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Arts

SUSHIRA VADYA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FLUTE IN MUSIC

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ABSTRACT Wind instruments exhibit great diversity in structure and sonority and have been prominent in the music of all cultures since prehistoric times. A system of classification of these instruments must reflect and categorize the relationships and the differences between the many varieties. The conventional division of the symphony orchestra into sections has simplified the grouping of wind instruments into woodwinds and brasses, but this is an inaccurate classification that generally does not apply outside Western culture. The fact that some modern woodwinds, such as flutes and saxophones, are made of metal whereas several ancestors of present-day brasses, such as the cornet and the serpent, were typically made of wood illustrates the unsuitability of a classification according to material. The most ancient and widespread Sushira Vadya (wind instrument) is the flute. The oldest mention is in the Veda-s wherein it is called Venu and Nadi.

KEYWORDS : SUSHIRA, VADYA, MUSIC, FLUTE, INSTRUMENT

One very popular belief is that the creation of the first Sushira Vadya might have been suggested to man by the wind whistling through holes in bamboos in the glades. This, while a common occurrence in the woods, does not relate to any human activity as was seen in the case of solid instruments, drums and, as we shall discuss later, stringed instruments. So, some other plausible area should be sought; and a few suggestions are being made here. The first and most natural is the simple common act of whistling which is very primitive; further, it is one indulged in by children and the aged, specially men. It is a bodily act that could have very easily suggesting the making of wind instruments. The reader might have also noted in many rural areas people speaking with hollow and loosely closed fists in front of their mouths, as a mark of respect. An extension of this is the habit amongst some primitives, for instance in Brazil, to have "megaphones cut from a hollow branch or a large cone, into which the player spoke, sang or roared he did not strive for a musical sound; on the contrary he wanted to distort his natural voice and to produce a harsh sound in order to frighten evil spirits". Another example is of a traveler in New Guinea who saw that the chieftain invariably held a conch shell before his mouth "so his voice had a very hollow sound". It is an everyday sight in over rural and semi urban homes to see housewives blowing into the fire through a metal or wooden tube to make the fire burn better. And we have all played with bottles, blowing across their mouths. These-whistling, mouth megaphones, conch shells, domestic blow tubes-could well have given birth to early wind instruments. And once again we are led to the conclusion that non-musical appliances are often the parents of musical instruments. Had there been any wooden wind instruments during the early stages of human civilizations they might not have come to light in the excavations; for vegetable matter like bamboo or any other wood could not have withstood the decaying effects of wind and water. It is, therefore, not surprising that the pre-historic instruments found are whistles, bone trumpets and bone flutes. Paleolithic wind instruments of any consequence are bone flutes without finger holes. Later on we come across flutes with holes, as well as conch shells; and much younger than these are the metallic earphones, flutes of bamboo and so on. As for instruments like the Shehnai and the Nagasvaram, they must have been very recent indeed. In our country, the Indus civilization's excavations have thrown up only clay whistles; wind instruments made of bone are found even today in the Himalayan regions. The flute, according to a distinguished scholar, was the invention of the Savara people living in the hill forests of Andhra and Odisha.

Whatever be the origin, however deep may be the influence of society, culture, more and tradition in delineating the tone, form and designs of Indian musical instruments, in broader aspect Indian musical instruments can be classified into four main heads depending upon the sound they produce. Bharata muni in his Natyashastra also classified Indian musical instruments into four broad categories namely, the stringed instruments (tat or Tantra Vadya), the wind instruments (Sushira Vadya), the Ghana Vadya and

the percussion instruments (Avanaddha Vadya). This mode of classification even survives today despite the introduction of newer musical instruments into the field. Music has always been an important part of Indian life. The range of musical phenomenon in India extends from simple melodies to what is one of the most well-developed "systems" of classical music in the world. There are references to various string and wind instruments, as well as several kinds of drums and cymbals, in the Vedas. Some date the advent of the system of classical Indian music to Amir Khusro. Muslim rulers and noblemen freely extended their patronage to music. In the courts of the Mughal emperors, music is said to have flourished, and the Tansen was one of the jewels of Akbar's court.

The Kombu as one meets it now in south India is a C-shaped trumpet made of brass or copper and is usually constructed of three pieces with the blowing end having a mouthpiece and the other piece spreading out into a circular shaped flare. It was made of gold, silver and copper of about half a meter in length. Today, naturally, a golden Kahala is unthinkable, unless it is a curio kept in a temple or the old princely paraphernalia. Sometimes one does come across a silver Kahala or karna amongst the processional accessories of deities. The common villager therefore uses a copper or brass Kahala.

The most ancient and widespread Sushira Vadya (wind instrument) is the flute. The oldest mention is in the Veda-s wherein it is called Venu and Nadi. The format was perhaps of bamboo and the latter of marsh reed. Holes at fixed distances are kept in a bamboo stick for producing sound of all the swaras in Indian scale. Today there are of two types, known as the horizontal and the vertical. The former is typically Indian: a companion to every village herdsman and the divine instrument of Lord Krishna, calling all Maids unto Him. The advantage of flute over other instrument is easy portability and sweet sound. Pandit Hari Prasad Chourasia has given new dimensions to live concerts of flute. The flute is made in the form of an open cylindrical air column about 66 cm long. Its fundamental pitch is middle C (C4) and it has a range of about three octaves to C7. Sound is produced from a flute by blowing onto a sharp edge, causing air enclosed in a tube to vibrate. The flute as shown above is a transverse or side-blown flute.

The modern flute was developed by Theo bald Boehm who experimented with it from 1832 to 1847, desiring to give it a bigger tone. He finally produced a parabolic (bowl-shaped) head joint attached to a cylindrical body with open-standing keys and finger pads to cover large finger holes. There are typically 16 holes, or four more than the minimum to cover the chromatic notes of an equal-tempered octave. Since then, other minor improvements have been made.

The incident narrated earlier of the New Guinea couple who invented the 'first' flute is familiar to every boy who plays with a

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bottle, blowing across its mouth. Wind instruments using this principle are the end-blown flutes of which there are a number of folk and tribal examples. One of them is the fifli of northeast India. It is a small bamboo length, of approximately fifteen centimeters, one end of which is open and the other end closed. The opening is placed on the lower lip, the flute being held down vertically, and air is blown across this opening. Obviously only very simple tunes can be played on the instrument. A little more complicated fifli which can produce melodies of larger range is constructed by binding a set of such tubes of read or bamboo and of various lengths somewhat like a small raft. Since the lengths of the tubes are dissimilar each produces a different pitch-the shorter ones sounding shrilled tones. There is another class of flutes which are blown into from one end but in an entirely different manner. The blowing end is not plain as in the above cases but is pressed into a narrow opening which is technically known as the beak; hence flutes with pressed ends are called beak flutes. Further, just near the beak along the tube there is another hole, the fipple hole. When the musician sends a current of air into the flute through the beak, it strikes against an edge in the fipple thus producing sound. The player creates melodies by closing and opening the finger holes on the body of the instrument. This kind of flute, known as the Bansuri in northern India, is very common specially as a pastoral instrument and is usually met with as a single flute

The flute now being described, the horizontal or cross flute, is closed at one end and open at the other. A few centimeters from the blocked end there is a hole known as the embouchure or blow hole into which the flutiest blows. Along the body of the instrument there are a number of apertures which are worked by fingers for playing a tune. One important fact to be kept in mind is that flutes in our country do not have any mechanical valves or keys to operate on the holes, for the use of such side hinders the production of the tonal niceties of raga music and hence have been avoided by our instrumentalists. Also our artists and audiences still prefer the bamboo flute, because of its mellow quality, to metallic tubes. The length of the Venu varies and depends upon the context: the shorter ones are employed for faster music and higher pitch, whereas the longer flutes are meant for slower music and lower pitch.

The flutes and trumpets described thus far had no mechanical parts, either to produce the sound or to control its pitch. In the trumpets, horns and conches the lips acted as flute controls and in the flutes the edge of the blow hole or the fipple discharged such a function. We will now turn to wind instruments that do use mechanical vibrators in some capacity or the other.

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