majumdar, Shantidev Ghosh, Jyotsna Kumar Ghosh, Nirmal Chandra Nandi, Gopal Chandra Das, Nilima Sen, Sitanshu Roy were the names of Esraj accompanists in Santiniketan.

Ranadhir Roy, a disciple of Aresh Chandra Bandyopadhyay, was a reader of Sangit Bhavana in Visva Bharati University. Nirmal Chandra Nandi, senior lecturer of Sangi Bhavana, Gopal Chandra Das a senior lecturer of Palli Sangathan Vibhag (Music Unit) had contributed their service to the university of Visva-Bharati. Ex-Professor Sunil Kabiraj used to teach in Sangit Bhavana. At present Prof. Buddhadev Das, a disciple of Pt. Ranadhir Roy is contributing his service by teaching Esraj for the new generation in Sangit Bhavana.

## CONCLUSION

According to the facts analyzed above, it concludes that Esraj can be categorized as a bowed fretted instrument in the chordophone category according to the modern instrument classification, and it does not matter even though it has various views and opinions about its origin and a scholar of Esraj what important find out new ways how to make it exist for the upcoming generation.

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