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Music: An Integral Element of Indian Theatre Forms

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ABSTRACT

All the cultures of the world have musical theatre impulses imbibed in them. Rites and rituals or ceremonial observances are invariably supported with hymns. Along with the spoken words, 'music' has been at the core of all theatrical expressions. Apart from endowing the recitation, singing and dance with instrumental and percussive accompaniment, it also underscores the theatrical action and emotional essence of the performance.

In India too these sacramental rites, magical performances, ceremonial proceedings and festivals are believed to be the precursors of drama. The elements of music which are rhythm and melody have been defining and supplementing the emotion of all the theatrical performances. From the ritualistic to the classical theatricals and from the folk to the refined traditional dramas, music is essential to augment the aesthetic quality of all Indian theatrical genres.

This paper briefly reviews the importance of verbal and non-verbal, musical compositions in enhancing the emotional and aesthetic effect of all Indian theatrical forms, especially 'drama' on Indian audience. The music has been an inherent component of theatre, be it of the classical period, folk or traditional.

However, the discussion does not include the modern play approach nurtured in the late 18th century CE after the arrival of the Proscenium stage.

KEYWORDS: Theatre, Music, India, Natyashastra, Folk, Tradition, Sound, Drama

INTRODUCTION

'Music' in a greater connotation is a scientific result derived from fusing the sounds of the universe. Ancient Indian *rishi-munis* – ascetics – and sages believed in the existence of a primordial or ultimate eternal sound that transcends space and time. They termed it as the *Naad*, which is the basis of the origin of the Universe. Accordingly, this is of two types: the *Aahat*, a sound caused by striking two or more elements, and the second is *Anaahat*, the sound that emerged from within and not by external actions. Both these primordial sounds existed throughout the evolution over successive generations, thus making them a part of life. With the transformation of sounds into aesthetic expressions, 'Music' evolved. The desire to communicate with one another paved way to 'Verbal' (oral) and 'Corporal' (physical) expressions. These oral and physical mediums are considered to be the basis of 'Music' and 'Drama' respectively. Various emotional, mental states like anger, sorrow, love, distraught, fear, frustration, pain and happiness are expressed orally (using sounds of varied pitch and volume) as well as

physically (using a mixture of facial expressions and body movements) or in combination. Like elsewhere, in India too, the combination of these elements has been the most effective method of primitive as well as sophisticated theatre communication.

2. MUSIC IN INDIAN THEATRE FORMS

The early genres of performances included, among others, different kinds of rituals, ceremonies and storytelling. In all of these genres, sound (as 'music') has been an effective accomplice. This was either through voices or through striking stretched skin membranes with bones and even primitive blow horns. The earliest ritualistic acts of worship were usually accompanied by chanting, invocation or rhythmic 'melodic' sounds. Musical notes have been helping the spiritualists and sages to reveal the inner emotional expressions. In the rites that were being observed, song and dance have been an integral part since the pre-historic times.

India is said to be home to many archaic rituals cherished by small rural communities for several centuries of which some are age-old classical traditions of dance-drama related to the *Natyashastra*, while, others are popular forms of folk entertainment reflecting the changing tastes of their audiences. To visualise their narration, all of these forms have used mimetic performances by a single actor-dancer and also by a group with songs and dances⁰¹.

In the Indian sub-continent, Music has been an inherent element in all of the rituals and noticed in ritualistic and secular dramas as well.

2.1. THEATRE MUSIC DURING CLASSICAL PERIOD

The literary legacy of India includes numerous *shastras* - manuals or treatise - covering a wide range of knowledge branches and several art forms, such as poetics, music, dance and theatre. The earliest treatise for theatre and dance is the *Natyashastra* compiled between 2nd century BCE to 2nd Century CE by sage Bharata and his 100 children (students). The age of this treatise itself hints the relevance of theatre and dance in Indian culture and therefore forms the basis of theatre.

As it was put into practice, it evolved with different types of theatrical forms. The different situations and environs where performances took place, from simple open arenas to large cave theatres as well as several kinds of wooden theatre structures also became part of its evolution process.

In a theatrical performance, music (vocal and instrumental) has been given great importance by sage Bharata. The indispensability of music to the staging of Sanskrit play can be accentuated from its format itself, which is of bonding speech with songs and movement. The treatise mentions that the '*Natya Dharmi*' (conventional performance) and the '*Lok Dharmi*', (folk theatre performance) need to be supported and complemented with music incorporating (the then existing) musical instruments as well as singing.

The importance attached to music in classical Indian theatre is evident from the fact that the director and actors in the troupe are required to be proficient in Music. However, unlike in the modern age of specialization, the classical era had no professional composers. The scoring of the music for a play was mostly composed by the *Sutradhar* - the director - while the artists and musicians were the executors⁰².

Music in classical Indian theatre enhances the emotion with the *Kavya* – poetry – presented with the support of musical notes to elevate the aesthetic experience for the performer as well as the audience.

Sage Bharata dedicates seven separate chapters from 28 to 34 to music, both vocal and instrumental. Chapter 28, which is on instrumental music, *Aatodya* mentions four types of regular musical instruments to be used during a theatrical performance⁰³.

The four groups based on their acoustic principle described are:

1. 'Tantu Vadya' or the string instruments (chordophones) that make sound by way of a vibrating string or strings stretched between two points,
2. 'Susheer' or the hollow instruments (aerophones) in which sound is generated by air as the primary vibrating medium,
3. 'Ghana' solid instruments (idiophones), where the sound is created by the instrument due to vibration. There is no string or membrane such as a bell or gong, and
4. 'Avanaddha' which are all of the covered instruments (membranophones) whose sound is generated by striking, rubbing, or fingering a stretched membrane⁰⁴.

The chapter 33 (Avanaddha) of the *Natyashastra*, defines the seating positions of the musicians of the Orchestra (*Kutapa*) as between the two doors of '*Nepathya*' (the tiring room) facing the east. Bharata mentions three such groups of musicians and they are,

1. Tata-kutapa – (vocalists, string instrumentalists and the flutists),
2. Avanaddha-kutapa - (percussionists playing instruments like Mrudanga, Panava and Dardura),
3. Natyakarta-kutapa (actors and actresses of the play).

The *kutapa* speaks about an arrangement where, players of covered instruments are seated first. A male singer sits facing north and to his left is the Veena-player. To the right of the male singer are the two flute-players while the female singer sits facing her male counterpart.

Natyashastra says that these groups of artistes, made to sit throughout the performance in full view, do not in any way divert or distract the attention of the actors or the audience and if the playing (of instruments) and singing is well performed then the production of the play (*Natya*) do not run any risk.

Further, the treatise does not restrict the use of music to the performances of intricate drama forms such as *Prakaran*, *Natak*, *Ihamrug*, *Samaavakar*, *Dim*, *Ank* and *Vyayog* but also directs its use to folk styles such as *Prahasan*, *Veethi* and *Bhaan*. This signifies the importance of musical accompaniment for and during all types of theatrical activities.

Music has been an integral part of all types of performances in and around India for more than 2,500 years. Such well thought notes in the scripts written during ancient period underline the importance of the 'accompanying' music during any theatrical performance in India.

2.2. MUSIC IN FOLK AND TRADITIONAL THEATRE FORMS OF INDIA

Since ages, Music has been playing an effective role in various drama performances right from the ritualistic to the folk and the classical genres. Historically, musical element exists in almost every known form of theatre, be that be ritualistic performances, Sanskrit theatre, dramatised rituals, dramatic rituals and later, secular dramas. In all of these forms, music and drama have been complementing each other.

Folk theatre in India which has existed since the pre-classical era has used chants along with dance and song. Music for indigenous theatre performances has been a part of the action and also as afterpieces. The same convention was followed by the traditional theatre forms, though they came in existence much later. Both of these genres use music as an inherent element, but unlike the classical Sanskrit theatre where more of *Margi* – music based on conventions – were incorporated, folk and traditional plays use more of the *Desi* stream which has been adapted either from folk music and folk songs or the semi-classical musical traditions of India. Performers always treat music as one of the major components of drama and thus drew on songs and music as a necessity. It is noteworthy that the purpose of incorporating songs in folk and traditional dramas is not only for the sake of it, but these songs are used as an auxiliary for a theatrical experience.

Music for a drama presentation in India has been used as:

1. Introduction of the characters
2. Scene changing device
3. Songs as a support to the dialogue or spoken word
4. Narration or commenting on the scene through a chorus chant and
5. Prayer and appeasement of the divinity.

While further dividing the motive for music application for theatrical performances around the Indian subcontinent, it is observed that the two forms, the Folk and the Traditional, incorporate music in a slightly different way.

Music for a folk play is used,

1. To call out to the members of the community and to set the mood of the performance
2. As chants and songs to appeal to the supernatural sung both in solo and in a chorus.
3. Introducing the characters and
4. As an instrumental accompaniment for dances and musical interludes.

The music applied during folk theatre performances has spontaneity and is the expression of the feeling of that particular moment. 'One' is not as important as 'We' and there is no independent identity of the singer or the instrumentalist(s). The compositions are improvised by the group and executed naturally. Nature and ambience is

the resource for the music of folk theatre and is not intellectually cultivated. Only the local folk instruments are used.

Whereas, Music for a Traditional play performance is used during,

1. Beginning prayer and ending chorus,
2. Scene changing and scene shifting interludes,
3. Musical accompaniment for songs and dances,
4. Passing comments on the scene through a chorus chant or solo song by the actor and
5. As an instrumental accompaniment as background to enhance the emotion of the scene.

The music for traditional plays is well structured and well-rehearsed. A separate time is given for its design. It incorporates logic and is intellectually cultivated. The playwright writes the drama, which is directed by the director and then that drama is presented scenically before the impressive audience along with music to enhance its theatricality. Instruments used here could be folk as well as classical and now western too.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSIC IN INDIAN DRAMA

3.1. VOCAL MUSIC

Songs are sung in all Indian theatre forms either as a solo voice or in the chorus and sometimes voices in combination, with or without instrumental accompaniment. Songs include monophonic - having a single line of melody as seen in ritualistic performances and polyphonic - consisting of more than one simultaneous melody as seen in dramatic rituals. Use of such songs in a drama is one of the best examples of vocal music. Generally, songs are used to enrich the emotional expressions. Many times these songs are presented by the character as an extension of dialogue or at times in chorus while entering the performing area or from the backstage.

Shamans and its later version, the *Sutradhaar* are often seen chanting and singing while the group enacts on the cue with the supportive vocal hum. These songs carry forward the action or the story in the drama.

In many of the folk plays, the chorus sings while the character enacts with dance-like movements. Here the main aim of the singers is to support the dance and to recite. These songs are often limited to the basic three or four notes sung without a formal scale. In some forms, choral singing is introduced as a break in the enactment where the chorus describes and comments upon the main action and the situation.

Whereas in the traditional theatre, singing comes as an independent art and it is often the trained singers who are put on the job. The actors, who in their characters sing during the scene, also need to be well versed in music. Songs have a scope of elaboration when sung in solo. The grammar of the music is followed, and rhythms can get intricate. Songs in such situations are more decorative and musically planned.

3.2. INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

In all Indian theatre forms, musical instruments are used. They are either with rhythm accompaniment or used independently of rhythm. They are grouped into:

1. Rhythmic instruments, e.g. Dhol, Dholki, Chenda, Goan Ghumot, Sambal, Duff, Halagi, Tabla, Mrudang and Pakhawaj,
2. Resonating instruments, e.g. Khartal, Zhaanj (Metal plates), Bells, hand-held Gongs and Cymbals,
3. Stringed instruments, e.g. Veena, Ektara, Sarangi, Sitar and Santoor, and
4. Wind instruments, e.g. Bamboo flutes, Shehanaie, Harmonium, Reed instruments and various horns.

Of these mentioned, the Chordophones family instruments do not feature in the early ritualistic plays and the folk plays whereas instruments like the Veena and Mrudang are an essential part of the classical Indian theatre. The traditional theatre takes the liberty of using all or any of the instruments while some secular plays are also seen using the modern Keyboards.

These instruments are used as an accompaniment for vocal music (song), dance and short musical interludes. During a performance, sounds of musical instruments are vehemently used for highlighting the emotions and fulfilling in the gaps. In certain traditional forms, they also provide a background score while in folk plays, they are used to draw attention to certain spoken words.

Independent use of musical instruments is also witnessed for setting the mood of the play at the beginning and also for complimenting the mood of a scene as it gets over.

Apart from Kutiyattam, perhaps India's oldest continuously performed theatre of the ancient world, there have been numerous theatre forms witnessed even today that are predominantly dependent on their musical accompaniment.

Two of the major traditional theatre forms that have received great patronage from the Goan audience since the 19th century CE are the Marathi Sangeet Natak (originated c 1879) and the Konkani Tiatr (originated in 1892). Both these forms are still very popular, and their success is primarily attributed to their music.

Music is a principal element in the other surviving folk and traditional theatre modes of India like Ankia Nat (Assam), Bhagavata Mela (Tamil Nadu), Bhamakalapam (Andhra Pradesh), Bhavai (North Gujrat, Saurashtra and areas of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan), Dashavatara (Konkan and Goa), Jatra (Bengal and areas of Bihar, Odisha, Assam and Tripura), Kathakali (Kerala), Tamasha (Maharashtra), Ram Leela (North India), Yakshagana (South Kannada region of Karnataka), Terukuthu (Tamil Nadu), Krishnattam (Kerala) and the Goan, Gawda Jagor, Kaalo and Ranmallem to name a few.

All of these forms (and a few more) which are witnessed even today depend on their musical element to attain completeness in their presentation.

4. SUMMARY

It can be concluded that, in all genres of Indian theatre forms, Music has been an integral part of drama from ancient times and will continue to be one of the major elements of Indian theatre. It serves as a medium for actors and the audience to help associate them with the ongoing performance. Music imparts energy to the text of the play and to the sentiment of the drama. It has the ability to tap into the hidden emotions of the play while boosting the abilities and expressions of the performer. In all of the Indian theatrical forms and especially 'Drama', Music is seen to improve the aesthetic quotient.

Apt use of Folk, Classical, Semi classical and Traditional music has always uplifted the entire theatrical experience.

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