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Sacred Music and Hindu Religious Experience: From Ancient Roots to the Modern Classical Tradition

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Received: 22 December 2018; Accepted: 24 January 2019; Published: 29 January 2019



Abstract: While music plays a significant role in many of the world's religions, it is in the Hindu religion that one finds one of the closest bonds between music and religious experience extending for millennia. The recitation of the syllable OM and the chanting of Sanskrit Mantras and hymns from the Vedas formed the core of ancient fire sacrifices. The Upanishads articulated OM as Śabda-Brahman, the Sound-Absolute that became the object of meditation in Yoga. First described by Bharata in the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* as a sacred art with reference to Rasa (emotional states), ancient music or Sangīta was a vehicle of liberation (Mokṣa) founded in the worship of deities such as Brahmā, Vishnu, Śiva, and Goddess Sarasvatī. Medieval Tantra and music texts introduced the concept of Nāda-Brahman as the source of sacred music that was understood in terms of Rāgas, melodic formulas, and Tālas, rhythms, forming the basis of Indian music today. Nearly all genres of Indian music, whether the classical Dhrupad and Khayal, or the devotional Bhajan and Kīrtan, share a common theoretical and practical understanding, and are bound together in a mystical spirituality based on the experience of sacred sound. Drawing upon ancient and medieval texts and Bhakti traditions, this article describes how music enables Hindu religious experience in fundamental ways. By citing several examples from the modern Hindustani classical vocal tradition of Khayal, including text and audio/video weblinks, it is revealed how the classical songs contain the wisdom of Hinduism and provide a deeper appreciation of the many musical styles that currently permeate the Hindu and Yoga landscapes of the West.

Keywords: Indian music; sacred sound; Hinduism; Kīrtan; Bhajan; Nāda-Brahman; Dhrupad; Khayal; Bhakti; Rasa; Sangīta; Rāga; Tāla

Our tradition teaches us that sound is God—Nāda Brahma. That is, musical sound and the musical experience are steps to the realization of the Self. We view music as a kind of spiritual discipline that raises one's inner being to divine peacefulness and bliss. The highest aim of our music is to reveal the essence of the universe it reflects, and the Rāgas are among the means by which this essence can be apprehended. Thus, through music, one can reach God.

—Ravi Shankar, Sitar maestro ([Shankar 1968](#), p. 17)

The above statement is one of the first public expressions in the West of the spirituality of Indian music by a renowned Indian musician. Beginning in the 1960s, many Westerners were exposed to Hindu religion and culture in the form of Yoga and Indian classical music. Due to the relaxation of American immigration rules in 1965, an infusion of Indian religious teachers and musicians paved the way for the adoption of Hinduism by Americans, as well as the formal instruction in Indian music on instruments such as the Sitar and Tabla. As a result, scholars and practitioners began the careful study of ancient Sanskrit texts that revealed the close links between Hindu religious thought and Indian music. From Vedic chant to the Upanishads, from Yoga philosophy to Tantric rituals, from theistic worship to the Bhakti movements, from classical Dhrupad and Khayal songs in Rāgas (melodic patterns) and Tālas (rhythms) to lighter forms of Bhajan and Kīrtan, many seemingly disparate sectors of Indian

tradition are found to be bound together in a mystical spirituality grounded in the experience of sacred sound. This essay first outlines the theoretical roots of sacred sound in India, and then explains the connections between these and sacred music, aesthetics, the traditions of devotion, and finally to the modern Hindustani classical tradition. The presentation demonstrates a continuity between the ancient and modern traditions by means of several examples of classical vocal compositions known as Khayal, including text and audio/video weblinks. The result is a deeper appreciation of the underlying spiritual unity of Indian music as well as a more accurate understanding of the variety of classical and devotional songs that permeate the Hindu and Yoga landscapes of the West.

To many Westerners, Ravi Shankar was their first exposure to Indian music. Yet two predecessors, one in America and one in India, had already set the stage for the acceptance of the spirituality of Indian music by aligning it with Yoga. Considered one of the first Yoga teachers to settle in America, Paramahansa Yogānanda (1893–1952), in his bestselling work, *Autobiography of a Yogi: The Classic Story of One of India's Greatest Spiritual Thinkers* (Yogānanda [1946] 2016, p. 131), suggested an alliance between the syllable OM (AUM) and the music or sound that can be heard through faculties taught in Yoga: “The ancient Rishis discovered these laws of sound alliance between nature and man. Because nature is an objectification of AUM, the Primal Sound or Vibratory Word, man can obtain control over all natural manifestations through the use of certain mantras or chants. The deeper aim of the early Rishi-musicians was to blend the singer with the Cosmic Song which can be heard through awakening of man’s occult spinal centers.”

Swami Śivānanda (1887–1963), also a key transmitter of Yoga, did not travel to the West. However, Śivānanda’s teachings were a noteworthy influence through disciples who brought his message to America and the Western world, including Swami Vishnudevānanda, Swami Satchidānanda, Swami Chidānanda, and Swami Nādashānanda. In his seminal book, *Music as Yoga* (Śivānanda 1956, pp. 6–7), Sivananda explained the relation between Yoga and music by means of OM: “What distinguished Indian music . . . It was always held to be but an extension and outward symbolization of the Omnipresent Praṇava Sound—OM—and utilized only for purposes of God attainment—a feature it has retained to the present-day, as will be evident from the fact that, up to the end of the last century, the subject of musical compositions has rarely been anything but God and his glories.” In terms of Yoga terminology, he identifies the physical Yoga with music (ibid., p. 18): “Music is a synthesis of the various Yogas or paths to God-realization. Music itself is Hatha Yoga Sadhana.” These provocative statements beckon us to look further by exploring the ancient Sanskrit sources on Indian music and the spirituality of Hindu religion. Since vocal music is the root of all music, this essay will focus primarily on the vocal classical tradition.

1. Sacred Sound: OM and Nāda-Brahman

Traditionally, the Indian experience of music has been bound to the apprehension of the divine in the context of religious activities, first through ancient fire sacrifices and then through Pūjā or devotional worship of various gods and goddesses. From the singing of the ancient Vedic hymns to the devotional chants and songs of modern-day devotees, Indian music is deeply grounded in the theological principles of sacred sound as contained in Hindu scriptures. The Vedas and Upanishads (ca. 2000–1000 BCE) contain information about the practice of chant and vocal utterance in relation to fire sacrifices to the gods. These ancient Indo-Āryan texts are believed to embody the eternal primeval sound that generated the universe, symbolized by the syllable OM, the power of which is manifest through oral chant. Recent research on the origins and history of the syllable OM has revealed that OM was closely associated with tonal chant and music from the beginning of its use in ancient India. According to Gerety (2015, p. 461), “The bottom line is that the first thousand years of OM constitute a Sāmavedic movement within the broader religious culture of Vedism. Amidst concurrent contributions by experts from the other Vedas, it was the singer-theologians of first the Jaiminīya, and then the Kauthuma, branches of Sāma-Veda who did the most to foster OM’s emergence. In my view, this is the single most important finding of the present study: that the history of the sacred syllable resounds

with music and song." Additionally, [Wilke and Moebus \(2011\)](#) explores the linguistic aspects of sound as communication in the context of Sanskritic culture. All this research helps us to understand the function of OM and why the chanting of OM is almost always tonal, unless muttered in near-silence. That is, OM is normally executed in a kind of monotone on the tonic note of a scale. This method is still the foundation of Hindu worship and the basis for opening classical vocal music performances.

The Vedic fire sacrifice always included chant and meditation on sound, such that ritual chanting was viewed as an effective means to interact with the cosmos and to obtain unseen spiritual merit toward a heavenly afterlife. Verses from the Rig Veda were chanted in roughly three distinct musical tones or accents, which were expanded to seven notes in the singing of hymns (Sāmans) from the Sāma Veda (ca. 1000 BCE). Utilized during elaborate sacrifices involving the offering of Soma juice, the Sāma Veda hymns comprise the earliest hymnal in world religion. They were believed to possess supernatural powers capable of petitioning and supporting the deities that controlled the forces of the universe, indicating to us that music was mysteriously linked to the divine at this early stage of Hindu ritual practice. [Thite \(1997, p. 68\)](#) described the attractive and powerful nature of the Sāma Veda hymns: "the poet-singers call, invoke, and invite the gods with the help of musical elements. In so doing they seem to be aware of the magnetic power of music and therefore they seem to be using that power in calling the gods." The connections between chant, music, and the gods in Vedic culture formed the basis of both the earliest classical music known as Gandharva Sangīta, and the later devotional music or Bhakti Sangit which formed part of the Bhakti movements. And while music in India formed part of both public worship and drama, it was viewed not only as entertainment, but as a vehicle toward liberation (Mokṣa) and immortality.

As discussed in [Beck \(1993\)](#), musical sound in Hindu tradition is linked to the divine Absolute known as Brahman through the concepts of Śabda-Brahman and especially Nāda-Brahman ("Sacred sound as God"), comprising Nāda-Śakti (sound energy) and Brahman (divine Absolute). Brahman, first articulated in the Upanishads, is also conceived in two ways: Nirguṇa (without attributes), and Saḡuṇa (with attributes). The followers of Nirguṇa-Brahman worship the Absolute beyond all material qualities, which can be approached without the use or need of icons or deities. The followers of Saḡuṇa-Brahman, on the other hand, prefer the use of images and statues as more effective means of meditation on the divine. The developing notion of Nāda-Brahman (sacred sound) is described in the Āgamas and Tantras as well as in Yoga commentaries and musicological texts such as the *Sangīta-Ratnākara*, encompassing both Nirguṇa and Saḡuṇa approaches to the Absolute. The term Nāda-Brahman refers to sacred sound that may be either unmanifest (Anāhata, "unstruck," existing in the divine realm) or manifest (Āhata, "struck," existing in the human realm, i.e., music). Although both perspectives of Nirguṇa and Saḡuṇa are discoverable in the Upanishads, the underlying philosophy is shared, namely, that the material world is temporary and illusory, and one should attempt to transgress the cycle of rebirth known as Samsāra by decreasing material attachment to family, friends, and possessions. This philosophy is also conveyed in the lyrics of classical songs known as Khayal.

Most Hindu practitioners follow the Saḡuṇa tradition. Whether as Vaishnavism (Vishnu or Krishna worship), Śaivism (Śiva worship), or Śaktism (goddess worship), the concept of Nāda-Brahman ('sacred sound') is employed to affirm that God or the Supreme Being contains the elemental of primal sound and can be approached in its deity form through sound and music. Regarding the Saḡuṇa aspect, [Hopkins \(1971, p. 20\)](#) has described how the names and epithets of deities were the sonic counterparts to the visual dimensions: "Sanskrit words were not just arbitrary labels assigned to phenomena; they were the sound forms of objects, actions, and attributes, related to the corresponding reality in the same way as visual forms, and different only in being perceived by the ear and not by the eye." True meditation on an icon thus involves both sound and image, leading us to the important role of music in Hindu religious experience. Moreover, the name of a deity was understood to contain all the spiritual potencies of the deity. Hence the well-known axiom, "Mantra (name) and Devatā (deity) are the same," that is affirmed throughout the Hindu tradition, lending credence to Nām-Kīrtan, the chanting of divine names.

2. Sacred Music: Sangīta

Indian music, known as Sangīta, is considered divine in origin and very closely identified with the Hindu gods and goddesses. The Goddess Sarasvatī, depicted with the Vina instrument in hand, is believed to be the divine patroness of music. Brahmā, the creator of the universe, fashioned Indian music out of the ingredients of the Sāma Veda and plays the hand cymbals. Vishnu the Preserver sounds the conch shell and plays the flute in the form of the incarnation known as Krishna. Śiva as Naṭarāja plays the Damaru drum during the dance of cosmic dissolution. Sangita has three divisions: vocal, instrumental, and dance.

Described in Beck (2012, chp. 2), Gandharva Sangīta was the ancient non-sacrificial counterpart to the sacrificial Sāma Veda hymns and considered a replica of the music performed and enjoyed in Lord Indra's heavenly court. Brought down to earth by the sage Nārada, this essentially vocal music included instruments such as the Vina, flutes, drums, and cymbals. The oldest surviving texts of Gandharva Sangīta, the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* by Bharata Muni and the *Dattilam* by Dattila (ca. 400–200 BCE), provide glimpses of this music as it was performed in sacred dramas, festivals, courtly ceremonies, and temple rituals in honor of the emerging great gods and goddesses such as Śiva, Vishnu, Brahmā, and Gaṇeṣa. Gandharva Sangīta was linked to the practice of Pūjā (worship of images) which gradually replaced the fire sacrifice as the center of Hindu religious activity.

In Sangīta, the musical note is wedded to a beat and a word. The inclusion of a lyric in the definition of music also underscores the centrality of vocal music in the ancient world. In the third verse of *Dattilam* (Nijenhuis 1970, p. 17), Sangīta is, “A collection of notes (Svara), which is based on words (Pada), which is well-measured by time-measurement (Tāla) and which is executed with attentiveness.” This statement is basically the same as that found in *Nāṭya-Śāstra* (28.8). While Vedic chants and Sāma Veda hymns were punctuated by metrical divisions that generated distinct units of unseen merit that accrued to the priest or sacrificer, similar metrical units were marked by the playing of hand cymbals and drums in Gandharva music. The ancient theorists held that the musicians and audience earned Mokṣa through accumulation of unseen merit through the marking of ritual (musical) time in the form of Tāla. The significance of rhythm or Tāla can thus be traced to the earliest texts on music. Liberation within the theistic and devotional traditions was also dependent on the emotion feelings of love that the practitioners held in terms of the developing personal relationship with their deity, including the proper Rasa sentiments.

3. Aesthetics of Rasa

In the Saguṇa approach to the divine, the deity is physically visible to the devotee in the form of an icon or statue. Believed to be more accessible to human devotion, the deities became the objects of aesthetic sentiments as expressed through the musical arts. The Upanishads describe Brahman (Absolute or God) as *raso vai sah*, full of the essence of aesthetic delight or Rasa (*Taittirīya Upanishad* 2.7.1). The association between Rasa and music began to appear in the earliest Sanskrit musical treatises and texts on Pūjā and the dramatic arts. Bharata Muni, in *Nāṭya-Śāstra*, was the first to outline the basic features of Indian music as well as the various aesthetic experiences (Rasas) associated with drama and the worship of icons. Rasas are the artistic or aesthetic expressions of emotional experiences that are believed to be universal traits of humanity, such as love, compassion, and heroism. In the *Nāṭya-Śāstra* (6.15, 39–45), Bharata Muni presents the original eight Rasas: Śringāra—erotic, Hāsya—comic, Karuṇā—compassion, Raudra—terror, Vīra—heroic, Bhayānaka—fear, Bībhatsa—disgust, and Adbhuta—wonder (Rangacharya 2003, pp. 54–56). The *Nāṭya-Śāstra* (19.38–40) ties the eight Rasas with the seven individual notes of the musical scale known for the first time as Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni (cf. do re mi fa so la ti): erotic—Pa (fifth), comic—Ma (fourth), compassion—Ga (third) and Ni (seventh), disgust and fear—Dha (sixth), heroic, terror, and wonder—Sa (tonic) and Re (second) (Rangacharya 2003, pp. 142–43).

Covering six chapters (*Nāṭya-Śāstra* 28–33), Bharata discussed vocal and instrumental music, musical instruments, and theoretical issues of scale (Grāma), mode (Jāti), meter (Mātrā), and rhythm

(Tāla). The ancient musical scales are known as Grāmas, of which there were three. Out of the notes of the Grāmas, sixteen Jātis or modes were formed which included some basic defining characteristics, such as notes of emphasis, phrase-like patterns, and so forth. The early notion of Jāti developed into the Rāga by the eighth century CE, as known from the famous text, *Brihaddēśī*, by Matanga. This text also connected the Rāga with sacred sound as Nāda-Brahman. The Rāga, as a special set of notes, was more distinct as a melodic pattern than the Jāti, and had unique structural characteristics, emotional content (Rasa), and methods of performance. All Rāgas comprise ascending and descending patterns of from five to seven notes derived from the seven-note scale above, with the additional lowering or raising of specific notes to enlarge the gamut. The Rāga quickly became the preferred form of expression for the classical and devotional songs coming out of the medieval Bhakti movements. Nānyadeva, in his twelfth-century *Bharata-bhāshya*, developed the relation between Rasas and Rāgas such that these associations were expressed in poetic form known Dhyāna-Mantras, and in the paintings (Rāgamālā) that further linked them with a season, time of day, and gender (male Rāga and female Rāginī).

As classical music was gradually separated from drama, four of the original eight Rasas—Śringāra, Karuṇā, Vīra, and Adbhuta—retained their association with music, with Śringāra Rasa holding its pride of place through the centuries. Śringāra Rasa was described as having two types: union (sambhoga) and separation (vipralambha). The first celebrates the joy and exhilaration of lovers meeting, the second endures the pangs of separation, including anxiety, yearning, and some jealousy. The universal human quality (sthāyi-bhāva) of Śringāra is romantic passion (ratī). Associated with white, pure, bright, beautiful and elegant attire, and the fullness of youth, Śringāra Rasa was also expressly affiliated with the god Vishnu, whose incarnation of Krishna became the nexus of divine love–play in later poetry and music. A ninth Rasa, Śānta Rasa (peace) was added by the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta in the tenth century CE. Śānta Rasa was the appropriate musical aesthetic in response to the formless nature of the divine, or Nirguṇa-Brahman, as endorsed by the non-dualist school of Advaita Vedanta propounded in Kashmiri Śaivism. Śringāra Rasa, however, was believed to transcend the formless or impersonal conception and was more suitable for the Saguṇa approach to the divine.

4. Bhakti and Music: Kīrtan and Bhajan

The Bhakti devotional movements began in southern India in the sixth century CE. At that time, separate Bhakti groups emerged as powerful forces favoring a devotion-centered Hinduism with song-texts composed primarily in vernacular, in this case Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada. Many new styles of regional devotional music were duly formalized to accompany liturgies in the temples of medieval times. These styles followed a simple aesthetic reflecting the perspective of music as an offering as well as a means toward communion with a chosen deity. In the evolving personal theism, Brahman was conceived as the supreme personal deity, whether Vishnu, Śiva, or Śakti, and believed to be the fountainhead of all Rasa (aesthetic pleasure or taste). The emotional experience of love and devotion produced by musicians in the minds of the listeners was linked to the divine by virtue of it being a part of the Bhakti tradition.

In support of the growing Bhakti movements, a tenth Rasa, Bhakti Rasa (devotional love), was introduced by the Vaishnava theologian Rūpa Goswami in the sixteenth century. Bhakti Rasa was widely adopted as the superior Rasa among religious groups and practitioners of the Saguṇa traditions and was believed to encompass and transform all the other Rasas. In the *Nārada-Bhakti-Sūtra* (ca. 100 BCE–400 CE) and the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (ninth century CE), five types of devotional love are described, namely, Śānta (meditational), Dāsya (servitude), Sākhyā (friendship), Vātsalya (parental), Kāntā (conjugal), with the highest being the latter as love between man and woman, which came to symbolize the love between the human and the divine. The *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* outlined the path of devotion or Bhakti Mārga as being superior to the path of knowledge (Jñāna Mārga) and action (Karma Mārga). Moreover, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* stressed that Bhakti was the culmination of all religious experiences and included the other paths in the truest sense. Under the influence of these texts and medieval scholars of Rasa such as Bhoja of Rajasthan (eleventh century),

Rūpa Goswami held that Śringāra, within the locus of Bhakti Rasa, was synonymous with the selfless love of the Gopīs (handmaidens) for Krishna, an ecstatic affection known as Krishna-ratī or Premā (highest love). As part of temple worship, Śringāra came to refer to the early morning decoration of the deities of Rādhā and Krishna as they are ‘dressed for conjugal love.’

The spread of the Bhakti traditions stimulated many new forms of architectural, literary, and artistic expression. In terms of music, the Medieval Period (ca. fourth to seventeenth century CE) is characterized by the rise of Bhakti Sangīt (“devotional music”), much of which followed the classical form of Rāga (melodic pattern) and Tāla (rhythmic cycle) and contained lyrics expressive of love and devotion toward a chosen deity. Unlike Vedic chant and Sāma Veda hymns, which are rendered in Sanskrit, Bhakti Sangīt is primarily sung in vernacular dialects such as Hindi and Braj Bhāṣā in the North, and Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada in the South. Various types of Bhakti Sangīt came to be referred to as either Kīrtan or Bhajan.

Kīrtan appears similar in definition to the Western hymn (*hymnus*, “song of praise”) or psalm (*psalmos*, “plucked song of praise”) as found in Biblical traditions, and in the Sufi Islamic songs of praise. The term Bhajan suggests a more interactive nature, since it shares with the word Bhakti and Bhagavān (‘Lord’) the common Sanskrit root *bhaj*, “to share, to partake of” (as in a rite). Bhagavān means the Lord who possesses *bhaga*, good fortune, opulence. Kīrtan and Bhajan, as terms for religious or devotional music apart from Vedic chant and the purely classical traditions, are directly linked to the growing Bhakti movements, and are performed so that God, ‘Bhagavān,’ is praised, worshipped, or appealed to in a mutual exchange of Bhakti. An interesting comparative study of Bhajan, Kirtan, and psalm is found in [Muck \(2001\)](#).

Several important scriptures in Sanskrit have endorsed Kīrtan and Bhajan in Hindu practice. These include the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* 9.13–14 provides two sequential verses that contain all three of the key terms—Kīrtan, Bhajan, Bhakti—with a shared objective. The terms Kīrtan (*kīrtayanto*) and Bhajan (*bhajanty*) refer to any act of worship or loving devotion, including music. The *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (6th to 9th century CE) endorses both Kīrtan and Gītī (song) as near-statutory practices within Pūjā. Kīrtan and Pūjā are inextricably linked in *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11.19.20. In *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11.11.36, song, dance, and instrumental music are mentioned as equal components of the divine service in the temple. Kīrtan is also understood to be expressed musically in the form of song, represented here with the Sanskrit term *gayana* (“singing”) in *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11.11.23. Singing in vernacular languages is an equally effective vehicle according to *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 11.27.45, leading to the widespread composition of vernacular songs in various regions of India.

A session of Kīrtan or Bhajan normally begins with chanting OM, and then proceeds with invocations in Sanskrit in honor of a guru, master or deity, followed by sequences of vernacular songs that reflect the group’s distinct or eclectic religious outlook; these are sometimes punctuated by short sermons or meditative recitations of Sanskrit verses from scripture. In closing, a special ceremony called Ārati is conducted as part of the Pūjā (“worship service”) which includes offerings of food, flowers, incense and lamps, and blowing of conches. The distribution of food, flowers, lamp wicks, and holy water concludes the session.

As musical compositions, Kīrtan and Bhajan songs range from complex structures to simple refrains or litanies containing divine names. Most have their own distinctive tune and rhythm that are easily followed by the audience. The most common Tālas are up-tempo, such as Keherva which has eight beats roughly corresponding to a Western cut time in 4/4. Another common rhythm is Dadra, a six-beat Tāla corresponding to Western 3/4 or 6/8 time. An example of a Bhajan by the poet Sūr Dās in Hindi is found in both textual and audio version in [Beck \(2006, p. 134\)](#). Set in the popular rhythm of Keherva, it nonetheless reflects the ancient philosophical view of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, whereby attachment to material things can be only relieved by surrender and devotion to God. In the penultimate lyric, Sūr Dās says (in translation), “Due to over-attachment for wife, children and wealth

I have lost all of my clear intelligence. Sur Das implores, “Lord, please relieve me of this great load, for now my ship (this body) has set sail.”

The collective singing of the names of God has always been very popular everywhere in India and is called Nām-Kīrtan, Nām-Sankīrtan or Nām-Bhajan. Sung to simple melodies and accompanied by drums and cymbals, Nām-Kīrtan expresses fervent devotion and serves as a means of spiritual release. Primarily a congregational practice, Nām-Kīrtan enables ordinary persons a sense of musical elation. Examples of three chants are:

- (1) Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rāma Hare Rāma Rāma Rāma Hare Hare. This is the famous Hare Krishna chant known as the Mahāmantra, Great Mantra for Deliverance as first propounded by Caitanya and other Bhakti saints that has continued in India by pious Hindus and more recently by members of the Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON). It is a petition to Rādhā (“Harā”), the energy of Krishna, and to Krishna who is also full of pleasure (“Rāma”).
- (2) Sītā Rām Sītā Rām Sītā Rām Jaya Sītā Rām. This is a chant to Rāma and Sītā: “All Glories to Lord Rāma and his consort Sītā.”
- (3) OM namah Śivāya. This is a chant to Śiva: “I bow to Lord Śiva.”

The practice of Nām-Kīrtan is advocated in the lyrics of the classical songs of Khayal discussed below under the name of “Hari Nām” or “Rām Nām.”

Bhajan, Kīrtan, and Nām-Kīrtan are mostly performed as an informal group enterprise of call-and-response, with participants seated on the floor in proximity to a lead singer, standing in temples, or walking in procession. Generally, a separate area in the temple facing or adjacent to a deity or picture is designated for music. Reading from an anthology of verses, lead singers often accompany themselves on a harmonium, a floor version of the upright, portable reed organ used by nineteenth-century Christian missionaries. The metal reed used in the harmonium, however, is Asiatic in origin. Linked to mouth organs used in the subcontinent, it is the basis for the western harmonica and accordion. Group members generally repeat the lines in unison after the leader. However, the leader may also sing solo or with occasional refrains sung by the group. Bhajan and Kīrtan musical ensembles, like almost all types of Indian music, include musical instruments. Percussion instruments, membranophones and idiophones, include pairs of hand cymbals called Kartal or Jhānjh, drums such as the Tabla, Pakhāvaj, Dholak or Khol, and occasionally bells, clappers or tambourines. A background drone may be provided by a Tanpura, if not by the harmonium or a Śruti Box, a small pumped instrument used in Carnatic music.

5. Dhrupad and Temple Music

During the thirteenth century, the classical music traditions separated into northern Hindustani and southern Carnatic. What developed as Hindustani music in northern regions stemmed from the devotional temple music that was performed by musicians in Mathurā, Vrindāvan, Braj, Gwalior, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh. For many years in the North, the musical style of Dhrupad was the principal classical vehicle for vernacular Bhakti lyrics, and was rendered in a slow, four-section format using the pure form of a Rāga, along with the strict rhythms of mainly Cautal (twelve beats) or Dhamār (fourteen beats). Dhrupad spread as a classical genre wherever it was patronized by the ruling elite, both in temples and ruling Hindu and Mughal courts. Important devotional styles that are related to Dhrupad are Havelī Sangīt and Samāj Gāyan, both originating in Vaishnava temples in the region of Braj. For specialized studies of Dhrupad, see [Srivastava \(1980\)](#) and [Sanyal and Widdess \(2004\)](#).

As the development of Bhakti included service, adoration and decoration of icons in temples, a central part of the Pūjā or worship service in temples was the rendering of songs addressed to various deities. As already explained, Hindu religion in the form of Saḡuṇa worship lends great importance to the image of the deity as an object of devotion and veneration. As such, many songs include lyrics that

describe a god or deity as part of the meditation process of the singer and listener in visualizing the divine. The lyrics of these compositions, whether in Sanskrit or vernacular, generate a vivid description of the gods and goddesses in what may be termed a verbal icon. Meditation on this “verbal icon” enables the aspirant to effectively focus his or her mind on the form and activities of the chosen deity. As a primary Bhakti text, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (8.6) has explained that the image in one’s mind at the time of death affects one’s future birth. Hence the musical experience of devotional love is not abstract but reconciled with the establishment of an image in the mind of the practitioner for purposes of gaining access to a soteriological outcome.

The three examples of traditional Dhrupad compositions below will demonstrate how the lyric creates an image in the mind of the devotee for purposes of liberation (Mokṣa) from the cycle of rebirth (Samsāra). The evolving classical style known as Khayal also served the same purpose. Expressing veneration for three Hindu deities, Sarasvatī, Śiva, and Krishna, each poem utilizes key words and phrases which invoke the visual image of the form of the deity to facilitate meditation. The songs, part of oral tradition and thus unpublished, are composed in the Braj Bhāṣā dialect of Hindi and translated by the author. The first composition is directed toward Sarasvatī, the Goddess of Learning and Music. The epithets and verbal descriptions of the Goddess serve to create an image in the mind for meditation:

Śāradā ko dharata dhyāna, Brahmā Vishnu karata gāna,
vīṇa-dhāri mayurāsana, Sāma-veda hasta dharata

Sarasvatī, who is Śāradā, is praised with song and meditated upon by Brahmā and Vishnu, is seen playing the Vīṇa (vīṇa-dhāri), seated on a peacock throne (mayurāsana), and holding the Sāma Veda (Sāma-veda hasta dharata).

Second, a standard composition in honor of Śiva is replete with iconographic detail associated with the image of Śiva and his pastimes:

Śankara Śiva Mahādeva, nīla-kaṅṭha śūlapāṇi,
gale nāga damaru kara, lepa anga vibhu tana

Śiva, who is Śankara and Mahādeva (the Great God), is blue-throated (nīla-kaṅṭha) from drinking the ocean of poison, holds a trident in his hand (śūlapāṇi), plays the hourglass drum (damaru kara), and sports a cobra snake around his neck (gale nāga). His body is smeared with divine ashes (lepa anga vibhu tana).

The third composition is sung during the early morning hours to wake the child Krishna:

Jāgiye Gopāla Lāla, ānanda-nidhi Nanda Bāla,
Yaśomati kahe bāra bāra, bhora bhayo pyāre.

O Darling Cowherd Son (Gopāla Lāla) Krishna, Child of Nanda (Nanda Bāla), storehouse of bliss (ānanda-nidhi), morning has come and so please wake up. Your mother Yaśodā (Yaśomati) is calling you again and again.

By the sixteenth century, Dhrupad was influential in the temple music styles of several Vaishnava traditions of Krishna worship that were established in Braj, Krishna’s home. These primarily include the Vallabha Sampradāya or Puṣṭi Mārg tradition, founded by saint Vallabha in the early sixteenth century, and the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya founded in the mid-sixteenth century by saint Hita Harivamśa.

The Dhrupad songs of Puṣṭi Mārg, called Havelī Sangīt, are drawn from the Braj Bhāṣā lyrics of their poets that describe the childhood pastimes of Krishna, including the festivals of Holi in the spring season and the Rāsa Dance in autumn. Originally established in Braj, where a group of eight singer-saints (Aṣṭachāp) including the famous poet Sūr Dās performed their musical worship of Krishna, Havelī Sangīt is now widely practiced in Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Rāgas that were sung as

early as the sixteenth century by the Vaishnava movements in Vrindāvan and are still sung in roughly the same manner today, are known to modern musicians through the manuscripts of hymnals that have come down to us over the centuries. These Rāgas reveal to us the range of devotional feelings and aesthetic Rasas that were common during worship services to Krishna. Many Rāgas still in use are mentioned in the hymnals of the Puṣṭi Mārg tradition, including Bhairav, Ramkali, Vilaval, Bibhas, Lalit, Malkauns, Todi, Malar, Vasant Purvi, Kalyan, Bihag, and Kafi. Unlike classical Dhrupad, Havelī Sangīt uses cymbals. As in Dhrupad, there are many compositions in Cautal of twelve beats and Dhamār of fourteen beats.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Vaishnava saint, Hita Harivamśa, founded the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya in Vrindāvan. This tradition established the devotional singing style known as Samāj Gāyan, which was also modeled upon Dhrupad. Focusing exclusively on the intimate love-play of Rādhā and Krishna, this sect gradually built up a unique repertoire of poetry that is saturated with Śringāra Rasa, culminating in a massive three-volume hymnal, *Śrī Śrī Rādhāvallabhajī kā Varṣotsava*. Set to various Rāgas, most of its poems describe the union and separation of Krishna and his beloved Rādhā and have been sung to musical accompaniment for nearly five-hundred years in the Rādhāvallabha temples. Within the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya, there are several Rāgas that are still prevalent, such as Sarang, Kanhara, Vilaval, Kalyan, Bhupali, Bibhas, Malhar, Kedar, and Todi. One hundred and eight songs from the above hymnal are preserved in text and audio format in [Beck \(2011\)](#). Samāj Gāyan is also practiced by members of the Nimbārka and the Haridāsī sampradāyas, two other Vaishnava traditions in the Braj area that pursue the musical interpretations of the relations between Rādhā and Krishna. Additional information on the Vaishnava genres is found in [Thielemann \(1996, 1999, 2000\)](#).

6. Classical Music of Khayal

The Dhrupad music of Vaishnavism described above flourished largely in isolation from the general public, catering exclusively to the devotees and pilgrims at holy shrines. Yet Dhrupad also provided the foundation for the Hindustani classical vocal music genre known as Khayal that flourished in the northern Hindu and Muslim courts. Many Muslim musicians became proficient in Khayal and contributed greatly to its repertoire and success. By the nineteenth century, Khayal virtually replaced Dhrupad as the predominant form of Hindustani vocal music, and by the twentieth century, it had shifted from the court to the concert arena. While expanding in new creative directions, Khayal, also sung in the vernacular Braj Bhāṣā dialect, nonetheless retained an affinity with the substance of the Dhrupad songs. A Khayal song is known as a 'bandish,' a carefully constructed musical composition with a balance of note, beat, and word that creates an image or idea in the mind that is greater than the sum of the individual parts. The modern Khayal performance on the concert stage has become an opportunity for musical virtuosity and showmanship with greater emphasis on creativity and free expression. Audiences of today expect to be overwhelmed by a dazzling display of stylistic elements: shimmering cascades of Tānas (note patterns comprising vowels), Mūrkiś (grace notes), Khuṭkās (rapid turns of phrases), speedy Sargams (Sa Re Ga Ma, etc.), rhythmic interchanges with the Tabla including Tihais (triplets). While many in the public sphere consider these modern innovations, they are found in the ancient texts. Khayal has been studied extensively by [Wade \(1984\)](#) and [Raja \(2009\)](#).

Despite the emphasis on vocal stylings in Khayal, and its large clientele of Muslim singers, the content depicted in the Khayal song lyrics, such as Dhrupad, continue to refer to spiritual messages, including philosophical ideas found in ancient texts, the description of deities, the praise of God through emphasis on Nām-Kīrtan, or simply the human longing for the Almighty. Many Khayal songs depict situations involving the god Krishna and his favorite goddess Rādhā, sometimes in the context of the seasons such as spring and monsoon, while other songs reveal Indian spiritual wisdom such as found in the Upanishads, including the illusory nature of material existence, the misery associated with greed and gluttony, the prospect of repeated births in the cycle of Samsāra or rebirth, and the need for assistance in crossing over to the other side, a place of permanent peace and tranquility.

The solution to these problems is often presented in the songs themselves: chanting divine names, meditation on the Lord, and engaging in devotional worship.

We now present a series of nine Khayal songs from the recording *Wisdom of the Khayal Song* (Beck 2016). Reflecting the Hindu religious experience, they establish continuity between the ancient and medieval traditions of Indian philosophy and devotion and the classical music of today. They are placed in one of four categories: (1) philosophical teachings, (2) praise of God, (3) descriptions of the divine pastimes, and (4) prescriptions of chanting divine names. The compositions are rendered in the rhythm of Tintal (sixteen beats). The lyrics and notations are published in the standard songbooks of Khayal (noted at the end of this subsection). The weblinks are given for the audio of each song, with three links to video performances.

The first two songs reflect the first category. In the first Khayal selection, the lyric expresses the notion of the divine source of music, reminding musicians and listeners that musical experience contributes toward spiritual attainments in this life and the next. This composition in Rāga Yaman reinforces the principle that music is directly connected to the notion of Nāda-Brahman or sacred sound. The lyrics contain the standard reference to Nāda as divided into Anāhata (unstruck sound) and Āhata (struck sound) and as being the source or fountainhead of the Svaras or musical notes, which are sung in this composition as part of the lyrics with reference to parts of the body and the 22 microtones.

One: Rāga Yaman (KPM 2.31–32). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/ahata-anahata-bheda-nade-ke---raag-yaman/GDCxRDkGcls> Video online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLOjO15AvAM>

Āhata anāhata bheda nāda ke
Prathama bheda śrutiyana so hove
Anāhata munijana dhyāna dharata jaba
Nābhi kaṇṭha aura mūrdha sthāna son
Mandra madhya aura tāra hovata
Sapta surana ke nāma bakhāne
Sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa ni dha pa ma ga re sa

Translation with annotation:

The fountainhead of sound in Indian music, Nāda-Brahman, is divided into two realms: Āhata or ‘struck’ sound (manifest), and Anāhata, or ‘unstruck’ sound (unmanifest). The struck sound is then divided into 22 Śrutis or microtones. The ancient sages meditated on the Anāhata dimension of Nāda-Brahman, being in touch with Divine Truth. The seven notes of music, Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni, are described as spread over three octaves, lower (Mandra), middle (Madhya), and higher (Tāra), which correspond to the three levels of the body; navel, throat, and head.

The next Khayal song in the first category is in Rāga Malkauns, and reflects the philosophy of the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. This conveys the view that life is suffering and under the control of illusion or Māyā. One needs to recognize the futility of material possessions and family attachments, and earnestly try to cross-over to the other side of existence as the only remedy for permanent relief from countless rebirths in this material world.

Two: Rāga Malkauns (KPM 3.708–709). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/suna-re-mana-murakha-ajnanī---raag-malkauns/FRsJYB9vdFU>

Suna re mana mūrakha ajñānī
Bhāi bandhu saba kuṭama kabīlā
Sanga calata kou nāhī
Moha jāla men bilama raho hai
Kauna kisī ko mānī

Eka dina panchī nikasa jā bego
Ye nece kara jānī

Translation with annotation:

Listen! Oh foolish and ignorant Mind! Brothers, friends, family, relatives, wife—none of these will accompany you at the time of death. You are mired in the false illusion of affection, when in fact no one is there for you. One day a bird will come to you and say it is time to go—will you be ready? One must concentrate on the Lord to avoid dire results at the time of death.

The next three Khayal compositions reflect the second category, whereby the lyric offers praise affirms the truth of the unity of God, who nonetheless has many names. Some songs portray a non-sectarian or ‘Generic God’ comprising an inclusive range of names or epithets, such as Prabhu (“Lord”), Sattār (“Divine Truth”), Karatār (“Creator”), Dātā (“Divine Giver”), who is offered prayer and a petition for liberation. The next three compositions express this notion fully. The first two are in Rāga Bhairav, an early morning Rāga for solemn meditation, and the third one in Rāga Kafi is for the daytime hours especially in the afternoon.

Three: Rāga Bhairav (RV 3.123–124). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/prabhu-data-re---raag-bhairav/BIECWIn8YHQ>

Prabhu dātā re, bhaja re mana jīvana ghari pala china
Jo tu cāhe ana dhana lacchamī
Dūdha pūta bahu terā
Vāko nāma bhaja guru ko nāma

Translation:

The Supreme Lord is the Giver of everything! Therefore worship Him every moment of your life. One who desires from you the blessings of this life and the next should heed this call and sincerely worship the Lord and take the name of one’s Guru.

Four: Rāga Bhairav (KPM 2.181–182).

Prabhu dātā sabana ke, tū rata le mana ghari pala china
Jo tū cāhe dūdha pūta ana
Dhana lacchami imāna vāko nāma
Le vāke raba ko nāma le, prabhu dātā sabana ke

Translation:

Oh Lord! You are the Giver of everything.
Let my mind recall you at every moment.
Whatever one desires from you, material or spiritual, the highest blessing is the pleasure of chanting your name in good faith.

Five: Rāga Kafi (KPM 1.46–47). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/prabhu-teri-daya-hai-apar---raag-kafi/OBkeVC0CQHU>

Prabhu terī dayā hai apār
Tu agama agocara avikala cara acara sakalaka
Tu ādhār patitana ko uddhār
Dīna anātha patīta aru durabala
Mahad aparādhī śaraṇāgata hūn
Catura tihār mohe pāra utār

Translation:

Oh Lord, Your mercy knows no boundaries.

Though you are inaccessible and unknowable in your fullness, you uplift the fallen and are the foundation of everything moving and non-moving. Poor, helpless, fallen, and weak, I am a sinner, full of offenses, yet I surrender to you. The poet Catur says “Please carry me across to the other side.”

In the third category, the lyric enhances meditation on a specific deity, whether Krishna, Śiva, or a Goddess, by describing the characteristics of the deity. The song formulates a “verbal icon” in the mind which assists the devotee to focus attention on a specific deity. Two examples are given. The first example is a song in Rāga Bihag that describes Krishna playing his flute by the side of the Yamunā River in his hometown of Vrindāvan. The second song in Rāga Yaman-Kalyan is a hymn to Śiva requesting him to reveal himself to the sincere devotee.

Six: Rāga Bihag (AG 38–40). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/bamsi-kaisi-baji-nanda-lala---raag-bihag/BwpaAyEAYws>

Bansī kaisī bajī nanda lāla
Tumarī jamunā jī ke ghāṭa
Dhuna mana men more bamsī suna sudha budha bisrānī
Jaga nistāraṇa bhakta nivāraṇa
Brija kī bhūmi para sarasa janama līno
Kālindī men nātho tuma nāga so prāṇī

Translation:

Oh Lord Krishna (Nanda Lāla), the sound of your flute by the side of the Yamunā River has captured my mind and made me lose all sense of comportment. You are the upholder of the universe and the shelter of devotees, yet you took birth in Braj, and pleased the wives of the Nāgas while defeating the demon Kaliya.

Seven: Rāga Yaman Kalyan (AG 1–2). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/darasana-deho-sankara-mahadeva---raag-yaman-kalyan/Rg4kdz9yQUE> Video online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r76hXnGWxoA>

Daraśana deho śankara mahādeva
Mahādeva tihāre daraśa binā mohe
Kala na parata gharī pala chīna dīna
Āna parī hūn śaraṇa tihāre
Tuma bīna kauna bandhāve dhīra
Bipatā parī mope mahā kaṭhina

Translation:

Oh Śankara, Mahādeva (Śiva), please give me your darśana (visión) without which there is no peace even for a moment. I approach you Lord, and surrender to you. Without you there is no stability in life, only danger and distress.

The next two songs in the fourth category prescribe the chanting of divine names as a remedy for the ills and misfortunes of life. In these cases, the lyric presents an urgent call for the singer or listener to take up the chanting of the divine name of God, most especially Rāma, as in ‘Rām Nām,’ or Vishnu or Krishna as in ‘Hari Nām.’

Eight: Rāga Vrindabani Sarang (KPM 3.503–504). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/rata-kara-rasana-rama-ko---raag-vrindabani-sarang/BQ0yVzdfeGc> Video online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su_7Pdgdp0s

Raṭākara rasanā rāma ko nāma
Raṭākara rasanā rāma ko nāma
Rāma rāma raghupati raghu-nāyaka

Krishna krishna karuṇā kara śyāma
Gopī pati gopāla gadādhara
Rādhā vara locana abhirāma

Translation:

Recite the name of Rāma with joy, Rāma who is Lord and leader of the Raghus, by whose mercy also appears as Krishna or Śyāma. Krishna is Gopāla, Lord of the Gopīs yet holds a club as Vishnu. More beautiful still is Rādhā whose eyes enchant.

Nine: Rāga Lalit (AG 112). Audio online: <https://www.saavn.com/song/hari-ka-nama-sumarale---raag-lalit/BBEeVzpRVnw>

Hari ka nāma sumara le tere
Dukha dalādala jāya manuvā
Jo hī terī dhyāve so hī phala pāve
Nāma sumrana sukha dāi manuvā

Translation:

Always remember the name of Lord Hari (Krishna) who takes away all pains. Whatever you desire from God, you will receive the fruits, but meditation on the Name brings the highest bliss.

Printed sources for the Khayal songs, with notations:

KPM. Bhatkhande, V. N. 1953–1964. *Kramika-Pustaka-Mālikā*. Vols. 1–6. Hathras, India.
RV. Patvardhan, V. N. 1962–1970. *Rāga-Vijñāna*. Vols. 1–7. Pune, India.
AG. Mehta, R. C. 1969. *Āgrā Gharānā: Paramparā, Gāyakī aur Cījen*. Baroda, India.

7. Conclusions

The comprehensive description and analysis of music in the major sectors of Hinduism is yet to be conducted by scholars, due in part to the enormous task it entails. Nonetheless, there have been targeted studies of religious and devotional music in ritual and temple settings over recent decades. Modern scholarship has also noted that despite differences in theology or philosophy among Hindu sects, a common factor in all these is the experience of vocal chant and music. Religious leaders widely consider devotional songs to be essential for the propagation of their faiths in order to make them more attractive, and though there may be differences in the content of the lyrics, there is no distinction in principle in the style of singing or performance. There are thousands of compositions that reflect this ideal among a diversity of sectarian traditions. The same Rāga or Tāla may be employed in songs that express love and devotion to Vishnu, Krishna, Śiva, the Goddess, or any deity. The vernacular classical songs of Khayal are an excellent focal point for the study of sacred music in Hindu religious experience because they encompass the entire range of Hindu philosophical and emotional content, reaching back to the ancient Sanskrit texts, as well as the diverse experiences of worship and reflection in the modern world. The beauty and depth of Indian classical music is also evident in the number of non-Hindu traditions that have absorbed it into their own worship experiences. There are Indian classical songs set to Rāgas and Tālas in Sikhism, in Sufi Islam, in Buddhism and Jainism, and among Indian Christians. As such, the universal experiences of love, surrender, and compassion are beautifully expressed and experienced through the medium of Indian classical music.

A clever axiom that is offered by Indian musicians themselves is that musical notes, when accompanied with the proper devotional sentiments of love, pertain to God or Īśvara, a generic name for the Supreme Being—from *svara* ('musical notes') to *Īśvara*.

In closing, Saxena (1997, p. 440) reiterates the case for the connection between the divine Absolute and sacred music in India: "If it is granted that the concept of the Absolute as sound is true and that music is a possible way to the final Reality, it would follow that the musician must cultivate sound in all its aspects and infinite variety." And the question of the spirituality of Indian music remains in the

affirmative (ibid., p. 437): “In the theory and contemporary practice of traditional Indian music itself there is ample room to perceive one’s concern and involvement with the art such that it becomes a definite help to spiritual growth.”

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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