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Music in India: An Overview

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Music in India: An Overview

India is a nation known for an array of qualities: its extremes in both poverty and wealth, its acceptance of many religions, and even its ethnic food and dress, but all of these only provide a small hint of the colorful culture of this country. A rich, complex history filled with traditions and unique spirituality encompasses this still-thriving group of people. One of the most fascinating aspects of Indian culture is music. The notion of Indian music usually elicits two contrasting genres: either long, classical ragas, or the pop music that saturates Bollywood, which comprises most of India's current music production. India's music has a rich history and philosophical background and has taken a long journey to get to where it is today.

The best way to begin to understand a foreign nation's music is by understanding how they think. Indian philosophy stresses the importance of sound, and, although not solely through the form of music, sound serves as the focal point for truth. Truth was passed down to sages through the sense of hearing before eventually being written, making sound instrumental to knowing and understanding truth. Even the nature of Indian education was based heavily on hearing (Rowell 24). All that was held sacred was passed down through oral traditions by people whose opinions were valued and trusted. The emphasis placed on sound obviously extends to music as well. Being the only art form that directly relies on the sense of hearing, music is of high importance in Indian culture and is a common vehicle to express truth.

Truth in Indian philosophy does not possess absolute forms as Western culture has taught until the recent rise of Postmodernism. It is not universal or

inarguable, but rather it comprises a complexity with many exceptions. While discussing how Hindu's derive their truth, Rowell describes Indian thought as being "relentlessly taxonomic" (24). This simply means that Indian truth is made up of countless sets and subsets of truths that are not necessarily true in every circumstance. They also welcome the questioning of truth, which until the postmodern era was rarely permitted in Western thought. In essence, "every statement turns out to be false in that it is inescapably an oversimplification that blurs finer distinctions. And because Indian thought tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive, contradictions abound, and the resulting categories are never as neatly organized or as mutually exclusive as we would like them to be" (Rowell 25).

Since truth relies on the power of sound, it is not surprising to find sound integral to India's creation narrative, which states that everything on earth originated from an initial sound called "Aum." This sound is the center of the universe and all things are a part of it. Sarrazin describes it as representing "the vibrating energy of the universe" (2). Aum is what separates humanity from the rest of nature because only humans are able to reproduce it. Even today this sound is used "in Yoga to find one's grounding or center" (*Indian Music for the Classroom* 3).

Music even has a direct link to the gods (Linden 1). Shiva, the destroyer god, has his own dance called the tandava, which represents the cycle of the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe. This dance is quick in tempo and vigorous in movement, depicting his power. Shiva has even been called "Nataraja" meaning "Lord of the Dance" (*Indian Music for the Classroom* 14). This intrinsically links him to music, making it an important and spiritual part of the Hindus' lives.

Thus, music is the most effective way to increase one's spirituality. This is not limited to classical or devotional music, but even the music of modern Indian film is written and performed with the knowledge that it will bring them closer to god (*Indian Music for the Classroom* 4).

Classical music in India is made up of two major components: raga and tala. Raga is the Indian word for melody and tala is rhythm. Differing from Western music, the ragas are set melodies to which the performer can add many different ornaments. Ornaments are a vital part of Indian classical music; these are notes added to the melody in order to give the piece an improvised, or more interesting, sound. Tala, usually performed on a small, tabla drum, is another driving point of music, keeping the beat and tempo. This differs from the Western approach in that the rhythm of Indian music uses specific patterns and onomatopoeic syllables in order to know which sounds to produce on the tabla. In general, classical Indian music presents a very interesting concept in Hindu philosophy that is not usually understood in the context of music; this is the idea of cycles (*Indian Music for the Classroom* 31) .

Cycles are a central theme in Indian religion, especially in the belief of reincarnation. Reincarnation, put simply, is the idea that when a person dies, they are born again on earth as another living thing based on how they lived past lives, making their lives a continuous cycle. Cycles are expressed very clearly in Indian classical music. Instead of using measures as Western tradition does, they prefer to use a method in which each phrase does not end with a bar line, but continues through a series of cycles. They have a pattern of rhythm that is repeated until the

end of the piece, allowing for each phrase to continue without using measures that cause for the melody to end (*Indian Music for the Classroom* 42).

Before being taught any instrument, most Hindi musicians must become well trained in voice. Good vocal technique is very different in India than it is in the West. In India, no vibrato is allowed so that a steady pitch can be maintained. As previously mentioned, ornaments are a larger component of Indian music than in Western music. Also, they are not taught to sing through the vowels as Westerners. Instead, they extend the consonants rather than the vowels (*Indian Music for the Classroom* 48).

Maybe the greatest difference between Western and Indian music is the lack of harmony seen in Hindi music. This is because they interpret their music horizontally rather than vertically. They focus on the melody, writing long cyclic phrases rather than having measures to break it down. Western music focuses harmonically, paying strict attention to the chords stacked in each measure, not solely on a winding melody (*Indian Music for the Classroom* 31).

The many differences between classical Indian music and Western music have diminished over time. Being a gradual process, Westernization of India began during its classical period. The British introduced two instruments that are used in India today: the harmonium and the violin. The latter of these two was quickly accepted and used in much of their music, but the former was not. Until the early seventies, the harmonium was banned from All Indian Radio, the largest employer for the musicians in South Asia. This was due to its portability and because it held its tune well during weather changes, which “did not conform to the traditional

flexible intonation in Indian music” (Linden 8). Today, however, it is accepted along with other Western instruments.

With the rise of the Indian film industry in the 1930s, film music has become the majority of the music listened to in India (Beaster-Jones 429). Every movie Bollywood, the film capital of India, produces is filled with both *filmi sangit* and *filmi git*. *Filmi sangit* is Hindi for film music, which is the underlying score of a movie, and *filmi git* means film song, which is an interruption of the plot in order for a musical number, similar to that of the Hollywood musical genre, to take place. Of the latter category, six or seven are common in every genre of Bollywood movie, not being isolated to a single genre as in Hollywood movies (Beaster-Jones 427). This specific kind of film music contributes to Bollywood’s success. The Indian film industry has an output three times as much as Hollywood, and its music industry is the second largest in the world (*Popular Film Songs in the Classroom* 1-2). This success is largely due to both the commercialization of Bollywood and the purposeful connection between sight and sound.

The way Indian movies are advertised seems backwards to Western culture. The soundtrack is played everywhere, as advertisement for its particular film, while in the West, the soundtrack is sold mostly as an afterthought for those who enjoyed a movie. While some may greatly appreciate the music of an American film, it is not widely known among the general public until after the movie has been showing (Beaster-Jones 426).

Hindi film music also makes the connection between sight and sound. As previously discussed, sound is a central idea to Indian philosophy and it has not

diminished in importance even in their modern film-making. The use of images to sell or teach is becoming popular and convenient because of the rising technology that allows films to be more easily produced and is replete in Bollywood productions (Beaster-Jones 429). These filmi git are written to fit a specific setting and mood, which is expressed on the screen. When these songs are paired with a visual representation, it becomes easier to recall and audiences will therefore remember the song by the scene of the film and vice-versa (Beaster-Jones 428).

A very important aspect of Hindi film is playback singing. In the United States and other Western countries, the practice of lip-synching or having others sing for the actor is typically viewed as suboptimal. However, in Hindi culture, playback singing is a common practice. Instead of teaching actors to sing, Bollywood chooses to use professional singers, in order to keep “the song quality and musicality high” (*Popular Film Songs in the Classroom 2*). The audiences of the movies are in full understanding of this concept and these singers experience celebrity status alongside the actors (*Popular Film Songs in the Classroom 2*).

The opinion of Western society in India was also greatly influenced by the Hindi film industry. Until the 1990s, there was a common theme of the Hindi main character being enticed into a nightclub by a foreigner, a Westerner, while foreign music is played. This is “often meant to embody the negative influence of Western materialism on urban India” (Beaster-Jones 428). This negative stance on the Western influence changed over time and is seen in more modern films by putting the nightclub in a positive light with more Western, electronic music and by being the “site of the modern youth” (Beaster-Jones 428). This acceptance of Western

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tradition in modern film music, but not total conformation to it, serves as a metaphor for contemporary Indian music. This exemplifies the relativity of Indian truth and the wide acceptance of contradicting ideas.

India's music has traveled a long road since its strictly spiritual roots. Though its modern music may seem more Western in appearance, its spirituality is not lost because of sound's unique connection to the spiritual realm. It provides the framework for every song introduced even now in Indian culture and will not soon disappear. Western society can learn much from the relationship between the philosophy and history of India and Hindi music. As Westerners, in order to improve our knowledge of music, it is important to understand other societies with different ways of writing and performing music. The depth of culture providing the backdrop of the importance of music and spirituality of India, when understood properly, reminds us that Western thought is simply that- Western.

Annotated Bibliography

Beaster-Jones, Jayson, "Evergreens to remixes: Hindi film songs and India's popular music heritage." *Ethnomusicology: Music of the Society for Ethnomusicology* Fall 2009: 425-448

This chapter talks about the importance of India's film music. It makes the comparison that this music is great in a way that is parallel to the way Indian classical music is important and powerful. It also goes into further detail about the modern music industry in India. This is very useful to me because I have plenty of information about classical Indian music and this will help me have an equal understanding of both the classical and the modern music of India.

Booth, Gregory D, "Preliminary thoughts on Hindi popular music and film production: India's 'culture industry(ies)', 1970-2000." *South Asian Popular Culture* July 2011: 215-221. Print.

This article goes through the history of the Indian film industry and it's production now. It also focuses on India's modern music industry as well as its connection to film. This will be very useful to my paper because it discusses how India views their music now, compared to when there was such a heavy spiritual influence in their philosophy of music.

Linden, Bob van der, "Silk music and empire: the moral representation of self in music." *Sikh Formations* June 2008: 14-15. Print.

This chapter talks about the music of the Sikh religion. This religion is one of the most prominent in India and it is worth talking about this because the Sikhs approach their music a little differently than the Hindus, and since this is such a major part of Indian culture, it is important to be informed. This will be useful to my paper because it will allow for variety within philosophy. Most of what I have to say is from the perspective of Hinduism, or just what India in general believes.

Prasad, B. A. Mahalashmi, "A Brief Look at the Identity, Connectedness and Alienation in the Traditional System of Indian Music." *Language in India* June 2013: 540-549. Print.

This article discusses the specifically South Indian, Carnatic, music, its history and how it is studied. It goes one step further, though, and puts Carnatic music into the present and discusses how the youth of South India are accepting their classical music. This will be very useful, especially because it brings my topic back to the present. It also goes into detail about the different components of the music, which is also very useful because that will be covered in the paper.

Rowell, Lewis. *Music and Musical Thought in Early India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.

Chapter 2- Thought

This chapter outlines some of the key concepts in Indian thought, especially pertaining to music. India's philosophy is inter-connected to all aspects of their life. In particular, their music is one aspect that is very clearly tied to their spirituality. This segment of Rowell's work discusses this connection and explains the importance of music. This can be easily used to give background to Indian philosophy when introducing some of the major concepts, such as their emphasis on the five senses.

Sarrazin, Natalie, "India's Music: Popular Film Songs in the Classroom." *Music Education Journal* September 2006: 26-32. Print.

This article emphasizes the importance of modern Indian film music and the need for it to be taught in the American classroom. It briefly walks through the history of Indian music, but it primarily focuses on the music used in films, which is the greatest source of Indian music today. This article also gives details as to how this music is produced and used. This is very useful to my paper because I am able to use it to provide details of modern Indian music and not only classical Indian music.

---. *Indian Music for the Classroom*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2009. Print.

This book is a comprehensive overview of music in India. It goes through its history, covering its philosophies, training, and the components that it contains. It presents it in a way understandable to students, providing exercises that expand their thinking throughout the book. This source is the most useful to me because it contains everything that I need to know. My other sources expand aspects that would be of further benefit to my paper, but this book is the foundation for what will be written.

Schafer, T, A Tipandjan, P Sedlmeier, "The functions of music and their relationship to music preference in India and Germany." *International Journal of*

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Psychology 2012: 370-380. Print.

This article discusses a test that was done regarding music preferences among both Indians and Germans in order to see if their opposing societies will choose different types of music because of their culture and religious influence. It may not seem that this directly applies to my paper, but it will help to really understand the way the Indians actually think, as opposed to what their