

VEDIC ORIGINS OF THE BHĀRATĪYA SAṄGĪTA

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ABSTRACT

The etymology of the two terms 'Saṅgīta' and 'Music' makes it clear that both the terms were born in entirely different dhārmic and cultural contexts. Bhāratīya Saṅgīta is different from the Western idea of music. Unlike music, Saṅgīta is not just an artistic expression or tool of entertainment. Therefore, the term music does not exactly justify as a synonym of 'Saṅgīta' and should not be interchangeably used. Saṅgīta has its origins in the Vedas, beginning from the oldest, the Rīg Veda to an elaborative discussion of it in the Sāma Veda. The two Vedāṅgas, Śikṣā and Chhandas, too, elaborately discuss the svaras and their rhythmic pronunciation, vādyā and nāda. The supreme gāyana is of Om, the ultimate Brahmanatva. It is from the three foundational notes given in the Vedas that later Saptasvara evolved. The three foundational svaras—Uddāta, Anudāta and Svarita paved way for the laukika svaras. The evolution has been from single-note Ārcika to two-note Gāthika, three-note Sāmika to four-note Swara-antra Saṅgīta respectively.

Keywords: Saṅgīta, Music, Veda, Sāmaveda, Kāla, Śilpa, Hindustānī Saṅgīta, Vedic literature

Introduction: Saṅgīta and Music as Terms

Saṅgīta (संगीत) is a Lalit kāla (refined art) that uses svāra (melody) and lāya (rhythm) to express human emotions and feelings. Its fundamental elements include nāda (sound), tāla (rhythm/beat), rāga (melody), svāra (notes), and lāya (rhythm/tempo). The word संगीत is derived from 'गीत' (song) combined with the prefix 'सम्' (together), meaning "singing in unison." Svāra and lāya, along with dance (nṛitya) and instrumental accompaniment (vādyā), is collectively termed Saṅgīta.

As stated in the Saṅgīta Ratnākara:

नृत्तं वाद्या नृगं प्रोक्तं वाद्ये गीता नुवर्ति च । असतो गीतं प्रधानत्वादत्रादाभिधीयते॥

"Nṛityaṁ vādyānugamaṁ proktaṁ vādyam gītā nuvartate,
Asato gītaṁ pradhānātvādatrādābhīdhīyate."

(Saṅgīta Ratnākara, 1.24–25)

This verse emphasises that Saṅgīta comprises singing, instrument playing, and dance, with singing holding a primary position, while the other two follow as complementary forms.

Another definition of Saṅgīta states:

'सम्यक् प्रकारेण गीयते तत्संगीतम्'

"Samyak prakāreṇa gīyate tatsaṅgītam"

Saṅgīta is that which is sung in a perfect and proper manner (Samyak prakāreṇa).

In the Hindu tradition, Saṅgīta encompasses a broader understanding of music, often including dance and drama as part of its expression. This holistic concept is captured by the famous categorisation of Saṅgīta as a "Triad" (संगीत त्रय, Saṅgīta Traya) in ancient Hindu thought, involving Gāna (singing), Vādyā (instrumental music), and Nṛtya (dance).

'Saṅgīta' thus implies "a form of art where different sounds, rhythms, and melodies are combined harmoniously." Saṅgīta refers not only to the melodic and rhythmic components but also to its connection with adhyātma (अध्यात्म), the divine. Saṅgīta has always been conceptualised as a form of devotional and ritualistic art, often intertwined with dhārmic and cultural traditions. The holistic approach of Gāna (song), Vādyā (instrumental music), and Nṛtya (dance) connects the physical, emotional, and spiritual

dimensions of the artist's expression. The idea of Saṅgīta as a total artistic experience places it closer to a performative and ritualistic act.

On the other hand, the word 'Music' comes from the Greek word Mousikē, which is derived from the term 'Muses'. The Muses were the nine goddesses of the arts and sciences in Greek mythology, each presiding over a specific domain of knowledge or artistic expression. However, the term Mousikē gradually became more specific to musical expression, denoting the art of sound produced with rhythm and melody. The term became more focused on sound and melody, as Western culture began to place greater emphasis on the auditory nature of music. It developed more as a form of artistic expression, focusing on emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic engagement and it became more secular and varied in its functions over time. It evolved into a specialised, intellectual, and often secular art form that emphasises auditory experience, emotional expression, and formal structure. The meaning shifted towards musical performance and composition in the modern sense.

In the modern, particularly Western view, music is primarily considered an art or cultural activity that involves structured arrangement of sounds. Melody, harmony, rhythm, and tonal qualities are integral. Although Saṅgīta and music have been used interchangeably in the present times, however, both the terms developed in entirely different civilisations, and Saṅgīta is not just an art form for entertainment or artistic expression and rather it transcends and encapsulates a cosmological order.

Saṅgīta in Vedas

In the Bhāratīya thought, Saṅgīta is an inseparable part of the Hindu Vedic Dharma tradition which is Sanātana (eternal). In the Vedāntic tradition, sound was seen as a manifestation of divine consciousness (the Om or Aum), the primordial vibration that signifies the creation of the universe and its cosmic harmony. The Vedas as the ultimate texts of Hindu Dharma and the foundation of its eternal knowledge, contain extensive references to Saṅgīta and related practices.

The Ṛigveda contains hymns that emphasise the power of sound (Svara) as a means of connecting the finite and the infinite. The Saṅgīta in this sense is not merely musical; it is adhyātmic and metaphysical, an essential part of the cosmos.

The Sāma Veda (or Saman Saṁhitā) is the cornerstone of Bhāratīya Saṅgīta as it lays its solid foundation. The word साम् (sāman) signifies "that which is sung," indicating verses meant for melodic chanting. The hymns of the Ṛig Veda (rik or richa), when sung in a specific melodic style, are referred to as sāman. According to the Pūrvamīmāṁsā, chanting (gīti) itself is साम (sama):

'गीतिषु सामाख्या' / "Gītishu samākhyā" (Pūrvamīmāṁsā, 2.1.36).

The Ṛig Veda also refers to hymns sung in a melodic form as Aṅgūṣya Sāman:

'आंगूष्यं साम' / "Aṅgūṣyaṁ sāman" (Ṛig Veda, 1.62.2).

Of the Sāma Veda's 1,875 hymns, 1,771 (over 90%) are derived directly from the Ṛig Veda, showing an intrinsic relationship between the two. The fusion of rik (hymn) and am (melody) forms sāman (स या सा ऋचा) + अम (गीति) = सामन् यानि सा ऋग्वेद है और अम संगीत है, इनके मिश्रण से सामवेद बनता है)

'ऋचि अध्यूहं साम' / "Rīci adhyūḍhaṁ sāman" (Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 1.6.1).

This concept is further explained in the Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad:

सा च अमश्चेति तत् साम्नः सामत्वम्। "Sa ca amaśce ti tat sāmaḥ sāmatvam"

(Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 1.3.22)

Here, it is stated that gāna (melody) is the very essence of sāman, and it defines its very existence and svātva.

The Brihadāranyaka Upaniṣad declares that svara is the core of the Sāma Veda:

तस्य हैतस्य साम्नोयः स्ववेद, ... तस्य स्वर एव स्वम्। "Tasya haitasya sāman yah svam veda... tasya svara eva svam."

(Brihadāranyaka Upaniṣad, 1.3.25).

In Rīgveda, Samāgānakarta (one who does Samāgāna) or the Ṛitvij (ऋत्विज्) of Sāmaveda is called 'Udgāta' (उद्गाता). Sāmaveda is considered the essence of the Vedas. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Śrī Kṛṣṇa highlights the supreme status of the Sāma Veda by identifying Himself with it:

'वेदानां सामवेदोऽस्मि' / "Vedanām Sāmavedo'smi"

(Bhagavad Gītā, 10.22).

Sāma Veda related Chāndogya Upaniṣad describes the Sāma Veda as the essence of the Rīg Veda richas (ऋचोः का सार), and its essence is termed as the Udgeetha (the supreme Gīt, the supreme Saṅgīta).

Parmātmā is the Supreme Saṅgīta. Om (ॐ) is the Udgeetha, the supreme Gīt:

ओमिति एतदक्षरम् उद्गीथम् उपासीता। "Om iti etadakṣaram udgeetham upāsīta."

(Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 1.1.1).

Sāṅgīta's Structure and Historical Evolution

The Sāma Veda discusses three fundamental notes (मूल स्वर):

- Udatta (उदात्त) (elevated pitch)
- Anudatta (अनुदात्त) (lowered pitch)
- Swarita (स्वरित) (neutral pitch).

The three swaras have been mentioned in the Rīg Veda too, however, in the Sāma Veda only the method of singing is additionally given. Further, three saptakas (सप्तक) have been mentioned as grām (ग्राम) in the Sāma Veda: Mandra (low) मन्द्र (निम्न); Madhya (middle) मध्य (मध्यम) and Tāra (high) तीव्र या तार (उच्च). These three foundational notes (मूल स्वर) have further given birth to laukika swar (लौकिक स्वरों का उद्भव) which are 7 in number:

- Śadja (षड्ज/Shadaj) (Sa-सा),
- Ṛiṣabha (ऋषभ/Rishabh) (Re-रे),
- Gandhāra (गंधार/Gandhar) (Ga-ग),
- Madhyama (मध्यम/Madhyam) (Ma-म),
- Pañcama (पंचम/Pancham) (Pa-प),
- Dhāivata (धैवत/Dhāivat) (Dh-ध),
- Niṣāda (निषाद/Nishad) (Ni-नि).

The Nārādīya Śikṣā (नारदिय शिक्षा -a part of the Śikṣā Vedāṅga) further elaborates on these notes and their derivatives, introducing the seven primary notes (saptaswaras):

- Śaḍja (Sa),
- Ṛiṣabha (Re),
- Gandhāra (Ga),
- Madhyama (Ma),
- Pañcama (Pa),
- Dhāivata (Dha),
- Niṣāda (Ni).

Udatta (उदात्त): Niṣāda, Gandhāra

Anudatta (अनुदात्त): Ṛiṣabha, Dhāivata

Swarita (स्वरित): Śaḍja, Madhyama, Pañcama

उदात्ते निषादगान्धारौ अनुदात्ते ऋषभधैवतौ। स्वरित प्रभवा ह्येते, षडज् मध्यम - पंचमाः॥

"Udatte Niṣādagamndharau Anudatte Ṛiṣabhadhāivatau,
Swarita prabhavah hyete, Śaḍjamadhyama-pañcamah."

(Nārādīya Śikṣā, 1.8.8)

The Nārādīya Śikṣā also explains the chronological development of Swaras and Sāṅgīta—

Ārcika to Gāthika to Sāmika and Swarāntara ('आर्चिक, गाथिक, सामिक, स्वरांतर'):

Ārcika Sāṅgīta: Based on single-note hymns of the Ṛig Veda.

Gāthika Sāṅgīta: Based on two-note chants of gāthas.

Sāmika Sāṅgīta: Three-note chants derived from the Sāma Veda.

Swarāntara Sāṅgīta: Four-note melodies.

आर्चिकं गाथिकं चैव, सामिकं च स्वरान्तरम्। कृतान्ते स्वरशास्त्राणां, प्रयोक्तव्यं विशेषतः॥

एकान्तरः स्वरो ह्यृक्षु, गाथासु द्वयन्तरः स्वरः। सामसु त्रन्तरं विद्याद्, एतावत् स्वरतोऽन्तरम्॥

(Nā. Śikṣā, 1.1.2-3)

Subsequent stages include the development of five-note (audava-औडव), six-note (śaḍava-षाडव), and seven-note (sapta swara- सप्त स्वर) systems, which are used in the present times too.

The Tāṇḍya Brāhmaṇa describes the method of ascending (aroh) and descending (avroh) scales, which mentions that a swara should be begun with Mandra, then taken to the level of Madhyama and further to the Tāra Sāptak. Similarly, while descending (avroh), in a systematic order, it should be done from the Tāra to Mandra and vice versa:

मन्द्र मिवाग्र आददीताथ तारतरम्, अथ तारतमम्।

"Mandra mivāgra ādadītātha tāratarām, atha tāratamam."

(Tāṇḍya Brāhmaṇa, 6.1.7).

In Vedic and post-Vedic literature, Nritya, Sāṅgīta, Vādyā (instrumental), etc. lalit kalās are collectively referred to as Śilpa/शिल्प (arts). According to the Kāushītaki Brāhmaṇa:

त्रिवृद् वै शिल्पं नृत्यं गीतं वादितमिति।

"Trivṛd vai śilpam nrityam gītam vāditamiti."

(Kāushītaki Brāhmaṇa, 29.5).

It specifically mentions that Śilpa includes nritya, gāyan, sāṅgīta, and vādyā vādana.

The Yajur Veda mentions the integration of music (gītam), dance (nrityam), and instruments (vādyā) in the Ṛik (ऋक्) and Sāman (सामन्) Samhitā (संहिता):

ऋक् सामयोः शिल्पे स्थः।

"Ṛik sāmāyoh śilpe sthah."

(Yajur Veda, 4.9).

Ācāryas like Pāṇini and Patañjali have cited various instruments, such as the mṛdaṅga, madhuka, and jhārjhāra (jhaṅgh), etc. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa and Gopatha Brāhmaṇa recognise lalit kalās or śilpas as the most important tools for ethical and moral refinement (आत्म संस्कृति):

आत्मसंस्कृतिर्वाशिल्पानि ; एतैर्यजमान आत्मानं संस्करते।

"Ātmasamskr̥tirvāva śilpāni; etairyajamaṇa ātmānaṁ samskurute."

(Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, 6.27; Gopatha Brāhmaṇa, 2.6.7).

In Vedic literature, the invention of Bhāvābhīnaya (भावभिनय -expression of emotions) and the expression of dance through bodily movements (नृत्त -Nr̥tta) are both described. A nartaka (नर्तक) is referred to as Nr̥tu (नृत्त). Nritya is accomplished through the expression of emotions, graceful movements of the feet, and rhythmic sāṅgīta arrangements. In nritya, there is a harmonious association of sāṅgīta and vādyā.

The Ṛig Veda and Atharva Veda also refer to various instruments, such as the vīṇa, tunava, śaṅkha, tālava, adamvara, surmi, gargara, piṅga, Nādi, and others, along with their performance contexts and techniques.

Harmony of Sāṅgīta in the Śikṣā and Chandas Vedāṅgas

The literal meaning of Vedāṅga is a 'limb of the Vedas,' signifying studies or knowledge related to the Vedas. The purpose of the Vedāṅgas is to provide detailed principles and methods that aid in the study, understanding, and accurate pronunciation of the Vedas. Out of the six main limbs of Vedāṅga (Śikṣā -Phonetics, Kalpa -Rituals, Vyākaraṇa -Grammar, Chandas -Metrics, Jyotiṣa -Astronomy and Mathematics, and Nirukta -Etymology), Śikṣā and Chandas hold special importance as they clarify the precise pronunciation and correct semantic meanings of mantras and are important from the point of view of sāṅgīta too.

Śikṣā is the branch of Vedāṅga that deals with sound (phonetics), pronunciation, and the precise articulation of Vedic mantras. It emphasises not only the accurate pronunciation of the Vedas but also

teaches how to chant mantras with the correct intonation and rhythm to enhance their adhyātmic and physical effectiveness.

In the Vedas, every word and mantra are based on a specific sound. The correct combination of vowels (svara) and consonants (vyanjana) generates the power of the mantras. The chanting of mantras produces a rhythm that harmonises with cosmic energy.

Through Śikṣā, one learns the identification, articulation, and rhythm of sounds to accurately express the power and effects of mantras. Technical aspects like nasal sounds and soft sounds play a crucial role in understanding the deeper impact of the mantras. The precise adherence to pitch and pronunciation ensures the generation of the mantra's energy and its intended effects.

Chandas is the branch of Vedāṅga that pertains to the rhythm and meter of Vedic mantras. The recitation of Vedic mantras follows specific rhythms and meters, which produce sound waves that balance mental and physical processes and enhance meditation and spiritual practices.

Each specific meter or rhythm in Vedic mantras aligns with cosmic energy. The rhythmic patterns and meters activate forces that work through the mantras. Chanting mantras in proper rhythm promotes internal energy flow and helps connect with elements like the moon, sun, and earth.

The Vedas include various meters, such as: Anuṣṭubh – A common meter divided into four parts; Gāyatrī – A special meter used in the Gāyatrī Mantra; and Triṣṭubh – Another significant meter found in certain Vedic mantras. These meters provide a distinctive rhythm to the mantras. The proper combination of sound (phonetics) and rhythm (meter) enhances the effectiveness of Vedic mantras. The union of sound (acoustic elements) and rhythm (tempo and beat) forms a musical harmony. When sound and rhythm are appropriately combined, the mantras not only resonate but also align with the cosmic consciousness.

Conclusion

Sāṅgīta, with its roots in the Vedic literature, is as Sanātana as the Dharma itself. The guru-śiṣya Paramparā, through which it is transmitted to generations, remains the same even in contemporary times. However, the essence of Sāṅgīta is in its wholesomeness as a Lalit Kalā, which is ingrained in the idea of singing and rhythm associated with the cosmic energy. Adhyātmikta is the ātmā of sāṅgīta, and its practice without this essence can only make it sheer art and aesthetic experience. This is a huge challenge for the Śāstrīya Paramparā in the times of shallowness creeping in Sāṁskṛti.

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