

A Comprehensive Study of Indian Classical Music - Origin, Structure, Evolution, and Cultural Significance

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Abstract

This research paper presents a comprehensive study of Indian music (Sangeet), focusing on its origin, evolution, structure, and cultural significance. The study traces the roots of Indian music from the Vedic period, particularly the Samaveda, and examines its development through ancient, medieval, and modern periods.

It explains the concept of music along with its three major components—vocal, instrumental, and dance. The paper further discusses the fundamental elements of music such as swar, taal, and laya, which form the structural foundation of Indian music. Special emphasis is given to the raga system, its classification, characteristics, and emotional impact.

Additionally, the study explores different types of music including classical, folk, and light music, along with the importance of musical instruments, gharana system, and contributions of great musicians. The paper concludes that Indian music is not only an artistic expression but also a reflection of cultural heritage, spirituality, and emotional depth. This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on existing literature and historical sources.

Keywords: Indian Classical Music, Sangeet, Raga, Taal, Laya, Gharana, Musical Instruments, Cultural Heritage, Hindustani Music, Musicology

1. Introduction and Origin of Indian Music

Music is regarded as one of the most powerful and expressive mediums through which human emotions are articulated. It is a universal art form that transcends the boundaries of language, region, caste, and time, thereby establishing a direct connection with the human soul. Since the dawn of human civilization, music has been an integral part of life, accompanying individuals in moments of joy, sorrow, and spiritual contemplation.

In the Indian cultural tradition, music occupies a position of profound significance and sanctity. It is not merely perceived as a form of artistic expression but is also considered a means of spiritual practice and inner elevation. In ancient times, sages and seers rendered the Vedas in specific tonal patterns and rhythmic structures, which eventually laid the foundation for a systematic tradition of music [5]. In particular, the Samaveda is widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of Indian music, as it presents Vedic hymns in a melodious and organized form. This highlights the deep-rooted connection of Indian music with spiritual consciousness and divine expression.

Since ancient times, music has served multiple purposes. It has played a pivotal role in religious rituals, worship, and sacrificial ceremonies. Furthermore, it has functioned as a source of entertainment, providing joy and alleviating mental stress. In the domain of education, music has also been utilized as an effective tool to enhance learning, making it more engaging and comprehensible.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Indian music is its vast diversity. India, being a land of varied languages, cultures, and traditions, reflects this diversity through its musical heritage. Consequently, both classical and folk traditions have flourished. Classical music is systematic, rule-oriented, and disciplined in nature, whereas folk music is simple, spontaneous, and deeply connected with the everyday lives of the people.

Over the course of time, Indian music has undergone continuous evolution. From the Vedic period to the medieval era of royal patronage, and further into the modern age influenced by cinema and Western musical elements, it has adapted itself to changing contexts [6]. In the contemporary world, with the advent of advanced technology, music has transcended geographical boundaries and attained a global presence. Thus, music is not merely an art form but an indispensable component of human existence. It significantly contributes to the emotional, cultural, and spiritual development of an individual. Therefore, the study of Indian music holds immense importance from artistic, cultural, and historical perspectives.

Origin of Music

The origin of music is closely linked to the earliest stages of human civilization. It is difficult to determine the exact moment when music was born, but it is certain that music began when humans started listening to sounds, understanding them, and imitating them. Early humans were inspired by various natural sounds—such as the chirping of birds, the flow of water, the movement of wind, and the rumbling of clouds—and gradually shaped these sounds into patterns of pitch and rhythm. These natural sounds eventually became the foundation of music.

To understand the origin of Indian music, it is essential to look at the Vedic period. According to Indian tradition, the roots of music lie in the Vedas, especially in the Samaveda. The Samaveda is often referred to as the “Veda of Music” because its hymns were chanted in specific melodic patterns and rhythmic structures [3]. The tonal and rhythmic qualities present in these chants later evolved into a more organized system of music. Thus, the origin of Indian music is deeply connected with religious and spiritual practices.

From a mythological perspective, the origin of music is also described in various traditions. It is believed that Lord Brahma created music and passed it on to Lord Shiva, who then entrusted it to Goddess Saraswati, the deity of knowledge and music. Additionally, Sage Narada is regarded as the first propagator of music, who spread this art among the people. Although these narratives are religious in nature, they reflect the high status that music has held in Indian society since ancient times.

As history progressed, music continued to evolve. During the Vedic period, music was mainly confined to religious rituals. However, in the post-Vedic and medieval periods, it expanded into royal courts. During this time, music received patronage and support, leading to the development of new ragas, raginis, and musical instruments. The medieval period, in particular, witnessed significant growth in music, with the emergence of various styles and traditions.

From a scientific point of view, music is based on sound. Sound is produced by vibrations, and when these vibrations are regular and harmonious, they create music [10]. The human voice and musical instruments serve as mediums to produce these sounds. In this sense, music can be seen as a beautiful blend of science and art.

Over time, music has absorbed influences from different cultures and traditions and has continued to develop. In the modern era, music has achieved a global presence through technological advancements. However, its roots still lie in ancient traditions and natural sounds.

Thus, the origin of music is the result of a continuous process that reflects a remarkable synthesis of nature, spirituality, science, and human creativity.

2. Historical Development of Indian Music

The history of Indian music is ancient, rich, and multidimensional, shaped by cultural, religious, and social influences over thousands of years. It has continuously evolved and can be broadly divided into four major periods: Vedic, Post-Vedic/Ancient, Medieval, and Modern.

Vedic Period (c. 1500 BCE onwards):

The origin of Indian music lies in the Vedic period, where it was mainly used in religious rituals and sacrifices. Music was based on the Samaveda, and hymns were chanted in specific tones and rhythms. Three primary notes—Udatta, Anudatta, and Svarita—were used. Music was transmitted orally and served spiritual purposes, laying the foundation of Indian music.

Post-Vedic / Ancient Period (c. 500 BCE – 1200 CE):

During this period, music became more structured and expanded beyond religious use. It was integrated with drama and dance, and important texts like the *Natyashastra* by Bharata Muni were composed. The concept of the Saptak (seven notes) developed, along with the early formation of the raga system [6]. Musical instruments such as the veena, flute, and mridangam also emerged, reflecting a more scientific approach to music.

Medieval Period (1200 – 1800 CE):

This period is considered the golden age of Indian music due to strong royal patronage. Classical music flourished, and systems like the Gharana tradition developed. Major styles such as Dhrupad and Khayal evolved, along with a wider variety of ragas and talas. Under Mughal rulers like Akbar, musicians such as Tansen gained prominence. Innovations included the creation of new ragas, development of instruments like the tabla and sitar, and a fusion of Persian and Indian musical elements.

Modern Period (19th Century – Present):

In the modern era, Indian music became more organized and widely accessible. Music education was institutionalized, and notation systems were developed. Scholars like Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar played key roles in systematizing music. Technological advancements such as radio, television, and the internet helped spread music globally.

Global Influence and Development Factors:

Today, Indian music has gained international recognition, influenced Western music and promoting cross-cultural collaborations. Its development has been driven by religious traditions, royal patronage, contributions of great musicians, cultural exchanges, and technological progress.

3. Etymology and Meaning of the Term “Music” and Fundamental Elements of Music (Swar, Taal, and Laya)

3.1 Etymology and Meaning of the Term “Music”

The term “Sangeet” (music) holds a significant place in Indian cultural and artistic tradition. It is derived from Sanskrit, combining two words— “Sam” (together or properly) and “Geet” (song). Thus, its literal meaning is singing in a harmonious manner [5]. However, in a broader sense, music is not limited to vocal

expression; it also includes instrumental performance and dance. Therefore, in Indian tradition, music is considered a combination of singing, playing, and dancing.

Ancient Indian texts also define music clearly. In the *Natyashastra* by Bharata Muni, music is described as an essential part of drama and is a combination of Geet (vocal), Vadya (instrumental), and Nritya (dance). This shows that music is not just an arrangement of sounds, but a complete art form involving both auditory and visual expression.

Music is not only a source of entertainment but also a powerful medium for expressing human emotions such as love, joy, devotion, and sorrow [25]. It can be understood as a universal language of emotions, capable of conveying meaning even without words.

Philosophically, music holds great importance in Indian thought. The concept of “Naad Brahma” suggests that the universe originated from sound, making music a path to connect with the divine. In ancient times, it was also considered a form of spiritual practice for achieving inner peace [26].

From a modern perspective, music is an organized system of sound based on pitch (swar), rhythm (laya), and beat (taal). Scientifically, it is formed through sound vibrations that directly influence human emotions and the brain.

Thus, “Sangeet” is a vast and multidimensional concept that represents a synthesis of art, science, emotion, and spirituality, which explains its high status in Indian culture.

3.2 Fundamental Elements of Music (Swar, Taal, and Laya)

The structure of Indian music is based on three fundamental elements—Swar (pitch/notes), Taal (rhythm), and Laya (tempo). These three elements can be compared to the soul, body, and movement of music. Only when they are properly balanced and harmonized does music become complete, effective, and melodious [23]. Any musical performance—whether vocal, instrumental, or dance—is considered incomplete without these elements.

3.2.1 Swar (Notes)

Swar (Notes) is the most basic element of music. It refers to a sound that is pleasing to hear and has a definite frequency. In Indian music, there are seven main notes:

Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni

These seven notes together form a Saptak (octave).

These notes are further classified into:

- Shuddha Swar (Natural notes) – Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni
- Vikrit Swar (Altered notes)
- Komal (flat) – Re, Ga, Dha, Ni
- Teevra (sharp) – Ma

The arrangement and combination of these notes form a Raga. Each note has its own significance and position. For example, ‘Sa’ is considered the fundamental note on which the entire musical system is based.

There are three types of octaves in Indian music:

- Mandra Saptak – Lower octave
- Madhya Saptak – Middle octave
- Taar Saptak – Higher octave

Regular practice (Riyaz) is essential for the correct pronunciation and control of notes. A skilled musician can evoke deep emotions through the proper use of swars.

3.2.2 Taal (Rhythm)

Taal is the element of music that organizes time and rhythm. It provides a structured framework, ensuring balance and discipline in musical presentation. It can be understood as the measurement of time in music. A taal is made up of a fixed number of Matras (beats) arranged in a cycle. For example:

Teentaal – 16 beats, Jhaptaal – 10 beats, Ektaal – 12 beats

Important components of taal include:

- Sam – The first and most important beat
- Tali – Stressed/clapped beats
- Khali – Unstressed or empty beat
- Vibhag – Sections of the taal

Knowledge of taal is essential for every musician, as it maintains order and coherence. Without taal, music would feel disorganized and chaotic.

3.2.3 Laya (Tempo)

Laya refers to the speed or tempo of music. It determines how fast or slow a piece is performed. Laya is closely related to taal, as taal provides the time framework and laya defines the pace within that framework.

There are three main types of laya:

- Vilambit Laya – Slow tempo
- Madhya Laya – Medium tempo
- Drut Laya – Fast tempo

Proper control of laya makes music more engaging and expressive. If the tempo becomes unbalanced, the beauty of the performance can be affected. In classical music, especially, artists gradually increase the tempo to create a powerful climax.

Coordination of Swar, Taal, and Laya

Swar, Taal, and Laya together bring completeness to music:

- Swar is the soul (melody)
- Taal is the structure (rhythm framework)
- Laya is the movement (tempo)

Their harmony is the hallmark of excellent music.

4. Components of Music (Vocal, Instrumental, and Dance) and Types of Music

Indian music is a comprehensive and multidimensional art form in which various artistic elements are harmoniously integrated. Traditionally, music is divided into three main components—Vocal music, Instrumental music, and Dance. These three elements together give completeness to music. Each component has its own significance, form, and medium of expression; however, when combined, they enhance the beauty and impact of music manifold.

4.1 Vocal Music

Vocal music is the most prominent and ancient component of music. It is based on sound produced by the human voice. In ancient times, before the development of musical instruments, vocal music was the only medium of musical expression. Humans began expressing their emotions—such as joy, sorrow, love, and devotion—through voice and words, which led to the development of the art of singing.

In Indian classical music, vocal music holds a position of great importance. The presentation of ragas is primarily done through singing [9]. Various styles fall under vocal music, such as Dhrupad, Khayal,

Thumri, Bhajan, and Ghazal. Each style has its own unique characteristics and method of presentation. For example, Dhrupad is serious and highly classical in nature, while Thumri is more expressive and romantic.

In vocal music, purity of pitch (swar), rhythm (laya), beat (taal), and pronunciation is extremely important. A skilled singer, through their voice, can evoke deep emotions in the listeners and transport them into a different world.

4.2 Instrumental Music

Instrumental music is the component of music in which expression is achieved through musical instruments. It is a highly developed and important aspect of music, where sound is produced using different types of instruments.

In Indian music, instruments are classified into four main categories—Tat (string instruments), Avanaddha (percussion instruments with membranes), Sushir (wind instruments), and Ghan (solid instruments). For example, Sitar, Sarod, and Veena belong to string instruments[18]; Tabla and Pakhawaj are percussion instruments; Flute and Shehnai are wind instruments; while Manjira and Cymbals fall under solid instruments.

The main feature of instrumental music is that emotions are expressed purely through sound, without the use of words [10]. A skilled instrumentalist can present the complete essence of a raga through their instrument. Mastery in finger movement, knowledge of rhythm, and regular practice are essential in instrumental music.

Indian classical music includes various styles of instrumental performance, such as Sitar playing, Tabla playing, and Flute playing. Each instrument has its own technique and presentation style.

4.3 Dance

Dance is the component of music in which emotions are expressed through body movements, gestures, and facial expressions. It can be considered as “visual music” because music is not only heard but also seen through dance [2].

The tradition of Indian dance is very ancient and finds mention in the Natyashastra. In dance, rhythm, tempo, and expression hold great importance. Body movements are synchronized with music in such a way that they create a graceful and appealing performance.

Indian dance is broadly divided into two types—Classical dance and Folk dance. Classical dances include Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, etc., while folk dances are based on regional traditions, such as Bhangra, Garba, and Ghoomar.

A key element of dance is Abhinaya (expression), through which the performer conveys various emotions such as love, joy, sorrow, anger, and devotion. Thus, dance presents music in a visual form and deeply influences the audience.

4.4 Types of Music

Indian music is vast and highly diverse, shaped by variations in time, region, society, and culture. Broadly, it is classified into Classical Music and Folk Music, while Light Music (Sugam Sangeet) has developed in the modern era as a bridge between these two forms [12].

Classical Music

Classical music is the most refined and systematic form of Indian music, based on well-defined rules and principles. The concepts of raga, taal, and laya play a central role and are followed with discipline. Its purpose is not only entertainment but also spiritual upliftment and inner peace.

Indian classical music is divided into two main traditions:

- Hindustani Classical Music (North India), which developed during the medieval period and includes styles such as Dhrupad, Khayal, Thumri, and Tarana. It emphasizes raga elaboration through alaap and taan and is more flexible and expressive.
- Carnatic Classical Music (South India), which is more traditional and strictly structured. It focuses on compositions like Kriti, Varnam, and Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi, with a systematic approach [8].

A key feature of classical music is its transmission through the guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) tradition.

Folk Music

Folk music represents the life, traditions, and culture of common people. It is simple, spontaneous, and emotionally rich, reflecting regional customs and lifestyles. Each region has its own unique forms, such as Kajri and Birha (Uttar Pradesh), Sohar and Chaita (Bihar), Maand (Rajasthan), Bhangra and Giddha (Punjab), and Phag and Nirgun (Madhya Pradesh).

Folk music is usually performed during festivals, weddings, agricultural activities, and other social occasions. It does not follow strict rules and evolves naturally through tradition and experience.

Light Music (Sugam Sangeet)

Light music is a modern, simplified form of music designed to be easily understood and enjoyed by the general public. It acts as a bridge between classical and folk music. It includes film songs, bhajans, ghazals, patriotic songs, and pop music. While it uses elements of classical music, these are presented in a simplified manner, making it more accessible. Today, it is highly popular and widely consumed.

Table 1 : Difference between Classical, Folk and Light Music

Basis	Classical Music	Folk Music	Light Music
Rules	Strict rules	No fixed rules	Simple rules
Purpose	Spiritual practice, discipline	Tradition and culture	Entertainment
Presentation	Formal and stage-based	Social and traditional settings	Modern platforms
Complexity	High	Low	Medium

5. Raga System and Musical Instruments

The Raga system is the soul of Indian classical music. A raga is not merely a group of notes but a structured musical framework capable of evoking specific emotions (rasa), moods, and psychological states [1]. Each raga has its own identity and emotional impact on the listener.

Definition of Raga

A raga is defined as “that which pleases or colors the mind.” Thus, it is both a technical structure and a medium of emotional expression.

Essential Elements of a Raga

The identity of a raga is based on:

- Swar (Notes): Shuddha, Komal, Teevra
- Aroh–Avaroh: Ascending and descending order
- Vadi–Samvadi: Main and supporting notes
- Pakad: Signature phrase
- Jati: Audav (5), Shadav (6), Sampurna (7)
- Chalan: Characteristic movement of notes

Classification of Ragas

Ragas are classified as:

- By Notes: Audav, Shadav, Sampurna (e.g., Bhupali, Yaman)
- By Thaats System: 10 thaats (Bhairav, Yaman, Kafi, Asavari, Bhairavi, Todi, Marwa, Poorvi, Khamaj, Bilawal), as given by Bhatkhande

Time Theory of Ragas

The time theory of ragas suggests that each raga is linked to a specific time of the day to enhance its emotional effect. For example, Bhairav and Todi are sung in the morning, Sarang in the afternoon, Yaman and Puriya in the evening, and Darbari and Malkauns at night. Performing a raga at its proper time increases its impact.

Raga and Emotion (Rasa)

Each raga expresses a distinct mood. Bhairav represents peace, Yaman conveys devotion, Darbari reflects depth and seriousness, Bageshree expresses love and emotion, while Malkauns is associated with meditation and tranquility. Thus, listening to a raga is an emotional experience.

Other Aspects of Raga

Other aspects of raga include the Raga–Ragini system, which is an old method of classification. Ragas have developed over time from the Vedic period to the medieval period (Tansen) and then to the modern era (Bhatkhande and Paluskar). A raga is usually presented in a sequence—Alap, Vilambit, Madhya, Drut, and Taan. It also has a scientific side, as sound vibrations affect the human mind. Today, around 200–300 ragas are commonly used.

Musical Instruments

Musical instruments play a vital role in expressing music without words and presenting raga, taal, and laya effectively. Their development has continued from ancient to modern times.

Classification of Instruments: -

The classification of musical instruments in Indian music is broadly divided into four categories. Tat (string instruments), such as sitar, sarod, veena, and tanpura, are played by plucking with fingers or a mizrab and have their origin linked to the ancient veena. Avanaddha (percussion instruments), including tabla, pakhawaj, dholak, and mridang, are played using hands or sticks; among these, the pakhawaj is more ancient, while the tabla developed later. Sushir (wind instruments), such as flute, shehnai, and nadaswaram, produce sound through air control and finger holes, with the flute being one of the oldest instruments. Ghan (solid instruments), including manjira, cymbals, and bell, are played by striking or shaking.

Each category follows specific playing techniques—string instruments are plucked, percussion instruments are struck, wind instruments require breath control, and solid instruments are struck or shaken. To master any instrument, a musician must have accuracy in swar, proper knowledge of taal, control over laya, and regular practice (Riyaz). Important instruments like the sitar provide classical melody, the tabla forms the rhythmic base, the flute expresses softness and emotion, and the shehnai is associated with auspicious occasions. Overall, musical instruments convey emotions effectively, where the flute represents love and peace, the tabla expresses energy, and the veena reflects spirituality.

6. Gharana System and Great Musicians and Their Contributions

Gharana System

The Gharana system is a distinctive feature of Indian classical music. The term “Gharana” means a family or tradition, referring to a specific style of music developed by a teacher and passed down through generations. It includes unique techniques of raga presentation, rhythm, and expression.

6.1 Origin of the Gharana System

The Gharana system developed during the medieval period under royal patronage. Musicians created their own styles and passed them through the Guru-Shishya tradition [21]. Over time, different regional styles evolved into separate gharanas.

6.2 Major Gharanas

- Gwalior Gharana – Oldest; simple style, focus on purity of raga and clear bandish
- Delhi Gharana – Famous for tabla; strong rhythm control and clear bols
- Banaras Gharana – Emotional and expressive; known for Thumri and Bhajan
- Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana – Complex; use of rare ragas and intricate taans
- Patiala Gharana – Fast, melodious taans; flexible and expressive

6.3 Comparison of Gharanas

Table 2: Comparison of Gharanas

Basis	Gwalior	Banaras	Delhi	Jaipur	Patiala
Style	Simple	Expressive	Technical	Complex	Melodious
Focus	Purity	Emotion	Rhythm	Structure	Taans
Usage	Learning	Thumri	Tabla	Raga dev.	Khayal

6.4 Importance of the Gharana System

The Gharana system helps preserve musical traditions, develop unique styles, strengthen the Guru–Shishya relationship, and maintain diversity in Indian music.

6.5 Gharana System in the Modern Era

Today, musicians often mix styles (fusion), but traditional gharanas still play a key role in preserving classical roots.

Great Musicians and Their Contributions

Indian music has developed due to the efforts of many great musicians who preserved and enriched its tradition. Their work gave Indian music a strong identity globally [18].

Major Musicians

- Tansen – Great musician of Akbar’s court; developed Dhrupad, created ragas like Darbari Kanada and Miyan ki Malhar
- Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande – Classified ragas into 10 Thaats; systematized music education
- Bismillah Khan – Gave classical status to shehnai; made it globally famous
- Ravi Shankar – Popularized Indian music worldwide; blended Indian and Western styles
- Lata Mangeshkar – “Nightingale of India”; gave new identity to film music
- Zakir Hussain – World-famous tabla player; introduced new techniques

7. Conclusion

Indian music is an ancient, rich, and multidimensional art form that reflects human emotions, cultural values, and spiritual consciousness. Its development has been continuous, beginning from the Vedic period and evolving through various historical stages into the modern era.

The origin of music lies in natural sounds and Vedic chants, which gradually developed into a structured system. Music in the Indian context includes vocal, instrumental, and dance forms, supported by fundamental elements such as swar, taal, and laya. The raga system further adds emotional depth and uniqueness to musical expression.

Indian music is diverse, comprising classical, folk, and light music. Classical music represents discipline and depth, folk music reflects cultural traditions, and light music connects both with wider audiences. The Gharana system and the development of musical instruments have also contributed significantly to its growth.

The contributions of great musicians like Tansen and Ravi Shankar have played a crucial role in shaping and globalizing Indian music.

Thus, Indian music is not only an art form but also a living tradition and a means of spiritual and cultural expression. Its study remains important for understanding its artistic, historical, and cultural significance, and it will continue to evolve in the future.

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