

# LISTENING TO THE DIVINE: THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN SHAIIVISM

Dr Kuldeep Raina<sup>1</sup>, Vishali Pandita<sup>2</sup>, Vishal Pandita<sup>3</sup>

1 Associate Professor, M.A.M College, Jammu, J&K

2 Flat No. 06, Block No. 98 Lane No. 18, Jagti Township Nagrota Jammu, J&k

3 Ph.D. Scholar, University of Delhi



## ABSTRACT

*Music holds a deeply symbolic and experiential role within the philosophy of Shaivism. More than a form of artistic expression, it is regarded as a sacred medium through which the divine can be perceived, invoked, and realized. According to Shaivite philosophy, especially in paths like Nāda Yoga and Kashmir Shaivism, the whole universe is made of sound or vibration (called nāda). This sound is believed to be the energy of Shiva, the highest form of consciousness. This paper explores how music helps people move from the outer world to the inner self, making it a spiritual tool in Shaivism. By looking at sacred texts, rituals, and teachings, the study shows how music brings Shaiva philosophy to life. In Shaivism, listening or singing becomes a way to grow spiritually, go beyond the ego, and experience a deeper connection with the divine.*

**Keywords:** Music, Shaivism, Vibration, Divine, Chants, Inner Self

## INTRODUCTION

Rooted in the concept of Nāda Brahma—the belief that the ultimate reality is sound—Shaivism views music not merely as an artistic endeavour but as a direct expression of the divine. Music is a vital element of Shaivism, deeply intertwined with its spiritual and philosophical foundation. In Shaiva traditions, sound serves not just as a form of artistic expression but as a sacred medium through which the divine is invoked, perceived, and realised. Chanting mantras, reciting holy texts, singing devotional hymns, and engaging in rhythmic rituals all reflect a deeper truth: that Shiva embodies both silence and sound, stillness and movement. The damaru (drum) of Natarāja (Shaiva), symbolises the primordial pulse of the cosmos, signifying that the very essence of existence is rooted in rhythm. In this context, music functions as a crucial link between the intellectual pursuit of philosophy and the emotional experience of devotion, acting as a bridge that connects ordinary thought with higher realms of transcendence.

In the Shaivite tradition, music is not merely an embellishment; it is an essential medium through which the sacred is experienced and realised. This paper aims to explore the multidimensional relationship between Shaivism and music, highlighting its significance as both a spiritual practice and a metaphysical concept.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a comprehensive review of existing literature, including research papers, scholarly articles, and case studies that examine the intersection of music and Shaiva philosophy. Information has been drawn from a variety of authoritative sources and authors to ensure a broad and balanced understanding of the topic. In addition, insights from surveys and interviews conducted with philosophers, practitioners, and musicians have been analysed to enrich the research and provide practical perspectives that support the theoretical framework.

## PHILOSOPHY OF SHAIIVISM

Shaivism stands as one of the oldest and most profound traditions within Hinduism, venerating Lord Shiva not merely as a deity among many, but as the ultimate, all-encompassing reality. To a Shaiva, Shiva is not a distant god watching from the heavens—He *is* existence itself. Every atom, every breath, every moment is pervaded by his presence. He is the source, the sustainer, the destroyer, and the hidden force behind the cosmic dance of creation and dissolution.

Shaivism does not dismiss the world as mere illusion. Instead, it teaches that the universe, in all its complexity and beauty, is a direct expression of Shiva's being. The divine is not hidden beyond the world—it is revealed through it. What is false, according to this tradition, is not the world itself but our fragmented perception of it. Shaivism teaches that the real illusion isn't the world—it's the idea that we are separate from Shiva, from each other, and from the universe around us. This illusion of division clouds the truth. For Shiva is not distant or confined to temples and images; He is the flame in fire, the flow in rivers, the breath in the trees, the stillness in the self. Creation is not apart from Him—it is Him, in endless form. The ultimate goal is not to escape the world, but to awaken to its sacredness, to realize that everything is a manifestation of the same divine consciousness known as Paramashiva. This tradition has taken many forms over the centuries—from the mystical yogis of Kashmir Shaivism to the deeply devotional Nayanars of South India. Yet all share a core insight: that by transcending ego and recognizing the divine in all things, we come home to Shiva—who was never separate from us to begin with.

## HISTORY OF SHAIVISM

Shaivism in Kashmir began to emerge as a distinctive spiritual and philosophical movement around the 8th or 9th century C.E., reaching its intellectual and mystical peak by the end of the 12th century. This tradition, later known as Kashmir Shaivism, presents itself not merely as a human philosophical endeavour but as a divine revelation. According to its sacred lineage, the origin of this tradition is attributed directly to Lord Shiva himself. As Kaliyuga unfolded—an era shadowed by spiritual amnesia—the once radiant wisdom of the Tantras slowly receded from the hearts and minds of humankind, veiled by ignorance and the weight of worldly illusion. The sacred knowledge that once illuminated the path to the divine grew dim, obscured by ignorance and the distractions of the materialistic world. In response to this decline, Shiva is believed to have manifested in his exalted form as Srikanthanatha, residing at Mount Kailasa. There, he bestowed the entirety of Tantric knowledge upon the great sage Durvasa, initiating him into the triadic structure of Shaiva metaphysics: Abheda (pure non-dualism), Bhedabheda (the interplay of unity and difference), and Bheda (duality). Armed with this supreme knowledge, Rishi Durvasa withdrew into deep meditation, seeking a disciple worthy of receiving and preserving this sacred transmission. Yet, despite his efforts, no suitable aspirant emerged. Faced with this challenge, Durvasa turned inward and, through the power of yogic will, gave rise to three sons born from his own mind. To the eldest of these sons, Trayambaka, Durvasa imparted the highest teachings—those of Abheda, the path of absolute non-duality as expounded in the Bhairava Tantras. This became the foundational seed of Kashmir Shaivism's monistic doctrine, a tradition that would later blossom through the insights of great sages and philosophers who carried this wisdom into the world.

## THE SACRED PULSE: MUSIC AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF SHAIVISM

"Yi yi karu'm suy artsun  
Yi rasini vichoarum thi mantar  
Yihay lagamo dhahas partsun  
Suy Parasivun tanthar" "

These deeply spiritual lines were spoken by the great Kashmiri mystic Lalleshwari (Lal Ded). In this Vāk, she shares a realization that resonates with the very heart of Shaivism and its connection to sacred sound and music:

*"Whatever I did, became worship of the Lord;  
Whatever I spoke, turned into a sacred mantra;  
Whatever I ate and drank, became an offering;  
And thus, I merged into Parashiva, the Supreme Being.*

Lalleshwari's mention of speech transforming into mantra reflects the core belief in Kashmir Shaivism that sound (Nāda) is divine. Just as music can elevate the soul, her words suggest that when one is inwardly awakened, even the simplest utterance becomes a sacred vibration—a form of inner music that merges the self with the eternal pulse of Shiva.

In this light, her Vāk becomes a testament to how music, mantra, and consciousness are interwoven in Shaiva practice. Every sound, like every act, can become a note in the soul's symphony toward union with the Supreme Sound—Parashiva.

In the Shaiva tradition, music is not just art—it is spiritual science, rooted in the deepest layers of reality. Shaivism teaches that the universe did not arise from physical elements, but from vibration, from consciousness set into motion. At the core of Shaiva philosophy lies Nāda—the primal vibration—from which the universe unfolds and through which all existence is sustained."

According to Shaiva philosophy, particularly the Kashmir Shaivism school, Shiva is not merely the god of destruction—he is the supreme consciousness (Paramashiva) who manifests the world through his own dynamic energy, known as Shakti. When Shiva desires to express himself, he does so through Spanda, the subtle pulsation or vibration that initiates all forms and phenomena.

Spanda is the subtle pulse of pure awareness—a silent rhythm not heard by the ears, but felt as the living heartbeat of existence. When we engage with music, especially sacred music, we are resonating with this inner vibration, aligning the limited self with the infinite.

Shaivism further teaches about Nāda Yoga, the path of spiritual realization through sound. This includes:

- Chanting mantras (like "Om Namah Shivaya") to purify the mind and invoke the divine.
- Listening to inner sound (Anāhata Nāda) during deep meditation, a practice where the yogi becomes aware of subtle, unstruck sounds within the body.
- Musical rituals and hymns that are designed not to please the senses, but to open the heart and still the mind.

Shiva is frequently depicted as Nataraja, the divine dancer whose cosmic dance represents the rhythmic flow of creation, preservation, and dissolution. But his dance is not silent—it is accompanied by the beat of the damaru, a small drum he holds in one hand. According to the Shaiva Agamas, this drum produces the first sound, "nāda", from which the Sanskrit alphabet—and by extension, all creation—emerges. The damaru thus becomes a symbol of sound birthing form.

Music in Shaivism is also about integration. When touched by the divine pulse, all opposites— noise and quiet, rest and motion, self and whole—dissolve into a single truth. Just as Bhairava Tantras emphasize the non-dual nature of reality (Abheda), music becomes a bridge between the finite listener and the infinite source.

So, in Shaiva thought, music is far more than a devotional tool—it is a mirror of the cosmos, a method of transformation, and a sacred path to self-realization. When we truly listen— with awareness, with surrender—music becomes a doorway to the eternal presence of Shiva, the source of all sound, silence, and stillness.

## **VOICES OF THE DIVINE: SAINTS WHO SANG THE SPIRIT OF SHIVISM**

Several saints and sages in Indian spiritual history have expressed or practiced Shaivism through music, sound and mantra, often blending devotion, philosophy, and the arts. While not all were "musicians" in

the modern sense, their use of sound, chanting, and poetic expression is deeply musical and reflects the Shaiva view of Nāda (sound) as divine.

Here are some notable saints and sages associated with musical or sonic expressions of Shaivism:

#### **Lalleshwari (Lal Ded) – Kashmir**

- A 14th-century Shaiva mystic-poetess whose Vāks (spontaneous verses) were sung and recited orally in Kashmiri.
- Her poetry is musical in nature, echoing rhythms of mantra and expressing non-dual Kashmir Shaivism.
- Though not a singer in the formal sense, her spiritual verses were sung by devotees, and they continue to influence musical traditions in Kashmir.

#### **Appar (Tirunavukkarasar) – Tamil Nadu**

- Another major Nayanmar saint, he composed devotional hymns rich in Shaiva philosophy.
- His compositions are chanted in temples, and many form the musical foundation of Tamil Shaiva liturgical practice.

#### **Sundarar – Tamil Nadu**

- He is counted among the three great pillars of Tamil Shaiva devotion, along with Sambandar and Appar.
- His hymns express personal devotion, surrender, and divine love, often through lyrical and melodic poetry.

#### **Abhinavagupta – Kashmir**

- A great philosopher and tantric master of Kashmir Shaivism, known more for his intellectual works.
- He showed that sound, vibration, and beauty aren't just experiences—they're tools for reaching higher consciousness in Shaiva thought.
- His *Tantraloka* and *Abhinavabhāratī* integrate aesthetics and music theory with Shaiva metaphysics.

#### **Manikkavacakar – Tamil Nadu**

- Author of the Tiruvacakam, a collection of Shaiva hymns filled with emotion, mysticism, and lyrical beauty.
- His verses are often set to music and considered some of the most devotional expressions of Shaivism.

#### **Nandanar – Tamil Nadu**

- A saint from a marginalized community who sang with deep love for Lord Shiva.
- His story emphasizes devotion over ritual, and his songs are remembered in Shaiva folk and classical traditions.

#### **Swami Muktananda – Modern Shaiva Siddhanta / Kashmir Shaivism Influenced**

- A modern yogi who emphasized chanting and mantra, especially Om Namah Shivaya, as a path to realization.
- Though not a musician, he used sound and music extensively in teaching Shaivabased Kundalini Yoga.

This reflects how music and Shaivism, journeying from the mystic North to the vibrant South, have not only united India culturally, but also shaped a shared way of living rooted in inner awareness, balance, and spiritual rhythm.

## Conclusion

The connection between music and Shaivism is a profound spiritual journey that transcends the boundaries of the material world. In Shaivism, music is not merely an artistic expression but a sacred language through which the divine is experienced. Rooted in the idea of Nāda, the primordial sound, Shaivism teaches that the universe itself is formed from vibration—an eternal rhythm that flows from Shiva, the supreme consciousness. This recognition of sound as the foundation of all existence makes music a vital force in the spiritual path, serving as a bridge between the human soul and the divine.

Shaivism, particularly in its Kashmir Shaivism tradition, reveals that the experience of sound, whether through chanting mantras, listening to sacred hymns, or tuning into the inner vibrations, helps transcend the limitations of the ego. The universe's rhythm, symbolized by Shiva's cosmic dance and the beat of his damaru, is a call to all souls to align with the eternal pulse of creation. This alignment with the divine rhythm is the core of Nāda Yoga, where the seeker moves closer to realizing the oneness with Shiva.

The teachings of great saints like Lallehwari, Appar, Sundarar, and Abhinavagupta bring to light the essential role of music in Shaivism as a tool for spiritual awakening. Through their hymns, poetry, and philosophical insights, they show that music is not only an expression of devotion but a direct pathway to self-realization. Whether in the lyrical chants of Tamil saints or the mystical verses of Lallehwari, music remains a sacred medium through which one can connect to the higher realms of consciousness and experience the divine presence.

As Shaivism spread from the mystic North to the culturally rich South, music became a unifying force, bringing together diverse regions under the same spiritual and philosophical umbrella. It played a crucial role in shaping the way of life for those who practiced Shaivism, guiding them toward inner balance, heightened awareness, and a deeper connection to the divine. Music, through its sacred vibrations, became a universal path of living, an expression of both the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the spiritual journey.

Ultimately, in Shaivism, music is more than sound—it is the very pulse of existence, the divine rhythm that carries one toward transcendence. Through music, the individual is reminded of the eternal truth that lies beyond duality, where silence and sound, movement and stillness, dissolve into the unity of the divine. This profound relationship between music and Shaivism continues to inspire, offering a timeless path to realizing the eternal presence of Shiva in every aspect of life.

## REFERENCES

- Gupta, Abhinav (10<sup>th</sup> Century). *"Tantra Loka"*.
- Joo, S. Lakshman (2008). *"Sivastotravali of Utpaladeva"*, D.K Print World Ltd.
- Joo, S. Lakshman (2015). *"The Manual for Self Realization"*, Universal Shaiva Fellowship.
- Joo, S. Lakshman (2015). *"Kashmir Shaivism: The Secret Supreme"*, Createspace Independent Pub.
- Pandit, Dr. B.N. (2008). *"Specific Principles of Kashmir Shaivism"*, MunshiramManoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Bhat, Jawahar Lal (2014). *"Lal-Ded Revisited"*, Self-Published.
- Dyczkowski, S.G. Mark (1989). *"The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism"*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House.
- Kshemaraja, (1911). *"Sivasutravimarsini"*, Archaeological and Research Department, Srinagar, Kashmir.