



Percussion Instruments in Ancient Indian Culture: A Study on Insights from Vedic Literature and Classical Texts

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Abstract

The percussion instruments in ancient Indian culture as depicted in Vedic literature and classical texts. It provides insights into the types of percussion instruments mentioned in these texts, their construction, significance in rituals and ceremonies, and their portrayal in later classical works such as Bharata's Natyasastra and the Ramayana. Through a detailed examination of various sources, including Vedic hymns, Brahmana texts, and Natyashastra, this study sheds light on the rich musical and cultural practices of ancient Indian society, emphasizing the importance of rhythmic accompaniment in religious rites, festive celebrations, and theatrical performances.

Keyword: Percussion Instruments, Ancient Indian Culture, Vedic Literature, Classical Texts, Drums, Bhumi-dundubhi, Dundhubi, Karkari, Samagana, Rig Veda, Satapatha Brahmana

I. Introduction

Percussion instruments have played a foundational role in the musical traditions of ancient India, contributing rhythmic complexity, cultural symbolism, and ritualistic significance to various artistic and religious practices. Through references in Vedic texts, classical treatises like Bharata's Natyasastra, and epic narratives such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, we gain valuable insights into the diverse array of percussion instruments that populated the ancient Indian musical landscape. From the resounding beats of the Muraja to the formidable resonance of the Bheri, each instrument carried its own distinct characteristics, serving as both musical tools and cultural artifacts.

Percussion Instruments in Vedic Literature

The drums covered with the skins of wild animals and large earthen drums reflects the primitive yet essential nature of percussion instruments in ancient times. These drums, made

from natural materials like animal skins and earthenware, would have been integral to Vedic rituals and ceremonies, providing rhythmic accompaniment to chants, hymns, and other forms of recitation.

The bhumi-dundubhi, is a formidable instrument used to signal danger or the approach of enemies. Its deep resonating pitch would have been effective in conveying warnings across distances, making it a crucial tool for early civilizations to communicate and defend themselves. Dundhubi is made from hollow tree trunks with skins stretched over the top, is another fascinating example of early percussion instruments. Its construction from natural materials reflects the ingenuity of ancient peoples in utilizing the resources available to them for musical expression and ritualistic purposes.

References to Percussion Instruments in Vedic Texts

References to percussion instruments in Vedic texts provide valuable insights into the musical culture of ancient India. The Rig Veda, one of the oldest Vedic texts dating back to approximately 1500–1200 BCE, contains several references to various percussion instruments, offering glimpses into their significance in rituals, ceremonies, and everyday life.

In Rig Veda 2.43.3, the term "Karkari" is mentioned as a percussion instrument. While the precise nature of the Karkari is not explicitly described in the text, its inclusion implies its importance in the musical practices of the time. The use of specific terminology for percussion instruments suggests that they were distinct and recognized components of Vedic music, indicating a sophisticated understanding of musical instrumentation.

Another percussion instrument mentioned in Vedic texts is the Karatala, referred to as the Aghati in some texts. The Karatala is known for its distinctive sound produced by striking, indicating



its role as a rhythmic accompaniment in Vedic performances. This suggests that percussion instruments were integral to the sonic landscape of Vedic rituals and ceremonies, contributing to the overall atmosphere and mood of the occasions.

Furthermore, Rig Veda 1.164.24 associates the seven notes with seven meters, demonstrating an early understanding of musical structure and organization in Vedic culture. This indicates that Vedic musicians had knowledge of musical theory, including concepts such as rhythm and meter, which informed their compositions and performances. The sophistication of Vedic musical knowledge underscores the importance of music in Vedic society and its role in religious, social, and cultural contexts.

The Satapatha Brahmana, a Vedic text associated with the Shukla Yajurveda, provides additional insights into the role of percussion instruments in Vedic society. In Satapatha Brahmana 13.1.5.1, an orchestra is described where men and women, including royalty, engage in music and dance. This text emphasizes the integral role of percussion instruments in various activities, including bathing rituals, highlighting their pervasive presence in daily life and ceremonial occasions among ancient Vedic communities.

Percussion Instruments in Bharata's Natyasastra

In Bharata's Natyasastra, an ancient Indian treatise on performing arts, percussion instruments are accorded significant importance, playing a vital role in enhancing the overall musical and theatrical experience. Bharata not only discusses the practical aspects of these instruments but also delves into their origins, symbolic significance, and scientific principles underlying their construction and sound production.

One of the prominent percussion instruments mentioned in the Natyasastra is the Mridanga Puskara. Bharata describes it as a drum-like instrument, likely akin to the Mridanga mentioned in other ancient Indian texts. The Mridanga, characterized by its cylindrical body and two heads covered with animal skin, is a traditional Indian drum with deep cultural and religious associations. Bharata's mention of the Mridanga Puskara underscores its role as a foundational percussion instrument in Indian classical music and performing arts.

Bharata also references several other percussion instruments made of leather, including the Panava, Dardura, and Pataha. These instruments, crafted from leather, varied in size,

shape, and tonal quality, offering a diverse range of rhythmic accompaniment to theatrical performances. The Panava, similar to the Mridanga, features two faces covered with membranes and was used during specific ceremonial and battle contexts. The Dardura, resembling a large water pot, and the Pataha, with its distinct sound characteristics, further enriched the sonic palette of performances described in the Natyasastra.

Additionally, Bharata mentions deep and resonant instruments like the Dundhubhi and Dondimi, which contributed to the atmospheric richness of musical compositions. The Dundhubhi, often associated with Lord Shiva, is depicted as an hourglass-shaped drum with knotted cords stretched across the heads, creating a deep and reverberating sound. The Dondimi, although less documented, is noted for its similar deep-sounding qualities, adding depth and intensity to musical renditions.

Bharata's scientific explanations for the deep sound produced by instruments like the Dundhubhi and Dondimi reflect an early understanding of acoustics and musical craftsmanship. His descriptions likely encompassed factors such as the materials used in constructing these instruments, the tension applied to the drumheads, and the resonance generated within their hollow bodies. These insights highlight the meticulous attention to detail and craftsmanship that characterized the development and refinement of percussion instruments in ancient India.

Avnaddha and Ghana Vadyas

The description of Avnaddha and Ghana vadyas in the Natyashastra provides valuable insights into the origins and characteristics of these percussion instruments. Avnaddha vadyas, also known as Pushkara vadyas according to Bharata, are credited to the sage Svati, who drew inspiration from the musical notes produced by raindrops falling on lotus leaves.

Bharata's use of the term "Pushkara vadyas" refers to Avnaddha vadyas, which include instruments like the Mridanga, Panava, and Dardura among others. These instruments are primarily percussion instruments, with the term "Pushkara" literally meaning a kind of drum.

The Vishnudharmottara Purana also highlights Pushkara vadyas as a significant category among Avnaddha vadyas. This further emphasizes the importance of percussion instruments like drums in the Avnaddha vadyas category.



Bharata Muni provides detailed descriptions of the three kinds of Mridanga - Alingya, Annika, and Urdhavaka. The Annika Mridanga was played in a 3/5 tala and had a diameter of twelve fingers. The Darura Mridanga resembled a ghata (water pot) with a mouth diameter of nine fingers covered by a stretched membrane. Abhinavagupta describes the Darura as resembling a huge water pot. Panava, mentioned alongside Bheri and Mridanga in the Ramayana, had two faces covered by membranes and was used during stuti (praise), deva puja (worship of deities), or battles. Nanyadeva suggests that the sound of Panava could induce Lord Shiva to dance. Panava's length was sixteen fingers with a face measuring five fingers. Bharata describes three wires stretched inside the Panava from one face to another, tuned to Shadaja, Rishabha, and Gandhara notes. A hole in the middle allowed the resonating strings' svaras (musical notes) to be heard clearly. Bharata also details the type of leather and its stretching over the faces of these instruments. Mridanga, Panava, and Dardura collectively are known as 'Pushkara Vadyas.'

Other Percussion Instruments in Natyasastra

Bharata Muni mentions several other Avanaddha vadyas apart from the Mridanga, Panava, and Dardura. These include Jhallari, Pataha, Dimdima, and Hudakka. Additionally, he refers to Mardala, Dundubhi, and Tripushkara-vadya.

Regarding the Tripushkara-vadya, Bharata mentions it at multiple places, but its exact form is subject to interpretation. It could be either a single drum with three faces (right, middle, and left) or three separate drums played together. Ancient Indian sculptures depict both forms: some show a drummer with two drums, one lying obliquely on the lap and the other in an upright position, while others show three "mridanga type drums," two in an upright position and one in an oblique position behind.

Ambiguity Surrounding Tripushkara-vadya

The ambiguity surrounding the Tripushkara-vadya in ancient Indian music and performance traditions underscores the intricate and multifaceted nature of percussion instruments during that era. Tripushkara-vadya, as mentioned in Bharata's Natyasastra and depicted in various sculptures and artistic representations, presents challenges in its interpretation and classification due to differing depictions and descriptions.

The term "Tripushkara-vadya" literally translates to "instrument with three faces." However, the exact form and structure of this instrument remain subject to interpretation, leading to ambiguity and scholarly debate. Some interpretations suggest that Tripushkara-vadya could be a single drum with three faces positioned in a specific configuration, such as right, middle, and left. This interpretation aligns with descriptions found in ancient texts and sculptures depicting a single drum with multiple faces, each potentially producing distinct sounds or tones.

On the other hand, alternative interpretations propose that Tripushkara-vadya may consist of three separate drums played together as a unified ensemble. This interpretation is supported by depictions in ancient Indian sculptures, where three drum-like instruments are depicted in close proximity or being played simultaneously by a single performer. These depictions suggest the possibility of three distinct drums functioning together to create harmonious rhythms and melodies.

The diversity of interpretations regarding the form and structure of Tripushkara-vadya reflects the complexity and richness of ancient Indian percussion instruments. It also underscores the challenges faced by scholars and researchers in accurately reconstructing and understanding musical traditions from historical sources and archaeological evidence.

Muraja and Bheri

Muraja, a percussion instrument akin to the Mridanga and Mardala, possesses distinct characteristics that set it apart in terms of size and structure. Described in ancient texts such as the Jatakas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, Muraja is noted for its smaller size compared to the Mardala. While the Mardala typically features larger dimensions, Muraja's left face measures eight fingers, and the right face measures seven fingers. This variation in size suggests differences in tonal quality and playing technique between the two instruments.

The mention of Muraja in ancient epics and scriptures highlights its significance in historical and cultural contexts. As a percussion instrument used in various cultural and ritualistic settings, Muraja played a crucial role in musical performances, religious ceremonies, and storytelling traditions. Its presence in sacred texts underscores its importance as a symbol of cultural heritage and artistic expression in ancient India.



Similarly, Bheri emerges as another notable percussion instrument with distinct characteristics and cultural significance. Made of metal, Bheri features two faces, each measuring three spans (balishta) along and covered by leather kept taut by strings. The material composition and construction of Bheri, particularly its bronze make, contribute to its durability and resonant sound quality.

Bheri's unique playing technique involves striking the right face with a *kona*, a type of beater, while the left face is struck with the hand. This distinctive method of playing produces a loud and commanding sound, which was renowned for its ability to evoke fear and awe among enemies. As such, Bheri was not only a musical instrument but also a symbol of power, strength, and intimidation in ancient warfare and battle scenarios.

The portrayal of Bheri in ancient texts and cultural narratives reflects its integral role in ancient Indian society, particularly in military contexts and ceremonial occasions. Its use as a signaling device, ceremonial instrument, and cultural artifact underscores its multifaceted significance in shaping historical narratives and cultural practices.

II. Conclusion:

In conclusion, percussion instruments played a significant role in ancient Indian culture, as evidenced by their mention in Vedic literature and classical texts. From the primitive yet essential drums covered with animal skins to the more elaborate instruments like the *Mridanga*, *Panava*, and *Dardura* described in Bharata's *Natyasastra*, these instruments were integral to various aspects of ancient Indian life. They provided rhythmic accompaniment to rituals, ceremonies, festive celebrations, and theatrical performances, contributing to the cultural and musical richness of ancient Indian society. Through the study of these instruments and their roles in ancient texts, we gain valuable insights into the musical practices and cultural traditions of ancient India, highlighting the importance of percussion in shaping the cultural identity of the civilization.

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