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An Overview of Voice Health and Hygiene

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Abstract

The role of vocal music in ancient India was integral to religious ceremonies, and even today, Hindu devotional practices heavily involve chanting and rhythmic movements. The voice is a medium of communication and expression for abstract creativity. In antiquity, a singer's voice, termed 'Sarira' was considered the medium capable of expressing the beauty of a 'Raga' without formal training, emphasizing the intimate connection between voice and body. Examining the qualities and defects of the singing voice, from ancient Sanskrit textbooks or lakshana granthas, recognizing defects in voice helps individuals identify and address potential issues related to vocal strain, fatigue, or damage. Right breathing techniques are essential for voice production, efficient breath control enables sustained vocalization, preventing fatigue. It also contributes to articulation, clarity, and emotional expression in speech and singing. Maintaining vocal hygiene is also crucial for an artist. This seminar article explores the significance of ancient Indian manuscripts about voice, emphasizing their importance in communication and artistic expression. It also addresses topics such as breathing, yoga, pranayama, and ayurveda shedding light on how these practices can be incorporated into the life of an artist.

Keywords: Voice, Vocal Health, Vocal Hygieine, Voice Quality, Voice Defects

Research Paper

Introduction

Bharata is a land of many arts and sciences. Many disciplines of knowledge have existed here since time immemorial. They are not all exclusive, they are beautifully interconnected and possessing the knowledge of different systems is always beneficial in improving one's skill. Music is one among the 64 arts, often called "Chatushasti kalas". It is a highly revered field. The singer or artist channels their emotions into music, creating a profound connection to the divine. It requires a wide range of skills that the artists need to acquire in order to express themselves. When it is so, often understanding other systems of knowledge facilitates the artist to sharpen, maintain,and upgrade their skills.

Voice for a singer is of utmost importance. Like how keeping the instrument in a top condition is important for instrumentalists, similarly for vocalists, keeping their instrument in good condition, i.e, the vocal chords is of utmost importance. Not all singers are born with a naturally excellent voice. They need to recognize their limitations and incorporate specific practices into their daily routines to overcome these shortcomings.

The Lakshana Granthas in music tell us about the different voices that the singers possess. They also talk about "Guna-Doshas", that means, the merits and demerits of voice. Examining the qualities and defects of the singing voice from ancient Sanskrit textbooks, recognizing defects in voice helps individuals identify and address potential issues related to vocal strain, fatigue, or damage. Right breathing techniques are essential for voice production and efficient breath control enables sustained vocalization, preventing fatigue. It also contributes to articulation, clarity, and emotional expression in speech and singing.

Research Methodology

This study includes Literature Review along with exploratory research with a qualitative approach.

Lakshana Granthas

When we look into the information in Music treatises regarding the qualities of a singer and qualities of voice, most texts like Nātyaśāstra by Bharata Muni, Brihaddesi by Matanga and others discuss the significance of voice in the context of performing arts by stressing on factors

like importance of clarity, volume, and emotional expression in singing. They recommend daily vocal exercises and warm-ups to maintain and enhance vocal quality, proper breathing techniques (Pranayama) for sustaining notes and phrases.

1. Sangeetha Ratnakara

In the Prakeernakadhyaya of Sangeetha Ratnakara it is given that:

"The vocal experts declare him to be the best among the singers who has an attractive voice of good tone quality, who is an adept in initiating and finishing (a raga); who is well versed in (singing) the raga-s, raganga-s, bhasanga-s, kriyanga-s and upanga-s, an expert in singing prabandha-s and knows the essentials of the different forms of alapti; who commands a natural access to the gamaka-s (shakes and graces) arising from all the three registers, and a self-controlled voice; who is aware of musical time (tala), and is attentive and indefatigable, who knows suddha and chāyālaga (compositions), who is an expert in all the specific intonations (kaku), who commands the movement of different sthaya-s; who is free of all blemishes, अनेकस्थाय संचारः सर्वदोषविवर्जितः given to regular exercise, mindful of laya (tempo), versatile and retentive; who has the capacity to hold his breath while singing with great passion and to arrest the attention of the audience, and who excels in the exposition of raga and belongs to a good tradition."[1]

"Voice is classified into four kinds viz. Khāhula, Nārāta, Bombaka, and Misraka which are now defined as under:

Khāhula | Nārata | Bombaka | Miśraka

(1) Khāhula: Arising from (the predominance of) phlegm (Kapha), khahula is creamy, sweet and soft. When it matures in the lower and the middle registers it becomes ādilla.

(2) Nārāta: The voice arising from (the predominance of) bile (pitta) which is full * (ghana), deep (gambhira), clear (līna) with the range of three registers is nārāta.

(3) Bombaka. Bombaka, however, as declared by Sarngadeva, is (the voice) that arises from (the predominance of) wind (vära) and is hollow, harsh, high sounding and rich (sthüla).

(4) Miśraka: Misraka is said to be (arising) by the admixture of these (three and is therefore called) sünnipätika.

Indeed, Bombaka is characterized by dryness (of voice) while Khahula is creamy; how then can there be the combination of the two characterized as they are by opposite qualities? To explain, it is thought to be (possible) by the elimination of the opposite (quality) of harshness and the combination of the unopposed (qualities of) sweetness and grossness etc. This (explanation) also holds good with regard to the similar objection concerning the opposition of qualities obtaining in-between the solidity of Nārāta and the hollowness of Bomba.

The four varieties of Misra (combine)

There are four varieties of misra viz. the respective combinations of (1) nārāta and khāhula, (2) nārāta and bombaka, (3) bombaka and khāhula and (4) all the three put together.

The combination of all the three, being free from hollowness and harshness is said to be the finest among the fine (voices) like Lord Siva (God) among the gods.

The combination of nārāta and khāhula is the best, while that of khāhula and bombaka is of average standard. Bomba in combination with nārāta is declared by Sarngadeva to be of low grade among (the different kinds of) voice; but of these all (the voice) that combines hollowness with harshness is considered to be the lowest. Many varieties (of voice) come into being by the intermixture of the different qualities of these (types).[2]

However, the above descriptions on types of voices are not found in the Charaka Samhita, one of the principal texts of Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine in India. In this regard, Naradiya Shiksha by Narada is a treatise which covers the principles of both vocal and instrumental music, emphasizing the importance of voice culture.

2. Naradiya Shiksha

The Naradiya Shiksha is a text that deals mainly with the musical notes and the pronunciation of the words in the Vedic language. Further, apart from specifying the characteristics of correct and melodious singing, the text also suggests the ways and the disciplines needed to improve the singer's voice culture.

Narada suggests–'an ardent student of music must lead a disciplined and well-regulated life; meditate at proper

times. He should learn to pronounce the Mantras clearly and crisply. He recommends consumption of Tri-phala-churna (a powder) mixed with salt for digestion, memory and lucid pronunciation. He also recommends breathing in of its smoke and also have honey (Madhu). He says, for securing a clear and sweet voice and attractive teeth, one should use the slick of a mango or wood-apple. Either for learning Vedas or Music, it is essential to have clear voice, self-control, attention, sound approach. A student of Music should learn to recognize the divinity in the Svaras'.[3]

Some pointers that he mentions are–

- Always preserve the fire in stomach, eat what is good. With the food assimilated, get up at dawn and meditate upon Brahmans.
- Autumnal equinox having passed, getting up at dawn is desired till the arrival of the spring night.
- Having got up in the morning with speech restrained, bite tooth sticks of the wood of mango, Palāśa, Bilva, Apāmārga and (or ?) Sirisa.
- Khadira, Kadamba, Karavira, Karañja-all thorny trees having milk are holy and conducive to fame. Cleaning the mouth with it produces lightness and sweetness (of speech); it also causes the correct pronunciation of letters as the ancient (preceptor) Audavraji has said.
- A pupil should always eat Triphala with salt. It generates fire, merit and causes good voice and clear pronunciation of letters.
- Having performed the requisite religious rites, taken breakfast, drunk dhūmaghṛta and becoming pure, speak.
- Commence with mandra. This is the rule in all the branches. Having passed the seven mantras, utter the desired speech.
- Do not utter such a speech as would obstruct the breath. By the obstruction of breath, distorted svara arises. In it the beauty of vowels and consonants doubtlessly gets lost.
- Knowledge acquired from a bad teacher is worthless.
- The Vedic knowledge, acquired from a good teacher, which is clear, handed down well, well-established, fused with good accent and good pronunciation, shines.
- One who has gaping mouth, lips hanging, uttering nasal sounds, stuttering or with the tongue tied, cannot make a delivery of speech, svara, etc. One who is single-minded, has the mind under control is suitable for pronunciation. Fierce, dull-witted, idle, afflicted with respiratory disease, having a distracted mind - these five do not acquire learning.
- One should acquire learning slowly

In this regard, the researcher interviewed an Ayurvedic practitioner who is an ENT specialist in Ayurveda. After noting the above points from Naradiya Shiksha, it is indeed a question if the above mentioned herbs are available in the contemporary times.

A. Interview with an Ayurveda Doctor

In order to gain an insight as to how much of the above-mentioned pointers could be practiced, the Ayurveda doctor, Ms. Shruthi Kiran, (Shruthi, 2024) was asked about these. Her answers are recorded as below:

1. In the Naradiya Shiksha text, it says a singer must consume triphala churna everyday. Is it good to consume it every day? At what time?
   - *It is good. It is a laxative. Some oversensitive people have to consume in smaller amounts. It is called Nitya rasayana which rejuvenates our body. 1 teaspoon at bed time would be right.*
2. The text (Naradiya shiksha) recommends chewing sticks of Palasha and Bilva (oral hygiene) after getting up. Are the modern ways of hygiene ok? Do they cause any difference for vocal muscles? Are there products of Palasha and Bilva available for Oral hygiene?
   - *Ayurvedic toothpastes are ok.*
3. In some ayurvedic texts, Yashtimadhu is suggested for singers, which make them have a "madhura" voice. What is the proportion suggested to be had? At what time? Can it be taken every day?
   - *Yashtimadhu comes under the category of Swarya - promotes good voice. It is a root variety. It should be taken early morning, triphala ghrita also could be taken for voice clarity.*
4. Are there any foods singers must avoid?
   - *Spicy foods, Alcohol, Katu aahara and ushna aahara (Pungent and hot foods)*
5. Do you suggest any other herbs/concoctions which could be beneficial?
   - *Herbs which come under Sariva, Kanthya category.*
6. Which pranayama exercises do you suggest?
   - *Bramari pranayama is beneficial.*

7. Are there everyday rituals that a singer can practice?
   - *Dinacharya can be practiced by all, which is very useful in avoiding certain diseases, bringing a sense of calm and well-being. The rituals are:*

- Waking up early in the morning and emptying bowels.
- Dantadhavana (Brushing teeth)
- Cleaning of tongue
- Kavala (Gargling)
- Gandusha (Medicated oil pulling)
- Nasya (administration of oil in nose)
- Abhyanga (Oil-massage for body)
- Vyayama (Exercise)
- Snana (Bath)
- Bhojana (Food)

When the above points are seen from Dinacharya, it is noted that it is similar to the pointers mentioned in Naradiya Shiksha.

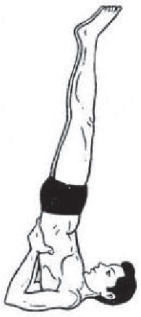
B. Interview with Yoga Practitioner

Right breathing techniques are essential for voice production, efficient breath control enables sustained vocalization, preventing fatigue. It also contributes to articulation, clarity, and emotional expression in speech and singing. In order to comprehend a Yoga Practitioner's perspective, a yoga trainer Ms. Vanita V (Vanitha, 2024) was interviewed. Her answers are given below:

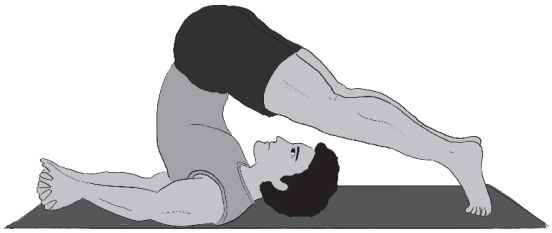
1. Is there any everyday routine, a singer can practice in order to maintain vocal health ?
   - *Gargling, 'ma' kara, 'amm' kara chanting (Chanting ma and amm)*
2. Which pranayama exercises do you suggest? (specifically for vocal health)
   - *Omkara chanting.*
3. Which yoga asanas and pranayama are suitable for everyday practice that benefit singers?
   - *Regular yogasanas (like suryanamaskar and the ones mentioned below), sarvanadi vibhagiya pranayama*
4. Is there any age restriction for practicing the asanas and pranayama mentioned above
   - *No age restrictions*
5. Are there any foods singers must avoid?
   - *Sour food*
6. Are there any specific yogasanas and pranayama that could be practices when there is hoarseness of voice and vocal fatigue?
   - *Sithali, sitkari, sadhanta,sarvanadi vibhagiya pranayamas.*

Some yogasanas and pranayama which could be beneficial

1. Sarvangasana

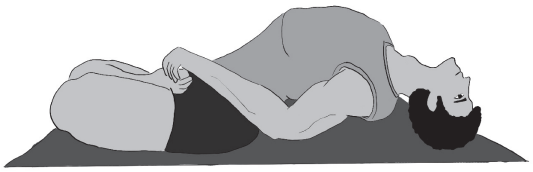


2. Halasana



3. Shirshasana

4. Matsyasana



5. Bhujangasana

6. Chakrasana

Observations

These are some of the points that the researcher noted during this process:

- The dinacharya mentioned by the Ayurvedic practitioner very much resembles the pointers given in Naradiya Shiksa.
- In the Prakeernakadhyaya of Sangita Ratnakara, various types of voices are discussed in detail, which arise from the 3 doshas viz. Vata, Pitta, Kapha. Even the voices arising from the combination of the above doshas are also discussed. But a cure is not suggested.
- Ayurvedic texts like Charaka samhita or Sharngadhara Samhita do not discuss the types of voices as seen in Sangita Ratnakara.
- The above Ayurvedic Texts provide various remedies for various throat problems. For example, various herbs are suggested under "Kanthya" category, or those which are good for throat.
- Both the Ayurveda practitioner and Yoga Practitioners were suggestive of a proper "Dinacharya" or the everyday routines. It is very important for an artist to treat their vocal apparatus carefully and need to regularly maintain the rituals.
- Both of them were suggestive of Pranayama and Bhramari pranayama.
- Commonly practiced asanas as listed above, including the Surya Namaskara were beneficial in maintaining healthy body and also, the above yogasanas improve stimulation and circulation of blood in the throat region.
- Practicing asanas removes toxins from the body.
- Breathing exercises or pranayama improve the flow of air and give control. Diaphragmatic breathing improves which enables the artist to increase their breath holding time and regulate the flow of air. Bhramari pranayama increases the pitch or range of voice.

Conclusion

It is indeed important for artists to look after their health holistically in order to have a well-nurtured voice. Dinacharya, or the everyday practices are essential for regular maintenance of vocal muscles. Yoga asanas help in stimulating the vocal muscles and strengthening them. Pranayama helps in relaxing the vocal muscles. These go a long way for an artist who is subject to long hours of practice and experiences regular wear and tear of vocal muscles.

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