

Textual Evidences of Early Music Therapy practices in India



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Abstract

The influence of sound and music on mental and physical health and well-being has been recognised since ancient times. While modern Indian music therapy is an evolving field and has been gaining significant traction only since the last decade, its roots can be traced back to ancient practices. Textual evidences of music therapy practices from an Indian context is found in musicological texts or the Lakṣaṇa Grantha-s which explore fundamental concepts such as Nāda (sound), Śruti (musical pitch), Grāma (musical modes), and Rāga-s (musical scales), along with various other aspects. Apart from Lakṣaṇa Grantha-s, early works on Ayurvēda, medicine, Yoga, etc, mention the role of music in healing and well-being. This paper aims to explore and understand the early practices of music therapy as documented in Indian texts and manuscripts. The paper also intends to highlight how these early practices align with the contemporary understandings of music therapy. The study attempts to bridge the gap between ancient practices and modern methodologies.

Keywords: Music Therapy, Manuscripts, Music History, Musicology, Indian Music,

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Introduction

Music therapy is the professional use of music and its elements as an intervention in medical, educational, and everyday environments with individuals, groups, families, or communities who seek to optimise their quality of life and improve their physical, social, communicative, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health and wellbeing (WFMT, 2011). Contemporary music therapy practice primarily involves four broad types of interventions: Receptive, Re-creation, Improvisation, and Song writing (Edwards, J., et al. 639-643).

The Receptive method involves subjects listening to music and responding to it silently, verbally, or in any other modality. This method is used to promote stimulation or relaxation, facilitate memory, develop auditory skills, enhance mood, and reduce anxiety. The Re-creation method aims to strengthen motor skills, improve social interaction, and develop self-expression through instrument playing or singing by encouraging

subjects to play or sing along to a pre-composed song (familiar or new), or playing various instruments depending on their abilities and objectives.

Improvisation involves extemporaneous music making using simple instruments, body percussion, or the voice. This intervention method facilitates expression and communication through music, especially when verbal communication is limited, increases freedom and the ability to make choices, and develops the capacity for socialising with another individual through music. Song writing is an intervention method where the therapist encourages and assists the subject in creating their own music or lyrics. This helps in validating experiences, externalising thoughts or emotions, building creativity, and promoting a different mode of expression.

The effect of sound and music on healthy and pathological states of mind and body appears to have been understood from early times. Traces of music therapy in India are found in musicological texts, such as Lakṣaṇa Grantha-s, which expound on the essentials

of music. Similarly, the Vedic texts, texts on Āyurvēda, etc. give direct or indirect information on music therapy from an Indian context.

Scope and Rationale

This paper explores the early practices of music

therapy as documented in selected Indian texts and aims to understand how these early practices align with contemporary music therapy. The texts considered for the study include Vedic literature, music literature, and texts on Indian medicine written in Sanskrit language.

| Text/Grantha | Author | Year/Period | Subject |
|-------------------|------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Atharva Vēda | | | Indian Medicine |
| Caraka Samhita | Caraka | Uncertain (100 BCE - 200 CE) / 600 CE | |
| Suśrutasaṃhitā | Suśruta | Uncertain (100 BCE - 200 CE) / 600 CE | |
| Aṣṭāṅgasāṅgraha | Vāgbhaṭa | 600 CE | |
| Saṅgīta Ratnākara | Śārṅgadeva | 13th Century | Indian Music |
| Saṅgīta Makaranda | Nārada | Uncertain | |

The rationale for selecting these texts is as follows:

- The Atharva Veda is considered the root of Ayurveda and has greatly influenced texts like the Caraka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita (Wujastyk, D, 1998). Scholars consider it one of the oldest surviving records of folk healing, highlighting its relevance to early therapeutic practices (Zysk, Kenneth G, 10-12).
- The Bṛhatrayī, which includes the Caraka Samhita, Suśrutasaṃhitā, and Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya, represents essential texts in Ayurveda. These texts collectively store a vast repository of Indian medical wisdom and form the basis of Ayurvedic practices.
- Among the musicological treatises, references to the transformative power of music are found in Saṅgīta Ratnākara and Saṅgīta Makaranda.

Textual Evidences of Indian Music Therapy

References in Atharva Vēda-s

The Atharva Vēda, one among the four texts Vedic literature, contains hymns on various themes such as Human soul, birth, rebirth, war and peace, health and age, dealing with evil, cosmic peace, etc. Among them, a wide range of physical ailments and cure for diseases are also dealt with. For example, fever (Kāṇḍa 1, Sukta 25; Kāṇḍa 5, Sukta 22), leprosy (Kāṇḍa 1, Suktas 23-24), cancer (Kāṇḍa 2, Sukta 33; Kāṇḍa 6, Sukta 14), hereditary and chronic diseases (Kāṇḍa 2, Sukta 8; Kāṇḍa 6, Sukta 14) and easing childbirth (Kāṇḍa 1, Sukta 11), etc.

In the Vedic tradition, herbs and medicines are not viewed as inert substances but as entities imbued with

vitality, sharing a cosmic energy that resonates with the human spirit. This perspective is crucial in understanding how the Vedic physician interacts with herbs as living energies, rather than mere physical agents, through chanting or reciting the hymns. (Tulsi Ram, 44)

The following table gives an overview of the themes of the hymns for health as given in Atharva Veda:

| S.No | Sukta | Theme of the Hymn |
|----------------|-------|-----------------------------|
| Kāṇḍa 1 | | |
| 1. | 11 | Easy Delivery |
| 2. | 12 | Lavation of Disease |
| 3. | 17 | Stop Bleeding |
| 4. | 22 | Heart Trouble & Jaundice |
| 5. | 23 | White Leprosy |
| 6. | 24 | Leprosy Cure |
| 7. | 25 | Fever Cure |
| Kāṇḍa 2 | | |
| 8. | 3 | Health and Healing |
| 9. | 8 | Hereditary Diseases |
| 10. | 9 | Rheumatism |
| 11. | 33 | Uprooting the Cancerous |
| Kāṇḍa 3 | | |
| 12. | 7 | Cure of Hereditary Diseases |
| 13. | 11 | Long Life & Yakshma Cure |
| 14. | 23 | Fertility |
| Kāṇḍa 4 | | |
| 15. | 5 | Sleep |
| 16. | 6 | Antidote to Poison |
| 17. | 13 | Cure of Snake Poison |
| Kāṇḍa 5 | | |

| | | |
|-----------------|-----|---------------------------------|
| 18. | 22 | Cure of Fever |
| 19. | 23 | Destruction of Germs |
| 20. | 29 | Destruction of Germs & Insects |
| Kāṇḍa 6 | | |
| 21. | 12 | Poison Cure |
| 22. | 14 | Cancer & Consumption |
| 23. | 44 | Herbal Cure |
| 24. | 83 | Cure of Scrofulous Inflammation |
| 25. | 85 | Yakshma Cure |
| 26. | 100 | Antidote to Poison |
| 27. | 138 | Cure for Impotence |
| Kāṇḍa 7 | | |
| 28. | 42 | Freedom from Disease |
| 29. | 74 | Cure of Excrescences |
| 30. | 76 | Cure of Excrescences |
| 31. | 88 | Snake Poison |
| 32. | 96 | Kidneys |
| 33. | 116 | Fever |
| Kāṇḍa 8 | | |
| 34. | 7 | Health and Herbs |
| Kāṇḍa 9 | | |
| 35. | 8 | Cure of Diseases |
| Kāṇḍa 10 | | |
| 36. | 4 | Snake Poison Cure |
| Kāṇḍa 19 | | |
| 37. | 39 | Freedom from Disease |

By chanting these specific hymns, healers would aim to alleviate the suffering of the patient through spiritual and vibrational means. It is seen that Herbs and natural remedies have been frequently mentioned alongside these hymns (Kāṇḍa 6, Sukta 44), and were likely used in combination with chanting. This synergy between sound and nature highlights the integrated approach of early Vedic healing practices, where music and medicine were not separate but complementary forces.

References in Bṛhatrayī (Medical Texts)

The Bṛhatrayī texts of Ayurveda; Caraka Saṃhita, Suśrutasaṃhitā, and Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya; mention music as part of medical practice.

• Caraka Saṃhitā:

- 1. Musicians in Therapy:** The author suggests that skilled musicians should be part of the therapeutic team (Sthana 1, Chapter 15, Verse 7).
- 2. Music for Coma Recovery:** Music is recommended for patients regaining consciousness from a coma (Sthana 1, Chapter 29, Verses 51-53).
- 3. Pitta Balance:** Soothing music is mentioned as an effective remedy for pitta imbalances (Sthana 3, Chapter 6, Verse 17).
- 4. Psychological Support in Tuberculosis:** The work suggests that engaging with pleasant music aids psychological health in tuberculosis patients (Sthana 6, Chapter 8, Verses 186-188).
- 5. Alcoholism Treatment:** Music is listed as one among the ten therapies for managing alcoholism (Sthana 6, Chapter 24, Verses 192-193).
- 6. Comfort through Music:** Music is advised to comfort patients during complications such as emesis / purgation. (Sthana 8, Chapter 6, Verse 85).

• Suśrutasaṃhitā:

- 1. Music in Therapeutic Complications:** Music is prescribed for patients experiencing complications from therapeutic emesis and purgation, particularly if they become unconscious (4th Section, 34th Chapter, Verses 12-13).
- 2. Music for Coma Recovery:** Suśruta recommends using music alongside other therapies to help awaken coma patients (6th Section, 46th Chapter, Verses 22-23).

• Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya:

Vāgbhaṭa reinforces music's role in treating conditions similar to that which has been mentioned in the Caraka Saṃhitā.

1. Pitta Aggravation (1.13.6)
2. Tuberculosis Treatment (4.5.83)
3. Coma Patient Care (4.7.113)
4. Therapeutic Emesis and Purgation (5.3.39)

References in Musicological Texts

• Saṅgīta Rāṭnākara:

In the Piṇḍōtpatti Prakaraṇa of the Svaragatādhyāya, Śārṅgadeva highlights music's ability to evoke emotional responses, illustrating its captivating nature in both animals and infants in the following verses;



| | |
|--|--|
| <p><i>ajñāta viṣayāsvādō bālah paryānikāgataḥ rudan gītāmṛtam pītvā harṣōtkarṣam prapadyatē (1.1.28)</i></p> <p><i>vanēcarastṛṇāhāraścitram matṛgaśiśuḥ paśuḥ lubdhō lubkasaramgītē gītē yacchatata jīvitam (1.1.29)</i></p> | <p>Translation: An infant, crying in a cradle, unaware of the enjoyment of objects, our tasting the nectar of a song, knows no bounds of joy. Even a fawn, an animal feeding on grass and moving in the forest, attracted by the song of a hunter, is ready to sacrifice its life.</p> |
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●Saṅgīta Makaranda

Nārada throws light on the therapeutic potential of rāga-s in Saṅgīta Makaranda. He mentions that Heptatonic rāgas promote longevity and wealth, while pentatonic rāgas are effective in curing diseases and alleviating fears. (Narada 20)

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|--|--|
| <p><i>āyurdharma yaśōbuddhi dhanadhānya phalam labhēt rāgābhivṛddhi santānam pūrṇarāgāḥ pragīyatē (1.3.80)</i></p> | <p>Meaning: Longevity, righteousness, fame, intelligence, wealth, grain and fruits are obtained by singing pūrṇa rāga-s or the heptatonic scales</p> |
| <p><i>vyādhināśī śatrunāśī bhayaśōkavināśanē vyādhidāridryasantāpē viṣamagrahamōcanē (1.3.82)</i></p> <p><i>kāmaḍambaranāśē ca maṅgalam viṣasamhṛtē auḍavēna pragātavyam grāmaśāntyarthakarmanī (1.3.83)</i></p> | <p>Meaning: The auḍava rāga-s or the pentatonic scales can ward off enemies, illness, fear and misery, poverty, alter the planetary positions that cause mishaps and cure the ill effects of poison.</p> |

Comparative analysis of early and present-day practices

The references in Br̥hatrayī to the use of music for coma recovery and managing therapeutic complications correspond closely to the modern receptive model of music therapy, where patients passively or actively listen to music for therapeutic benefits. The references in Atharva Veda mostly associate with psychological means such as manifestation and reassurance through hymns and chants while at the same time aligns with current practices that focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Sangita Makaranda is probably the only musicological text that provides us historical documentation of what is called raga therapy in the present day. It is to be noted that pentatonic scales are widely used for music therapy in the west, which substantiates the claims made by Narada in Sangita Makaranda. (Costa, Marco et al.)

Conclusion

The exploration of early music therapy practices in India reveals a rich tapestry of understanding regarding the therapeutic potential of music across various ancient texts. The Atharva Veda lays a foundational framework, emphasising specific hymns for curing diseases, promoting holistic wellness, and addressing chronic conditions, while also highlighting the importance of sound in achieving longevity and fertility. The integration

of music in healthcare reflects a deep recognition of its emotional and restorative qualities.

Similarly, the Br̥hatrayī reinforce the role of skilled musicians in therapeutic settings, advocating for music's use in recovery from coma and managing various health issues, including pitta imbalances and tuberculosis. These texts suggest that music is not just a supplementary treatment but an essential component of healing.

While the musicological texts, such as Saṅgīta Rātnākara and Saṅgīta Makaranda, may not provide as extensive references as the medical texts, they nonetheless highlight music's capacity to evoke emotional responses and its transformative power.

In conclusion, the textual evidence underscores that music therapy has historical roots in India, showcasing its multifaceted role in healing, emotional expression, and overall wellness. This legacy invites further exploration and integration of music therapy into contemporary healthcare practices.

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