

Engrossed Minds, Embodied Moods and Liberated Spirits in Two Musical Traditions of India ^[1]

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One of the most salient marketing and exoticizing ploys in introducing the classical music of India to the Western world during the 1960s centered on the trope of Eastern spirituality. The West's spiritual reserve was bankrupt, foolishly spent in pursuit of material happiness, a pursuit whose cost was met through economic Imperialism and an illegal war. The East, especially mysterious India, was imagined as a place where spirituality and transcendental peace were still to be found. The discourse of self realization that accompanied the musical performances of such renowned masters of the tradition as Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Pandit Ravi Shankar certainly helped to further these notions of spiritual rebirth through Indian musical experience. Possibly as a result of the link of Indian music's imputed spirituality with its superficial, faddish popularity in the United States during that decade, scholars seeking to carry out serious study of this tradition felt compelled not only to distance themselves from the spirituality trope, but also to subvert the trope within their own discourse – for example, by jokingly making reference to Indian music's appeal to those seeking instant enlightenment (Neuman 1984: 9). As a result, I feel that some of the ramifications of the very real pervasiveness of what I'll call the "spiritual component" of Indian music remain understated in the abundance of scholarly research on the classical music of India.

My principal concern here is to present the phenomenological basis for Indian music's spirituality as I have experienced it, and as others within the tradition have affirmed it as an important, tangible part of their musical life and practices. As a student of musical performance practice both at the Banaras Hindu University and within the traditional *guru-shishya* relationship, my experience of the music's "spiritual component" was far from trivial, and it never approached the realm of jocularly. At the Banaras Hindu University, the link of the musical and the spiritual was reinforced with communal musical prayer every class day at a designated time, and its epistemology was eloquently articulated in classes dealing with the aesthetics and philosophy of music. As a disciple of Pandit Ravi Shankar, spirituality was embedded in the devotional nature of the relationship – devotion to one's guru, musical practice (*abhyas*, or *riaz*), and immediate tradition (the *gharana*), but it was also a seemingly tangible force that appeared during especially beautiful moments of my musical training – experiences that in many ways are beyond my capacity to translate into language, but which have been characterized by some of my co-students as "feeling as

though one is in the presence of God". Spirituality is certainly bound up with the link between the student and guru – both Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar, as well as many other musicians, construct portable shrines of their gurus to which they offer prayers prior to proceeding to the stage, a time when one is especially intent on receiving Divine inspiration. Ustad Ali Akbar Khan once remarked to me that he is not really playing the *sarod* when he performs; he is simply providing a vehicle for a divine force to manifest itself.

What I will recount here is not entirely new. Daniel Neuman (1980) had noted the spiritual component of Indian musical practice over fifteen years ago, and in a recent article, Robert Simms (1994) writes similar thoughts about the peculiar emphasis on practice found in Indian music, linking the phenomenon ultimately to a devotional spirituality. In searching for a theoretical basis for these cultural notions, I will eventually turn our attention to the *rasa* theory of Indian aesthetics, a subject relatively well known to South Asianists. However, its relevance to music has been demonstrated by only a few scholars – foremost among them being Prem Lata Sharma (1973), Wim van der Meer (1980) and, most recently, Lewis Rowell (1992). Yet, in doing so, none of these writers has explicitly provided the phenomenological link that underlies the “spiritual component” of the aesthetic experience

of Indian music. For this, I have relied upon the detailed work of K. C. Pandey (1959), whose study of the history of Indian aesthetics is remarkable for its widesweeping breadth and insightful comparative study of all its classical traditions.

This paper is not so much a report of recent research as it is a presentation of ideas that may not yet be fully formed, nor thoroughly integrated. Yet, I present them, nevertheless, for they dwell on an aspect of Indian music that has long captured my imagination, both intellectually and musically. As a performer of the *sitar*, I have sought to find some significance in my musical pursuits that transcends just making good



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Ali Akbar Khan, b. 1922

music. For many years I have devoted much of my body, mind and spirit to my Indian musical quest. Through my devotion to the tradition, to my guru, and to my *gharana*, I feel that I have experienced an emotional universe shared by my musical teachers and co-students. It is within this universe of the emotions that one finds embedded the direct connection to the spirituality of Indian music. Let me, then, turn to *rasa*, and, in particular, to the thoughts of an eleventh-century aesthete, Abhinavagupta, and his theory of transcendence through aesthetic experience.

Abhinavagupta's theory of musical transcendence

It has become a truism to state that India's philosophical traditions represent some of the deepest thinking in human history. I claim no particular expertise in Indian philosophy, and do not seek here to validate truisms. Rather, what I intend is to argue for the desirability of including in one's theoretical premises those that are based on philosophical underpinnings indigenous to the culture in which one carries out research. It has been an important part of its intellectual history that ethnomusicology has looked often to other disciplines in its search for theoretical paradigms. Its interdisciplinarity is surely one of ethnomusicology's strongest attractions. However, during the last decade, it has been my perception that this interdisciplinarity has not been as catholic as we may wish to believe. At its worst, research data appear to be subjugated to an agenda motivated by interests that have very little to do with the culture from which the data come. I would believe that, especially when seeking insightful exegeses of the process of cognate aesthetic experience, the paradigms of indigenous thinkers should be the starting point in analysing field data.

Any analysis of aesthetic experience in Indian classical music would be inexcusably remiss if it were to overlook Abhinavagupta's interpretation of the theory of *rasa*. *Rasa* is the nexus where we find the total integration of mind, body and spirit. *Rasa* theory is consonant with contemporary ethnomusicological paradigms: it focuses on the aesthetic experience as it arises in the dynamic context of performance, it presupposes enculturated minds as a prerequisite to aesthetic experience, and it is relational as it locates aesthetic meaning not so much as something to be found in an artistic product, but rather, as something to be evoked from the culturally conditioned unconscious of the aesthete. In other words, *rasa* theory, especially as articulated by Abhinavagupta, views the aesthetic potential of artistic expressions to be culturally bounded. At the same time, the theory, in combination with the non-dualistic philosophy of Saiva monism, illuminates a path that transcends cultural barriers in the actual experience of aesthetic rapture.

Abhinavagupta was an eleventh-century Kashmiri philosopher. His thoughts on the

aesthetic experience represent the culmination of a tradition of theorizing by philosophers over the course of several centuries. At the root of this theorizing was an aphorism in the classical dramaturgical treatise, *Natyasastra*, regarding *rasa*: *vibhava*, *anubhava*, *vyabhicari sanyoga*, *rasa nispati* – through the union of *vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhicari*, *rasa*, or aesthetic enjoyment, is made manifest. *Vibhava* is the aesthetic locus, *anubhava* are physical expressions of emotive feeling, including such reactions as blushing, weeping, trembling, and sweating; the *vyabhicari* include fundamental emotions, the *sthayi bhavas*, as well as numerous (thirty-three) subsidiary emotions/feelings and/or moods. Because of its brevity and ambiguity, the statement in the *Natyasastra* was interpreted differently by different aestheticians. Abhinavagupta's exegesis has stood as the culmination of the cumulative process of unpacking the implications of the original statement of the *Natyasastra*. It includes notions of collective experience as well as individual, acquired capacities to respond to aesthetic stimuli. Aesthetic experience is bound up in a process of universalizing meaning, freeing it from the space and time of the vehicle that carries it. In other words, aesthetic effect is direct and immediate, bypassing thought processes necessary for mundane understanding.

Abhinavagupta posits that for aesthetic experience to occur, the individual must first undergo a process of universalization, *sadharanikaran*. To become universalized means to become depersonalized, to be deindividualized. Abhinavagupta's process of universalization is not so much concerned with a mundane social consciousness as it is with the concept of a universal soul, or *atma*. To become universalized, one must lose sense of one's ego. When this occurs, we can suppose a unity of experience by a large group observing the same aesthetic phenomena. His theory places aesthetic experience within the observer, and attributes its germination to the power of the aesthetic expression to evoke associations with past experiences, or *samskaras*.

Abhinavagupta's theory stems from a combination of the component of the bliss of experiencing the universal soul, *Adyatmic Anand*, which comes from the philosophical tradition, *Advaita Vedanta*, with the component of *vyengena* – the reverberative association effect – which is derived from the *dhvani* theory of the ninth-century literary theorist, Anandavardana. His theory moves the capacity for aesthetic experience from an innate element of the aesthetic expression to the subjective experience of a universalized, depersonalized self drawing upon past experience unconsciously and at a metaphysical level. I find it interesting that an eleventh-century aesthetician reached such a conclusion through an interdisciplinary approach. I also find it interesting that Abhinavagupta located the emotions in our subconscious, an hypothesis that has recently been confirmed by neurological research on the limbic system.

Let me try to restate and summarize the principle tenets of Abhinavagupta's theory of aesthetic experience:

- 1) only individuals who have experienced emotional situations in real life can have aesthetic awareness. They are equipped with latent emotions in their subconscious.
- 2) the aesthetic experience is triggered by the unhampered contemplation of artistic performance during which the aesthete undergoes the process of depersonalization and deindividualization – *sadharanikaran*. This process is catalyzed by the power of suggestion, or *vyengena*. Through empathetic perception, the latent *sthayi bhava*, one of the fundamental emotions, is aroused in the aesthete. This *sthayi bhava* corresponds to the immanent *rasa* of the expressive medium. The welling up of this emotion causes a state of total engrossment, which concomitantly leads to the loss of ego.
- 3) the totally unhampered experience of the *sthayi bhava* welling up from within is *rasa*. In other words, *rasa* is activated and expressed.
- 4) the totally universalized aesthete, absorbed in *rasa*, attains a transcendent state of divine bliss – *anand*, a kind of super *rasa* that subsumes all others. This experience of *anand* is tantamount to union with the Universal soul, *Atma*, since the individual has lost sense of self and is permeated with ecstasy. Thus, the individual experiences a spiritual liberation – *moksa*.

In Indian music, *rag-bhava* is the expressive aspect that is to be experienced in the performance of a *rag*. In accordance with Abhinavagupta's theory, the *rasa*-experience brought about by the perception of *rag-bhava* has the potential to effect an experience in the listener tantamount to a divine revelation. However, only those listeners who come to the event with a deep knowledge of the artistic medium and pure intent can have the potential to be catapulted to the blissful state of *anand*. It requires a special kind of predisposition.

To fully comprehend the theoretical potential of the properly conceived musical expression



Akhil Bakshi

Ravi Shankar, b. 1920



Shivkumar Sharma

to produce a spiritually liberating experience, one must go deeper into the tenets of Abhinavagupta's philosophy. Abhinavagupta adhered to the Saiva Trika school of Advaita Vedanta, a philosophy of non-duality. The Ultimate in Saiva monism is dynamic, not static – it is the root of causation and contains within itself all that it causes to exist (i.e., the whole universe). Therefore, all of existence is a reflection of the Divine Ultimate, and the experience of the true aspect of anything in existence is the same as the experience of the Divine. The Saiva theory uses the metaphor of reflection, implying that the entire universe is related to the Ultimate exactly as is the reflection of an external object to the smooth surface of the mirror that produces the reflected image. The

Ultimate is characterized as unity in multiplicity: it is the indissoluble union of the light of consciousness (*prakas*) and freedom (*vimarsa*). The universe, a manifested reflection of the Ultimate, is broadly divisible into two – expressive sounds and the things for which expressive sounds stand – the latter said to be essentially of the nature of the light of consciousness, the former, of freedom. The universe does not exist independently. It exists only as a reflection of the Ultimate, and it exists because of the Ultimate's limitless power of freedom (Pandey 1959: 562-5).

Sound, at the level of the Ultimate, is called *Para-Nada*. It is a state of perfect unity of elemental sounds from which all gross sounds and ideas spring forth. It is a state of perfect identity of expressible idea and expressive sound, and it is present in all limited subjects at a transcendental level of selfconsciousness. As it becomes manifest, it evolves through three states – *pasyanti*, *madhyama*, and *vaikhari*. In the process of passing through these states, there is greater distinction of the thought idea and the sound that expresses it: *pasyanti* is a state of the faintest awareness of a distinction between the idea and its expressed sound; *madhyama* is the sound of the idea that is in one's consciousness but not yet articulated; and *vaikhari* is the stage in which the distinction between sound and thought is manifested because the physical organs of speech cause the idea to be voiced. Musical sounds, especially those unhindered with referential text, would be classified by the Saiva philosopher at the level of "gross" *pasyanti* because they are inarticulate, yet they can be heard (i.e., they are gross).

Inasmuch as they are non-referential, musical sounds, especially in comparison with language, are representative of the quality of unity of expressible idea and the sound that expresses the idea. Because they are at the level of *pasyanti*, they are closest to *Para-Nada*. Hence, concentration on musical notes guides the listener towards the transcendental level. Musical experience at the transcendental level is the direct experience of *Para-Nada*. Another term used for this is *ananda*, pure bliss, the super *rasa* that I spoke of above. Indian musicians seem to imply the experience of *ananda* when they state that their music is a path to self-realization, to a transcendent state above self-consciousness at the level of Truth in the Ultimate sense. Similar concepts of the ultimate meaning of music in Indian culture still exist. A succinct statement by Ravi Shankar that strikes a remarkably consonant note with Kashmiri Saiva philosophy readily comes to mind: “The highest aim of our music is to reveal the essence of the universe it reflects, and the *rag*s are among the means by which this essence can be apprehended” (1968:17). And further, the following statement by Kashmiri *santur* master, Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma, seems to express ideas that are exceptionally in tune with those that I have outlined here:

Each *rag* has got its specific mood. And those *rag*s are connected with the timings of the day. Some are played in the early morning to convey a devotional mood, a prayerful mood. Then there are certain *rag*s which are played in the evening and the night, which can be a romantic mood. Different emotions are there. For instance, I go on the stage. I know what *rag* I am going to play. I know the mood of that *rag*. Then, naturally, I can visualize certain things connected with that mood which were seen some time back, which were registered in my mind, and I recollect it. And that sort of inspires me to create the mood of the *rag*. But still, then, I have a very strong feeling...this is something which I call the take off point. The beginning of our journey. And our destination is something else. The audience reaction is so important that all the quality and standard of a performance depend on that. Because this music is not written. What we play, it is all created there. And what we expect from the audience is that they should be at the same wavelength – the same tuning – they should feel the same thing what the artist is feeling. So, all these things all are all combined together. Then a situation is created – what I call the destination – where the *rag*, the musicians, the instruments, the audience...they all merge together...and the whole atmosphere doesn't remain a particular auditorium or place...it becomes a *rag*. And I feel that's a situation where the listeners are experiencing a bliss...the same bliss that the artist is experiencing. They are not there to be entertained, or come there to take it as an enjoyment or some entertainment sort of thing. It's a bliss. And both of them – the listeners and the artists – they become together. That is the ultimate. I think.

So while it may be misguided for those seeking instant enlightenment to look for it in Indian classical music, it seems plausible to suggest that those who live the tradition have the

opportunity to experience an instant of enlightenment.

Spiritual liberation through engrossment is a theme that reappears in several of India's musical traditions. I have found that the goal may be the same in these traditions, but the path to get there, and the conceptualization of the path, may differ from that found in the art tradition. For example, in my research on Hindu *kirtan* assemblies in Banaras, I found that a similar state of ecstatic bliss is sought by congregants.

My personal experience with Hindu devotional music differed a great deal from my experience with the classical tradition. I was more affected in the bodily and mental realms than in the spiritual realm as a result of my field work on *kirtan*. At times, I thought my auditory canal had suffered irreversible damage as a result of spending long, continuous hours in the presence of the deafening roar of the *kirtan*. Intellectually, and quite frankly, I was perplexed. When, at the Sankat Mochan Temple on Hanuman Jayanti, I encountered no less than fifteen different *kirtan* organizations simultaneously performing, I wondered how a group of people could want to subject themselves to that degree of cacophony. I must have been missing something. Most apparently, I was unable to share in the religious ecstasy that these people experienced. It wasn't my thing; I was an ethnomusicologist doing fieldwork – not a devotee. Through my interviews, I learned that congregants viewed their music as a medium through which they could attain engrossment, total mental involvement leading to religious ecstasy. But the music they sang served only as a medium for the actual engrossment causing agent. Here, it was the sonic symbol of the Divine, represented textually either by name, deed or description of appearance, that led congregants to a state of engrossment. Music was ancillary to the process. Its purpose was to interject an enjoyable entertainment into the religious activity of remembering the deity. Piercian semiotics would ascribe an indexical function to this Divine symbol, for the sound of the Divine name is as closely related to the actual Divine as are smoke and fire, or thunder and lightning – it is simply another form of the same energy.

Hindustani classical music and popular Hindu devotional song: two traditions that are about as far apart as any two musics of one culture could be. That engrossment is a goal of experience in both indicates to me that there is some common cultural ideal that encompasses both expressive/impressive traditions. What I hope to have shown here is that two very different processes are at work in leading the individual to such an engrossed state. In the art music tradition, engrossment and bliss are the direct outcome of an aesthetic experience of a music whose formative elements are shaped by a transcendent philosophy; in the popular devotional assembly, engrossment is achieved through the intense religious experience of a deity, perceiving the deity in visual iconic form as well as in its sonic form. On the one hand, an aesthetic artifice designed to bear emotion – *rag*, becomes the

permeating substance of experience that overrides all else, including one's ego; on the other, a religious construct of the Divine serves to rivet the devotee's attention to the point that an ecstatic bliss overtakes the participant. In both situations, a communal unity in spiritual liberation is the theoretical state sought by the participants.

I have purposefully avoided reference throughout this paper to Thomas Csordas's thoughtful essay, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology," for the simple reason that my thoughts have been informed more by my cultural experience as a Westerner living the tradition of Indian classical music, part of which included exposure to Abhinavagupta's aesthetic theories, than they have been by Csordas and the ideas of Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty that he used in constructing his embodiment paradigm. However, in closing, I feel compelled to point out that fundamental concepts of Csordas's argument are found in Abhinavagupta's thoughts of a thousand years ago. To begin with, Csordas, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu all



Raghubir Singh

Devotional street singers, Varanasi

sought to collapse dualities such as mind-body, subject-object and structure-practice to arrive at a paradigm of non-dualism. I have already pointed out that Abhinavagupta adhered to a philosophy of non-dualism. Csordas's goal was to arrive at the existential beginning of perception, not the objectified end. He wished to capture the transcendent moment at which perception begins and both constitutes and is constituted by culture. To do this, Csordas combined Merleau-Ponty's concept of the pre-objective, the percept of something before culturally inscribed meanings have been assigned to it, with Bourdieu's concept of habitus – the structuring structures that lead to socially consonant and unifying ways of acting. Merleau-Ponty, in summarizing the character of his concept of pre-objective postulates "a primary process of signification in which the thing expressed does not exist apart from its expression, and in which the signs themselves induce their significance externally" (1962: 166). This sounds surprisingly close to *pasyanti*, the state of unity of expressible idea and expression. Additionally, Abhinavagupta's philosophy of non-dualism, the reflection theory, leads to epistemic ramifications concerning the process of perception

and knowledge. Pandey points out that perception is limited by the sense that is actively perceiving, and that perception is based in reflection: the intellect is like a mirror that receives the reflection of not only that which is reflected upon the sense organs, but also what is reflected from memory; what shines in consciousness is undifferentiated from the self, but what is reflected in the intellect shines objectively as separate from the self-conscious. Implicit in this conceptualization is a notion that again is evocative of Merleau-Ponty's notion of pre-objective, the percept prior to receiving culturally inscribed meaning. As for Bourdieu's habitus, a similar, but certainly not identical, concept exists in Abhinavagupta's conceptualization of *samskara*, the lived experiences that shape the ways in which individuals respond to perceived realities. The Indian twist here is that an individual's collective structuring experiences would include those of past lives as well as the present. Because of this, a social group, such as audience members in an expressive performance, share a collective subconscious that generates a baseline for behavioral response.

Had I used exclusively the ideas of Csordas, Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty, I wonder if I would have generated thoughts about the aesthetic experience of *rag* that ring so viscerally consonant with my experience of Indian music. Simultaneously, as I reflect upon the thoughts I have committed to print in this short article, my mind continues to search for explanations of phenomena of Hindustani socio-musical practice I have experienced that fail to conform with Abhinavagupta's sublime and profound aesthetic theory. Could it be that a distinction needs to be made between mundane and sublime experience, while recognizing that both are capable of existing in the same socio-musical moment? And if so, how can the implications of this be reconciled in an ethnomusicological analysis of the aesthetic process? I am not yet prepared to answer my own question, but I will surely continue to ponder it.

Notes

- 1 An earlier draft of this paper was to have been presented at the Fortieth Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology (UCLA, 1995) in a session on Body, Mind and Spirit in Theory and Performance, one of the major themes of the conference. The other participants in the session were Amelia Dutta, Shari Johnston and Guha Shankar. Due to an inadvertent scheduling snafu, there was insufficient time to present the entire session, and I voluntarily withdrew.

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