

EXPLORING THE MELODIC RHYTHM: INSTRUMENTS IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

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Abstract: *Classical instruments play a pivotal role in Indian classical dance, enhancing the overall aesthetic and rhythmic elements of the performance. The tabla is fundamental in providing intricate rhythms, accentuating footwork, and establishing a dynamic beat structure. Accompanying the tabla, the pakhawaj, a barrel-shaped drum, adds depth and resonance, particularly in Kathak. Melodic instruments like the sitar and sarod bring a rich tapestry of sound to Indian classical dance. The Veena, is also employed for its resonant and soulful tones, creating a melodic foundation that resonates the dance's narrative. Wind instruments like the flute and shehnai contribute to the melodic palette, offering fluid and expressive tones. The Bansuri is often used in Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi. Harmonium, also finds its place in dance performances as well. It offers a harmonic background and rhythm to support the dancer's movements. The Tanpura, with its continuous drone, provides a foundational pitch, helping dancers, maintain their intonation, and ensuring a harmonious musical environment. Percussion instruments such as Ghatam, Manjira are crucial for their rhythmic complexities. They add layers to the overall sonic experience.*

Keywords: *Music, Dance, Instruments, Accompanist*

INTRODUCTION

Musical instruments play a crucial role in Indian classical dance forms and are considered necessary to the overall performance. They provide rhythm, melody and enhance the emotional expression of the dance. The origin of Indian classical music can be traced back thousands of years with its roots deeply embedded in ancient Indian Scriptures. "Thus we find Sama Veda is the essence of music. The Vedic hymns were chanted with the help of swaras like Udatta, Anudatta, Swarita and were set to tune and rhythm."¹ The detailed knowledge of classical music can be seen in treaties like Natya Shastra written by Bharata Muni. It provides a comprehensive framework for various aspects of Indian classical music, dance and drama. The instruments in dance act as a medium through which the dancer communicates their ideas, emotions and intentions. The presence of live musicians and the rich sound of instruments create a vibrant and immersive experience for the audience. The intricate rhythms and melodic phrases lighten up the aesthetic value of the dance performance, making it more engaging and captivating. Musical instruments can be found in various cultures and traditions. Different instruments have different timbres, pitch, ranges and playing techniques, allowing musicians to express their artistic ideas and create a rich variety of musical textures.

Chapters XXVIII to XXXIV of Natyashastra deals with four kinds of musical instruments namely Tata Vadya, Avanadh Vadya, Sushira Vadya and Ghana Vadya. The eight Indian classical dance forms namely- Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu), Kathak (north India), Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh), Odissi (Odissa), Sattriya (Assam), Manipuri (Manipur), Mohiniyattam (Kerala), Kathakali (Kerala) have their own unique set of instruments in their accompaniment based on their culture, traditions and geographical region. Below is the detailed study of these four kinds of instruments used in different classical dance forms.

1. TATA VADYA

Tata Vadya, also known as stringed instrument, produce sound by striking strings stretched over a resonating chambers. These instruments are also called “chordophones”. String instruments provide a melodic, accompaniment and rhythmic support, enhancing the overall musical experience. “Concert instruments like the Veena, Bin, Sitar, Sarod, Taus, Sarangi, Flute and Nagaswaram have developed an elaborate plucking technique, finger technique, bow technique, and blowing technique.”² Here are some commonly used string instruments in different dance forms:

I) SITAR

The Sitar is one of the most prominent string instruments in Indian classical music and dance. “The invention of Sitar is commonly credited to the famous singer ‘Amir Khusru’ of the court of Sultan Ala-u-din in the fourteenth century.”³ It is believed to have its origin in the 13th century and became popular in the 20th century through the efforts of ‘Pandit Ravi Shankar’ ji who introduced it to the common people. It is used in Hindustani classical music. It has a long neck (Dandi) with a gourd shaped resonating chamber called ‘Tumba’ at the lower end. It usually has 18 to 20 metal frets called ‘parda’ on the neck of sitar. It also has some wooden pegs called ‘Khuntis’ to hold the strings and is used to tune the sitar by rotating them. There are usually 18 to 20 strings in sitar. Among them, seven strings are the main playing strings and remaining are used to resonate the sound of the main strings. These strings rest on the ‘jawari’ or bridge. ‘Mirzab’ is a metallic tool worn on players right index finger used to pluck the strings. Sitar is usually used in Kathak dance, Odissi dance accompaniment.

II) PENA

Pena is a string instrument that is slightly similar to ‘ravanhatta’. It is traditionally used in Manipuri dance of Manipur. It is an important instrument in traditional music and dance of Metei community, ethnic group in Manipur. The Pena consists of a small hollow body made from a dried gourd covered with animal skin. The neck of the instrument is made of wood or bamboo, usually 2 to 3 feet long. The strings are made of horse hair. The instrument is played with a bow, which is drawn across the strings to produce sound.

III) VEENA

The Veena is an ancient Indian string instrument, often seen in Bharatanatyam of Tamil Nadu. Veena is used both in Carnatic and Hindustani music tradition. The famous Carnatic composer, Tyagaraja is said to have been deeply influenced by Veena and many of his compositions are based on Veena melodies. There are different types of Veena- Saraswati Veena, Rudra Veena, etc. Veena is a hollow body made from a single piece of jackfruit wood or teakwood. It has a long neck with curved bridge with seven strings.

IV) SARANGI

The Sarangi, a traditional Indian classical string instrument operates through a unique mechanism. It features a carved out wooden body, a bridge and three main gut strings along with a number of sympathetic strings. This instrument is played with a bow and the musician can produce a wide range of tones by manipulating the strings with the fingers. The Sarangi lacks frets, allowing for

fluid and nuanced notes. The musician can employ various techniques such as slides, vibrato and integrate ornamentation. The Sarangi is often used as an accompaniment for Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi. It's melodic richness and capacity for expressive ornamentation allow it to complement the intricate footwork, graceful movements and emoting storytelling. The Sarangi player known as a 'Sarangiya' is a vital member of the ensemble contributing to the overall aesthetic experience of the performance.

2. AVANADH VADYA

Avanadh Vadya is a traditional Indian percussion instrument known for its rhythmic qualities. The instrument is played by striking its surfaces with hands or sticks, creating intricate beats. It's rich history dates back centuries, showcasing the artistry and craftsmanship of Indian musical traditions. Here are some commonly used Avanadh Vadya in different classical dances of India:

I) TABLA

The tabla is a percussion instrument widely used in Indian classical music and dance enhancing the rhythmic complexity and adding a dynamic layer to performances. Tabla is mainly seen as the main accompanying instrument in Kathak. The Tabla Vada employs a combination of various strokes like 'bols' to produce a wide range of sounds. The bols of tabla mimic the dancers footwork, creating an appealing visual spectacle on stage. Many a times, a question and answer round, called 'Jugalabandi' between the strokes of tabla bols and the sound of dancers footwork can also be seen on stage, which wins a great round of applause from the audience. Tabla consists of two hand played drums, smaller one called 'Dayan' played with the dominant hand and produces higher pitched tones and is often made from rosewood or teak. The larger drum called 'Bayan' is usually made of metal play or combination of both. It is played with the non-dominant hand and produces lower pitched tones. Both drums have central area called 'Syahi' or 'Pudi' which is a black dough like substance made of a mixture of rice flour, iron fillings etc. The surface of each drum is divided into sections which produces specific rhythmic patterns or compositions. "They mark the time, which is of a very complicated nature, and differs in many respects from ours, to suit the varied modes of the music."⁴

II) MRIDANGAM

The origin of this percussion instrument is from South India that plays a pivotal role in Carnatic music performances. It serves as a rhythmic accompaniment enhancing the dance experience. This double headed drum is crafted from wood and goatskin, producing a resonant and rich sound. In Indian classical dances such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, the mridangam serves as the primary accompaniment to the dance sequences. The artist skilfully complements the nuances of the dancers expressions, contributing to the overall aesthetic appeal of the performance. It consists of a cylindrical body with two faces, made from a mixture of clay, rice flour and iron fillings. One face is larger and is played with the palm, while the other, smaller face is played with the fingers. It provides a strong foundation for melodic and vocal elements.

III) PUNG

In Indian classical dance, ‘pung’ refers to the traditional percussion instrument known as the ‘Manipuri pung’. “The music is provided by four kinds of instruments including percussion instruments like the Pung (the Manipuri drum) and other varieties of drums and wind instruments like the flute, conch shells, and a trumpet like horn”.⁵ The instrument is originated from the north-eastern state of Manipur. The pung is a barrel shaped drum played with both hands and is an integral part of the accompanying music ensemble in Manipuri dance performance. Its rhythmic beats provide a dynamic and vibrant foundation to the dance, enhancing the overall aesthetic appeal. Dancers often synchronise their movements with the intricate patterns produced by the pung, creating a seamless blend of rhythm and expression. The pung player known as ‘Pung Cholan artist’ plays a crucial role in setting the pace and mood of the performance. Its lively and resonant beats not only support the dancers, but also engage the audience, making the performance a captivating sensory experience deeply rooted in tradition.

3. SUSHIR VADYA

Sushir Vaidya as described in the Natyashastra refers to a category of musical instruments that produce sounds by blowing air through them. They hold significant place in Indian classical music, dance and theatrical performances. Natyashastra provides guidelines on the use of these instruments in various context emphasising their role in creating mood and enhancing the overall aesthetic experience of a performance. The sound produced by sushir vadya is considered divine and is believed to connect the audience with a higher spiritual realm. The term ‘sushir’ itself translates to wind highlighting the primary mechanism of sound production in these instruments. Here are some of the Sushir Vadyas:

I) BANSURI

One of the prominent Sushir Vadya used in Indian classical dances is the ‘bansuri’ or ‘bamboo flute’. “It is also called the Murali or Fillagori. It is always associated with Krishna, and he is usually represented standing on one leg and playing it.”⁶ The Bansuri with its beautiful and soulful tones is often employed to evoke emotions and express intricate nuances in dance performances. Its ability to produce both delicate and powerful sound makes it versatile, complimenting various dance styles. Typically it has 6 to 7 finger holes and one blowhole. Musicians produce sound by blowing air across the blowhole while manipulating finger placement to control pitch and tone. The Bansuri’s distinctive sound results from its conical shape and the vibrating column of air within. Crafted from bamboo, the Bansuri embodies a balance between rigidity and flexibility. Its length determines pitch, with longer flutes producing lower tones. The Bansuri has unique playing techniques, such as ‘meend’ and ‘gamak’. Bansuri can be seen playing in Kathak, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam and other dances also.

II) HARMONIUM

The harmonium is a reed organ categorised as a wind instrument that holds a unique place in Kathak. Its melodic tones provide a rhythmic and harmonic backdrop, enhancing the emotional depth of Kathak dance. The harmonium’s portability makes it a convenient choice for accompanying dancers, allowing musicians to follow the intricate footwork and expressions

seamlessly. It with its bellows and keys, produce sustained notes and chords, adding a resonant layer to the intricate rhythms of Kathak. “Nagma”, a rhythmic pattern played on harmonium, is the primary accompaniment for Kathak dancers. Harmonium consists of a set of keys and bellows. When keys are pressed, air from the bellows is forced over metal reeds, creating sound. Harmonium often provides melodic support to the dancer’s footwork and expressions. Its rhythmic pattern helps the dancer to dance a particular composition of a taal, holding it in a bounded time cycle.

III) NADASWARAM

The Nadaswaram, a traditional South Indian wind instrument holds cultural significance in classical music, dance and religious ceremonies. “It is part of the family of instruments, known as ‘mangala vadyam’ (lit. ‘Auspicious’ vadya ‘instrument’)”.⁷ It is a double reed wind instrument playing a crucial role in classical music and dance. Consisting of a cylindrical wooden body and a metal bell, its unique construction enhances resonance. Musicians produce sound by blowing through reeds while manipulating finger holes. Typically played in pairs, the instruments’ powerful, resonant tone makes it ideal for dances in open space and temple ceremonies. ‘Mallari’, played traditionally on the Nadaswaram when the ‘Utsav Murthy’ or Temple deity is being taken out in a procession. This is performed as an invocation item in a Bharatanatyam repertoire.

4. GHANA VADYA

Ghana vadya, also known as ‘ideophones’ or percussion instruments that are solid and do not require tuning. The Ghana vadya are believed to be the world’s oldest instruments. They don’t have the ability to produce sounds with different pitches. They’re generally made of ceramic, metal or glass and the noises are usually short lived and are produced by collision of striking two things capable of producing sound vibrations. These instruments are usually used as timekeepers and also assist dancers and vocalists in emphasising specific rhythmic patterns. “There is the Illathalam used in the Kathakali plays. The Brahma Talam is used in temple rituals”.⁸ here are some of the Ghana Vadya:

I) MANJIRA

Manjira, also known as cymbals, holds a significant place in Indian classical dance forms, serving both rhythmic and symbolic purposes. These small hand held metallic discs produce crisp and melodious sounds, enhancing the overall musicality of a performance. These Manjiras can be seen in Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi. Manjira gives an effective sound effect in Abhinay also. In stuti, vandana, bhajan, Manjira plays a very significant role. It is usually played by accompanist. The rhythmic pattern created by Manjira complement the intricate footwork and gestures of the dancer, contributing to the overall aesthetic appeal of the performance. Manjira is employed to signal transitions highlighting key moments and establish a dynamic connection between the dancer, the music and the audience.

II) NATTUVANGAM TALAM

Nattuvangam is a rhythmic component in classical Indian dance, particularly in Bharatanatyam. It involves the art of playing the cymbals, known as nattuvangam or ‘Talam’ by the conductor or

nattuvangam. The talam is a complex rhythmic cycle that serves as the foundation for the dance, providing a framework for the dancers movements and expressions. The nattuvanar, often the guru or teacher not only plays the cymbals but also vocalises rhythmic syllables, guiding the dancer through intricate patterns and beats. Talam consists of various beats and time signatures is creating a dynamic and rich rhythmic tapestry. It establishes a dialogue between the dancer and the musician, enhancing the overall aesthetic experience. The intricate interplay of rhythm, footwork and hand gestures is a hallmark of this classical art form and the nattuvangam Talam plays a pivotal role in preserving and showcasing the tradition.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we can say that instruments used in Indian classical dance are not mere accompaniments, they are indispensable partners in weaving the intricate tapestry of rhythm and melody, enhancing the visual and auditory spectacle of this culturally rich art form. These instruments, deeply rooted in tradition contribute to the overall aesthetic and emotional expression of the dance form.

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