

Reflections on ancient Indian music from the *bhāruta stūpa* sculptures

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Abstract

Indian sculptures are valuable archaeological sources for the study of ancient Indian music, especially during the early ancient period, when there are only a few musicological treatises, and most textual references come from non-musicological literature. The sculptures from the Bharhut stupa, a Buddhist shrine in Madhya Pradesh, serve as an important source for investigating musical instruments during the ancient era. This paper takes a review of these sculptures and establishes the musical connections by corroborating the contemporary and later textual references. With this, the paper sheds light on Indian music in general, and Indian musical instruments in particular, during the 2nd century BCE.

Keywords

Ancient Indian Music, Musical Instruments, Bharhuta Stupa, Organology, Musicology, Music Archaeology

Main Text

Introduction

India being a land of ethnic and cultural diversity, the fabric of Indian music too is multicolour. Though the musicological treatises are considered as the primary source for historical study of Indian music, the archaeological evidences including the sculptures form an important evidence for tracking the transitions and transformations in the music. The ancient Buddhist relic at Bharut has some prominent depictions of music scenes. These sculptures stand as an important source of information about the musical scenario around 2nd century CE in India.

Objectives

Firstly, this research paper takes an account of the musical scenes from the Buddhist shrine at Bharut. Secondly, corroborating the literary sources with these sculptures, the paper also attempts to explain the music during Shunga dynasty (circa 2nd century CE). Thirdly, this paper sheds some light on the missing links in the music history of India.

Methodology

Considering the Bharut sculptures as a central theme and also a primary source, the investigation is done with comparative approach to the data from other contemporary sources, such as sculptures at Amaravati, Sanchi. This investigation further leads to the confirmation from the literary sources. As the Bharut sculptures belong to the Buddhist shrine, the Buddhist

Pali literature is used as a primary source, along with the secondary sources such as Vedic Sanskrit literature, aṣṭādhyāyī and nāṭyaśāstra. Corroborating the archaeological and literary sources, the paper explains the nature of music, various musical instruments and orchestra in the 2nd century CE.

The Buddhist shrine at bhāruta

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Alexander Cunningham discovered the Buddhist shrine at bhāruta in 1873. According to Cunningham, the stūpa dates between 250 to 200 BCE.¹ On the other hand, Benimadhab Barua traces the period of this shrine between 1-84 to 148 CE, i.e. during the Śuṅga dynasty.² Being a Buddhist shrine, the sculptures carved on this stūpa portray various incidences from Buddha's life along with the Jātaka tales. Even though these sculptures have a religious purpose, and not musical purpose, the scenes in the carvings contain minute details of musical instruments, with a correctness in the depiction. This certainly helps to explain the musical scenario in the period of these sculptures.

The difference between the mārṅga saṅgīta, i.e. music in the Vedic ritualistic tradition, and deśhī saṅgīta, i.e. folk music or the secular is clear in the terms, such as laukika saṅgīta and gāndharva saṅgīta, and this difference also reflects in the social setup as reflected in the texts. It is possible that the Vedic society looked down to the laukika saṅgīta. But two streams can't stay in a state of differences or conflict for a long time and they start interacting with each other, culminating into confluence. This process is perpetual and we can trace this process from the 6th century BCE till the period of Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and onwards. This process of musical integration or merger is not clearly mentioned in the musicological treatises, but we can trace this process through archaeological evidences including sculptures. Today we don't get purely musicological treatises prior to Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, and that is why one needs to trace the history of music from non-musicological texts as well as archaeological evidences. Hence, this paper tries to bring out the picture of music in the ancient India from the evidence of 2nd century BCE sculptures from bhāruta stūpa, other contemporary sculptures from Sanchi and Amaravati, along with the contemporary textual references.

The musical scenes at bhāruta stūpa are as following -

- 1) Celestial celebration of Buddha's birth,³
- 2) Festival at vaijayaṅta prāsada,⁴
- 3) padma-apsarā,⁵

¹ Cunningham. pg. 14

² Barua. pg. 29

³ Ibid. plate XXXIX, pg. 34

⁴ Ibid. plate XLII, pg. 39

⁵ Ibid. plate LXVIII, pg. 81

- 4) pañchashikha gandharva at indasāla cave,⁶
- 5) Three panels depicting a monkey tale,⁷
- 6) The paṭaha player in the scene of Buddha's mahā-abhiniṣkramaṇa.⁸

[See the plates attached separately with the paper. Also see the plates having the sketches of musical instruments.]

Besides these major musical scenes, there are many sculptures such as dancing Gandharva couple, etc. at bhāruta stūpa. But these sculptures are not taken into consideration in this paper as they don't provide much musical information. As these sculptures give only visual signal, we can't talk much about the actual musical scale, style of singing or playing; but we can definitely talk about the instruments and orchestra.

Orchestra

We find two portrayals of orchestra at bhāruta stūpa. These orchestras consist of 3 singers, 2 vīṇā players, 1 mṛdaṅga player, 1 kāṇsyatālikā player, accompanying 4 dancers. In both scenes, the number of singers is the same, i.e. seven. Pāṇinī uses the term 'tūrya' for musical instruments in 'aṣṭādhyāyī'.⁹ He mentions the term 'parivādivyā' for instrument players.¹⁰ Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra uses the term 'kutapa' for the orchestra, with the mention of vocalists singing with keeping rhythm with claps, along with the vīṇā, veṇū and mṛdaṅga players.¹¹ From Nāṭyaśāstra, we also get to know that there was a prescribed sitting arrangement of the musicians in the kutapa. These kutapa-s used to perform on various occasions such as ritual performances, processions, festivals. Apart from bhāruta stūpa, we get the depiction of such kutapa-s in the sculptures at Sanchi, Amaravati and also in Gupta period art, such as Ajanta paintings and sculpture panel at Pavaya.

We find portrayal of only vīṇā, mṛdaṅga and kāṇsyatālikā at bhāruta stūpa. But in the sculptures from the later period, the number of instruments seems to be increased. Amaravati sculptures have veṇū, śaṅkha and kachchapī vīṇā in the kutapa, which is absent at bhāruta stūpa; and Pavaya sculptures have a vakrā vīṇā, a kacchapī vīṇā, a pair of ūrdhvaka mṛdaṅga, kāṇsyatālikā and a 'bhānda-vādyā' which is mentioned in Nāṭyaśāstra. So, from these sculptures, one can observe the increasing number of instruments and the development of kutapa in this period. Today, we find such kind of orchestras in south Indian music and dance, such as 'Nayyādimelam' in Tamilnadu and 'Pañchavādyam' in Odisha.

Idiophones

There is depiction of only 2 'ghana vādyā', i.e. idiophones in bhāruta stūpa. That are kāṇsyatālikā and ghaṇṭā. The kāṇsyatālikā was used in accompaniment of dance, by playing it with a wooden stick, for keeping the tempo. From the sculpture, it seems that kāṇsyatālikā player used to sit next to mṛdaṅga player in the kutapa. We find a similar instrument called

⁶ Ibid. plate LXI, pg. 69

⁷ Ibid. plate XCVI, pg. 148, 148a

⁸ Ibid. plate XXIII, pg. 18

⁹ aṣṭādhyāyī 2.4.2. (द्वंद्वश्च प्राणितूर्यसेनाङ्गानाम्...)

¹⁰ Ibid. 3.2.146 (निन्दहिंस...परिवादिव्या)

¹¹ nāṭyaśāstra 28.3.5

‘semmankalam’ in Kerala. The kānsyatālikā is also present in the scene of a monkey tale at bhāruta stūpa. In the same tale, there is depiction of 2 ghaṇṭā-s.

Membranophones

There are two avanaddha vādya (percussion instruments) in bhāruta stūpa -

(1) **ūrdhvaka mṛdaṅga** - This is depicted in two scenes on Prasenajita pillar and Ajatashatru pillar. This mṛdaṅga is played with placing it vertical and beating on one head. This type of instrument is identified as ūrdhvaka mṛdaṅga from the description in Nāṭyaśāstra. Similar instrument is also seen at Amaravati stūpa. In Pavaya sculpture, there is a depiction of pair of this, which can be seen as the development in this instrument.

(2) **paṭaha / bherī** - This instrument is seen in the three scenes of monkey tale and also in the scene of Buddha’s mahā-abhiniṣkramaṇa. It is played with two sticks on both the heads of the instrument, with tying it to the player’s neck. This instrument is also carved on the Amaravati stūpa. There are several references to this instrument in the later Vedic texts and Jātaka tales. It was used for public proclamation. From the Jātaka tales, it is known that there were clans or families of professional bherī players in ancient times.¹² In other contemporary sculptures, with can see percussion instruments such as paṇava, timila and dardura.

Aerophones

Only one suṣira vādya (blown instrument or aerophone) is carved at bhāruta stūpa, called as ‘bakura’, that is also named as ‘naliśaṅkha’ in Jātaka tales. This was a sort of conch with a loud, roaring sound, used as martial instrument. It is carved in the monkey tale scene at bhāruta stūpa. Similar kind of instrument ‘bokor’ is still found in an aboriginal tribe on Madagascar islands.¹³ The Pali literature gives ample of references to other types of conches such as sāmuddika śaṅkha, mahāmuṭṭhi śaṅkha. There reference to professional conch player clan in ‘śaṅkhadhamana jātaka’.¹⁴ We also find a Yaksha figure playing a big conch called as mahāmuṭṭhi śaṅkha, holding it with both the hands.

Apart from śaṅkha, there is depiction of veṇū, algoja with two pipes and tutārī at Sanchi, Amaravati, and also at Gupta period terracotta figurines from Kaushambi and Pavaya sculpture.

Chordophones

The single tantu-vādya (string instrument) at bhāruta stūpa is a curved vīṇā, which Anand Coomarswamy described as ‘the ancient Indian vīṇā’.¹⁵ There is description of various vīṇā-s such as godhā, kāṇḍamayī, vakrā, kapiśīrṣā, alābu, pishilā, vāṇa, citrā and vipaṇcī, in the Vedic literature and epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. Both depictions of the seven stringed lutes from bhāruta stūpa can be identified as citrā vīṇā. Nāṭyaśāstra mentions seven stringed vīṇā as citrā, which was played by plucking with the fingers, and nine stringed vīṇā as

¹² bherīvāda jātaka, no. 59. Cowell, pg. 146

¹³ Taralekar, pg. 50

¹⁴ jātaka, no. 60. Cowell, pg. 147

¹⁵ Coomarswamy, 1931

vipañcī, which was played with a plectrum.¹⁶ According to this description, the lute in the orchestra carved at bhāruta stūpa is vipañcī vīṇā, and the lute in the hands of padma-apsarā is definitely citrā vīṇā, as the sculptures have carved the lutes with 7 and 9 strings respectively. Curt Sachs has called this lute as ‘Vedic karkarāī vīṇā’.¹⁷ On the other hand, Tarlekar identifies this lute as ‘gargara vīṇā’.¹⁸ But it must not be karkarāī or gargara as sāyaṇācārya explains it as ‘instrument that makes a harsh, loud sound’ and it is impossible that such a harsh sounding instrument was used in orchestra. The Pali literatures refer to seven stringed lute as ‘sattatantī’.¹⁹ The ‘pañcaśikha gandharva’, which is often mentioned in Pali literature, is portrayed at bhāruta stūpa in the indaśālā cave scene. In this portrayal too, pañcaśikha gandharva is depicted holding the citrā vīṇā.

We also find the citrā vīṇā in other sculptures from the Śuṅga period, at Kaushambi, Besnagar, etc. For example-

1. The vīṇā player female figure at Besnagar pillar,
2. The vīṇā player female figure on the terracotta plaques at Kaushambi,
3. The terracotta figurine of a female vīṇā player, now at Lucknow museum.

Such vakrā-vīṇā is also depicted at Amaravati stūpa in the orchestral scene and pañcaśikha gandharva. We also find the same vīṇā on the golden coin of King Samudragupta. This proves that such lutes were largely used till 6th century CE. We rarely find such lutes in the post-6th century CE sculptures, which indicate a gradual disappearance of this type of lutes in Indian music. After 6th century, we find this vīṇā in the carving of saraswatī at lakṣmaṇakāntī temple, and the last depiction of vakrā-vīṇā is found in the 11th century CE temple at Modhera.

The vakrā-vīṇā was replaced by long-necked lute called as kacchapī vīṇā, and one of the first depiction of such lute is found in 2nd century CE at Amaravati stūpa and Pavaya sculpture. This lute was used more prominently from Gupta period onwards and we find its ample depiction in the Ajanta paintings. One finds kacchapī vīṇā and other types of lutes with long neck and gourd from 6th century onwards very prominently. Vanishing of vakrā-vīṇā and coming of long-necked lutes more in circulation suggests a prominent shift in the music-making in India. This also suggests the direction of development in the string instruments in India.

Today we don’t have a single example of curved lute in current art-music traditions in India, i.e. mainly Hindustani or Carnatic music traditions. But such lutes are still used in folk music in India, for example, ‘gogiyā bāṇa’ in the rajagoṇḍa tribe and ‘sagodayazh’ in southern India.²⁰ The ‘soug’ in Myanmar is a similar kind of lute.²¹

The vakrā-vīṇā, as depicted in bhāruta stūpa, was used as a solo instrument, as well as an accompanying instrument for dance and theatrical performances. Nāṭyaśāstra describes three types of applications of vīṇā in dramatic presentations- tattva, anugata and ogha.²² It is mentioned that, from the two vīṇā-s in the theatrical orchestra, one should be having tuning in ‘pramāṇa-śrīti’ and that would be achala-vīṇā (stable in tuning) and the others should be with

¹⁶ nāṭyaśāstra 29.118

¹⁷ Sachs, pg. 92

¹⁸ Tarlekar, pg. 7

¹⁹ jātaka, no. 243. Cowell, pg. 172

²⁰ Deva, pg. 114

²¹ Ferrars, pg. 176

²² nāṭyaśāstra 29.113

chala-śrti and they will be chala-vīṇā (with changeable tuning). The pair of vīṇā-s depicted in bhāruta stūpa might be consisting of one pramana-śrti vīṇā and one chala-śrti vīṇā. Nāṭyaśāstra explains the 'karaṇa', i.e. playing technique in the vīṇā ensemble, and there are six types of karaṇa- rūpa, pratikṛti, pratibheda, rūpaśeṣa, ogha and pratiśuṣka. Besides these references from Nāṭyaśāstra, there are plenty references of solo playing of such vakrā-vīṇā in Pali literature. There is a famous jāṭaka tale called 'guttīla jāṭaka' which narrates musical rivalry of maestro guttīla and his disciple musila in playing vīṇā.²³ There are accounts of solo vīṇā playing of pañcaśikha gandharva and king udayana in some stories.

The śāṅkhāyana āraṇyaka gives an interesting allegory of human body and vīṇā, and it states various parts of vīṇā such as ambhaṇa, carma, chidra, śīras, tantri.²⁴ The ambhaṇa means the sound box, which is called as 'ḍoṇī' or 'ḍoṇika' in Pali texts.²⁵ The carma is the animal skin tied upon the sound box of vīṇā, having the Pali term 'camma' or 'pokkhara'. From the Vedic description of godhā-vīṇā and mention of 'godhā parivādanti' in samyutta nikāya, it suggests that the skin of monitor lizard was used.²⁶ The jāṭaka tales also describe the vīṇā-chidra, i.e. holes on the sound post.²⁷ The vīṇā-daṇḍa is explained poetically as 'unnata-hasta', i.e. lifted arm.²⁸ The vīṇā-daṇḍa was made of bamboo.²⁹ It was decorated with paintings. The vīṇā of pañcaśikha gandharva is called as 'vaidūrya-daṇḍa-vīṇā', meaning the vīṇā with neck decorated with precious stones.³⁰ There is mention of golden, floral decoration on the vīṇā-daṇḍa.³¹ The uppermost round part or the head of vīṇā-daṇḍa was called as 'śīras'.

The vīṇā was played with plectrum or without plectrum. The plectrum was called as 'vāḍini'.³² In the śāṅkhāyana śrautasūtra, while comparing the human body with vīṇā, the similarity of plectrum with human tongue is stated.³³ The plectrum was not just used to pluck the strings, but it was also used to make a hitting sound on the vīṇā-daṇḍa.³⁴ The vīṇā was also played with fingers. In the padma-apsarā sculpture at bhāruta stūpa, and also in the sculptures of Amaravati and Pavaya, the vīṇā-players are portrayed playing vīṇā with finger. In a jāṭaka tale, there is reference to vīṇā being played by 'agganakha', i.e. the tip of fingernail.³⁵ The vīṇā was either kept on one's lap or hung on the shoulder with a strap.³⁶ The vīṇā in bhāruta stūpa are placed on the lap. On the other hand, the Amaravati stūpa has depiction of pañcaśikha

²³ Cowell, *ibid.*

²⁴ śāṅkhāyana āraṇyaka 8.9

²⁵ samyutta nikāya 4.117

²⁶ miliṇḍa-paṇḍo मिलिंदपणो, ५३

²⁷ jāṭaka, no. 432, Cowell, pg. 298

²⁸ mayūrāśṭaka, verse 7

²⁹ dhammapada aṭṭhakathā 1.4.33

³⁰ avadāna śataka 1.3

³¹ buddhacaritam 5.48

³² śāṅkhāyana āraṇyaka, 8.9

³³ śāṅkhāyana śrautasūtra 17-18

³⁴ Jāṭaka, *ibid.*

³⁵ Coomarswamy, 1930. pg. 249

³⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 250

gandharva with the vīṇā suspended with a strap.³⁷ In divyāvadāna, there is a mention of falling down the vīṇā on the floor due to damage to the strap.³⁸

The strings were called as ‘sūtra’, ‘parivādinī’, and the śāṅkhāyana śrautasūtra explains the strings of vīṇā being made with munja grass.³⁹ Aśvaghoṣa’s Buddha-Carita mentions the golden strings of vīṇā.⁴⁰ The number of strings to vīṇā range from one to hundred. The terracotta figurine at Rupad (circa 1200 BCE) has four-stringed vīṇā. The vīṇā in Besnagar sculpture has five strings, and the vīṇā in a sculpture at Lucknow museum has six strings. Most of sculptures portray seven-stringed vīṇā-s. The vīṇā-s in bhāruta as well as Amaravati stūpa are ‘sattatanti’, i.e. seven-stringed.⁴¹ The vīṇā in Gupta period sculptures has 10 strings. Abhinavagupta mentions ‘mahati-vīṇā’ of 21 strings. The śāṅkhāyana śrautasūtra states ‘śatatantī’, i.e. vīṇā having hundred strings. Today, the curved lutes such as gogiyā bāṇa and song have 5 and 7 strings, respectively.⁴²

The timbre of strings is also described in the Pali literature. The guttala jātaka mentions the ‘bhramaratanī’, i.e. a string with sound resembling to bee’s humming.⁴³ The story of king udayana from dhamma-pada-aṭṭha-katha mentions the divine sound of udayana’s hatthikanta-vīṇā.⁴⁴

The hāthigumphā inscription of khāravela, the king of kalinga in the 2nd century CE mentions a music conference that was organized by the king in the capital city, in the third year after his coronation.⁴⁵ This mention of music conference under royal patronage is an important archaeological evidence of music conference in ancient India.

Conclusion

After describing the status of Indian music in the 2nd century CE, the paper points out the transition from the Vedic music to music in the nāṭyaśāstra. Going further, the paper also comments on the nature of mārṅga sangīta and deshī sangīta in ancient India.

In this way, the sculptures from bhāruta stūpa and the corroborative evidences give us a fair idea of the musical scene in the Śuṅga period, i.e. India in 2nd century CE. This also sheds some light on the transitions in the musical history, especially from Vedic music to the Nāṭyaśāstra period music.

³⁷ Burges, figure 7, pg. 35

³⁸ divyāvadāna 17, Cowell & Nell (1886) pg. 553

³⁹ śāṅkhāyana śrautasūtra, 18

⁴⁰ buddhacaritam 5.55

⁴¹ śāṅkhāyana śrautasūtra, 17

⁴² Deva, pg. 113

⁴³ jātaka, no. 243, Cowell, pg. 172

⁴⁴ dhammapada aṭṭhakathā, 1.215

⁴⁵ Jayaswal and Banerji, pg. 72

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