FOLK MUSIC OF INDIA
RECORDED IN INDIA BY ALL INDIA RADIO  NOTES BY WASANtha WANA SINGH

AGRA, MOTI MASJID

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE
MUSIC of INDIA -- FOLK

--TRADITIONAL & CLASSICAL

Introduction by Wasantha Wana Singh

Early in its history simple scales of five and seven tones were used on a variety of string, wind and percussion instruments in India.

According to Indian mythology, the Hindu trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara (Siva), men of great knowledge who were enlightened of the natural forces of the universe (creation, preservation and destruction), were great musicians of their day. They were looked upon as superbeings, or gods, who inspired the rishis (sages) Bharata, Thumburu, Narada and others. The legend is that the sage Bharata acquired his knowledge of music directly from the great Brahma and systematized the art and introduced it to the world as sangita, a term used by Bharata meaning the embodiment of song, instrumental music and dance.

After Bharata had learned the art of music from Brahma, he taught it to the inhabitants of Indra's heaven (Gandarva Loka) -- the gandarvas, kinnara, and apsarares (singers, instrumentalists and dancers) -- who were said to have performed this celestial music, called Marga Sangita, in the presence of Isiwarana, the supreme god. Following this, Bharata taught the sangita and the lasya nrtthya (gentle female dance) shown him by Siva's consort, Uma Devi, to his disciples.

Music which is practiced in conjunction with the Vedic liturgy is called celestial music. Any form of music maintained by the people of a province or region is called terrestrial music, or desiya sangita. It is observed and preserved to suit the natural disposition of the local populace. These terms correspond to "sacred" and "secular" as used in Western music. The Indian scale is divided into 22 sections, and each section is called a sruthi (microtone), out of which seven tones are selected for the main tones of the scale. These tones are called swaras.

When we compare the Indian with the Western scales, we find that the former possesses all twelve tones of the latter, in virtually the same tuning, and that the additional ten sruthies produce tones which are almost directly halfway between the half steps of the chromatic scale, and are loosely called quarter tones. Such tones are not always introduced as fixed steps, but may appear as carefully controlled sliding tones. The fine art of such sliding tones (called mhir in India) has no parallel in the West.

The combination of five, six or seven swaras (tones) selected from the 22-sruthi scale of India, forms a melodic foundation or a skeleton pattern with set laws of progression in ascension and descension. This pattern, expressing a definite feeling or philosophical concept, is called a raga. The word raga originated from the word ranj meaning to color, and it implies color of mind, i.e. emotion. A Musician must always observe rules to preserve the purity of the raga. However, within the rules of the raga he is allowed to improvise, which makes him a composer as well as an instrumentalist. For this reason there are no complete written scores of Indian music as it is performed, for each instrumentalist interprets the raga according to his inclination, but well within the formula. The ragas themselves, and foundation melody-patterns, are of course written down.

There are six fundamental ragas (a seventh is mentioned in Indian mythology) from which other male ragas and female raganis are derived. Indians recognize the validity of performing a particular raga at a suitable time of the day and season of the year. In this respect, legend states that, once long ago, in the court of the great Mogul emperor, Akbar, the celebrated court musician Tan Sen was ordered to sing a night raga at noon, the consequence of which brought darkness down on the place where he stood and wherever the sound of his voice reached.

The expression of rhythm is prevalent throughout India. In every corner of the land, one may see children as well as adults expressing rhythm on numerous types of drums. Occasionally one may encounter a youngster producing some very intricate rhythms on an empty can or a wooden box.

The thala, or the time measurement, in Indian music is independent of the melody which it accompanies, and runs in cycles with a major accent, a minor accent and a minus or silent accent. The singer and the instrumentalist, who carry the melody, and the drummer, who marks the time, must have perfect aural coordination in order to go around as many cycles of rhythm as they desire and then meet at the sama, or the major accent, without prearrangement. Hindu timing is divided into three sections: the first, thala, which moves in bars consisting of a fixed number of beats. The second, laya, regulates this movement with three different speeds -- vilambitha (slow), maddya (medium), and dhrutha (accelerated time). The last is mathra, or the minor unit of thala.

Thala may be compared with a study of the rhythmical aspect of form in Western music; laya with a study of tempo, and mathra with studies of individual measure forms, or meter. The complicated
pattern of thala, which is composed of mnemonic- 
cal sentences, is called the bala and is divided in- 
to three sections. The first mnemonic phrase, 
which portrays the skeleton pattern with its accentu- 
ation, is called the Teka. Each phrase varies by 
degrees and is played with embellishments, care- 
fully avoiding repetition. Some thalas are composed 
of tremendous variety of mnemonic phrases. To 
master these it takes a lifetime of patience, en- 
durance and energy.

In comparing the music of India with that of the 
West, the comments of the late Sir Rabindranath 
Tagore, famed poet of India, will be of special 
interest:

"For us, Hindu music has above all a 
transcendental significance. It disengages the 
spiritual from the happenings of life; it sings of 
the relationship of the human soul with the 
soul of things beyond. The world by day is like 
European music; a flowing concourse of vast 
harmony composed of concord and discord and 
many disconnected segments. And the night 
world is our Indian music; one pure, deep and 
tender raga. They both stir us, yet the two are 
contradictory in spirit. But they cannot be 
helped. At the very root nature is divided into 
two, day and night, unity and variety, finite and 
infinite. We people of India live in the realm of 
night; we are overpowered by the sense of the one 
and the infinite. Our music draws the listen- 
er away beyond the realm of everyday joys and 
sorrows, and takes us to that lonely region of 
renunciation which lies at the root of the uni-
verse, while European music leads us a variegat-
ted dance through the endless rise and fall of 
human grief and joy."

Indian dancing has two outstanding character-
istics, the use of the hands to tell a story, by 
means of gestures, and the complicated foot 
work. The art of dance is used, primarily, to 
tell the stories and myths concerning the gods 
and heroes of mythology. It is interesting to 
note that the gesture language of the Hindu dance 
has survived the ages of crises that the Indian 
civilization has been forced to undergo. It is 
closely related to the symbolic language of the 
finger, hands and of the bodily postures which 
form an intrinsic part of the daily ritual of the 
devotee of Yoga practice.

Since Yoga is the study of mind over matter, 
it is only natural that all dancers must learn the 
aspect of bodily control which forms a fundamen-
tal part of this practice. When it is mentioned 
that both the musicians and the dancers learn 
Yoga in order to interpret the arts of India, it 
does not mean that they are able to walk on em-
bers, or stick pins into themselves. This is only 
a lower aspect of the same science.

A distinguishing feature of Indian dance is the 
dancers’ foot-work, which produces musical 
articulation from the ankle bells. These bells, 
accompanying the music, frequently echo the 
mnemonic phrases beaten on the drum but 
sometimes produce counter effects. Therefore, 
an Indian dancer is considered a musical instru-
ment, producing melody from her bodily move-
mont, rhythm from her foot work and words to 
her composition through her hand gestures.

Notes on Musical Instruments by 
Harold Courlander

Among the truly vast number of musical in-
struments used in Indian classical, traditional 
and folk music, these are perhaps the best known 
and the most commonly seen:

Sarangi: A box-shaped or roughly boat-shaped 
instrument with four main strings and a varying 
number of sympathetic strings, ranging 
from seven to as many as one hundred. The word 
sarangi means 100-stringed. This instrument 
is played with a bow, and is very popular in the 
north and central states. Variants of the sarangi, 
some of them older forms, are the dilruba, the 
taus and the sarinda.

Israj: A nineteen-stringed bowed instrument. Four 
strings are played with the bow, the rest are 
sympathetic.

Sitar: A seven-stringed instrument played in the 
manner of the steel guitar.

Vina or veena: A variant of the sitar, with two 
large calabashes attached, one at each end, to 
act as resonators. The vina is made of bamboo, 
with frets, and has seven strings.

Sur bahar: A stringed instrument resembling the 
sitar, but larger.

Tanpura: A stringed instrument.

Pungi: A blown instrument made of two small 
reed and a gourd or calabash.

Vani: A bamboo flute.

Bansri: A type of flute.

Shahnai: An oboe-like wind instrument of North 
India.

Karatali and manjira: Small cymbals used by 
singers in a chorus.

Nadhaswaram: Variant of the shahnai.

Kattyavana veena: A xylophone-like instrument 
with wooden keys.
Kartals: Wooden hand clappers.

Chungurus: A string of small bells tied on a ribbon, used for religious songs and dances.

Ghara (also known as ghaghar and matka): An earthen pot played by striking with a stick. The tone is controlled by a hand over the natural opening.

Jalatarang: Composed of numerous bowls partially filled with water to produce specific tones. They are played by striking them with wooden sticks.

Mirdam: A barrel-shaped drum with two heads and tapering ends. The center of each head has a circular piece of parchment cemented to it. One head is pitched high, the other lower.

Pakavaj: A drum similar to the mirdam, especially favored by Moslems.

Tappu: A shallow, wheel-shaped finger drum.

Dolak: A barrel-shaped two-headed drum, played with the palm and fingers. It is used to accompany soloists and in group singing.

Tabla: A set of two small drums used for beating time.

Duff: A small hand drum.

Nugara: A large kettle drum.

Khol, algoza, baya, mirdanga: Drums of various styles.

Gopi-jantra: A small barrel-shaped drum with a single head. A gut cord affixed to the head passes through the body of the drum. The drum is held under the arm with the open end forward, and the cord is held taut and plucked to produce drum tones. Varying the tension on the cord changes the tone. Other instruments widely used are the harmonium and bagpipes.

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SIDE I, Band 1: Folk Song from West Bengal (Champa Bothri Desha Dekai) -- This is a love song in which the young man compares his sweetheart to the champa flower surrounded by the beauty of nature. The instruments used are the israj, sitar, flute, gopi-jantra, and dolak, with a harmonium in the background.

SIDE I, Band 2: Folk Song from Haryana (Punjab, Northern India). This is a love song sung by the young people of this region. The instruments used are the sarangi, the pakavaj and the kartals.

SIDE I, Band 3: Tamil Folk Song from the province of Madras, South India. The instruments used are the vani, a bamboo flute, the mirdam and the violin.

SIDE I, Band 4: Naga Swaram -- played on three reed instruments, two of which hold the drone and are made of wood (sometimes sandalwood), while the third carries the melody and is made of silver. The drum is barrel-shaped and is played with a stick on the left side and with the fingers and palm of the hand on the right. Cymbals accompany the other instruments. This type of music is very popular in the temples of South India and also is used at marriage ceremonies and other auspicious occasions. In this particular piece the instrumentalist is performing a snake charmers' melody (composed in the ragini asaori) which usually is played on the pungi.
SIDE II, Band 1: Religious Song from Kerla -- the main instruments here are the ancient kattyavana veenas (made of wooden slabs) which are used as percussors in the gamelan. The playing technique is much the same as with Western xylophones. The drum accompanying the singing and instruments is the dolak. It is very popular among folk musicians. Kerla, located in Malayalam, means "the cocoanut country."

SIDE II, Band 2: Sanae Gath (Raga Kaphi) -- a classical piece played on the shahnavi (Indian oboe), with the accompaniment of the tabla and baya drums and a drone. Mr. Bismillah is unanimously considered one of India's best performers on this particular instrument. His co-artist, the drummer, is also well known.

SIDE II, Band 3: Rajastan folk song -- played on the sarangi, gopi-jantra, sitar in the background, and the tabla and baya.

SIDE II, Bands 4 and 5: Folk Songs from South India. Instruments in Band 4 are flute, violin and miradm. Instruments in Band 5 are flute, miradm and tappu. This particular type of song is popular among the laborers working in the tea gardens, rowing boats, or doing any heavy duty work.

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SIDE I, Bands 1 and 2: Unnaippol (parts 1 and 2): Sung by Turaykur M. Rajagopala, accompanied on a veena, khol and violin. The raga Ramboji is a "morning" piece, sung in the Tamil language of South India. Unnaippol means "like you."

SIDE I, Band 3: Sangeeta Gnamamu; sung by Kumari Shyamala, accompanied by veena and khol, in Telegu.

SIDE I, Band 4: Theruvu Theppo; Sung by D.K. Pattamal, accompanied by veena, khol, and violin. The raga Kamas is an "evening" piece, sung here in the Tamil language of South India by a well known singer from that area.

SIDE I, Band 5: Raga Bhairavi (or Bhairavi): Played on the jalatarang by master Dattopant and Group. Instruments, in addition to the jalatarang, are the tabla and the tanpura. This raga is an "early morning" piece.

SIDE II, Band 6: Raga Saarang: Played by master Dattopant and Group. Same instruments as in Band 5. This raga is a "mid-day" piece.

SIDE II, Band 7: Aag (or Aaj) Mere Ghar Pritam: Sung by Kumari Juthika Ray, with orchestral accompaniment. This piece is a Bhajan, a type of song which is exclusively religious in content. The language here is Hindi. Kumari Juthika Ray is a famous Bhajan singer.

SIDE II, Band 8: Nirvadhi Sugadha: played by T. N. Rajaratnam Pillai on the nadaswaram. The nadaswaram resembles the shahnavi of North India and the European clarinet. This type of piece is played on ceremonial occasions, such as weddings. The performer is one of the well known South Indian players of this instrument. He is accompanied on a nagara.

SIDE II, Band 9: Parmarth Cha Panth Vikat Nach Aakale: sung by Dattopant in Marathi. This song is a type called Bhav Geet. The first line of the song reads: "Roads to good deeds are difficult to follow." The singer is accompanied by a harmonium and a tabla.

Photograph of Bengali street musician, Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Music Department.

Harold Courlander, editor
Moses Asch, production director