

**Rhythms and Recitations:
Vedic Origins of Indian Classical Music in
Nationalist Discourse and Modern-day Practice**

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Many scholars have written about the place of music and the arts in pre-Independence nationalist movements in India at the turn of the twentieth century. Partha Chatterjee (1993), for example, has argued that musical practices were part of an “inner domain” in which colonized Indian citizens could exercise a large degree of freedom and independence separate from the outer domain of British colonial rule. Music, therefore, was an important platform for the negotiation of nationalist values in the decades leading up to India’s Independence.

An important dimension of these early twentieth-century nationalist movements was the desire to acknowledge and reflect the pristine, ancient, and scientific nature of India’s national heritage. Nationalist movements were concerned with locating bodies of knowledge in ancient Sanskrit Hindu texts and traditions as evidence of the existence of an “archaic Hindu science.” Gyan Prakash describes these movements of the early 20th century: “With science signifying religion, culture, and the nation...the representation of the modern nation as the return of archaic Hindu science became a compelling and enduring trope in the nationalist imagination, a trope that survives powerfully into the present” (1997: 538).

The Vedic Origins Narrative

Indian classical music’s ties to an ancient, purely Indian, scientific past were highlighted in the well-known legend that Indian music originated in the Vedas, particularly in the hymns of the Sāmaveda. The Vedas are a corpus of ancient Sanskrit texts that serve as the foundation of Hindu religious practices and ritual, which have been preserved in a rigid system of oral transmission from guru to disciple. Traditional Hindu views state that ancient Indian *rṣis* (“seers” or “sages”) channeled the Vedas during extended bouts of meditation; Vedic recitations are thought to be sonic representations of “the source and ‘blueprint’ of the universe” (Holdredge 1996: 9).

The legend that Indian classical music originated from the chanting of the Sāmaveda is documented as early as the second century CE in the Nāṭyaśāstra. This narrative resurfaced with a new vigor in the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century as a subversive argument proving that India had its own systems of arts in place long before the British had arrived on the subcontinent. And in recent decades, this narrative of Vedic origins remains an important discourse for classical musicians to elevate the position of their art form and status among a public who prefers pop music and Bollywood film song.

In contemporary Western musicological scholarship, there has been a general hesitancy to write about this topic, most likely stemming from skepticism about whether music theory appearing in Indian texts prior to the seventeenth century is relevant to classical music practices of today. Many scholars (Indian and Western) have demonstrated that the Indian music theory of ancient and medieval eras does not describe modern-day practice. My aim is not to challenge these scholars' findings, but to address this issue from a different angle.

First, I explore practices of tāla and rhythmic improvisation in South Indian classical music (Karnātak music) as evidence for the legitimacy of this Vedic origins narrative. I compare the prosodic practices of Sanskrit recitation (rules pertaining to meter and accents, as documented in Vedic chant, Hindu epic poetry, and historical treatises on the subject) with the improvisational practices performed by Karnātak percussionists in South India today.

Second, I discuss the Vedic origins narrative as a discourse with a specific social agenda relevant to classical percussionists in South India today. Until the last few decades, percussionists have been significantly marginalized in the classical Indian music community.¹ Highlighting the similarity of certain musical processes with the methods used by Vedic priests in the transmission and recitation of the Vedas is one way for percussionists to negotiate their positions as legitimate classical artists in contemporary Indian society.

Overview of Sanskrit Prosody

I will begin my examination of the links between Sanskrit prosody and Karnātak rhythm by offering a brief summary of the prosodic rules pertaining to the recitation of Sanskrit verses. Rules associated with the metrics of recitation were so important in ancient Indian thought that they comprised one branch of the Vedāṅgas (“limbs of the Vedas”), six auxiliary disciplines used to understand the Vedas. Four out of the six vedāṅgas deal with aspects of language. I bring this up to highlight the importance of language in Indian thought, for it is from language—from the sciences of phonetics, grammar, etymology, and prosody associated with ritual language—that all scientific knowledge and scientific models emerge in ancient India.

The earliest surviving text we have addressing the topic of prosody is a sixth century CE version of the *Chandaḥśāstra*.² With the title that loosely translates as “The Science of the Chandas” (or “metric speech”), this text distinguishes between two systems of meter in language: (1) meters based on the number of syllables, a system known as *akṣarachanda*; and (2) meters based on the number of pulses of duration, a system known as *mātrachanda*.³ The metrical practices associated with Vedic recitation would most accurately be classified as *akṣarachanda*, as the division of Vedic text into lines or verses is dependent primarily on the number of syllables in the line. For example, the verses of the Sāmaveda are almost completely composed in the Gāyatrī meter, a recurring meter of twenty-four syllables divided into three lines of eight syllables each. On the other hand, the recitation practices associated with the performance of the great Hindu epics indicate the incorporation of *mātrachanda* meters as well, as the duration and placement of long and short syllables play a significant role in the organization of many lines in the epic Sanskrit texts.

Between the Vedic and classical Sanskrit periods, evidence of a transition in the conception of Sanskrit prosody emerges in the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata, the well-known

Indian epics composed during what is known as the epic Sanskrit period. These great Hindu epics indicate that the duration and the placement of short and long syllables were gaining significance in Sanskrit recitation. For example, the following two verses from the Śānti Parvan (“Book of Peace”) in the Mahābhārata are composed in a mātra-based meter known as *ratthoddhatā*:

yac ca te manasi vartate param
yatra cā ‘sti tava saṁśayaḥ kvacit
śrūyatām ayam ahaṁ tavā ‘grataḥ
putra kiṁ hi kathayāmi te punaḥ
(xii.247.23, Śānti Parvan, Mahābhārata,
cited in Hopkins [1902: 323])

In this meter, each line of the verse has eleven syllables, but the more significant organizational principle is the order of the syllables based on the accentuation pattern of the meter (long-short-long-short-short-short-long-short-long-short-long), which, as demonstrated in the breakdown of the syllables in Figure 1.1, remains constant in each line of the text.

Figure 1.1: Accentuation Pattern of *ratthoddhatā* Meter

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Sample lines of text from Mahābhārata:	A- yac ca te manasi vartate param / B- yatra cā ‘sti tava saṁśayaḥ kvacit // C- śrūyatām ayam ahaṁ tavā ‘grataḥ / D- putra kiṁ hi kathayāmi te punaḥ //										
Line A broken into syllables:	yac	ca	te	ma	na	si	var	ta	te	pa	ram
Line B broken into syllables:	yat	ra	cā	sti	ta	va	saṁ	śa	yaḥ	kva	cit
Line C broken into syllables:	śru	ya	tām	a	yam	a	haṁ	ta	vā	gra	taḥ
Line D broken into syllables:	put	ra	kiṁ	hi	ka	tha	yā	mi	te	pu	naḥ
Accentuation Pattern for all lines:	guru (long)	laghu (short)	guru (long)	laghu (short)	laghu (short)	laghu (short)	guru (long)	laghu (short)	guru (long)	laghu (short)	guru (long)

In the mātrachanda system, the duration of syllables is based on the distinction between *laghu* (or light/ short) and *guru* (or heavy/ long) accentuation. In general, *laghu* syllables are recited for the duration of one mātra; *guru* syllables are recited for a duration of two mātras.⁴ The tempo and duration of the mātras in performance are fairly flexible according to the reciter’s interpretation and preference, but it is important that the durations of short and long syllables are relative to one another (in the same way that we might consider eighth notes and quarter notes as relative to one another).

Sanskritic Prosody and Tāla in Indian Classical Music

What I am trying to highlight about the development of prosody in Sanskrit recitation is the gradual shift from being concerned with numbers of syllables, as in Vedic chant, to being concerned with durations and patterns of durations, as in the recitation of the later Sanskrit epics. Most relevant to notions of tāla in Indian classical music is the idea of syllables having relational durations and being arranged in aesthetically pleasing patterns. Interestingly, terminology such

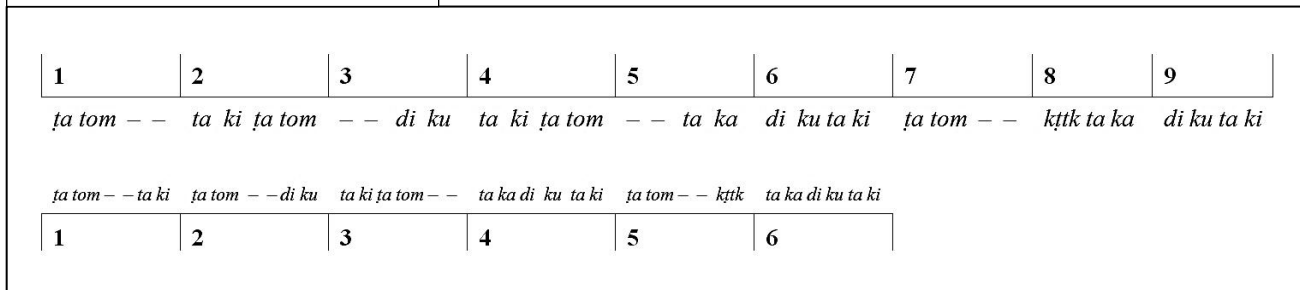
as laghu, guru, and *pluta* (meaning “protracted”), used to describe the accentuation of syllables in poetics, are applied within early music theory to describe different segments of tāla cycle. The earliest documented system of tāla (found in the Nāṭyaśāstra, ca. second century CE) organizes these relational durations of laghu, guru, and pluta into patterns known as the mārḡa tālas, which functioned as set patterns of proportions that could be performed on several different scales. The laghu in this instance represents the span of time to complete one musical event, while the guru and pluta represent a span of time that is twice and three times as long, respectively. As Lewis Rowell (1992) describes it, mārḡa tālas are not prescribed lengths of time but maps of the relative density of events within a span of time. Mārḡa tālas specify the “rhythmic path” that musical events undergo.

Later tāla systems, such as the deśī system, utilized a fixed number of beats and added two other proportions of duration: *drutam*, or one-half laghu; and *anudrutam*, or one-quarter laghu. Modern practice fixes the drutam at two beats (indicated by a clap and a wave) and the anudrutam as one beat (indicated by a clap). The laghu functions in this instance as a segment of the tāla with a variable number of beats (3, 4, 5, 7, or 9), which is indicated by a clap followed by finger counts. The modern South Indian tāla system contains seven different structural formations based on combinations of laghu, drutam, and anudrutam, with five different options for the length of the laghu (see Nelson 1998). Most musicologists agree that modern systems of tāla, which have dropped the larger proportions of guru and pluta, are more closely related to the deśī system rather than the mārḡa system.

Sanskritic Prosody and Rhythmic Improvisation in Karṇātak Classical Music

While the number of beats in a tāla is fixed in modern-day practice, the idea of proportionate relational durations on different scales (as in the mārḡa tāla system) still plays an important role in rhythmic improvisation. Percussionists will often improvise by performing a rhythmic pattern or motive across different durations of the tāla. Using this improvisational rhythmic device, which I refer to as “re-scaling,” Karṇātak percussionists demonstrate their mastery over the domain of tāla by presenting re-scaled versions of the same rhythmic phrase one right after the other. Hearing the percussionist’s rhythmic improvisation against the steady beats of the tāla gives the aural impression that the rhythmic phrase has been inflated or compressed. Figure 1.2 depicts how a re-scaled version of the same rhythmic phrase, notated in the syllabic drum language known as *solkattu*, lines up differently with the tāla, depicted in this figure as a linear, ruler-like scale.

Figure 1.2: Depiction of Re-scaling



Another rhythmic device that Karnātak percussionists use is what I call “redistribution,” in which percussionists reorganize a standard repetitive pattern (such as a *mora* [or *tihai*, in Hindustānī music], a rhythmic figure or phrase that is repeated three times) into a different rhythmic shape, often into an expansion or contraction pattern. Reorganizing the patterns of their standard rhythmic vocabulary is a useful improvisational device that provides the percussionist with a number of options from a limited amount of rhythmic material. Figure 1.3 depicts a short *mora* phrase based on the repetition of a five-pulse motive and two possible resulting phrases when the *mora* is transformed using the redistribution method. The shape of the *mora* is transformed using this procedure, but the number of pulses in each version of the phrase remains the same. While Figure 1.3 depicts a fairly simple example of redistribution, this transformation process can be applied to much longer and more complicated phrases.

Figure 1.3: Example of Redistribution Applied to Short Mora Phrase		
Standard Mora Format	Redistributed as Expansion Phrase	Redistributed as Reduction Phrase
<i>tā ka tā ki ṭa</i> <i>tā ka tā ki ṭa</i> <i>tā ka tā ki ṭa</i>	<i>tā ki ṭa</i> <i>tā ka tā ki ṭa</i> <i>tā ka tā ka tā ki ṭa</i>	<i>tā ka tā ka tā ki ṭa</i> <i>tā ka tā ki ṭa</i> <i>tā ki ṭa</i>
This <i>mora</i> is based on the repetition of a 5-pulse motive “ <i>tā ka tā ki ṭa</i> ”.	This transformation has redistributed the pulses in a standard 15-pulse <i>mora</i> format into an expansion phrase structured as 3 + 5 + 7.	This transformation has redistributed the pulses in a standard 15-pulse <i>mora</i> format into a reduction phrase structured as 7 + 5 + 3.
Total span of phrase: 15 pulses	Total span of phrase: 15 pulses	Total span of phrase: 15 pulses

This rhythmic device (redistribution) is congruent with a similar process of rhythmic and textual reorganization used by Vedic priests in the transmission, recitation, and internalization of Vedic chant. As documented in Wayne Howard’s study of Vedic recitation (1986), *vikṛti* refers to intense recitation exercises performed by reorganizing the syllables of Vedic mantras according to pre-specified formulas. The purpose of these exercises is to train priests to recite the Vedic scripture with absolute sonic precision, as it is the *sound* of Vedic chant (rather than the semantic meaning of the texts) that is the most crucial element for Vedic ritual efficacy.⁵ Just as a priest is not considered to have mastered a Vedic mantra until he can perform a number of *vikṛti* variations of the verses without mistakes (mental exercises which essentially reorganize the syllables of the Vedic verses), a percussionist is not considered to have mastered a particular rhythmic phrase until he can permutate the phrase into a variety of mathematical variations on the spot during performance.

Conclusion and Avenues for Future Research

In this paper I have demonstrated that the similarities between prosodic concepts in Sanskrit recitation and modern conceptions of *tāla* and rhythmic improvisation in Karnātak music is not mere coincidence. Terms borrowed from the science of prosody still comprise a major portion of the terminology associated with *tāla* theory in South Indian classical music.

Likewise, aesthetical considerations associated with rhythmic improvisation in Karṇātak music reflect the prosodic rules associated with Sanskrit recitation.

I speculate that much of the musical crossover between the poetics of language and the aesthetics of music occurred in historical settings where musicians and the reciters of Sanskrit texts were interacting directly with one another, perhaps in dramaturgical performances of the great Sanskrit epics or in Hindu ritual settings. In the case of South Indian percussionists, I speculate that the Hindu temple is a significant historic arena to explore. Musical crossover and dialogue between the practices of Vedic ritual and classical Indian music is especially plausible in the Tanjore region of Tamil Nadu, for example, which is hailed both as both the birthplace of modern Karṇātak music practices (Subramanian 2006) as well as an important center for the transmission and preservation of Sāmavedic chant (Howard 1977). Crossover is particularly noticeable in South Indian rhythmic practices because the foundation of modern Karṇātak percussion was laid by two twentieth-century mṛidangam artists who were strongly influenced by the improvisational practices of temple musicians, especially the rhythmic devices used by *tavil* (a South Indian temple drum) players during processions.⁶

While I am fascinated by this overlap between Sanskrit prosody and tāla (reflected in both music terminology and in the aesthetical values associated with rhythmic improvisation), the idea that modern-day notions of tāla can trace its lineage to ancient and medieval notions of Sanskrit prosody is a story that has long been accepted among the classical music community. The connections between tāla and Sanskrit prosody, between rhythmic improvisation and Sanskrit recitation, are tacit assumptions that most artists do not feel are necessary to emphasize. When I did encounter talk of musical origins among percussionists during my fieldwork in South India, the speakers seemed particularly concerned with elevating percussion practice within larger discourses on spirituality and portraying Indian classical music theory pertaining to rhythm (tāla theory) as systematic and scientific. The narrative that Indian music originated in the hymns of the Vedas seems to satisfy the aims of both these discourses: that the practice of percussion, as part of the Indian classical music forum, is worthwhile because it is both a spiritual as well as scientific endeavor. Discourse that draws connections between rhythmic practice and Sanskrit recitations also points to the larger social agenda to elevate the status of Karṇātak percussionists in the classical Indian music community (and, on an even more macro scale, to elevate the status of classical Indian music on the whole in a society that prefers pop music and Bollywood songs). I hope that my introduction to the relationships between Sanskrit prosody, tāla, and rhythmic improvisation in Karṇātak music demonstrates that this social agenda should not detract from the possibility that there is most likely some truth to the narrative of Vedic origins.

Notes:

¹ There are several reasons for this historical discrimination:

(1) drumheads are made of animal skin, and touching animal hide is considered to be impure;
(2) drums are associated with the nonclassical traditions of dance and temple processions;
(3) the study and performance of rāga has been privileged over tāla at least since the 19th century, if not earlier, when Orientalist scholars began to be interested in studies of Indian music (an overwhelming majority of Orientalist scholarship on Indian music from the nineteenth century onward is concerned with issues of pitch and intonation, or elements of rāga).

² The sixth-century version is attributed to author Jayadeva and is thought to be based on a fourth/ third century text by author Pingala.

³ Later texts add a third category known as gaṇachanda, which are meters based on specific groupings of durations.

⁴ Syllables are laghu if they contain a short vowel (a, i, u); syllables are guru if they contain a long vowel (ā, ī, ū, e, o, au, ai), if they end in a consonant, or if they contain certain consonant clusters.

⁵ David Carpenter's (1992) introduction recounts Louis Renou's (1960) realization that the custodians of the Vedic hymns were less interested in the semantic meaning of the texts as they were in preserving the sonic form of the texts. A more controversial examination of the Vedic scriptures by Indologist Frits Staal (1993) suggests that the Vedic mantras predate the development of language in man and thus retain meaning only in the context of ritual.

⁶ The two twentieth-century mṛdangam artists I am citing are: Palghat Mani Iyer (1912–81), who is said to have been strongly influenced by the improvisation techniques used by *tavil* musicians in the temples of Kerala, and Palani Subramania Pillai (1908–62), who was himself the son of an eminent *tavil* musician in Tamil Nadu. These two percussionists are cited in many publications as the “fathers” of the modern mṛdangam style (Brown 1965; Nelson 1991; Sankaran 1994); I was told a similar narrative during my fieldwork in South India in 2008.

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