

REASSESSING JAIN MUSIC THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC EDUCATION AND PERFORMING ARTS

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ABSTRACT

Jain treatises on music, canonical texts, illustrated manuscripts, and narrative literature constitute a rich yet understudied source for understanding the art and science of music. These works provide a holistic perspective on music, encompassing its philosophical, spiritual, and educational dimensions. This paper examines Jain musical texts and canonical writings that discuss the theory and practice of music in detail. It explores Jain beliefs regarding the role of music in cultivating inner harmony, self-purification, and the attainment of moksha, while demonstrating their parallels with the Vedic concept of Nada Brahma and spiritual liberation. The study highlights how these philosophical foundations are often overlooked in contemporary music education and performance practices, leading to a gradual detachment from the deeper spiritual purpose of music. It further investigates whether Jain musical concepts find a place in present-day institutional music education, the Gharana tradition, or other forms of Guru-Shishya Parampara. By examining both theoretical and performance aspects, the paper seeks to draw attention to the relevance of Jain musical thought and advocates for its greater recognition within national and international scholarship, particularly in an era that increasingly seeks inner harmony and spiritual balance.

Keywords: Music Writings, Moksh, Science, Subtleties, Self Purification

Introduction

India possesses one of the world's oldest and richest musical traditions, encompassing classical, folk, devotional, and regional forms. Among the various religious traditions that have contributed to Indian music, Jainism holds a unique place due to its strong philosophical, ethical, and spiritual foundations. Jain principles such as ahimsa (non-violence), self-discipline, meditation, and spiritual purification have significantly influenced its musical traditions, where music is regarded not merely as entertainment but as a means of self-cultivation, inner harmony, and spiritual advancement.

Jain literature and devotional practices contain extensive references to music, including stutis, stavans, bhajans, ritual chants, and liturgical recitations. Both Agamic and non-Agamic texts provide valuable insights into musical theory, instruments, rhythmic structures, performance practices, dance, and aesthetics. Jain scholars also made important contributions to Indian musicology through treatises such as *Sangita Samaysara* by Parsvadeva and *Sangitopanisat Saroddhara* by Sudhakalasha, which discuss ragas, talas, sound production, performance techniques, and music pedagogy.

Despite these significant contributions, Jain musical thought has received limited attention in mainstream musicological studies. In the contemporary era, where music education often emphasizes technical proficiency and performance skills, Jain musical philosophy offers a holistic perspective that integrates ethical values, mindfulness, discipline, and spiritual growth. Therefore, a critical reassessment of Jain musical traditions is essential for understanding their contribution to Indian musical heritage and their relevance to contemporary music education and performing arts.

Review of Literature

The study of Indian music has largely focused on Vedic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions, while the musical heritage of Jainism has received comparatively limited attention. However, Jain literature and musicological treatises reveal a rich musical tradition that has significantly contributed to the development of Indian music. Jain philosophy regards music not merely as entertainment but as a means of spiritual growth, self-discipline, ethical refinement, and inner harmony.

Jain canonical and non-canonical texts contain numerous references to music, musical instruments, singing, dance, and performance traditions, indicating the important role of music in religious, educational, and social life. Literary works such as *Nayadhammakaho*, *Paumacariyam*, and *Adipurana* highlight the existence of organized musical and artistic gatherings within Jain communities.

Jain scholars also made notable contributions to Indian musicology through treatises such as *Sangita Samaysara* by Parsvadeva and *Sangitopanisat Saroddhara* by Sudhakalasha. These works discuss concepts such as sound, ragas, talas, musical forms, dance, and performance practices, reflecting the sophistication of Jain musical scholarship. They also

emphasize the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical performance, a principle that remains relevant in contemporary music education.

Recent studies recognize the educational and spiritual value of Jain musical thought, particularly its emphasis on discipline, mindfulness, self-reflection, and ethical development. These principles align closely with modern educational goals and the holistic approach promoted by India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Despite its significance, Jain musicology remains under-researched, and comprehensive studies on its theory, pedagogy, and contemporary relevance are limited. Therefore, further exploration of Jain musical traditions is necessary to achieve a more inclusive understanding of Indian music and enrich contemporary music education and performing arts.

Research Methodology

The present study examined the contributions of Jain literature and musicological treatises to music education and performing arts. The review of Agamic and non-Agamic literature revealed extensive references to music, dance, drama, musical instruments, song forms, and theoretical concepts such as *svara*, *grama*, and *murcchana*. These findings indicate that music occupied an important position within Jain cultural and educational traditions. The study further explored two major Jain musicological treatises, namely *Sangita Samaysara* by Parsvadeva and *Sangitopanisat Saroddhara* by Sudhakalasha. Both works provide systematic discussions on music theory, performance practices, rhythmic structures, dance traditions, and pedagogical principles. The treatises demonstrate the advanced level of musical scholarship achieved by Jain authors and preserve valuable information regarding medieval Indian music. 9 The findings reveal that Jain musical thought extends beyond technical and aesthetic considerations to incorporate ethical, meditative, and spiritual dimensions. Music is presented as a means of self-discipline, self-purification, and ultimately liberation. The study also highlights the continuing relevance of Jain musical traditions in contemporary educational and performance contexts, particularly in promoting a holistic understanding of music.

Result

Jain Agamic and Non-Agamic Literature

The review of Jain Agamic and non-Agamic literature revealed extensive references to the theory and practice of music, indicating the existence of a well-developed musical tradition within Jain culture. The Agamic literature, compiled by the Ganadharas and Sruta-Kevalis, contains valuable information regarding various aspects of music, dance, and drama. Texts such as *Rayapaseniya*, *Jeevabhigama*, *Vihayapannatti*, and *Jambuddiva Pannatti* describe a variety of musical instruments under the category of *Turya*. The *Anuyogsutta* contains detailed references to *svara*, *gita*, *grama*, and *murcchana*, while the *Sthananga Sutra* discusses seven *svaras*, *svarasthanas*, *svara-lakshanas*, three *gramas*, their *murcchanas*, and the merits and demerits of musical compositions. Several Jain texts, including *Nayadhammakaho* and *Rayapaseniya*, mention seventy-two arts, among which singing, dancing, and instrumental music occupy prominent positions. References to organized artistic assemblies such as *sangita-gosthi*, *vadya-gosthi*, *vina-gosthi*, and *nrityagosthi* were identified in works such as *Adipurana* by Jinasena. The text also refers to *AnandaNataka*, a musical dance-drama, and describes various dance forms including *lila-nritya*, *sucinritya*, *bahurupini-nritya*, and *cakra-nritya*. Evidence of dramatic traditions was also found in *Rayapaseniya* and *Nayadhammakaho*. The *Rayapaseniya* describes thirty-two forms of dramatic performances incorporating dance, symbolic mandalas, auspicious motifs such as the swastika, representations of letters, and depictions of celestial phenomena including the movements of the sun, moon, and eclipses. The *Pinda-Niryukti* records references to staged dramatic performances in *Pataliputra*, while the *Nisitha-Curni* and *Angavijja* mention musical instruments such as the *vina*, *pakhara*, and *daddaraka*. A unique dance form known as *Nalikagalaka* is described in *Vasudevahindi*. Further references to music and performing arts were identified in *Paumacariyam* of Vimala Suri and *Samaraicakaha* of Haribhadra Suri. The latter includes *nritya*, *gita*, *vaditra*, *puskaragata*, and *samatala* within the broader concept of *sangita*. Jain *Apabhramsha* literature authored by Pushpadanta, Vira, Padmakirti, and Dhanapala also contains numerous references to vocal music, instrumental accompaniment, dance, and dramatic performances. *Pasanahacariu* describes the coordination of instruments with vocal music, while *Jambusamicariu* discusses the distinct sounds produced by various musical instruments. (1)

Descriptions of song forms such as *dhruva*, *carcari*, *dhavala*, *mangala*, *chalita*, *akseptika*, and *rasaka* were also observed. In addition, references to the classification of *ragas*, the history of the *tarana* mode, and musical instruments such as the *sarangi* and *ravanahastaka* indicate the presence of sophisticated musicological knowledge within Jain literary traditions. (2)

Music Treatise: Sangita Samaysara (3)

The review identified *Sangita Samaysara* by Parsvadeva as one of the earliest and most significant Jain contributions to Indian musicology. The treatise primarily focuses on the prevailing traditions of *desi* music and dance and contains detailed discussions on compositional forms known as *prabandhas*. The text clearly distinguishes between *margi* and *desi* musical

traditions and establishes their respective characteristics. The treatise is divided into multiple chapters dealing with topics such as nada, dhvani, sarira, gita, alapti, varna, alankara, sthaya, raga, vadya, abhinaya, tala, and prastara. References to earlier authorities including Kohala, Matanga, Dattila, Pratap, Digambara, and Sankara were also identified. Parsvadeva discusses sixty six shrutis following the tradition of Kohala and provides definitions of various gamakas. An entire chapter is devoted to desi sangita, alapti, and sthaya. 7 The treatise contains detailed discussions on raga classification, svara-vyavastha, upanga, and raganga concepts. Additional chapters describe musical instruments, performance techniques, angika-abhinaya, and rhythmic theory. Notably, Parsvadeva describes hundred and one talas elaborates upon Vadanirnaya, a unique aspect related to musical performance and evaluation. The text also includes discussions of alapti, a rhythmically free introduction to raga performance, which bears similarities to the contemporary concept of alap. A significant finding was Parsvadeva's explicit assertion that the ultimate purpose of music is the attainment of moksha, thereby emphasizing the spiritual dimension of musical practice.

Music Treatise: Sangitopanisat Saroddhara (4)

Another major contribution identified in the review was Sangitopanisat Saroddhara, composed by the Jain monk Sudhakalasha in the fourteenth century. The text represents an important source for understanding the musical traditions of Western India and provides extensive information regarding music, dance, and performance practices. One of the most distinctive features of the treatise is its pictorial representation of ragas, which forms the basis of later raga-dhyana traditions. The text assigns anthropomorphic forms to ragas, svaras, gramas, murcchanas, and tanas, making it one of the earliest known sources of raga iconography. Sudhakalasha also records thirty-two types of bhramaris and differentiates between nrnta and nrtya, associating them respectively with male and female performers. The treatise is organized into six chapters dealing with desi gita, nadotpatti, tala, raga, vadya, nrtya, and nrnta paddhati. It describes numerous varieties of prabandhas and rupakas, while also commenting on the declining number of composers and performers of prabandha traditions during the author's period. The work documents seventy-three talas, including Prithvikundala Tala, a tala consisting of sixty matras introduced by the author himself. Sudhakalasha's treatment of tala differs from prevailing traditions by considering virama as one-eighth of a matra rather than one-fourth. Another noteworthy finding was the inclusion of patas or mnemonic syllables for individual talas, representing an early tradition not documented in several contemporary musicological works. The treatise also contains critical observations regarding the growing separation between theoreticians and practitioners. Sudhakalasha emphasizes that the study of dance and music cannot be completed solely through textual knowledge and stresses the importance of practical learning from performers and teachers. The text further provides elaborate visual descriptions of ragas and raginis. Ragas such as Sri, Vasanta, Bhairava, Panchama, Megha, and Nattanarayana are described through anthropomorphic imagery involving multiple faces and arms. Additionally, thirty-six bhashas are depicted as possessing vinas and representing forms of musical sound. Several ragas appearing in the text are documented for the first time, making the treatise an important source for understanding the evolution of raga traditions and historical performance practices.

Discussion

The present study reassesses the contribution of Jain literature and musicological treatises to Indian music education and performing arts. The findings reveal that Jainism possesses a rich and systematic musical tradition that extends beyond devotional practices and encompasses theoretical, pedagogical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of music. Although Jain contributions to philosophy, ethics, art, architecture, and literature have been extensively studied, their role in the development of musicology has remained comparatively underrepresented in mainstream scholarship. The analysis of Agamic and non-Agamic literature demonstrates that music occupied a significant place within Jain society from ancient times. References to svara, gita, grama, murcchana, musical instruments, dance forms, dramatic performances, and artistic assemblies indicate the existence of a well-developed musical culture. The mention of seventy-two arts in several Jain texts, including singing, dancing, and instrumental music, suggests that music was considered an important component of education and cultural life. These findings support the view that Jain communities actively participated in the preservation and transmission of musical knowledge. The study also highlights the substantial contribution of Jain scholars to Indian musicology through specialized treatises such as Sangita Samaysara and Sangitopanisat Saroddhara. Parsvadeva's Sangita Samaysara presents a systematic treatment of musical concepts including nada, raga, tala, alankara, abhinaya, and performance practices. His distinction between margi and desi traditions and the detailed classification of talas, ragas, and shrutis demonstrate a high degree of theoretical sophistication. Particularly noteworthy is his emphasis on moksha as the ultimate purpose of music, reflecting the Jain perspective that music serves as a means of spiritual advancement rather than mere entertainment. Similarly, Sudhakalasha's Sangitopanisat Saroddhara provides valuable insights into medieval Indian music and performance traditions. The treatise is remarkable for its visual representation of ragas and raginis, making it one of the earliest known sources of raga iconography. The work also offers important observations regarding the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical performance. Sudhakalasha's concern regarding the growing separation between scholars and practitioners remains

relevant even today, when music education often faces challenges in balancing academic study with practical training. An important finding of the study is the holistic approach to music reflected in Jain thought. Unlike contemporary systems that frequently emphasize technical proficiency and performance excellence, Jain musical philosophy integrates artistic practice with ethical discipline, self-control, meditation, and spiritual growth. Music is viewed as a medium for self-purification and selfrealization, aligning closely with broader Jain principles such as ahimsa, restraint, and mindfulness. This perspective offers valuable insights for contemporary music education, which increasingly recognizes the importance of holistic development alongside technical competence. The findings also demonstrate the continuity of Jain musical traditions through devotional singing, ritual chants, festival music, and community-based performances. These practices illustrate how musical traditions have been preserved and transmitted across generations while maintaining their spiritual and cultural significance. Such continuity highlights the enduring relevance of Jain musical heritage within contemporary performing arts.

Conclusion

The present study establishes that Jainism has made significant contributions to the development of Indian music through its literary traditions, musicological treatises, devotional practices, and philosophical perspectives. Jain Agamic and non-Agamic literature preserve valuable evidence regarding the existence of a rich musical culture encompassing vocal music, instrumental performance, dance, drama, and music theory. The treatises Sangita Samaysara and Sangitopanisat Saroddhara further demonstrate the depth and sophistication of Jain musicological scholarship. A distinctive feature of Jain musical thought is its emphasis on the spiritual purpose of music. Unlike approaches that regard music solely as an artistic or entertainment-oriented activity, Jainism views music as a vehicle for self-purification, ethical development, and attainment of moksha. This holistic understanding integrates technical excellence with moral and spiritual growth. In the contemporary era, where music education often focuses primarily on performance and professional achievement, the insights provided by Jain musical traditions offer a valuable alternative perspective. The emphasis on discipline, mindfulness, theoretical understanding, and spiritual awareness can contribute to a more balanced and comprehensive approach to music education and performing arts. Therefore, Jain musicology deserves greater recognition within academic research, music education curricula, and performing arts scholarship. Further investigation of Jain musical sources may not only enrich our understanding of India's musical heritage but also provide meaningful directions for the future development of music education and artistic practice.

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