

Study of Historical Development and Cultural Significance of Bansuri in North Indian Classical Music



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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the historical development and cultural significance of the Bansuri, a traditional Indian bamboo flute within the context of North Indian classical music. By tracing its origins, evolution, and role in various musical traditions, the study highlights the instrument's contributions to Indian music and culture. The paper discusses the pre-historic wind instruments and traces of Bansuri-like instruments at the time of excavation by archaeologists during Indus Valley Civilization. The paper also analyses the wind instruments and importance of instruments similar to Bansuri, termed in Vedic Period, as well as in post-Vedic texts and in Śārṅgadeva's book Saṃgītaratnākara. The paper also looks into the contributions of renowned flute artists Pt. Pannalal Ghosh in elevating the Bansuri's structural design and playing techniques and Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia in upbrining Bansuri's repertoire globally. This paper also highlights the cultural significance, its role in both classical and folk music. This paper adopts a comprehensive research approach, incorporating qualitative methods and literature review. The comprehensive examination of historical development and cultural significance of Bansuri underscores its importance in North Indian classical music. The data is collected from secondary sources.

Keywords: Bansuri, Pre-historic, Vedic, Post-Vedic, Culture, Significance, Classical music

Research Paper

Introduction

Indian classical music is an ancient tradition with many different styles, forms, and instruments. Musical instruments play a crucial role in creating and defining the sounds of different musical genres. Every instrument has a rich and extensive history in Indian tradition. Alike, the history of Bansuri is also deeply rooted back to the pre-historic period.

This research paper is a journey to study the history in the origin and development of one of the oldest instruments Bansuri, the Indian bamboo flute and its cultural significance as it holds a prominent place in Indian classical music and culture. Bamboo, the material from which the Bansuri is crafted, which marks the connection between nature and music. The Bansuri is renowned for its melodious sound with simple construction and association with Indian classical music, particularly in the context of Hindustani and Carnatic traditions.

Historical Overview of Bansuri

Understanding the history of Bansuri helps trace the evolution of its design, playing techniques and its role in music. The historical overview of Bansuri are as follows:

Pre – Historic Period and Indus Valley Civilization

While reviewing the literatures, it has been found that there are no written evidences of flute during the pre-historic period. But, some of the earliest known flutes during the Stone Age were made from bird and animal bones has been found during the Archaeological discoveries. The Jiahu flutes were discovered at the Jiahu archaeological site in Henan Province, China, dating back to around 6000 BCE, which were made from the wing bones of the red-crowned crane, a bird species native to East Asia. The Divje Babe flute discovered in northwest Slovenia, estimated to be over

40,000 years old was made from the fragment of left femur of young cave bear. The bone fragment is found approximately 11.6 cm long and has two main holes, and two additional holes. It has been suggested that it was made by Neanderthals as a form of musical instrument, and became known as the 'Neanderthal flute', which is considered as it would be the world's oldest known musical instrument.^[1] Recently in 2008, another five holed flute dated back 35,000 years ago was discovered in a cave called Hohle Fels near Ulm of Germany. The flute is made from the wing bone of a griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) and is about 21.8 cm (8.6 inches) long.^[2] These ancient flutes made from bones, represent some of the earliest examples of musical instruments and provide evidence of early human engagement with music.

The oldest history of India is that of the Indus Valley civilization. Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa are the two places where historical finds of the Indus civilization have been discovered by the archaeological departments.^[3] Archaeological findings, including small flutes made of terracotta and other materials were found during the excavations suggest that early inhabitants of this region had a tradition of using wind instruments.^[4]

These findings suggest that there is no direct evidence of Bansuri during pre-historic and Indus valley period.

Vedic and Post-Vedic Period

The earliest explicit references to the Bansuri come from ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas. Various musical instruments were in use in the Vedic times. Wind instruments were mentioned in Rigveda. The date of oldest text, Rigveda variously estimated by scholars from 2,000 B.C to 10,000 B.C.^[5] The terms like Nadi, Nalika, Bakura were discussed as wind instruments in Rigveda.^[6] In Yajurveda, 'Tunava'- a wind instrument played by blowing, Shankh – a conch shell is a wind instrument that produces resonant sound when blown were mentioned as wind instruments along with many other musical instruments.^[7] The Samaveda, one of the four Vedas of ancient Indian literature, is considered as the "Veda of melodies and chants" and is specifically focused on the musical aspects of the Vedic rituals. The Samaveda includes references to wind instruments that were likely used to accompany the vocal chants. 'Venu' or 'Vaṁśī' (flute) and Veena were used as essential accompanying instruments in Sāmagāna.^[8] It is even found that the tuning of the Veena was based on the notes of Vaṁśī. Hence, the notes of the Vaṁśī were considered as the base and authentic notes for all the musicians. The term 'Venu' was used to refer to the

Indian flute, although the exact term Bansuri is not used, the descriptions align with the characteristics of bamboo flutes. The Bansuri's role in the Vedic period, though not explicitly detailed in every text, is evident through the general references to music, and musical instruments.

The Bansuri is deeply associated with Lord Krishna. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa describes the Bansuri's deep association with Lord Krishna, depicts significant cultural and religious symbol in Indian traditions, literature and art.^[9]

After the Vedic period, the Ramayana, one of the major ancient Indian epics was composed around 600 B.C. to 200 B.C., that includes numerous references to music, musical instruments, and the arts. Among wind instruments, there is a reference to 'Venu' (the term used to refer to a bamboo flute) in Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa (30,50) and Vaṁśa has also appeared in Sundarakāṇḍa of Ramayana which is synonymous with 'Venu'.^[10] The Mahabharata, another major ancient Indian epic was roughly dated between 400-450 B.C. where not so many references to music were found. However, in Droṇa parva, there is reference to the wind instruments like gomukha (cow-faced horn or trumpet) and Śankha. In Santi parva, there is also reference to Venu (ch.52, 4-5).^[11] These references reflect the importance of Indian flute in our culture.

The oldest Indian treatise on dramaturgy and musical theory is the Nāṭyaśāstra, written by Bharata Muni in between 1st and 3rd century, also mentions about Venu and method of playing it, which is classified under the category of Suśira vādyā (wind instruments).^[12]

The Indian treatise, Saṃgītaratnākara, written by Śārṅgadeva in the 13th century (1210 AD -1247 AD), is one of the most comprehensive and significant texts on Indian classical music. This treatise covers a wide range of topics, including music theory, vocal and instrumental music, and dance. The book mentions about the flute made up of Bamboo, Khair, Ivory, Sandal, iron, bronze, silver and gold.^[13] The text also mentions other types of flutes under the broader category of Suśira vādyā (wind instruments). The 14 kinds of flutes mentioned in this text are as follows:

Name	Length (in angul)	Distance between mukhrandhra and tarrandhra (in angul)
1. Umapati	19	2
2. Tripurush	20	3
3. Chaturmukh	21	4

4. Panchwaktra	22	5
5. Shanmukh	23	6
6. Muniraj	24	7
7. Vasu	25	8
8. Nathendra	26	9
9. Maharandra	27	10
10. Rudra	28	11
11. Aditya	29	12
12. Manu	31	14
13. Kalanidhi	33	16
14. Ashtadasha	35	18

where angul equals to half the width of thumb.^[14]

The 20th Century Developments

In 20th century, the legendary Indian flautist Pt. Pannalal Ghosh (1911-1960) credited with revolutionizing the Bansuri and elevating its role in Hindustani Classical Music.^[15] Bansuri primarily was a folk instrument. Pt. Pannalal Ghosh transformed it into a prominent and respected medium by expanding the length of the Bansuri. It seemed to him that a larger instrument with a lower pitch would be more suitable for the classical genres and finally settled on a flute of thirty-two inches in length. Traditional Bansuri had six finger holes. Pt. Ghosh added a seventh hole, named as 'Dhruva Madhyam' hole for playing Teevra Mandhyam in Mandra Saptak (base octave) extends the range of the instrument facilitating accurate rendition of many ragas. He introduces gāyakī ang (Vocal style) on the Bansuri.^[16] This is also evident from his available recordings that he also has a unique playing technique which enriched Bansuri's expressiveness. This innovation facilitated in expanding the instrument's technical capabilities and versatility. His style of performance had a significant role in the innovation needed to elevate the Bansuri in the classical music of North India.

Following the footsteps of Pt. Pannalal Ghosh, renowned flute artist Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia contributed a great role in popularizing the Bansuri both in India and internationally. Pt. Chaurasia is known for his virtuosity and innovative techniques, which have further expanded the Bansuri's expressive capabilities, allowing to explore and perform complex ragas an ease and is obvious from many video recordings available on internet. He adapted the style more commonly associated with the stringed instruments such as sitar and sarod, the tantrakari ang. Pt. Chaurasia has widely collaborated with Indian musicians as well as Western musicians, thus enriching

North Indian Classical music globally through Bansuri.

In context of Hindustani classical music, both bandish and gat are played on the Bansuri. The artists follow gāyakī style to perform bandish and gatkari style to perform the gat. As a solo instrument, the performance starts with Raga alaap, followed by jod, jhala, bandishes in Vilambit Laya (slow tempo) or Madhya Laya (medium tempo) or Drut Laya (fast tempo) and improvisations showcasing musician's mastery over raga and tala (rhythm) in khayal classical form. Bansuri is also used in semi-classical forms of music like Thumri, Dadra and Bhajan where its expressiveness enhances different emotions and moods. One of the key significances of Bansuri as an accompanying instrument is its ability to enhance different emotions (rasa) and moods (bhava).

Many other eminent artists like Pt. Vijay Raghav Rao, Pt. Raghunath Set, Pt. Nityanand Haldipur, Pt. Ronu Majumdar, Pt. Pravin Godkhindi have continued to innovate, each bringing their unique style and interpretations to the instrument till date. Thus, Bansuri has an enriched cultural and musical significance.

Cultural Significance of Bansuri

The Bansuri, a traditional Indian bamboo flute, is not merely a musical instrument but a significant cultural symbol deeply embedded in Indian heritage. Its history spans thousands of years, making it one of the oldest musical instruments still in use today.

Hindu mythology often associates the Bansuri with Lord Krishna, connection to divinity further enhances the instrument's cultural significance, as it symbolizes love, joy, and the divine connection between humanity and nature. It also underscores the spiritual significance, often used in devotional songs (Bhajans) and rituals to invoke divine presence. Myself, as a research scholar was fortunate enough to witness playing of Bansuri (Venu) at Ambalapuzha Sree Krishna Swamy temple as a part of ritual in Athazha Sheeveli which signifies its spiritual and cultural significance.

Extensive artistic representations of flutes and flute players, for example in relief sculptures from Ajanta and Ellora, Amaravati and Gandhara, as well as Buddhist sculptures at Sanchi, attest to the widespread use of the instrument over many centuries, both in the accompaniment of singers and as a member of instrumental ensembles. A photograph by Debashish Banerjee in the book Music of Ancient Civilizations highlights a panel in Sanchi (Circa 2nd Century BCE) depicts short lutes and transverse flutes being played in a procession.^[17]



The Bansuri plays a prominent role in both Hindustani (North Indian) and Carnatic (South Indian) classical music. It has significant importance in Hindustani classical music. It is used to perform complex ragas and intricate compositions, showcasing its melodic range and versatility. The Bansuri is also an important accompaniment in classical dance forms such as Kathak. It provides a melodic framework that complements the rhythmic patterns and expressive storytelling of the dancers. It is also used as an accompanying instrument with drama, and storytelling many other traditional forms of expression as well. Its soothing tone are frequently used in Indian music to convey the nuances of different emotions.

The Bansuri also holds a significant place in Indian folk music and cultural celebrations, with variations in playing styles across different regions. It accompanies a wide range of folk songs, including those sung during festivals, rituals, and everyday work, serving as a medium for communal expression and communication. Variations in the size, scale and playing techniques of the Bansuri lead to its adaptability to different regional styles and cultures in folk music. In many Indian folk traditions, the Bansuri is often used as an accompanying instrument to narrates stories of local legends and historical events.

The innovations and virtuosic performances of many eminent artists helps in popularization of the instrument, bringing it from a folk background into the classical music. Its resonative sound that conveys deep emotions, all contributes to its enduring presence and significance in Indian culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper summarises the historical evolution of Bansuri as a prominent musical instrument in North Indian classical music, by examining its origin, traces and transformation through various periods like pre-historic and Indus Valley civilization, Vedic and Post-Vedic period. In 20th century, Pt. Pannalal Ghosh's innovations in structural design and playing techniques of Bansuri has expanded its range and expressive capabilities, transforming it into a respected instrument in Hindustani classical music. Due to the development of structural and playing techniques of the instrument has also enabled its collaborative capacity with other musicians across different genres which showcases Bansuri's versatility and adaptability. The Bansuri also holds immense cultural significance in India. The innovations on the structural design of the flute have expanded the instrument's range and expressive capabilities transforming it from a

folk music instrument into well esteemed instrument in Indian Classical traditions. The Bansuri has also a great significance in semi-classical, folk music and Indian art as well. It is associated with regional cultures and rituals of different communities of India.

The study of historical development and cultural significance of Bansuri serves in knowing the rich and diverse heritage of Indian music and culture. In the era of fusion and contemporary music, there is always a scope of innovations and collaborations leaving research gap for further studies related with Bansuri.

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