



SWEET SOUNDS

HINDUSTANI MUSIC

By Priya Purushothaman

On a crackly radio broadcast coming from the back of a tea shop, strains of a melancholy sitar can be heard. A wedding party parades through the streets, announcing its presence with the haunting sound of a shehnai. The husky voice of a pining woman croons ghazals on television in an old Hindi film.

Music infiltrates our lives in many different contexts, often creating subconscious impressions in our minds. For each individual, a particular sound may be associated with a personal experience, but what is the larger context? Why do we often hear the shehnai in weddings, and what is the quality of that luring sound? How does the sitar create both a percussive and melodic sound? Where have these melodies come from, and how are they performed in contemporary times?

Here, we will focus on unveiling the mask of Hindustani Raagsangeet, the north Indian classical tradition that has been embedded in Indian culture for centuries. It is an intricate and subtle art form that paints an emotional gamut spanning from the meditative to sensuous. To understand how it conveys these emotions through melody, rhythm and language, we must travel back to the incipient stages, when the early discoveries about sound were made.

The first intentional use

of intonations and rhythm is traced back to the Rig Veda, in which three distinct pitches, uttered in specific meters, were chanted in praise of the natural elements. The Sama Veda developed further upon the pitches used in the Rig Veda and expanded to use seven notes, creating what is known as a saphthak.

The Sama Veda consists of hymns that were sung to accompany sacrificial offerings to gain the favour of the Gods. Because the Vedic tradition is an oral one, all the hymns were passed on from guru to shishya through the gurukul system, in which the shishya lives with the guru to study all aspects of the Vedas and religious scriptures. This system of learning was also adopted later in the study of Hindustani music.

From the hymns of the Sama Veda came what is known as Prabandha Gan, an elaborate style of singing that presented detailed, sacred compositions in Sanskrit that were to be sung in temples. During this period, the structure of this music and the theory of the fine arts were expounded in Bharata's



'Natyashastra', one of the foundational texts for Indian classical music, theatre and dance. Instruments have been identified and classified into categories based on the way they produce sound, a method of classification that is still used all over the world.

We also see the first documentation of the concept of raga, the melodic base for all Indian classical music, and the notion of rasa theory, which deals with the emotions depicted through various arts. This text, along with another known as the 'Dattilam', codified many musical

principles and bridged the transition between sama-gayan and raga-based music. The Prabandha Gan style evolved into what is known as the Drupad, a

form that also praised the lords but was sung in vernacular languages. Like its predecessor, the Drupad featured a fixed composition, but also added an improvisational element with its distinguishing "Nom-Tom" alaap, a free form use of syllables to depict the raag. At this point in history, we find a critical division in the development of Indian classical music. With the advent of Islamic rule, the existing musical tradition diverges into two: what will later be classified as the Hindustani style in the north and the Carnatic in the south.

Persian musical modes, instruments, culture, and language, heavily influence the music in the north in a new direction that amalgamates all of these new elements.

More on these turn of events soon!