

Vedic Chanting and its Relation to Indian Music

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Vedas—the Earliest Music Form

The earliest literary reference to music in Ancient India is contained in Vedic literature. As is well known, the four Vedas—Rik, Yajur, Sama and Atharva—are the first literary works of India, and they continue to exercise great influence on the spiritual and cultural life, and even day-to-day matters of life in India, till the present. In essence they mirror the life of the Indian people of that time, from their profoundest wisdom to adoration of nature, speculation on Creation and Existence, daily ritual practices and even their scientific/technical knowledge.

Vedic knowledge has traveled through a vast span of time of about three millennia or more and has been preserved largely through the oral medium. It is only in the last couple of centuries that the Vedic texts were published from ancient manuscripts and were made available to general readership. From ancient times Vedic hymns were passed on from teacher to disciple through the oral tradition of chanting, which perhaps facilitated correct enunciation and easy memorization of the hymns.

The Tradition of Vedic Chanting

The literary form that bears this communication is the mantra, the closest English

equivalent of which is 'hymn', and the Indian Musical Journey also begins with it. We are able to follow the sequence of evolution of Indian Music from this point of commencement, tracing the development of Svaras or musical notes, as well as the seeds of some of its fundamental techniques which were sown during the Vedic period.

The tradition of Vedic chanting may be broadly classified in two streams:

1) Chanting of hymns of Rigveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda in the three Vedic *Svara* or accents, namely Udatta, Anudatta and Svarita; and also Prachaya, whose position is same as Udatta.

2) (i) Chanting of hymns of Samaveda (Archika / Richa) in the accents mentioned above.

(ii) Singing of hymns of Samaveda (*Gana* / song) in four to seven Vedic *Svaras* or musical notes, namely *Krushta*, *Prathama*, *Dvitiya*, *Tritiya*, *Chaturtha*, *Mandra* and *Atisvarya*.¹

Vedic *Svara* was critically important, as the meaning of a Richa or mantra² changed with any incorrect use of *Svara*. Naradiya Shiksha, the famous treatise on Shiksha (which deals with the Vedic methods of pronunciation), contends that if a mantra is pronounced in an incorrect note, it fails to express the intended meaning. Thus it is



A classical vocalist and researcher in Indian Classical Music from New Delhi, the author did her PhD on 'Musical Heritage in Valmiki's Ramayana'. This article is based on her research as part of a project under the aegis of IGNCA, New Delhi. □

imperative that the mantras are chanted in the designated Svaras. Scholars and students of Vedas meticulously adhere to this tradition till the present times.

The three accents—Anudatta, Udatta and Svarita—are defined by ancient scholars as the lower, upper and middle pitch; 'Anudatta', denoting the lower pitch, 'Udatta' the upper pitch and 'Svarita', the middle pitch.³ However, scholars have later interpreted the position of Svarita as not the 'middle pitch' between Anudatta and Udatta but as higher than that of Udatta, and contend that the position of Svarita as the middle pitch may be considered only from the linguistic point of view.

These Rigvedic accents may be equated to *Ni*, *Sa* and *Ri* of the contemporary Indian musical scale, a fact supported by actual practice. Anudatta corresponds to the musical note komal Nishada [Ni], Udatta corresponds to Shadja [Sa], and Svarita to komal Rishabha [Ri] of the Hindustani music scale prevalent today.

These Vedic Svaras gradually developed into seven musical notes in the singing tradition of Samaveda.

Svara—the Indian Musical Note

In the present times, Svara, the Indian counterpart of the contemporary western musical 'note' is the primary and principal ingredient of music. The term *Svara* is defined in the Mahabhashya as '*svayam rajanta iti*', meaning 'that which sparkles without an external support'.⁴ Sharngadeva, the ancient musicologist of the 13th century defines *Svara* as that which pleases the listener: '*svato ranjayati shrotrichittam sa svara uchyate*'.⁵

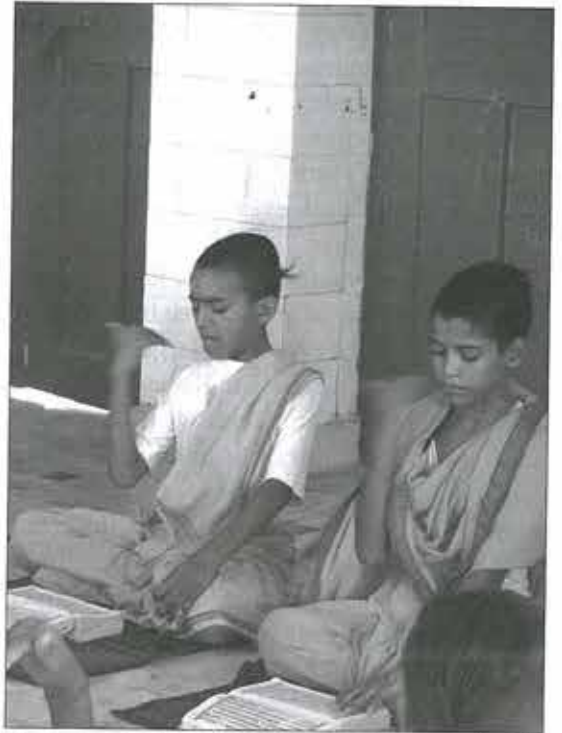
In fact the entire structure of Indian music is based on the Svara. There are seven basic or shuddha Svaras and five vikrita

Svaras, which deviate from their original designated positions. The shuddha Svaras are known as Shadja, Rishabha, Gandhara, Madhyama, Panchama, Dhaivata and Nishada.

The principal concepts in Indian music such as Grama, Murcchana, Jati and Raga are primarily based on Svaras. These are closely associated with each other.

Grama denotes a group of Svaras which are systematically arranged or positioned among the Shrutis, which are microtones or fine division of musical sound that can be heard and distinguished from one another.

Murcchana denotes ascending and descending order of Svaras, and the beautiful



musical phrases created by them. Jati, the predecessor of *Raga* was born of *Murcchana* and may be defined as a group of specific notes endowed with specific characteristic features. *Raga* is similar to Jati but abstract in nature. It is the fundamental concept of Indian Music

today. It has a distinct character of its own, which is unique in the world of music.

The Vedic Svaras used in the enunciation or singing of the hymns of Samaveda, and the manner in which they are employed by traditional Samagas or experts of Sama singing in the present times, appear to bear seeds of some of the above mentioned concepts of Indian music such as Grama and Murcchana.

This study is an attempt to seek the roots of the seven Svaras of Indian music in the Sama Svaras: the first musical notes which were employed in singing, in the history of Indian Music.

The Samavedic Link

Of the four Vedas, Samaveda largely contains Richas from the Rigveda, which when sung, constitute the Samavedic text, the rendering of which is considered as the most ancient musical form of India. The term 'Sama'

thus indicates the musical rendering of a Richa. Samavedic mantras were sung in four to seven Svaras, a practice meticulously implemented by traditional Sama scholars.

In 2nd century, Bharata states in his Natyashastra '*Samabhyo gitameva cha*', i.e. music (in Natya or theatre) was adopted from Samaveda. In the subsequent centuries Matanga, Sharngadeva and other scholar-musicologists contend that the seven Svaras originated from the Samaveda and the basic scales arose from these Svaras [*Samavedad svaro jatah svarebhyo ganasambhava*'].

The Mandukya Shiksha also states that seven Svaras are sung by the Sama singers [*Saptasvarastu giyante samabhih samagairbudhaih*]. The significance of the Samaveda with respect to origins of Indian Music is thus established indisputably in the ancient treatises.

(To be continued. . .)

References

1. Naradiya Shiksha 1. 1.12
2. '*Mananat trayate iti mantrah*'—the etymological meaning of Mantra, which means: constantly contemplating and reflecting of which leads to deliverance/ salvation. Richa: Rigvedic hymn
3. '*Uccairudattah. Nicairanudattah. Svaritah samaharah*' Taittiriya Pratishakhya
4. Mahabhashya, 1.2.29
5. Samgitaratnakara, 1.1.24

To sing the glory of the Lord in the company of devotees is a means to devotion, if the right mood and proper atmosphere is kept up. But along with singing you should also spend time in repetition of His Name in silence.

—Swami Saradananda

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(Continued from the previous issue...)

The Samavedic Text

The Samaveda has two principal parts: *Archika* and *Gana*. The *Archika* is related to the *Richas* of the Rigveda, which are sung. It has two parts, namely *Purvarchika* and *Uttararchika*. The *Gana* portion includes the same *Richas* in the form of *Gana* or songs. There may be more than one song for a particular *Richa*. A *Richa* ascribed to a particular Rishi in the Rigveda Samhita or the Samaveda Samhita, may be ascribed to a different Rishi in the *Gana* portion of the Samaveda, who is considered as the seer of that Sama or Song.

The Development of Seven Svara

According to the *Naradiya Shiksha*, the seven musical notes or Svaras developed from the three Rigvedic accents during the period of Samaveda:⁶

Udatte nishadagandharavanudatta

rishabhadhaivatau.

Svaritaprabhava hyete shadjamadhyamapanchamah.

Accordingly, the seven Svaras owe their origin to the three original Rigvedic accents:

1. Nishada and Gandhara originate from Udatte.
2. Rishabha and Dhaivata from Anudatta.

3. Shadja, Madhyama and Panchama from Svarita.

Naradiya Shiksha also refers to the original names of the seven svaras of Samavedic era as Prathama, Dvitiya, Tritiya, Chaturtha, Mandra, Atisvara and Krushta.⁷

The first four Svaras were named as numbers such as Prathama, Dvitiya, Tritiya and Chaturtha; while the later three had descriptive names such as Mandra, Krushta and Atisvarya. This probably indicates a gradual development of the Svaras. It appears that initially there were four Svaras in the Sama Grama, which were named as numbers. Krushta and others were added later and named according to their qualities. Mandra denotes 'low', thus it was lower than the already existent lowest note, which was Chaturtha. Atisvarya was even lower than Mandra and was perhaps the lowest note discovered during that era. Krushta, derived from the root Krush, which means 'to shout' or 'to speak very loudly', came to be known as the highest Sama note known so far.

The complete Saptaka (collection of seven svaras: the equivalent term for the western 'Octave') thus included Krushta, Prathama, Dvitiya, Tritiya, Chaturtha, Mandra

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and Atisvarya in this order, which indicates that the Samavedic Svaras were sung in the descending order.

According to Naradiya Shiksha, these seven Svaras correspond to the Madhyama, Gandhara, Rishabha, Shadja, Dhaivata, Nishada and Panchama Svara (Ma Ga, Ri, Sa, Dha, Ni, Pa) of the bamboo flute.⁸ Accordingly, the first note of Samagana, Prathama is known as the Madhyama of the bamboo flute, the second: Dvitiya is Gandhara, the third: Tritiya is Rishabha, the fourth: Chaturtha is Shadja, the fifth: Mandra is Dhaivata, the sixth: Atisvarya is Nishada and the seventh or Krushta is regarded as the Panchama of the bamboo flute.

Although all the seven notes are regarded to have developed during the Samavedic era, only a few Sama mantras were sung, using all of them.

The Singing of Sama

Sama-singing was a structured, sequenced performance presented by a group with distinct roles for each member of the group. The Sama singers were known as Prastota, Udgata, Pratiharta and Subrahmanya, among whom the chief singer was Udgata.

Saman singing is divided into five parts called Bhakti, namely-

1. *Humkara or Himkara*
2. *Prastava*
3. *Udgitha*
4. *Pratihara*
5. *Nidhana*

At commencement all of them sing 'Hum' or Humkara together. Thereafter the Prastota sings the Prastava or the first part of the mantra/ song. Then the Udgata sings the Udgitha, which constitutes the major and the key section. The Pratiharta takes on from the

last line of the Udgitha to sing the Pratihara. The final section Nidhana is sung collectively by the Prastota, Udgata and Pratiharta, after which all conclude by singing 'Om' in unison. The Subrahmanya has the specific duty of chanting subrahmany-ahvana.⁹

In some cases however, two more sections are added in the singing of a Sama, dividing it into seven parts as the following-

1. *Humkara or Himkara*
2. *Prastava*
3. *Adi*
4. *Udgitha*
5. *Pratihara*
6. *Upadrava*
7. *Nidhana*

Here the first part of Udgitha is regarded as Adi and the final part of Pratihara as Upadrava. There is little difference with regard to its music. The Upadrava part is sung by the Udgata.

This traditional method of Sama-singing is still prevalent in some parts of India, and is especially sung as part of Shrauta yajna.

Notation System: Gatravina

Vedic scholars adhere to a tradition of hand and finger movements in order to maintain purity of accents. This system was perhaps developed to deter any incorrect use of *Svara* thereby preventing error in pronunciation.

Naradiya Shiksha mentions two kinds of Vina (string instrument); one that is made of wood while the other is Gatra or the human body or a limb of the human body, which is used as Vina. He calls it Gatravina, through which the Samagas indicate Svaras.¹⁰

In the arrangement of Svaras on the Gatravina, the Krushta is denoted at the tip of the Angushtha/ thumb, the Prathama or Madhyama is denoted on the parvana or phalanx of the thumb, Dvitiya or Gandhara

is denoted on the parvana of the index finger, similarly Tritiya or Rishabha on the middle finger, Chaturtha or Shadja on the ring finger, Mandra/ Dhaivata on the little finger and Atisvara/ Nishada is denoted below the root of the little finger.¹¹

The process of learning and singing of Samagana involves singing and depicting the designated Svaras on fingers simultaneously. The use of Gatravina is mandatory for a Sama singer especially when he is undergoing training. The notes are depicted by touching the designated areas on the fingers with the thumb. In this process a student memorizes the designated Svaras of a particular mantra, which are irrevocable. Sama singers have followed this system for centuries. This is followed meticulously even in the present times.

A well-defined system of notation was introduced much later to facilitate the correct use of the Rigvedic accents Udatta, Anudatta and Svarita wherein symbols such as ' _ , I ' were used to denote the svaras. While Anudatta was denoted by a horizontal line below a syllable, for Udatta there was no sign and Svarita was denoted by a vertical line above a syllable. The same Svaras in the Sama Samhita were denoted by numbers 3, 1 and 2.

This indicates that the ancient Sama singing initially involved three notes. The fourth note came to be known as Svarantara, meaning the nearby, or the next note. Gradually

seven Svaras of the Samavedic era developed and came to be known as Prathama, Dvitiya, Tritiya, Chaturtha, Mandra, Atisvara and Krushta, which were denoted by the numbers 1 to 7. The numbers were written above the syllables.

The Saman scale may be notated as the following-

1.	Prathama	Ma
2.	Dvitiya	Ga
3.	Tritiya	Re
4.	Chaturtha	Sa
5.	Mandra	Dha
6.	Atisvara	Ni
7.	(Ati) Krushta	Pa

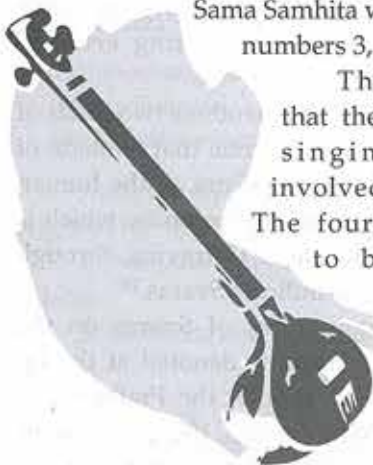
The Sama mantras in the Samagana texts available today bear this system of notation. However, most of the present day Sama experts prefer to rely on the oral tradition.

Schools of Vedic learning: Shakha

As an oral tradition Vedic knowledge was passed on from a Guru to Shishya, who learnt to chant Vedic hymns in the particular style of his preceptor, who strictly adhered to the style taught by his own Guru. Several traditions or schools of Vedic chanting thus came into being, which developed their own distinct method of chanting. These traditional schools of Vedic learning came to be known as shakha.

It is said¹² that the Rigveda had 21 shakhas, Yajurveda 101, Samaveda 1000 and Atharvaveda 9. Most of these schools are now completely untraceable, while a few have been able to sustain their tradition till the present times.

The diversity of traditions of Vedic chanting and the nature of all available evidence being only in the oral medium, it is difficult in





the present day to determine either a singular authentic tradition of chanting, or the true nature of the Svaras.

The Three Living Samavedic Shakhas

Among the thousand different traditions of the Samaveda as referred by Maharishi Patanjali in his Mahabhashya, thirteen are listed in the Jaimini Grihyasutra (1.14), and Samatarpanam¹³ of which only three, namely the Jaiminiya, Kauthuma and Ranayaniya Shakhas exist today (carrying the name of their respective original Gurus or Acharyas) which can be traced without ambiguity.

Each Shakha follows a specific style of singing the Saman mantra, with obvious differences with the others. Variations exist also within the same Shakha between different seats or centres of Vedic studies, influenced by geographical location as also the internal traditions of families.

At present traditional experts of the three living shakhas of the Samaveda are located in various parts of India. The Jaiminiya Samagas are based in Kerala and Tamilnadu, and follow two distinct traditions. They



practice detailed hand and finger movements signifying particular patterns of the Svaras as it is chanted. This facilitates accurate recollection and singing of the Svaras. The practice of moving the entire palm upward, downward and to the sides is characteristic of the Kerala-Jaiminiyas and distinct from other traditional schools of South India.

The Kauthuma Samagas have two traditions, namely the Prachina Paddhati (ancient style) and the Navina Paddhati (new style). Presently, Kauthuma Samagas are also characterized by their two distinct styles namely Gurjara Paddhati and Madra or Dravida Paddhati. They are the most widespread among the three Shakhas and are based in Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Varanasi, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

The Ranayaniya Shakha is predominant in the Karwar region (Honnavar-Panchagrama) in north Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, where Samagas sing in the Karnataka Paddhati. Another section of Ranayaniya Shakha is based in Varanasi, where Samagas practice the Kashi Paddhati.

(To be continued. . .)

References

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| 6. NS, 1.8.8 | 7. NS, 1.1.12 | 8. NS, 1.5.1,2 (Mysore Ed. P.24) | 9. The Saman Chants, p 63 |
| 10. NS, 1.6.2 | 11. Ibid, 1.7.3,4 | 12. Catvaro vedah samga sarasya bahudha bhinnah Ekashatamadhvaryu-shakha. Sahasravartma samavedah. Ekavimshatidha bahvrichyam. Navadhatharvano vedah. Patanjali's Paspashahnika (vide, Vaidika Sahitya aur Samskriti, p. 113). | 13. Vide, Vaidika Sahitya Aur Samskriti, p. 140. |

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Changes in the Pronunciation of Mantras

Apparently Sama texts undergo various changes when they are adjusted for singing. They are technically known as Vikara, Vishleshana, Vikarshana, Abhyasa, Virama, Stobha, Lopa and Agama, where 'agna' becomes 'ognayi', 'vitaye' changes to 'vayi tayayi'. 'Grinano havya dataye' becomes 'Grinano, ha vyada tayayi', and so on.

The singing of Stobha is another distinctive feature of Sama singing. Stobhas are generally understood as non-textual phonetic forms having no meaning. Some traditions however also employ Stobhas which denote meaning. According to the traditional Samavedic scholars, Stobhas are used in order to make the Sama sing-able or more melodious and also for *Chandapurti* or to complete the Chandas or Vedic rhythm. Stobhas are used by all shakhas, each following a distinct pattern. There are a variety of Stobha such as 'Havu, Aih, Au ho va, Hoyi', which are often inserted in the beginning of a Sama, and are considered useful aids in building up of the Svaras. This practice may be compared to the Alapa¹⁴ at the commencement of a Raga, in the classical music system of the present day.

Stobhas (just as Alapa) are also inserted between the lines of a Sama, and sometimes

at the end. A word from the original text may be lengthened or shortened with the help of the Stobha (as a Bol Alapa in Raga music). However, a basic difference between the two is that Alapa and Bol Alapa in Raga music are open to improvisation, while in Samavedic singing the use of Stobha are defined, but may vary in different traditions. Personal improvisation is not permitted in Sama singing.

Origin of Techniques

After a preliminary study of the techniques employed by each school of Sama-singing in the present day, it has been noticed that each maintain that they employ the same prescribed Svaras. With a sound knowledge of the technical aspects of classical music, one can easily follow the Svaras and determine a parallel. One may also find some techniques which have close resemblance to the techniques of Hindustani music of today.

Firsthand information received from practicing Samagas of the living Shakhas in present times, perhaps reveal for the first time a set of remarkable connections of Samagana with present-day Indian Music:

a) The Svaras Shadja, Shuddha Rishabha and Shuddha Dhaivata can be clearly

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identified from the Sama singing of the Jaiminiya Samagas of Kerala.

b) Their mode has stress areas which closely parallel the 'Gamakas'¹⁵ of Indian classical music.

c) Some of the Svaras used by the Tamil Jaiminiya are moved in ascending and descending order in a manner that closely resemble the technique of 'Meend'¹⁶ of Indian classical music.

d) The Svaras Shadja, Shuddha Rishabha, Komal Gandhara and Madhyama can be clearly identified from the Sama singing of the Kauthuma Samagas of the Madra Paddhati. The Gurjara Paddhati of the same Shakha appears to employ Komal Nishada in addition to the above mentioned Svaras.

e) The Svaras Shadja, Shuddha Rishabha, Madhyama, shuddha Dhaivata (mandra), and even Mandra Panchama can be clearly identified from the Sama singing of the Samagas of the Ranayaniya Shakha based in Karnataka. The particular manner in which Shadja is touched while going on to the Mandra Dhaivata is a common technique in today's classical music, where it is known as the 'Kan Svara'.

f) The Svaras—Komal Nishada, Shadja, Komal Rishabha, Komal Gandhara—can be clearly identified from the Sama singing of the Samagas of the Ranayaniya Shakha of Kashi (Govardhani paddhati).

Though the Naradiya Shiksha equates the Svaras of the Samaveda with the Svaras of classical Indian music of a later period, where they correspond to the *Ma, Ga, Ri, Sa, Dha, Ni* and *Pa* (of the bamboo Flute), it appears that the actual position of the Svaras have undergone considerable change after the period of Naradiya Shiksha. If we try to notate the Sama hymns according to the

Svaras prescribed by Naradiya Shiksha, the transformation becomes evident.

For example, in the first line of the hymn '*Devo vo dravinodah*', the Svaras are given as 5, 4, 5, 2, 4 and 5. The Svara designated for *De* is 5th, i.e., Mandra or Dhaivata; for *vo* is 4th, i.e., Chaturtha or Shadja; for the vowel *o* or avagraha is 5th, i.e., Dhaivata again, and the Svara designated for *vo* is 2nd, i.e., Dvitiya or Gandhara; and so on; thus for '*devo vo*' we have Dha, Sa, Dha, Ga. However if the same is notated according to Svaras as sung in Hindustani music today, it becomes Komal Ga, Ri, Komal Ga, Ri, Sa, Komal Ga with a touch of Ma.

According to scholars, the Samavedic Svaras laid the foundation of *Murcchana*¹⁷, which in turn became the source of Jati and Raga of Hindustani music.¹⁸ The opening Svara in the Saman singing was regarded as the first or Arambhaka Svara. As each of the seven svara namely Ma, Ga, Ri, Sa, Dha, Ni and Pa became the Arambhaka Svara, new Svara and phrases of Svaras grew from them thus initiating the development of *Murcchana*. It is widely accepted by scholars that *Murcchana* is the foundation of the concept of Raga, the seeds of which appears to be germinating in the music of Samaveda. It appears however, that this concept is not in use in the present practice of Samagana.



The use of techniques such as Gamaka, Meend and Kan Svvara in the present day practice of Samagana (by practicing Samagas) are indicators of some kind of parallel between the chanting of present day and the practice of Indian music today. These evidences or parallels definitely exist in the present day Samagana but their source and cause of origin are yet to be established and are subject to further investigation.

It is difficult to comprehend whether these techniques of singing influenced the technical nuances of the music of today or were centuries old influences of the local regions where they thrived. The practice of

Koodiyattam in Kerala may be considered as an example of such intimate influence¹⁹.

Conclusion

The cultural artefact of Vedic Chanting and its Samavedic counterpart, in the forms and locations they are sustained till the present, are living links for India to its past and its identity. This is confirmed again in this study, where clear indicators are present that demonstrate that Indian Music, as we know it today, is an inheritance from these practices.

It is thus very important that this tradition is nurtured back to health, to explore fully its relation to Indian Music. □

(Concluded.)

References

14. Alapa is a specific manner of elaborating a Raga with the help of notes, using the syllable 'A'. It is sung at the commencement of a Raga, as also in its elaboration and improvisation. The Bol-Alapa is a similar manner of improvisation where the lyrics of the song are also used, and are inserted in between.
15. Gamaka is a technique in Indian classical music of singing one Svvara after the other, or repeating only one Svvara with a specific technique of stress or emphasis in the accent.
16. Meend is another technique in Indian classical music where two or more Svaras are connected by soft and unbroken/ continuous ascent and descent of Svaras. Both the techniques are used in vocal as well as instrumental music.
17. Murcchana is a technical term in Hindustani Music that denotes the practice of ascending and descending order of notes, and beautiful musical phrases created by them.
18. *Bharatiya Sangit Ka Itihas*, p 68.
19. Koodiyattam is an ancient form of theatre in Sanskrit which involves music and dance, prevalent in Kerala for the past thousand years. Scholars agree that its music has an unmistakable resemblance to Samagana practiced in Kerala.

Swamiji's Musical Voice

In quoting from the Upanishads his [Swami Vivekananda] voice was most musical. He would quote a verse in Sanskrit, with intonations, and then translate it into beautiful English, of which he had a wonderful command. And in his mystical religion he seemed perfectly and unquestionably happy. . . I can see him yet as he stepped upon the platform, a regal, majestic figure, vital, forceful, dominant, and at the first sound of the wonderful voice, a voice all music—now like the plaintive minor strain of an Eolian harp, again, deep, vibrant, resonant there was a hush, a stillness that could almost be felt, and the vast audience breathed as one man.

—Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, Advaita Ashrama, 1.35 and 1.307