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Indian Classical Music: Cultural Syncretism and Its Role in Shaping Societal Norms in India

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ABSTRACT

Indian classical music, with its rich tapestry of sounds, modes, and rhythms, stands as a testament to the cultural diversity and depth of India. This musical tradition, spanning thousands of years, has not only survived the test of time but has thrived, evolving into a complex system of ragas and talas that resonate with the soul of India. The evolution of Indian classical music is a story of cultural syncretism, where various influences—local, regional, and foreign—have been absorbed, adapted, and reinterpreted to create something uniquely Indian. This research paper aims to explore the trajectory of Indian classical music's evolution, emphasizing its role in cultural syncretism and its impact on shaping societal norms in historical India.

Key Words- Indian Classical Music, Cultural Exchange, Persian Culture

INTRODUCTION

The roots of Indian classical music can be traced back to the Vedic period, where the earliest form of music was integral to religious rituals and ceremonies. Over centuries, it has been influenced by various cultural invasions, including Persian, Arabian and Central Asian, each adding new dimensions to the music. These influences have been integrated into the classical music framework, contributing to its richness and diversity. Cultural syncretism, the blending of different cultural influences into a new and distinct form, is a hallmark of Indian classical music. Indian classical music has served as a medium for cultural exchange, absorbing elements from various invaders, travellers, and local traditions, leading to the development of distinct styles such as Hindustani and Carnatic music.



More than just entertainment, music in India has always had a profound role in shaping societal norms and values. Through the philosophical and spiritual lyrics of bhajans and kirtans, to the expressive narratives of the ragas, Indian classical music has influenced social behaviour, religious practices, and cultural identities and integrations blending the diverse cultures into one. Music has always been a powerful vehicle for transmitting cultural values, fostering community cohesion, and changing societal norms throughout India's history.

Research Objective & Significance

The objective of this research is to illuminate the significant role of Indian classical music in the cultural syncretism of India and its profound impact on the development of societal norms. By tracing the evolution of this art form, this study aims to highlight the dynamic interaction between music, culture, and society in historical India. Throughout history, music has served as a mirror of societal evolution, reflecting changing norms and values. From ancient rituals to modern protests, music has been a powerful tool for expressing cultural identity and resisting oppression. It has documented historical events, preserving narratives and memories for future generations. This study not only contributes to the academic discourse on music and cultural studies but also underscores the importance of preserving musical traditions as living embodiments of a society's heritage and values.

Research Gap

While there is substantial enlightenment on the history and development of Indian classical music, including its origin, evolution, and distinct styles like Hindustani and Carnatic music, a comprehensive analysis of its role in cultural syncretism and shaping societal norms in India remains less explored. Several studies have focused on the musical, theoretical, and performance aspects of Indian classical music; however, there is a noticeable gap in interdisciplinary research that integrates musicology with socio-cultural history to understand how Indian classical music is not only a product of cultural integration but also an active agent in shaping and reflecting societal norms across different historical epochs.

Interdisciplinary Analysis: Throughout the centuries, India has been a melting pot of foreign cultural influences that have seamlessly integrated with indigenous elements to form a unique and unmistakably Indian synthesis. The history of the Indian subcontinent, spanning thousands of years, is marked by a diverse tapestry of religious and cultural traditions. A lack of interdisciplinary approach that combine musicology with social history, anthropology and



cultural studies to examine Indian classical music's role in society. This includes exploring how musical innovations were influenced by and reflected broader societal changes, such as shifts in religious practices, social hierarchies, and cultural identities.

Comparative Studies: There is a gap in comparative analysis between the different genres of Indian classical music (e.g., Hindustani vs. Carnatic) in terms of their socio cultural impacts and the mechanisms of cultural exchange and syncretism they each embody.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. **"The Music of India" by Reginald Massey**

This book provides a comprehensive overview of the history and development of Indian music, including classical, folk, and modern genres. It explores the cultural significance of music in Indian society and its evolution over the centuries.

2. **"Music and Musical Thought in Early India" by Lewis Rowell**

Rowell's book examines the theoretical and philosophical foundations of Indian music from Vedic times to the classical period. It is an essential read for understanding the intellectual underpinnings of Indian classical music.

3. **"Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective" by Krishna Sharma**

While not exclusively about music, this book delves into the Bhakti movement's profound influence on Indian culture, including music. It offers insights into how devotional practices have shaped artistic expressions, including classical music.

4. **"Hindustani Music in Colonial Bombay" by Peter Manuel**

This book explores the transformation of North Indian classical music during the colonial period in Bombay, highlighting the socio-economic and cultural dynamics that influenced its development.

5. **"Music, Modernity, and Publicness in India" by Tejaswini Niranjana**

Exploring the role of music in shaping public culture in India, this book examines how musical practices have been involved in the negotiation of modernity and publicness, offering insights into the societal impact of music.

Historiography

Plethora of ancient civilizations that thrived on the Indian subcontinent, such as the Vedic, Persian, Greek, Islamic and Dravidian cultures, had an influence on Indian culture and classical music through many factors. Through trade, conquest, and the exchange of cultures,



each of these civilizations made their own contributions to the growth and evolution of Indian culture and classical music which can be observed till now.

A historical analysis of "The Evolution of Indian Classical Music: Cultural Syncretism and Its Role in Shaping Societal Norms in Historical India" requires examining various periods of Indian history, highlighting key moments of cultural exchange, and analysing the impact of these on societal norms. This analysis will explore how Indian classical music has not only adapted and evolved over time but also how it has influenced and been influenced by societal changes, reflecting the dynamic cultural syncretism of India which has been a result of the musical integration over decades.

Cultural Syncretism

Cultural syncretism in Indian classical music is evident in the assimilation of various musical instruments, styles, and genres from different cultures. Instruments like Sitar and Tabla, which are staples of Indian classical music, have their origins and influences from Central Asian and Persian cultures. This blending of musical elements from diverse cultures has not only enriched Indian classical music but also served as a medium of unity and cultural exchange.

The further mentioned Historical Frame of Reference analysis that outlines how Indian classical music has influenced and been influenced by cultural coalescence:

1. Vedic period

The origin of Indian classical music can be linked, to the Vedic hymns, emphasizing the sacredness of sound and its importance in spiritual practices. Important melodic sources involving Gandharvas and Apsaras are praised in the Rig Veda. The Vedas mentioned music as "Gandharva Veda," which examined musical and song forms, indicating that they placed a high value on it and crafted its importance in the society.

The Vedic scriptures, notably the Samaveda, features elaborate hymns and chants that formed an integral part of religious observances and rituals. The rhythmic cadences and melodic frameworks of these chants laid the groundwork for the subsequent evolution of classical music. For example, traditional instruments such as Ektara and Bansuri were assimilated into classical music ensembles, diversifying the auditory spectrum of Indian classical music. Similarly, the melodic contours and rhythmic motifs of folk melodies played a pivotal role in shaping classical ragas and talas, showcasing the symbiotic relationship between folk



traditions and classical music. The theoretical foundation laid in Bharata's Natyashastra underscores music's role in drama and dance, expanding its influence beyond purely religious contexts into cultural and societal spheres.

The spread of Buddhism and Jainism introduced new forms of music and performance arts, emphasizing the role of music in education and as a means of spreading philosophical teachings. Persian and Central Asian cultures exerted an impact on Indian classical music all throughout the Maurya and Gupta eras, after the Vedas. The emergence of Persian musical traditions had an enormous influence on the growth of Indian classical music. The field of music underwent growth and advancement throughout the Gupta Empire. New styles of Indian classical music were established by musicians and artists, encompassing vocal, instrumental, and rhythmic innovations.

2. Mughal Era

The Mughal Empire's patronage of arts led to a golden age of music, where musicians were esteemed members of the court. This era saw the synthesis of Persian and Indian musical traditions, enriching the repertoire of Indian classical music. This period witnessed the development of new melodic frameworks, rhythmic patterns and compositions, laying the foundation for the classical music traditions that continue to thrive in India today. Integration of Indian and Persian musical traditions was steered because of Akbar's encouragement for Hindustani classical music. When musicians from various places and backgrounds came together, they exchanged their views, experiences, creativity and the blend of diverse musical symphony led to the creation of futuristic music new styles and compositions whose magic which is still found in the musical history of India. Akbar's interest in Sufism also influenced Indian classical music. Sufism emphasized devotion and a personal connection with the divine, using music as a key element in worship and spiritual gatherings, thus democratizing religious practices. Many musical instruments from other countries and regions were brought in and integrated into Akbar's court. Indian classical music has been strengthened in terms of repertory and tone by the addition of instruments such as the Dilruba, Rabab, sitar and the Persian santoor etc. which were the results of musical and cultural syncretism. Akbar implemented policies of religious tolerance so that people could express their views and exchange ideas. This policy genuinely complemented the situation, and this fostered the interaction and exchange of cultures across the country. This created an environment easier



for Hindus, Muslims, and other religious groups to share musical concepts, methods and ideas which aided in the growth of a rich and varied musical heritage.

3. British Colonial Impact

The British colonial period introduced Western musical instruments and theories, leading to further cross-cultural exchange. However, it also marked a period of institutionalization of music education, which impacted the traditional Guru-Shishya (teacher-student) transmission system. In the Guru-Shishya tradition, knowledge and skills were passed down orally from teacher to student in a highly personalized and intimate manner. However, with the institutionalization of music education under British influence, there was a shift towards a more formalized and structured approach to learning music, which often involved written notation and standardized curriculum. The British colonial period had a complex impact on the music education landscape in India, introducing Western musical influences while simultaneously altering traditional modes of musical transmission. Indian classical music started to be influenced by European musical elements like harmony and orchestration during the colonial era. Composers from the latter half of the nineteenth century, such as Ali Akbar Khan and Pt. Ravi Shankar, who fused Western instruments, methods and styles with the fundamentals of Indian classical music, have been particularly noteworthy for the effect they had in their works.

4. Post-Independence Era to Contemporary Times

Revival and Institutionalization: Post-independence, there was a conscious effort to revive traditional Indian arts, leading to the establishment of institutions like the Sangeet Natak Akademi, ICCR etc. which played a significant role in the preservation and dissemination of classical music.

Globalization and Fusion: The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen Indian classical music entering the global stage, with fusion genres blending Indian and Western musical elements, reflecting ongoing cultural syncretism.

Collaboration with musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds, fusion with other musical genres and electronic music, and the use of digital platforms for dissemination have further enriched the tradition of cultural syncretism in Indian classical music.

5. Influence on Culture and society



The historical journey of Indian classical music exemplifies cultural syncretism, where external influences have been assimilated and reinterpreted within the Indian context, enriching the musical tradition. This music has not only reflected India's diverse cultural heritage but has also played a crucial role in shaping societal norms, challenging social hierarchies, and fostering a sense of national identity. By tracing its evolution, we gain insights into the complex interplay between music, culture, and society in India, highlighting the enduring power of Indian classical music to bridge differences and bring about social cohesion.

SHAPING SOCIETAL NORMS

Indian classical music has played a pivotal role in shaping societal norms through its deep association with spirituality, education, and social hierarchy. Music in India is not just an art form; it's a mean of spiritual practice and social teaching. The Bhakti and Sufi movements, which emphasized devotion through music and poetry, challenged the rigid caste system and promoted a message of unity and equality in society. The lyrics of compositions, often derived from religious texts or philosophical ideas, have been used to impart moral values and foster a sense of community among listeners. Here's an analysis that delineates how Indian classical music has been influential in shaping societal norms:

1. Impact on Identity and Social Cohesion: The evolution of Indian classical music has contributed significantly to the development of regional identities and national cohesion. The distinct musical styles have not only preserved the linguistic and cultural heritage of their regions but have also served as symbols of pride and identity. Moreover, Indian classical music has been instrumental in bridging cultural gaps, promoting mutual respect and understanding among India's diverse communities. National events, festivals, and public concerts often feature classical music performances, underscoring its role in fostering a unified national identity amidst diversity.

2. Spiritual Impact: Numerous compositions in Indian classical music are profoundly established in spiritual and philosophical concepts. Through its verses and tunes, it promotes values such as dedications, devotion and internal peace, hence affecting societal standards with respect to other worldly existence and ethical quality.

3. Gender Elements: Traditionally, Indian classical music has been ruled by male artistes. Be that as it may, there have been noteworthy strides in a long time, with more



female performers picking up acknowledgment. Hence, the gender orientation dynamics inside the classical music community shed light on broader societal states of mind towards gender orientation and balance.

4. Collective Solidarity, Social Concordance, and Patriotism: Indian classical music, with its wealthy history and differing conventions, serves as a binding drive for diverse communities and locales in India. It could rise above etymological, social, and devout obstructions, cultivating a sense of concordance and solidarity among individuals from different foundations, which is pivotal for social developments to succeed. Indian classical music has long been entwined with the patriotism of India. During the development of Indian autonomy, artists like Rabindranath Tagore utilized classical music to motivate a sense of nationalism and solidarity among the Indian people, contributing to the movement's energy.

5. Resurgence of Interest: There has been an encouraging interest by industrialists, business tycoons and social organizations in conventional Indian classical music, as part of endeavours to protect social legacy and advance social incorporation. Various organizations and people organize concerts, workshops, and instructive activities to revitalize classical music conventions and make them available to more extensive groups of onlookers, subsequently contributing to shaping societal norms.

6. Relevance and Challenges: In contemporary times, Indian classical music faces the challenge of staying relevant in the face of globalization and the proliferation of popular music. However, it continues to adapt and thrive, finding new audiences through fusion with other music forms and digital media. Its role in shaping societal norms may have evolved, but it remains a vital expression of India's cultural diversity and a testament to its capacity for syncretism.

Conclusion

The evolution of Indian classical music is a compelling example of cultural syncretism and its capacity to shape and reflect societal norms. As a living tradition, it continues to evolve, embracing new influences while preserving its rich heritage. The importance of Indian classical music not only as an art form but as a crucial component of India's cultural identity, offering a window into the complex interplay between music, culture, and society in historical and contemporary India. Indian classical music not only entertains but also educates, unites and inspires continuing to shape the cultural and societal landscape of India.



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