

# IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVISATION IN INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADVAITA VEDANTA

SAEBOM PARK

Research Scholar, Department of Instrumental Music, Faculty of Performing Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

## Abstract

This article explores the significance of improvisation in Indian classical music, emphasizing its foundation on *rāga*, the melodic structure. Improvisation is considered essential in leading and developing ragas. Each performance of a musician can be different even if they perform the same raga, influenced by either outer factors or inner ones. The representation of raga is not a completely freeform playing style because it should be explored within the particular frame of the raga, but still relies on the musician's spontaneous ability to perform at the moment of the performance. Musicians learn not only how to reveal the specific character and movement of a raga but also how to create and improvise through direct communication and rigorous training with their Guru. The capacity of *Upaj*, which means creation or origin, is required for each musician. It showcases the potential insight of a musician, a concept that can be regarded as meaningful from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta, which asserts that pure consciousness already pervades everywhere. Developing improvisation skills in Indian classical music becomes a path to self-discovery and unlocking one's potential, akin to transcending *Maya*, which denotes an illusion to reveal pure consciousness.

**Key Words:** Indian Classical Music, *Rāga*, Improvisation, *Upaj*, Pure Consciousness, Advaita Vedanta

## INTRODUCTION

This article discovers that the fundamental role of improvisation in Indian classical music, emphasizing its significance as a primary function. It focuses on comprehending the distinctive characteristics and progression of the melodic framework or system known as *raga*. The meaning and role of improvisation in Indian classical music will be carefully defined. Furthermore, the article investigates how musicians can develop the capacity for improvisation. Additionally, it highlights the connection between the principles of improvisation in Indian classical music and a philosophical perspective. This exploration is approached through an understanding of the concept of the state of consciousness, particularly from the viewpoint of Advaita Vedanta, which is one of the six main schools of Indian philosophy known as *śad-darśana*.

## ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES OF RAGA

A *rāga* is a melodic framework which lays the foundation of Indian classical music. Ragas are explored based on the monophonic melodies, where the intervals between different notes and the tonic or base note, *Sa(ṣaḍja)*, are crucial. While it might be tempting to consider them as a classification system for scales or modes from the Western music perspectives, ragas have distinctive attributes that differentiate them beyond a mere sequence of notes.

Each raga consists of its own *rūpa*, referring to the melodic form or structure. This encompasses the ascending (*āroha*) and descending (*avaroha*) sequences of notes. The Chalan

of each raga denotes the specific melodic phrases defining its character or musical personality, involving a unique movement that requires proper interpretation.

Above all, a raga holds an emotional or aesthetic essence believed to evoke specific Rasas. This implies that a raga is not merely a melodic system producing simple sequences or combinations of notes. A raga is intimately connected with sentiments. Moreover, each raga has a special timing that is considered suitable to and recommended for singing or playing. Some swaras, referring to notes, are regarded as matching specific times from the perspective of aesthetics in Indian music. There are also some ragas related to seasons, such as the representative Ragas Megh and Miyan ki Malhar, which are for the rainy season. Consequently, the mentioned essential attributes of ragas are sophisticatedly interwoven, constituting the distinctive characteristics of each raga and enhancing its essence.

### **MEANING AND ROLE OF IMPROVISATION IN INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC**

Improvisation plays a crucial role in Indian classical music. While it does not imply expressions based on absolute autonomy in this music, meaning it is not entirely free-form performance, spontaneity is a key element in leading and progressing ragas within the structure. Indian music does not rely on fixed musical notation throughout the entire performance. The ability to lead a whole raga is fueled by the musician's capacity for creation and improvisation. Additionally, both outer and inner factors influence the musician's performance during the ongoing rendition.

Since improvisation leads the raga performance, various factors can influence it. The way of improvisation is definitely affected by a variety of outer factors. These can include time, space, ambience, weather, etc. Besides these outer factors, the inner factors like the mood, condition, aim of the musician, and so on might affect the musician and his performance. The way of improvisation in Indian classical music should follow the principles based on the structure of ragas, but it is still changeable and flexible. Each musician plays differently even in the same raga that other musicians play, and it may be different from what he played before. The performance is not the same even though they sing or play gat, which is the composition taken over through their belonging to a Gharana, referring to a musical lineage or tradition, with minor, subtle changes, and ornaments.

In essence, one of the distinctive aspects of Indian classical music is that a musician should have the ability to create and improvise their own melodies and rhythms based on the structure of ragas. The capacity for a musician to simultaneously possess the skills to create their own musical expression while performing carries significant meaning. Namely, it implies that in Indian classical music, the rendition of music is entirely driven by their subjective interpretation. Building upon the foundation of raga, the musician can spontaneously showcase not only their playing skills but also their creative, interpretative, and expressive abilities, revealing their limitless potential. In other words, a rendition of raga

is the expressive articulation through which an individual can unleash their countless creativity and uniqueness.

### **UNFOLDMENT OF RAGA THROUGH IMPROVISATION**

Alap is the opening section that introduces and develops a raga through melodic improvisation. It begins at a slow tempo without any accompanying instruments. Musicians deeply contemplate each swara according to the raga they have selected for the performance, only under the drone sound from the Tanpura. Through this process, a musician entirely concentrates on expressing the note combination and the movement and flow of the particular raga, reflecting their trained musical skills and the mood evoked in the specific raga system at that moment. This gradually progresses to Jor and Jhala portions. This long elaboration is fully based on improvisation, emerging from training with a Guru and their own hard practice. Furthermore, it is the outcome of a conversation with the moment for musicians performing and the specific system of the raga, which supports and leads to their complete improvisation.

After this detailed exploration of the raga, a percussion instrument like the Tabla joins this progression, deepening the sentiment and colour of each raga. At this point, musicians play a gat, a pre-established melodic composition turned over as per the gharana. However, improvisation is still an edifice to lead the further progression of the raga. Vistār, tāns, and extra ornaments or embellishments need to be sung or played spontaneously within the tāla, which denotes the specific measurement for the rhythmic beat. Therefore, it is also indispensable that the musician communicates with an accompanist musician. They engage in improvisations by taking turns with an intimate interaction in the moment. It is not uncommon for the main performer and the percussion accompanist to participate in spontaneous improvisation during the performance without prior rehearsal or coordination.

### **THE WAY TO CULTIVATE THE CAPACITY FOR CREATION AND IMPROVISATION**

The way to cultivate the capability for improvisation necessitates comprehensive and intensive training. It demands an elevated state of mind because it needs full concentration within the peculiar system. Therefore, in Indian classical music, disciples learn music directly from their Guru in the system of Guru-Shishya Parampara, the teacher-disciple learning tradition. The Guru not only shares their musical techniques but also imparts philosophical or spiritual experiences to their disciples. This is the distinction that makes Indian classical music special. In other words, a disciple learns to represent the expressive character of a raga as well as their musical development, creating their own compositions towards the final goal.

Therefore, Guru-Shishya Parampara is the very fundamental system in explaining the characteristics of Indian classical music. In this way, disciples start to follow how their Gurus play. Every time the Guru plays different things, even for the same raga, the disciple has to

catch such a delicate variation through it. It requires disciples to absorb ideas, experience, and philosophy of each Guru with a good discipline.

Additionally, as mentioned before, improvisation in Indian classical music also requires peculiar rules within the raga system. Ragas can be classified by time. That is, raga classification is built on the cycle of time. It leads to provoke the proper rasa that a raga has on its own. Rasa can be described as fundamental feelings or mental states. According to Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, there are eight rasas: Śṛṅgāra signifies love, Hāsyā denotes laughter, Karuṇā represents compassion, Raudra embodies anger, Vīra conveys courage, Bhayānaka instills fear, Bībhatsa manifests disgust, and Adbhuta expresses wonder. Later, Abhinavagupta includes Śānta, indicating peace, among these eight rasas in his commentary on the Nāṭyaśāstra. This can be a unique characteristic of Indian classical music that is hard to find in other genres of music.

### **THE STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND ADVAITA VEDANTA**

The improvisation in Indian classical music is crucial from a philosophical perspective, holding greater significance in terms of ontology and metaphysics. This is particularly evident from the viewpoint of Advaita Vedanta, one of the six main schools in Indian philosophy, known as ṣad-darśana.

According to Advaita philosophy, there are not two fundamental entities. In other words, there is one non-dual reality. This reality is not based on the idea that the object produces consciousness or vice versa. The non-dual reality is pure consciousness, so-called witness consciousness which pervades everywhere. It is regarded as the ultimate reality or the Absolute, representing the supreme, formless, and infinite cosmic power known as Brahman. This consciousness inherently illuminates itself. However, it is concealed by the illusion which can be called māyā. The removal of māyā allows the revelation of pure consciousness.

From this perspective, the way of improvisation which can be seen in Indian classical music is deeply linked with the pursuit for revealing pure consciousness. The state dedicated to training and nurturing improvisational skills, as well as the act of performing Indian classical music through improvisation, bears a striking resemblance to a meditative state. This deep level of consciousness not only fosters technical proficiency but also prompts the emergence of profound insights among musicians. Ultimately, musicians aim to discover their pure consciousness through this elaborate system of improvisation.

The concept of Upaj, inherent in each musician, signifies the origin of production and creation. Musicians are required to express their accumulated and experienced skills, acquired through rigorous training. In doing so, they engage with external factors that can influence their state at the moment of performance.

As a result, improvisation in Indian classical music elevates the state of musicians. With their potential insights revealed, the beauty of raga is enhanced. Pure consciousness shines through in the nuanced artistry of improvisation. This spiritual endeavour in Indian classical music finds expression through improvisation, and the fundamental beauty lies in how this creative process evokes pure consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

This article tries to find out the profound significance of improvisation in Indian classical music, particularly when viewed through the lens of Advaita Vedanta philosophy. The exploration begins by highlighting the foundational role and attributes of ragas, the melodic structures that underpin this musical tradition.

It underscores that improvisation plays a salient role in Indian classical music, where musicians possess the capacity to create and improvise within the framework of ragas. This improvisational skill is cultivated through dedicated training in the Guru-Shishya Parampara, where disciples not only learn musical techniques but also absorb the philosophical and spiritual experiences of their Gurus.

Furthermore, it is explored that there is the profound link between improvisation and the Advaita Vedanta philosophy which asserts the existence of a non-dual reality, pure consciousness, representing the ultimate cosmic power known as Brahman. The removal of the illusion, or *māyā*, allows the revelation of this pure consciousness. The way of improvisation in Indian classical music, therefore, becomes a path to revealing this pure consciousness and encountering self-realization, akin to a meditative state.

The concept of *Upaj*, denoting creation and origin, is intrinsic to each musician, representing the potential insight and creativity. Through the process of improvisation, musicians elevate their state of consciousness, and the beauty of raga is heightened. Ultimately, the spiritual effort in Indian classical music finds its expression through improvisation, and the fundamental beauty lies in how this creative and brilliant process awakens pure consciousness.

In essence, improvisation becomes a transformative and inventive journey for an individual musician in Indian classical music. Through sophisticated expressions within the structured framework of ragas, the musician embarks on a quest to unveil the pure consciousness that permeates the cosmos.

## REFERENCES

- Bagchee, S. (1998). *Nād: Understanding Rāga Music*. Mumbai: Eshwar.
- Chatterjee, S., & Datta, D. (1939). *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. University of Calcutta.
- Clarke, D., & Clarke, E. (2011). *Music and Consciousness: Philosophical, Psychological, and Cultural Perspectives*. Oxford University Press.



- Daniélou, A. (1995). *Music and the Power of Sound: The Influence of Tuning and Interval on Consciousness*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International.
- Daniélou, A. (1975). The Psychology of Improvisation in the Music of North India. *The World of Music*, 17(4), 16–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43620728>
- Daniélou, A. (1976). Aesthetics and Indian Music. *The World of Music*, 18(2), 17–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43563517>
- Daniélou, A. (2003). *The Rāga-s of Northern Indian Music*. Delhi: Munishiram Manpharlal Publishers.
- Datta, V., & Lath, M. (1967). Improvisation in Indian Music / L'improvisation dans la musique / indienne Improvisation in indischer Musik. *The World of Music*, 9(1), 27–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24318760>
- Iyer, V. S. (2009). *Advaita: The Truth of Non-Duality*. Epigraph Publishing.
- King, R. (1999). *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.