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Music and Dance in Vedic Literature: A Cultural Exploration

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Abstract

The ancient Indian scriptures, collectively known as the Vedas, provide invaluable insights into the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Indian subcontinent. Among the many aspects of life and society discussed in these texts, Music and dance hold a prominent place. This essay delves into the references to music and dance found in the *R̥gveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Upanishads*, Highlighting their significance In the Vedic Society. It also explores the role of deities like Indra and the Maruts in relation to music and dance. The Vedaṅgas help us to understand the Vedic literature in its appropriate manner. Vedaṅgas and its symbolic application to Bharata's Natya Shastra Is also part of my article.

Keywords: *R̥gveda* (RV), *Samaveda* (SV), *Yajurveda* (YV), *Upanishad*, Dance, Vedic Society

Introduction

The Vedas, the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism, offer a vivid panorama of life in ancient India alongside spiritual and philosophical teachings. They provide glimpses into various aspects of Vedic society, including music and dance. These art forms were not just forms of entertainment, but also integral to rituals, worship and cultural expression.

The study of Chaturdasa Vidyasthanas like the four Vedas, Six Vedaṅgas, Dharma Sastra of Manu, Ardha Sastra of Kautilya, Kama sastra of Vatsyayana and many Epics and Mythology of Indian literature can bring in a holistic understanding of the art of Indian Music and Dance.

Macdonell and Keith (1912) denotes that -

- Silpa in the Vedas means art, of which three kinds – *nr̥tya*/dance, *gita*/music and *Vaadita*/instrumental music, are enumerated in the *Kausitaki Brahmana* (29-5).

- '*Nr̥ti*' in one passage of the RV 3-51-4 means dancer in Ludwig's translation.
- '*Nrtu*' occurs once in the RV denoting female dancer in 1-92-4. Dancing is often referred to in the RV (1-10-1, 1-92-4).
- *Nr̥ta*-Gita (dance and song) are mentioned in the Jaiminiya Brahmana.
- If we put all the terms on Music, Musical Instruments, Dance, Jewellery and Ornaments in the four Vedas together, that will give us a beautiful picture of the Vedic society. No wonder Bharata wrote a beautiful treatise on dance in Sanskrit in the post-Vedic period (Swaminathan, 2015).

Music and Dance in the Vedas - A Panoramic View

The *R̥gveda*, the oldest of the four Vedas, contains hymns that sing praises to various deities, natural forces, and cosmic principles. It contains references to music, often associated with divine worship. In Rig Vedic hymns, the word '*Gandharva*' appears which refers to a class of celestial musicians

associated with the divine realms. The Gandharvas are believed to have been adept at playing various musical instruments, and their melodious tunes are thought to have delighted the gods and contributed to the harmony of the universe.

The *Samaveda*, known as the 'Veda of Melodies,' is primarily concerned with the musical aspects of the Vedic rituals. It consists of a collection of melodies or '*saman*' derived from the Rig Vedic verses. These melodies were chanted during rituals to invoke specific energies and evoke particular emotions. The *Samaveda* emphasizes the importance of proper pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation in these chants, reflecting the deep connection between sound, spirituality, and cosmic order.

The Yajurveda, on the other hand, is more concerned with the procedural aspects of rituals. It provides instructions for priests on how to perform sacrifices and ceremonies correctly. While it doesn't emphasize music and dance as prominently as the *Rgveda* and *Samaveda*, it does contain references to the rhythmic recitation of mantras during rituals. These recitations were likely accompanied by specific hand gestures and bodily movements, resembling a form of ritualistic dance.

In the AV (12-1-41) the earth was described as a place where humans sing, dance and live. '*Yasyām Gāyanti Nrutyanti Bhūmyām Martyāvailyabā*'. In another hymn it is said that 'Prānchi agāma nrutayē hasāya grāghēya āyuprataram dadhāna' which means we shall live ever happily smiling and dancing.

Dance in *Rgveda*

The *Rgveda* stands as an unparalleled masterpiece, encompassing the realms of religion, philosophy, mythology, and poetry.

The hymns in this work burst forth with poetry effortlessly, demonstrating the poets' exceptional perception of beauty. Their mental world is a captivating blend of child-like simplicity, brimming with freshness and delicate emotions on one hand, and a profoundly intricate thought process, rich with metaphor and mythology, on the other.

The gods and goddesses that come to life within these pages are indeed symbolic representations of natural phenomena, whether in the celestial or terrestrial spheres. Yet, they are also endearing and heroic beings, possessing supernatural qualities. These deities can serve as a source of inspiration for mortals but have not yet taken on the distant and fearsome divine forms to which prayers are offered. This pantheon is vast and diverse, comprising warriors, poets, and life-givers who embody vigour and impulsiveness. They traverse the skies in celestial chariots and are glorified, human-like beings driven by human emotions and motives. These representations of natural phenomena and cosmic forces are portrayed as dancing and singing, mirroring the earthly celebrations seen in weddings and funerary rites, all beautifully expressed in the hymns of the *Rgveda*.

Indra

In *Rgveda*, Indra is the greatest of the entire pantheon of the Gods. He has been conceived primarily as a thunder-god and a god of battle who assumes most beautiful forms at will (10-112-1), is armed with bows and arrows (8-45-4), is borne on a car which is golden (6-29-2), and is swifter than thought (10-112-2). To this Indra are applied the epithets of the car-fighter (Rathestha), the soma-drinker (Somapavan) (8-2-4), and the leader of dancers-the dancer Indra-and one

who makes others dance. More than a dozen hymns utilize these epithets of dancing for him. In RV 1-130, the entire hymn refers to him as a dancer in battle who has destroyed ninety cities:

Dancing Gods are found in the Vedas. Indra has been thought of in the RV (1-130-7) as one who also made others to dance and delight (RV 2-22-4, 8-24-9, 8-24-12, 8-92-2).

The term '*nṛto*,' derived from the vocative of '*nṛtu*,' is used to refer to Indra as the dancer who has, in a heroic display of power, laid waste to ninety cities using his thunderbolt (*vajra*) (1-130-7). In another hymn (2-22-4), he is invoked as the one who causes others to dance and brings joy, emphasizing his role as a source of delight. This description aligns with his benevolent aspect, where his actions are believed to be for the benefit of humanity, and he is acknowledged as the victor of rainfall. Similar epithets are reiterated in 8-24-9 and 13, where he is addressed as the one who instigates dancing '*Nṛtuh*' equals '*nartayitaa*' in one of the epithets (RV 8-92-3).

In the RV 8-92-3, the term '*nṛtuh*' (equivalent to '*nartayita*') is employed, once again emphasizing Indra's role as a dancer. A comparable epithet portraying Indra as the dancer and bestower of abundant sustenance is used in the RV 2-22-4, where he is beseeched to bring prosperity and wealth through his divine dance. These hymns collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of Indra, celebrating his attributes as a warrior, protector, and source of joy and abundance.

Maruts

The close associates of Indra, the Maruts and the Aśvins, are also dancers. Marut is often called by the name dancer (*nṛtu*). In a

most beautiful hymn translated by Max Mueller the Maruts dance around the well, desirous of water: 'In the measured steps and wildly shouting, the gleemen have danced towards the well. They who appeared one by one like thieves were helpers to me to see the light'. They are really the gay dancers, the *kirino nṛtuh* (RV 5-52-12), who are the invokers and the leaders of the dance. The verse is the first specific description of dancing in literature where more than an epithet has been used (Kapila Vatsyayan, 1968).

She further says that, 'in another hymn, too, the Maruts are invoked as dancers and the form *nṛtavah* is employed for them: in this They are called out for care and friendship, 'Oh ye dancers with golden ornaments on your chest, even a mortal comes to ask for your brotherhood: take care of us ye Maruts, for your friendship lasts forever' (RV 8-20-22), The Maruts are here addressed in the plural as a troupe or a company of dancers.

Asvins

The Asvins are the twin gods to whom singing and dancing are attributed. They, too, are called out as dancers (*nṛtu*): they are addressed in the plural-who dance in association with the daughter of the Sun, Surya. They are addressed as the twin Asvins and the hosts of Maruts.

Ushas

In the *Ṛgveda*, the goddess of dawn, Ushas, is celebrated by the poets with a profusion of adjectives and epithets, each more enchanting than the last. Ushas is depicted in a manner that compares her to a dancer, emphasizing her grace and beauty. She is likened to a dancer (*nṛturiva*) who adorns herself with opulent ornaments, much like a

young maiden who is lovingly dressed by her mother. Ushas is described as a valiant and gracious figure who smiles warmly, revealing her charms to those who adore her. She is portrayed as a bringer of treasures who dispels the darkness of night, symbolically breaking open the gates of darkness to usher in the light of dawn. This poetic imagery showcases the beauty and vitality associated with Ushas, portraying her as a radiant and captivating goddess who heralds the arrival of a new day with her vibrant and graceful presence.

Apsarasas

There are a good number of Hymns praising the dance of Apsarasas, the nymphs, also called as the Celestial dancers/ courtesans. Rambha, Urvasi, Menaka, Tilothama are some of the much known Celestial dancers, who dances in the Indra's court.

The concept of nymphs is closely related to the dancing gods. They are consorts of the Gandharvas (RV 10-123-5, 7-33-9, 7-33-12, 7-10-95, 10-132-6) but do not belong to the category of gods; they are the semi divine people. By the time of Atharva Veda, they became Indra's favourite dancers.

Description of the Apsaras as dancing with the Gandharvas is found in abundance in the AV (4-371, 4-37-4, 4-37-5). Men and women sang and danced even amidst the disease and pestilence they feared. They gathered in the assembly house (AV 7-12-2) 'sabha', which was meeting place for social entertainment including dance and music (Swaminathan, 2015).

Dance in Vedic Society: Symbolism and Ritual Significance

'We come next to the direct description of dancing in the life of the ordinary people. Secular poetry in the *Rgveda* gives us a fairly

clear picture of the part played by dancing in society. Occasion for it was provided by marriages, funerals, harvest festivals, sacrifices and communal gatherings, when the inner music of the soul of the crowd following any happy occurrence demanded expression in the happy rhythmic movements of the limbs; men and women of the community participated in this carnival of mirth. Funeral Hymn 10-18 asks the survivors and relatives of the deceased, after he had been laid to rest, to go forth to sing, dance and laugh and prolong their own span of existence' (Kapila Vatsyayan, 1968).

Additionally, dance played a role in ritual performances. During certain rituals, priests would perform rhythmic movements and gestures while reciting hymns, creating a harmonious blend of sound and movement. These dances were seen as a way to communicate with the divine, express devotion, and facilitate a deeper connection with the spiritual realm.

Dancing has been an integral part of Hindu funeral rites since ancient times, dating back to the Rigvedic period. When an elderly man passes away without leaving a widow or if the elderly lady predeceases her husband, the funeral procession is often accompanied by music and dance. Among the 'Aiyars of the South,' a specific community, it is the women who participate in this dance. The dancers form a circle around a lamp, its multiple flames casting a warm and vibrant glow.

In the RV (10-94-4), there is a vivid description of yet another form of community dance. The hymn portrays a scene where dancers, often accompanied by strong exhilarating drinks, call upon the god Indra. They are described as being bold and

enthusiastic, dancing with their sisters, their movements echoing across the earth.

This hymn offers a lively depiction of a dance filled with energy and vitality. The atmosphere is charged with the joyful cries of the dancers, and the sound produced by their dance and song is referred to as 'nyũnkha.' This sound may have been akin to the rhythmic chanting reminiscent of the Naga dancing. According to Katyayana (1-8-18), it consisted of sixteen such omkaras, contributing to the rhythmic and melodious character of the dance and song.

Certain Rigvedic hymns vividly portray a dance characterized by its vigor and liveliness. The atmosphere during these dances reverberates with the joyful cries of the participants. The rhythmic sound produced during this dance and song is referred to as 'nyũnkha,' which may have resembled the cadence of 'omkaras,' a melodic and rhythmic chanting associated with Naga dancing. According to Katyayana (1-8-18), this 'nyũnkha' consisted of sixteen such omkaras, adding to the rhythmic complexity of the dance.

These hymns offer a unique glimpse into a specific type of couple dancing, which is not frequently encountered in Sanskrit literature. The dancers form couples, holding their sisters, and within this vast gathering of hundreds and thousands, each couple engages in the dance. This collective social dance involves embracing one another, and the speed of their movements is so swift that it creates a humming sound that resonates through the earth.

The subsequent verse (10-94-5) suggests a gliding movement during the dance, further emphasizing the rapid and agile nature

of the performance. These descriptions provide valuable insights into the dynamic and diverse forms of dance in the ancient Vedic period.

Music and Samaveda

In the *Samaveda*, references to dancing are relatively scarce compared to the *Rgveda*, but this Veda plays a significant role in the evolution of dance and music by introducing the concept of 'Margi' and 'Desi' types of music and dancing. This distinction marks the earliest conscious differentiation between what would later be termed classical and popular forms of music and dance in the years to come.

These distinctions would go on to shape the rich tapestry of Indian performing arts, with classical forms like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Carnatic music emerging from the Margi tradition, while folk and regional dance forms continued to flourish in the Desi traditions.

The solfa system in Indian music, known as 'sargam,' is closely related to the ancient practice of 'swara' (musical notes) and 'tala' (rhythmic patterns) in the Vedas, including the *Samaveda*. However, the formalization of the solfa system as we know it today, with syllables like 'sa,' 're,' 'ga,' 'ma,' 'pa,' 'dha,' and 'ni' representing the seven basic notes, is attributed to later developments in Indian classical music.

The system of solfa, as well as its counterparts in Western music, was refined and organized over centuries by scholars and musicians. Indian classical music, particularly in the context of the *Natya Shastra* and subsequent musical treatises, played a crucial role in the development and codification of musical notation systems.

So, while the roots of the solfa system can be traced back to ancient Vedic practices,

its evolution into the formalized system used in present-day Indian music involved contributions from various sources and underwent substantial development over time.

Upanishads

The Upanishads, ancient philosophical texts that explore profound spiritual and metaphysical concepts, do make mention of the terms 'nṛtta' and 'nata' in various contexts. These terms are sometimes used metaphorically or symbolically to elucidate abstract philosophical ideas. Music and dance are employed as allegorical tools to help convey these abstract concepts to the reader or listener.

In some Upanishads, music and dance are depicted as instruments of temptation, where they symbolize worldly distractions that can hinder spiritual progress. They represent the allure of sensory pleasures and the material world, which can divert one's focus from the pursuit of spiritual realization.

Additionally, a few Upanishads list music and dance among the subjects of study or knowledge. This inclusion suggests that these arts were considered valuable aspects of education and culture during the time when the Upanishads were composed.

Overall, the references to music and dance in the Upanishads serve to underscore their significance in both the cultural and philosophical contexts of ancient India, illustrating how these arts were interwoven with the exploration of profound philosophical and spiritual themes.

In the *Katha Upanishad* we find Naciketa being tempted by Yama to accept fair ones of heaven sitting in ornamental chariots, playing harps'. The players on the fura, and the like, are not to be gained by men. In the

Kena Upanisad, and the relationship of the body and the soul, and the interdependence of each, is explained in terms of the five sense organs. Dancing as an art, however, is not directly referred to in these texts (Kapila vatsyayan, 1968).

In the Chandogya Upanisad, we find that, among the arts listed, there is one called devajñana vidya which includes the arts of music, dancing, mythology, and perfume-making (Chandogya Upanisad, 8-1-2). All the Puranas and Itihasas have praised the dance as a Chakshusha Kratuva, which means a visual sacrifice.

Upanishads: Bridging the Spiritual and Artistic Realms

The Upanishads, philosophical texts that delve into the nature of reality and the self, continue the exploration of music and dance in a more symbolic and metaphorical manner. The concept of 'Nada Brahman' is introduced, which equates the cosmic sound (nada) to the ultimate reality (Brahman). This idea forms the basis of the belief that music and rhythm are inherent in the very fabric of the universe, and by attuning oneself to these cosmic vibrations, one can attain spiritual enlightenment.

The Upanishads also discuss the idea of 'Ananda' often translated as 'bliss' or 'divine joy.' This concept relates to the experience of transcendent happiness that arises from realizing one's unity with the cosmos. Music and dance are considered vehicles for attaining this bliss, as they have the power to uplift the soul and connect the individual with the divine source.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the references to music and dance in the *Rgveda*, *Samaveda*,

Yajurveda, and *Upanishads* highlight the integral role these art forms played in Vedic society. Beyond being forms of entertainment, music and dance were woven into the fabric of ritualistic practices, spiritual contemplation, and cosmic understanding. The portrayal of deities like Indra and the Maruts engaged in divine dances symbolizes the interplay between the celestial and earthly realms. As the *Upanishads* bridge the realms of the spiritual and the artistic, they reveal the profound connection between sound, movement, and the deepest truths of existence. Through this exploration, we gain a richer understanding of the multifaceted cultural and spiritual heritage of ancient India.

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Veda Samskruti is an inherent intellectual property of Bhaarata dEsham. It is the basic duty and right of every citizen in Bhaarata dEsham to protect this Intellectual property. Indian Constitution and Law provides provision for protection and preservation of its culture, its monuments, architecture etc.

The Chaturvedas said to have 1131 shaakhaas right up to the time of Aadi Shankaraachaarya and thereafter during last more than ten centuries, many shaakhaas are out of practice due to various reasons and presently only seven shaakaas are in the practice of Guru shiShya parampara.

There is a need to continuously preserve these available shaakhaas which may likely to disappear in future due to various external forces acting in the country vigorously with the power of money and global politics. It is time for the intellectuals of Bharata dEsham to wake-up and work collectively to protect and preserve Veda Samskruti of Bharata dEsham, by empowering the Youth of Bharat dEsham, the future care takers of this great Indian Heritage , with suitable education of our correct history and culture.

The above background lead to formation of this Veda Samskruti Samiti which is registered under Societies acts of Government of Telangana, with Regd. No. 961/2016 by Sri A.H. Prabhakara Rao, who is the Founder and President of the Samiti.

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