Śaṅkarī Music and Other Classical Music of India: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

During the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement in Assam, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva founded the sacred practice of Śaṅkarī music, which has great cultural and spiritual significance. Hindustani and Carnatic music are two of India's major classical music traditions that are tried to compare in this paper with Śaṅkarī music of Assam, which is mainly conveyed through Bargīta. In contrast to Hindustani and Carnatic music's highly structured and technically intricate arrangements, Śaṅkarī music compositions like Bargīta, Aṅkīyā gīta etc. prioritize accessibility, simplicity, and group participations. The results demonstrate how Śaṅkarī music functions as a tool for social change and identity development in Assamese society in addition to being a regional adaption of Indian classical ideas. This comparative research illustrates the diversity of Indian musical heritage and the contribution of regional religious movements to its enrichment by placing Śaṅkarī music within the larger context of Indian classical traditions.

Keywords: Śaṅkarī, Neo-Vaiṣṇavite, Bargīta, Aṅkīyā gīta.

Introduction:

India has a long history of using music as a means of social cohesion, philosophy, and devotion in addition to being an art form. The subcontinent's most structured classical traditions are represented by Hindustani and Carnatic music, while regional devotional movements like Assamese Śaṅkarī music show how classical ideas were modified to meet local cultural and spiritual demands. Śaṅkarī music and Indian classical traditions are compared in this study, with an emphasis on musical structure, religious purpose, performance techniques, and cultural identity.

Objectives:

- To know the relation between Indian classical music traditions and the historical roots of Śaṅkarī music.
- To find out the similarities and differences of rāgas, tālas, and compositions between Śaṅkarī music and other traditional musical systems.
- To examine their performances.

Methodology:

The analysis is based on secondary sources, such as academic publications on Bargīta, Hindustani music, Carnatic music, historical documents, and musicological studies. Additionally, interviews with practitioners of the Śaṅkarī and other classical music traditions

as well as field observations in Sattras and Nāmghars (community prayer hall) were used to collect primary data.

Historical Roots:

Śaṅkarī Music: Śaṅkarī music has its roots in the Bhakti movement of Assam in the 15th and 16th centuries, which was led by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568), a Vaiṣṇavite saint-reformer. The main genre of Śaṅkarī music was introduced by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva as Bargīta, the "celestial songs," which were written in Brajāvalī language, as a way to show devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa. Śaṅkarī music, which was influenced by Indian classical traditions, especially rāgas and tālas, was purposefully made simpler so that people of all castes and social classes could enjoy it. Śaṅkarī music thus became more than just a musical genre; it is a cultural and spiritual expression that connected classical frameworks with folk traditions, establishing a unique Assamese identity.

Hindustani Music: North India's classical music, known as Hindustani music, has its origins in the ancient vedic era, when the sāmveda or sacred chants, were repeated in particular melodic patterns. This legacy developed over centuries as a result of contacts with local cultures, devout Bhakti movements, and the influence of Persian and Central Asian music brought by the Mughal courts and the Delhi Sultanate. Under the patronage of the monarchy, Hindustani music advanced, and renowned individuals like Āmīr Khuśru are recognized for having invented new rāgas and instruments. With the emergence of the ghārānā system in the 16th century, it standardized pedagogical and performance methods. Hindustani music thus developed as an intricate and improvised tradition, fusing Indo-Persian and ancient Indian elements to create a highly expressive and versatile classical art form.

Carnatic Music: The ancient Vedic chants and devotional rituals of the earliest Hindu temples are the source of South India's classical music, known as Carnatic music. Before the 13th century, when styles began to divide north and south, it maintained many of the pan-Indian classical ideals, which were rooted in the Nātya śāstra and Saṅgīta Ratnākara. Compared to Hindustani music, which was inspired by Persian and Central Asian music, Carnatic music was more isolated and maintained its strong connections to temple rituals and religious expression. Carnatic music received a major boost from the Bhakti movement of the 15th–17th centuries, when saint-composers such as Pūrāṇdrdāsa, who is frequently referred to as the "Father of Carnatic Music," defined the rāga–tāla framework and systematized teaching techniques. The repertoire that still characterizes the genre today was shaped by the later compositions of the "Trinity of Carnatic Music"—Tyāgaraja, Muthuswamī Dikshitar, and Śyāma Śastrī—which blended complex melodic and rhythmic patterns with profound devotional profundity. Thus, Carnatic music flourished as a unique regional classical form while maintaining connection with its ancient beginnings as a composition-centered spiritually grounded system. The Differences between, Carnatic, Hindustani and Śaṅkarī Music can be put together as in the following table:

Sl/cateria	Carnatic	Hindustani	Śaṅkarī

Origin	Carnatic is a purer form of music that was evolved from ancient Hindu traditions. It was developed during the Bhakti movement in the 15th to16th century. This style of music got a boost during 19th-20th century.	Hindustani music was originated much earlier than Carnatic music. It has emerged as a distinct form of music due to Islamic and Persian influences. This style of music is synthesized with Islamic traditions, Vedic chants, and Persian Musiqu-e-Assil.	It was developed during the Bhakti movement in the 15th to16th century. It is the unique creation of Śaṅkaradeva in Assam, which contains many features of old Indian classical music tradition.
Geographical Origin	Carnatic music originated in South India, particularly in the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Kerala	Hindustani music originated in North India, particularly in the regions of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan.	Śaṅkarī music originated in North-East India, particularly in the regions of Assam.
Tālas	There are 35 Tālas [1]	There are unlimited tālas in Hindustani system of Music. [2]	12 Tālas and 12 Upatāls[3]
Rāgas	Total 72 rāgas , rāgas are grouped by the technical traits of their scales.	6 major rāgas, rāgas are classified according to such characteristics as mood, season, and time.	36 rāgas, rāgas are classified according to time.[4]

[1] Mukharjee Deepa (2020) *Mastering Shastriya Sangeet*, p-68
[2] Ibid p-68
[3] Neog&Changkakati (2008) Rhythm in the Vaishnava Music of Assam p-42
[4] Das Khana(2017) Bargeet Twata aru Swarlipi p-38

Performance Style	Carnatic music is known for its energetic and lively performances. The performances typically include compositions with composed lyrics and structured improvisations.	A more introspective and meditative style characterizes Hindustani music. The performances are often longer, and the artists explore the emotional and aesthetic aspects of the rāgas. The use of ālāpa (slow, improvised introduction) and Jor (medium-tempo development) before entering the main composition is common.	A meditative style characterizes śaṅkarī music. The performances are often longer, and the artists explore the emotional and aesthetic aspects of the rāgas. The use of ālāp (slow, improvised introduction) before entering the main composition is common.
Instruments	Vīna, Mṛdaṅgam flute, ghatam, kañjira, and Mandolin. The violin is particularly prominent in Carnatic music and is often used as a solo instrument.	Tabla, Saraṅgī, Sitar, sarod, flute, harmonium and Santoor. These instruments are used to accompany vocal performances and also for solo performances.	Khol (a special type of drum with spiritual sound), Cymbal (tāl) are the prominent instruments of śaṅkarī music. Now a days use of flute, violin, and harmonium are seen.
Composition	Indigenous	Afghan, Persia and Arab	Indigenous
Divisions	Only one particular prescribed style of singing	Several sub-styles	Three main Sub-Divisions.
Variations/scope	Freedom to improvise	Scope to do variations and improvise	It is unique, so no need to be improvised.
Importance	Vocal and devotional aspects are equally important.	More importance to vocal music	More importance on devotion.
Theme	Mainly based on the Sahitya or lyric oriented	It emphasizes on the musical structure	Mainly based on Old Indian Scripture

Scale	It retains the style of traditional Octave.	Adopted a scale of śuddha swara saptaka or Octave of natural notes.	The saptaswara system in traditional Indian music.
Influence	Hindustani Music influenced it.	Carnatic Music influenced it.	But it is unique.
Styles	Based on Gamak	Not based on gamak	Not based on gamak
Laya	Vilambita laya	Has freedom, basically used drūta & madyā laya.	All are used.
Language	Sanskrit language scripts and through Vedic traditions.	Sanskrit language scripts and through Vedic traditions.	Used Brajāvalī Language.
Famous Practitioners	Dr M. Balamuralikrishna, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, M. S. Subbulakshmi, Lalgudi Jayaraman, and T. N. Seshagopalan.	Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, and Begum Parveen Sultana.	Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavadeva were the main exponent of śaṅkarī music.

Similarities:

Common Spiritual Base: Bhakti (devotion) and spirituality are the foundation of all these musical traditions. For example, Hindustani Bhajans express devotion to Kṛṣṇa or Shiva, Tyāgarājā's Carnatic Krītis glorify Lord Rāma, and Śaṅkarī Bargīta praises Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Rāga and Tāla Use: Every method maintains to the traditional framework of tāla (rhythmic cycle) and rāga (melodic pattern).For example, Hindustani use Yāman and Bhairavī, Carnatic uses Māyāmalavagowla and Kalyānī, while Śaṅkarī Bargīta uses rāgas like āśowārī and Kalyān

Concentration on vocal music: According to all three traditions, the human voice are the most authentic means of expressing of devotion and melody. For instance, Śaṅkarī Bargīta is mainly sung, and Carnatic Krīti and Hindustani Khāyal are equally primarily vocal forms.

Moral and Devotional Themes: All religions' lyrics express moral principles, spiritual surrender, and divine love. For instance, Carnatic Krītis and Hindustani Bhajans glorify devotion and morality, whereas Śaṅkarī Bargītas emphasize submission to one God (eka śaran hari nām dharma).

Gūrū-Śiśyā Parampara (Tradition of Teacher-Disciple): All of these musical styles are passed down orally via a committed teacher-student bond. For instance, the parampara system is used in Carnatic music, Hindustani music continues through ghāranas, and Śaṅkarī music is taught in sattras.

Integrating Religion and Music: In every culture, music is a vital component of ritual and devotion. For instance, Hindustani Dhrupad was played in temples, Śaṅkarī music is sung in Nāmghars, and Carnatic music has its roots in temple ceremonies.

Local Variations on a Common Tradition: All developed from the traditional Indian music found in books like Śaṅgīta Ratnākara and Nātya Śāśtra. As an illustration, Śaṅkarī music modified these classical ideas for Assamese devotional life, whereas Carnatic and Hindustani music developed locally with distinctive instruments and techniques.7.

Expression of Emotions (Rasa):Deep feeling, particularly bhakti rasa (devotional sensibility), is the goal of every tradition. Example: A Bargīta's calm tone reflects the passion of a Carnatic Pādam or a Hindustani Thumri.

Comparative study of Hindustani and Śaṅkarī tāla.

There are some basic similarities between the rhythms of North Indian or Hindustani music and the rhythms (tāl) of Śaṅkarī music as well as some striking differences between the two genres. The scriptures say, "Tālah kālkriyā manam''—the rhythm determines the measure of time in music. Rhythm is the lifeblood of music. Songs, instruments and dances are based on rhythm. The ancient text Saṅgīta Ratnākara says, "gītaṁ, vādyaṁ tathā nṛtyaṁ trayām saṅgīta mūchyāte''". We can't be a singer or a musician if we don't know the rhythm. The scripture says that a rhythm is formed by a set of small equal measures. Talk is denoted by divisions, claps, blanks, measures. Motion equal to rhythm is called laya. The rhythm of Hindustani music refers to the rhythm of the tābla and the pākhawāj or mṛdaṅga. When we talk about Śaṅkarī rhythms (tāl), mean mainly the Assamese khol and in some cases the Assamese mṛdaṅgas. Thus, this conversation will attempt to provide a summary of the instruments mentioned above as well as the similarities and differences in the rhythms that are tuned.

Both Hindustani and Śaṅkarī rhythms are mainly leather or unbound instruments. Like the tābla, the main percussion instrument of Hindustani music, the Śaṅkarī khol has dāinā-bāyā (right-left sides). The Hindustani pākhawāj or mṛdaṅga and the Śaṅkarī khol and mṛdaṅg have the same body with the dāinā-bāyā.

The instruments of Hindustani rhythm and Śaṅkarī rhythm are played with the fingers or palm of the hand. There is no custom of playing with sticks or clubs. Tābla and khol instruments are designed to produce subtle and complex sounds with the help of fingers. Therefore, it is necessary to acquire scientific teacher-oriented education to play such instruments.

Like Hindustani rhythms, śaṅkarī rhythms have open and closed bolts. Like the Hindustani rhythms, the śaṅkarī khol has its own rhythm. In Hindustani and Śaṅkarī music, several terminology for sounds are similar. For instance, the words dha, ta, dhin, tak, tag, nag, nak, trik, trighi, and so on are the same in both systems.

Jāti and rhythms are used in both Hindustani and Carnataka music. There is a description about the rūpaka tāla in famous book Vādyāpradīpa as follows--

prati jugma śese loghu thākaya jāhāt I

tāhār rūpak nām vedat prakhyāta II

(Meaning--In every pair, there is something subtle and light;

Its symbolic name is renowned in the Vedas.)

In the case of Hindustani rhythms, sometimes when playing delayed thekas (delayed thekas of ektāl, jhum, tilwara etc.), the weight of the scale is properly maintained by filling the gap between the two main bols with spontaneous bols. In the case of the rhythm of Śaṅkarī music, this is done through 'ragar' between the two main notes.

Some of the rhythms of some sattras have similarities in measure, division, clap and blank with the theka of some Hindustani rhythms.

In the case of Hindustani and Śaṅkarī rhythms, some rhythms have the same names. However, the categories, dimensions, etc. are not the same. There are many rhythms of the same name— ektāli, brahmatāli, cutātāli, rūpak, etc.

Some of the rhythmic verses of Hindustani music have similar meanings to the rhythmic verses of Śaṅkarī music.

Just as the verse is played on the tābla or pākhawāj in harmony with the verse of the kathak dance, the bāyan sometimes expresses the verse through the melody of the khol and accompanies it with the dance.

Hindustani singing, playing and dancing does not always have a rhythmic band. Different rāgas can be performed in different rhythms. There is no mention of any rhythm in the songs of the Bargīta book. Only three songs of Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva mention three rhythms in each song. These songs are known as "six-rhythm songs". However, the names of the rhythms are mentioned in the Aṅkīyā gīta.

As the word 'kalā' is found in Hindustani music, the old book of Assam called "Vādya Pradīp" also mentions 'kalā' as "Kalā Purāṇat Ghat...,"

The differences:

In the Hindustani system, the same theka is used for songs, instruments and dances. In Śaṅkarī

music, the gā-mān (theka) used in singing is usually different from the gā-mān used in dance.

The thekā of Hindustani rhythm is always in a cycle. There are many cycles in Śaṅkarī music in some cases, the gā-man used in one sattra is twice or longer than the gā-man used in another sattra.

North Indian palm battlefields are hit 'stronger' than other dimensions. The emphasis on the rhythm of the khol does not always apply. At the end of a beat which precedes a measure without one or more bols.

In the Hindustani style, special emphasis is placed on playing the tehāi. There is no such use of tehāi in the case of Śaṅkarī rhythms.

There is no rule of two or more spaces at the same time in Hindustani rhythm. This rule does not apply to the rhythm of the Śaṅkarī. In the case of Śaṅkarī rhythms, there are two or more empty rhythms (suda or khali) in a row.

The main sounds of the tābla are te, re, ta, tin, khun, ge, ka, dha and thin. The words dhei, dao, khit, tak are usually used in the khol.

The use of dense instruments is not seen with the tābla and pākhawāj. There is a custom of playing the consonant 'tāl' as an accompaniment to the khol. In addition, in some cases the bol of the khol and the bol of a percussion instrument combine to form a bol similar to the 'jhingthak' bol many people assume. Ta with the shell listen to what you have to do.

There are three wooden gators   to tune the Hindustani bhāgar and pākhawāj, but there is no such arrangement for the main or round tune of the Śaṅkarī music. This instrument will be difficult to accept as a classical instrument without provision for easy adjustment of the opening.

Hindustani music does not have many padoras or tābla pairs played at the same time. However, only a small number of tāblas are played in concert. Before the beginning of the bhāona, the singers and dancers execute a lot of khols and bhortāls in a good example of Śaṅkarī music. Additionally, when the bar bāyan (head of the drum beater) holds the khol on his head, seven to twelve khols are played at the same time.

Learning the khol in addition to singing and dancing is one of the distinctive features of Śaṅkarī music, however Hindustani music performers are not required to learn these skills. This is another characteristic that sets Śaṅkarī music apart.

When playing the khol or mṛdaṅg, the focus is on using various body postures or folds to convey rhythm. While this function is present in Hindustani rhythm performance, it is not quite essential.

Despite their regional and technical differences, Śaṅkarī, Hindustani, and Carnatic music all represent the identical soul—the spiritual essence of Indian art. Together, they preserve the nation's eternal harmony between cultural identity, devotion, and melody.

Findings

The comparison of Śaṅkarī music and other Indian classical music traditions reveals that, despite having a similar basis in the saptaswara (seven-note) scale system, its development and intent are very different. Established by Śrīmanta Śaṅkardeva, Śaṅkarī music evolved as a communal and spiritual art form based on moral principles and devotion (bhakti). It makes music accessible to all devotees during congregational singing by using simple rāgas, distinct melodies, and moderate rhythmic patterns. Hindustani and Carnatic music, on the other hand, developed into highly structured, performance-focused traditions that prioritize technical proficiency, improvisation, and aesthetic beauty. The results also show that, whereas classical traditions mostly concentrated on musical brilliance and royal patronage, Śaṅkarī music was

vital in fostering religious concord, cultural identity, and social togetherness in Assam. Therefore, the main characteristic of Śaṅkarī music is its combination of simplicity, culture, and dedication, which makes it an essential link between music, spirituality, and society.

Conclusion

There are many similarities and distinctions between the rhythms of Hindustani, Carnatic classical music and Śaṅkarī music, as the discussion above makes it clear. The distinctions may have given it some kind of indigenous and distinctive quality, but the many similarities give them a classical or all-India status. The issue is that different sattras use independent Śaṅkarī rhythm components. There may be disagreements on the gā-man or gā-bājāna even within the same sattra. If the full Śaṅkarī rhythm cannot be expressed in a single formula, it cannot be bound to a different standard. The fundamental idea behind Śaṅkarī music is that the music and independent playing (lahara) can be further enhanced by simply changing the instruments as needed. As a result, it is imperative that a generally recognized unit standard for Śaṅkarī rhythm be established right away by scientific study and discussions among Sattras led by experienced musicians without compromising the traditions.   The aforementioned explanation makes it clear that, in the case of Indian classical music, our similarities provide us with a national standing, while our differences give us a clear regional identity. Both Hindustani and Carnatic music express great assimilative power, also absorbing folk tunes and regional characteristics as well as elevating many of these tunes to the status of rāga, but Śaṅkarī music also followed the same character. Indian classical music is meditative, immersive and uplifting nature, it provides a sense of peace, elation and has spiritual roots.

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