

STUDY OF MUSICALITY IN THE RECITATION OF RELIGIOUS HYMNS

T.K.L. Sujatha¹



Abstract

Religious traditions across the globe have their unique ways of reciting sacred hymns based on different melodic structures. Whether it is the chanting of Veda mantras in Hinduism or the recitation of Salaah in Islam or the singing of psalms in Christianity, there is a melodic flow in these hymns. Hymns have their own melodic appeal that makes them stand out among various melodic compositions, regardless of their language. The objective of this paper is to study the musicality of different religious hymns by selecting a few hymns from different traditions. This paper limits its study to the musical aspects of the oral traditions of reciting sacred hymns of different religions and it attempts to explore the unique musical elements in these hymns and also offers an insight into the artistic expressions across different religious cultures, through their musical recitations. Audio samples of the hymns are collected from various sources including field recordings, online resources and interviews. The collected data is subject to musical analysis by giving notations to the selected audio samples using musical notes of the Indian system of music, analyzing tonal variations and vocal techniques, and comparing the musical features to study the similarities and distinctions. The results of the analysis include finding the musical phrases from the chanting of different hymns, listing the observed commonalities and differences, and realizing the limited scope of melody. Eventually, the study accentuates the power of the musical notes, even with limited combinations, in building an effective auditory impact. These findings have significant implications on understanding the role of music in diverse religious traditions. This in turn results in establishing the fact that music has been an integral part of religious practices which takes it beyond the level of entertainment.

Keywords

Melody, Musical Aspects, Religious Hymns

¹ Musician and Researcher, Hyderabad, India. Email: drtklsujatha@gmail.com

Introduction

‘Hymn’ is a Greek word that means a song of praise. Hymns are written for the purpose of meditation or prayer in any tradition. They are also meant to invoke and please the Gods. Most of the hymns are addressed to a deity of that particular religion. Hymns play a major role in the sacred rituals of all religions. Hymns have their own melodic way of rendition. Though the musicality of hymns is limited, it adds great value in bringing auspiciousness to the recitation. There may be use of only a few musical notes in the recitations. To identify their musical features, and to study and analyse them is very important to understand the role of music in religious traditions. Culture also plays a significant role in the musicality of the recitations. A comparative study among different religious hymns also gives scope for interesting observations.

Whether it is Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity, these hymns have had their own influence on society for centuries. This paper gives a view of the role of music involved in the recitation of these sacred hymns. This paper limited its scope to analyzing the musicality in the Hymns of three major religions of the world namely; Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, selected due to their global prevalence and distinct musical renditions.

Methodology

- The study involves mixed methods.
- Audio samples of hymns were collected from various sources including field recordings, online resources, and interviews.
- The collected data is subject to musical analysis to the selected audio samples using musical notes of Indian system of music.
- Audios of Vedic hymns were collected from a Vedic Scholar from the Vedic school at Varija Ashram, Visakhapatnam, India.
- Recordings of the students of Vedic schools were collected
- A Vedic scholar interviewed to understand the old scripts of the Vedas.
- Islamic hymns were collected from the priests of the Muslim community from Dubai, UAE.
- Information regarding Christian hymns collected from Pastors of various churches.
- Audios of Islamic and Christian hymns were collected from online sources, YouTube.

Vedic Hymns

In Hinduism, Vedas are considered the oldest religious hymns that can be traced back to 500 B.C. When Aryans invaded India, they brought the system of knowledge in the form of Vedic hymns and rituals. These Vedas are considered as the sources of wisdom. There are mainly four Vedas: Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda. They are passed down from one generation to another only through oral traditions. The Vedic oral tradition is considered as the oldest. In the beginning, Vedas are executed with only three notes, known as Udatta, Anudatta and Svarita. Among them, Svarita is the middle note. Udatta is rendered as a higher note and Anudatta is rendered as a lower note to Svarita. Later these three notes were extended to five notes and then to seven. These notes are sung with different modulations. There is a view that these Vedic renditions gave rise to the musical notes which gradually developed into a proper system of music as music is believed to have originated from Vedas. Ramamatya quotes in the preface of the musical treatise “Swaramelakalanidhi”,

“Samavedaadidam Gitam sanjagraaha pitaamahaha”

The above sentence means that Music has been derived from Sama Veda.

The oral tradition of Vedic recitation has been passed on by a father to a son or a Guru to his students i.e., shishyas. Different Ashrams and schools are established to spread this knowledge system.

Every religious activity is executed only with the recitation of hymns. Hymns play a very crucial role in the rituals. The recitation of Rig Veda is confined to three notes, namely, Udatta, Anudatta and Svarita. Later, one more note Dirgha Svarita is added as an extra note to Svarita for elongation of a note. The melodic aspect depends on the accents of the syllables involved in those hymns. Rig Veda is performed mainly in the temples and in religious rituals at private homes. Earlier there was no musical representation of these recitations. That evolved gradually. In recent times the three notes are marked clearly with their accents. Anudatta is shown by a horizontal line beneath a syllable, Svarita is marked by a vertical stroke above the syllable, Dirgha Svarita is represented with double vertical strokes above the syllable and the accent-less syllables after Svarita are left without any signs and so on. With the help of these grammatical markings, it has become easy to recite the hymns uniformly by anyone from anywhere.

According to Pratisakhya, the work that deals with the phonetic aspect of the language used in Vedas, Udatta, Anudatta and Svarita are the three notes mentioned above and Svarita is

higher than Udatta and a Svara cannot be translated to a tone. According to them, Svarita is that which comprises more than one tone.

An example of a Rig Vedic hymn with markings:

Agni mīle pūrohitam yagnyasyā devamrītvijām hotāram

Ratṇa dhaatāmam, hari: om, hari: om īshetvorjetvāyavāsthō

Here, ‘mi’, ‘jam’, ‘ta’ in the first line are Dirgha Svaritas and are symbolized with two vertical strokes above and they are elongated as two notes. All the letters with single vertical strokes like ‘hi’, ‘sya’ are rendered with single elongation (Svarita). The letters which are underlined with horizontal lines like ‘a’, ‘pu’, ‘ya’, ‘de’ etc., are Anudatta notes.

The hymn or poem of Rig Veda is called ‘Rukku’ and in Yajur Veda. It is called ‘Panasa’. The way of recitation and the markings are the same for Rig Veda, Sukla Yajur Veda, and Adharva Veda.

The recitation style and markings of the Krishna Yajurveda and Sama Veda differ from those of the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda.

In Krishna Yajur Veda there is no specification of Dirgha svara in every hymn. In Yajur Veda, the word ‘Gum’ is heard a lot at the end of every hymn whereas, there is absolutely no usage of such a word in the Rig Veda.

In Krishna Yajur Veda, even if one vertical stroke is given, it has to be rendered as a single letter without elongation, unlike in Rig Veda.

For example,

Om īshetvorjetvāyavāsthō pa yavāsthā devovāssayītha

Here, in the second word, ‘vaa’ is an elongated letter with a vertical stroke above, however, it is not rendered as a double note. In Yajur Veda, it is rendered as a single note only.

If we take the example of Atharva Veda,

In the phrase, “***Samnoo devirabhishtaya***”, the letter ‘noo’ has an elongated form with a vertical stroke above, indicating it should be rendered as a double note, similar to the Rig Veda style. Additionally, the letter ‘shta’, has a vertical stroke above, signifying, it should be recited as an elongated note. This style of recitation closely resembles that of the Rig Veda.

It is considered that all music is born from Sama Veda. The poems are called Richas and they are sung with Alap (melody). According to Chandogya Upanishad, Sama means Sa (richa)+amah (Alap). Sama gana or singing including both melody and rhythm. These hymns are termed ‘Uha’ (investigated) and ‘Uhya’ (to be investigated). In this system, the numbers 1,2,3, are used above the vowels to denote the Udatta, Anudatta, and Svarita svaras instead of horizontal and vertical strokes. These elongations and ornamentations are called ‘Kampann’ and they are of seven types. All these seven types are denoted with 1,2, and 3 numbers only. Sama gana is further divided into a threefold structure of recitation, Archika (one note is used), Gathika (two notes are used) and Samika (three notes are used).

For example,

1 2 3 1 12 3 2 1 1 2

Tadvo gaaya suthe sacha puruhyathaaya satvane |

Here, the numbers are denoted above the letters, which denote the ornamentation of the letters.

Ae.division:

Representation of Vedic hymns recitation in Indian Notation System:

If we denote the recitation of Vedic hymns in Indian svara notation, we can denote the Udatta, Anudatta, and Svarita with svaras ‘Ri’ (1st variety²), ‘Ni’³ (1st variety), ‘Sa’, considering Svarita as the middle or base note. The additional svaras to these are ‘Ga’ (2nd variety) and ‘Pa’.

The general recitation of the Vedic hymns has the following melodic structure:

Rig Veda: णSRs णSRs णSR.....SRRS णSRsणSRsS.....

Sama Veda: SRRRS णRRsS – णRSsणRSsणSRsणSS
 णSRs णSR, nSRsS.....

Atharva Veda: PणSणS.....S.....ण.....S.....णS...णS...णS.....SSS.....णणणणS...

Yajur Veda: णS.....s nS णSणRS rrS SSRsSs णSrSs.....

² 1st variety – a lower variety of note, 2nd variety is the higher variety of the note

³ In South Indian Notational systems, the seven notes are -Sa-Shadja(tonic/base note), Ri-Rishabha, Ga-Gandhara, Ma- Madhyama, Pa-Panchama, Dha-Dhaivatha, Ni-Nishadha

The more we research, the more details we get in any system of knowledge.

Islamic Hymns

Music in Islam has many social constraints. Many Muslims believe that music is not at all allowed in Islam. They feel it is blasphemy. However, some people consider that some forms of music are allowed. In many areas of Muslim existence, the so-called devotional music or religious music is very popular. The recitation of the Quran in a melodious way is accepted by many. The Quran has no specific references to music. Musical recitation of hymns is performed in Palaces, courts of Kings, and in private gatherings, to avoid conflicts between believers and non-believers of music traditions. Historically, the concept of music aroused and made a mark in the Islamic world in the Golden Age. The influence of European culture brought so much change in the Islamic world as well. This is the period where music gained little prominence in the form of recitation of religious hymns. There are different opinions regarding musical recitations of hymns in Islam.

To those who were allowed to express themselves through music, it was restricted to only vocals, without the playing of instruments. Vocal recitations were allowed to be presented to an audience of the same gender. Some of them were allowed a few rhythmic instruments like one-sided drum and the tambourine. No other melodic instruments were allowed. Women were allowed to play ‘Daf’ only in personal gatherings at home and festival celebrations.

The recitation of the Quran has a lot of Arabic influence. The recitations or readings of the holy hymns of the Quran are called Qiraat. In the past, there was no written form. These recitations were orally passed down from generation to generation. After the advent of the written script, many versions emerged. Not many vowels and consonants are included in the script, which makes it more difficult to recite with uniformity. There are many steps involved in the evolution of the script for the Quran. In the beginning, dots were used to differentiate vowels. Then different marks were used. Later different colors were used to differentiate the letters. This marks the latest Arabic way of writing. The recitations were named after the reciters of the Quran. Their style of recitation became popular in major cities like Makka and Madina. This had a greater influence on the Islamic youth throughout the world. Initially, the number of reciters was very limited due to the difficulty in pronunciation and execution. The influence of Arabic music introduced numerous minor notes or tones into the recitation of Quran hymns, making it challenging to note these subtle nuances. Consequently, these tunes

can only be transmitted orally to the next generations. The general prayer performed by Muslims called Salaah or Namaz, has a strict rendition style with the following features.

The poetic prose of verses of different lengths is sung.

- The verses are sung free of rhythm.
- The voice techniques are based on the pronunciation methods of Arabic influence.
- The preference for scale and melodic rendition is based on the Arabic way of singing.

The Indo-Muslim music has emerged as liturgical and non-liturgical. The liturgical music includes Qirat, and the non-liturgical music includes majlis, qawwalis, milad, etc., This is executed more with the influence of North Indian Music like the Sthayi-Antara Principle. Milad mostly emphasizes on the vocal modulations. It has strict rules. This is not meant for performance.

Because of the complexities involved in the execution styles of Islamic hymns, it is very difficult to notate them.

Christian Hymns

Music played a very important role in the Christian worship for centuries. Hymns are sung in the praise of God, in particular, when addressing Jesus Christ. They are devotional in nature and the verses are mostly the Psalms of the Bible. There are some general verses that praise the qualities of God and explain good deeds to the people. In general, Christian hymns are performed for occasions and celebrations. There are also some hymns which praise the popular saints of divinity. In the earlier centuries, if the verses were not from the Bible, many groups used to reject such hymn recitations. Only biblical verses were sung without any instruments. Hymns are different from Carols. Carols are sung and presented only at the time of Christmas to celebrate the festival. People consider the singing of hymns as a deep spiritual activity to submit themselves to God. There are many Hymns that have been popular from the early centuries.

Previously, instruments were not used in hymn recitations. Later, with the influence of different cultures, instruments also got included in the hymn presentations. Mostly there used to be a group recitation of hymns. String instruments like Harp, Lyre are used prominently in the group renditions. These hymns also have no written notation form in the beginning and are orally transmitted to generations. Churches were the centers to sing, learn, and enjoy these hymns. Later, a proper musical system evolved and these hymn recitations also adopted

those techniques of writing notations for easy understanding and preservation of tunes. These Psalms or the verses of the Bible are set to melody and rhythm and are made like proper songs to sing. They are compositions by themselves, which are presented mostly in groups. They adopted the Western notation system of using major and minor notes and rhythmic meters. Nowadays there is also the influence of popular music in hymn recitals, which is objected to by orthodox Christian systems.

Christian Hymn Recitation in the Indian Musical Notation

- *Jesus Refulsit* – St.Hilary-Latin Hymn around 4th Century AD.

Here, the notation is given for the important phrases of the hymn: This hymn goes with a free flow of rhythm.

P SssS.....G2g2G2g2...G2g2g1g1R2r2 G2g2PM1PppppSN2.....

N2...pN2pN2N2d2d1d1D1spN2pN1...n2R2.....G2R2SN2D2Pd2d2d2P.....

In this hymn, all seven notes are used with all varieties of majors and minors. Therefore, with all the varieties almost 11 notes are used in an octave.

- *Corde Natus*: Aurelius Prudentius -10th Century hymn, based on a Latin poem.

Here the notes are of C major scale.

S R G M G R G R S.....

G M P D P M G M P.....

D N Š P M G G R S..

D N S R G M G R S.....

This is very close to the scale called Sankarabharanam of the South Indian Musical System or Bilawal of the North Indian Musical System.

- *Orientis Partibus*: Traditional hymn- Latin hymn

S R G S R N S...

P P D P G.

S S N S D N S.....

This tune is very close to a scale called Harikambhoji of the South Indian System of music.

These notations for the tunes of hymns are provided to understand the recitation in all modes. This study helps people appreciate the melody behind the hymns globally.

The scale of Harikambhoji has s r2 g2 m1 p d2 n1.

For the analysis, only three hymns are taken.

Music encompasses various compositional forms, genres, and traditions. Interestingly, it has served as a vital medium for communicating, documenting, and teaching the core elements of different religions. Hymns, a significant facet of every religion, become more relatable and relevant to humanity when paired with music. Every hymn, inherently important from a sonic perspective, is enriched by the addition of music.

Results and Discussions

Vedic hymns are considered as the oldest hymns. From the oldest treatises like Bharata's 'Natyaśāstra', one can trace the origin of music to the Vedas. The musical recitation of Vedic hymns paved way to the evolution of musical notes which gradually developed into the system of music. According to many treatises, the Rig Veda is confined to 3 notes, the Sama Veda represents melody, the Yajur Veda has sacrificial formulas and the Atharva Veda has magical formulae. Indian music is 'Nada' based. And it is more meditative. The lesser the musicality in it, the purer it is. The musical phrases are so simple, with all the musicality. There are no complex rhythmic patterns other than the sense of timing in the rendition of Vedic hymns.

Islam and music are a complex idea. The Quran contains no direct references to Music. Islamic Hymns are more influenced by Arabic music. That is why there are more microtonal variations in the recitation of the Quran. Some opine that instruments are not allowed other than Vocals. There is a lot of European and Western influence on Islamic music. Phrases of varying length and free rhythm are the key features of Islamic music. It is very difficult to fix the notation of Quran recitation in the Indian Music System as there are more microtonal frequencies in their rendition. Voice quality and style of singing are determined by consonant articulation of Arabic pronunciation. There is no rhythm aspect in a rendition of the Quran.

Hymns are songs used in Christian worship. Psalms of the Bible are set to tunes and are sung in Churches. The tunes of hymns of different time periods show the evolution of music from times. These are not just the recitations like Vedic hymns and Islamic hymns, they are songs

by themselves. These hymns are set to a particular rhythmic meter, unlike Vedic and Islamic hymns. There are many stanzas or verses of poetry set to the same musical tunes.

Conclusions

Music has long transcended its role as mere entertainment to become an integral part of religious practice. Its role extends into communicating, documenting, and teaching the core elements of various religions. The study of the musicality in sacred hymns across different faiths opens up extensive avenues for further research into these traditions, their cultures, and the methods of their execution. Analyzing the musical aspects of sacred hymns provides a clearer understanding of the various recitation modes employed.

Different religious hymns exhibit distinct musical characteristics. Vedic and Islamic hymns generally follow a consistent tempo, while Christian hymns are often composed in meter, making them easier to sing for everyone, not just musicians. Unlike Vedic and Islamic hymns, which maintain a more structured form, Christian hymns are accessible due to their simpler melodic structures. Regardless of the tradition, hymns are typically performed according to established tunes with little room for improvisation, preserving their traditional form.

The simplicity of melodic content in religious hymns ensures they can be rendered by people of all musical backgrounds. Hymns are not meant for entertainment; rather, their repetitive nature serves as a form of meditation and muse. Variations in their renditions are minimal, as excessive musicality could detract from the hymns' purity.

Historically, the three-note recitation of Vedic hymns led to the development of seven-note system and eventually a comprehensive musical system. Similarly, the microtonal recitation of Islamic hymns offers insights into its unique musical system, expanding the scope of study in this field. This study highlights the potential for future research into the recitation practices of each religion and provides a foundation for exploring the origins and evolution of these hymns.

Acknowledgments

- I extend my sincere thanks to Sri Srikanth Mudumbai, Vedic Scholar at Varija Ashram, Visakhapatnam, India, who helped me with the original audio recordings of Vedic hymns.

- I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Kalaga Venkata Subrahmanya Somayaji (Som Kalaga) of Dubai, who helped me with the audio recordings of the Quran from different places.
- I wish to thank Sunita Grace from Bangalore, India for helping me with the list of popular Christian hymns.
- Appreciation is extended to Mr. Suman and Mr. Sheik Imdad for supporting me with the list of hymns.

References

Regula Qureshi. (1972). Indo-Music Religious Music Overview. Indian Music Issue, Vol.3, No.2, Pp 15-22

M.H. (Sep 1,1874). Secular Music in Churches. The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular, Vol.16, N0.379, P.617

Wayne Howard. (1982).Music and Accentuation in Vedic Literature. The World of Music, Vol.24, N0.3, Pp 23-34

Brief study of Music in Vedas with special reference to Sama Veda
https://nios.ac.in/media/documents/Hindustani_Music_242/hindustanimusictheorybook1/HMB1Ch6.pdf

Sri Aurobindo. (1999), *The Secret of the Veda*, 3rd Edition, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Pondicherry.

Vasudeva S.Agrawala, (1981), *Vedic Lectures*, Pruthvi Prakashan Publishers, Banaras, India.

M.K.Durrany. (1982), *The Gita and The Quran-A Comparative Study*, Nag Publishers, Delhi.

The Noble Quran - Quran.com(1995) The Quran.Foundation <https://quran.com/en>

Saudi Mosque Quran Rendition <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/m.php?|=ar#&f=1>

St.Hilary. (2015, December 17) . Jesus Refulsit. [video] Chamber Choir of George Watson's College, Edinburgh. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMJnlPHqch0>

Aurelius Prudentius.(2020, November 19) Corde Natus.[video] St. Olaf Choir, Norway
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgCOuvENPRk>

Traditional Hymn. (2010, December 09). *Orientis Partibus* [video]. Quire Cleveland by Ross. W. Duffin, Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland).<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yn--eGxF8p4>