

"Sounding the Sacred Earth: Indian Classical Music in the Age of the Anthropocene"

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecological imagination embedded in Indian Classical Music, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene—a geological epoch marked by extensive human-induced environmental transformation. Music is the greatest tool for communication, preserving culture, tradition, lifestyle practices, religious practices, and environmental practices through its compositions and passing them on to the next generations. Drawing from both Carnatic and Hindustani traditions, the two genres of Indian Classical Music, the study explores how music articulates a cosmological worldview that sacralizes nature and expresses elemental harmony. Central to this inquiry are the Panchabhuta Linga Kritis of Muthuswami Dikshitar, which invoke the five great elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—not merely as metaphysical concepts but as lived, sonic experiences. Using a qualitative, interpretive methodology, this paper undertakes a brief, simple textual and musicological analysis of selected compositions, supported by insights from the environmental humanities and Indian philosophy. The findings reveal that Indian Classical Music encodes ecological consciousness through its raga system, lyrical content, and performative context, fostering a relational understanding of humans and the natural world. This research contributes to interdisciplinary thought by positioning Indian Classical Music as a cultural resource for ecological thinking in the Anthropocene. It shows that traditional musical practices can serve as tools for environmental awareness, cultural preservation, and ethical reflection on sustainability. The paper thus opens a dialogue between indigenous aesthetics and contemporary environmental discourse, offering new pathways for integrating art and ecological responsibility.

Keywords: Indian Classical Music, Anthropocene, Environmental Humanities, Panchabhuta, Carnatic Music, Ecology and Sound, Nada Brahma

Introduction

Indian Classical Music is the most scientifically established genre among all the genres of World Music, dating back its origin to the period of vedās¹. The mere existence of musical sound was absorbed, experienced, and analyzed by many lakṣaṇakārās² to get a scientific understanding, and thus it formed a strong base for explaining the healing power of Indian Music. The Indian classical rāgās with their organised svara vibrations have immense therapeutic potential³. The purpose of practicing Indian Classical Music was to attain salvation or liberation from worldly life.

Everything on Earth is made of atoms and molecules, which are constantly in motion and generate vibrations. This implies that everything on the earth vibrates because of the constant movement of the tiniest particles, the atoms⁴. At the root level, a minor malfunction in anything results in disorganized vibrations. The music, of any genre, has the power to set right the vibrations. The only point of concern is that it is underused. The sound vibrations alter the current vibration, helping it reach the desired state. When the sound vibrations go in tune with nature, the ecological balance can always be maintained. There should be a careful study of the sound on par with nature. Such a scientific study of Indian Classical Music was developed from the beginning and remains up to date. It is only the ways of utilizing that are expected to be low, due to a lack of awareness or dilution in the system of practice. Music is always the greatest communication tool, and it is universally acceptable regardless of genre. Musically expressed statements have a more purposeful reach than those expressed in mere words.

¹ History of Indian Music by Swami Chidananda

² Lakshanakara is the music scholar who is well versed in music theory

³ Music Therapy with Indian Music, page: 3

⁴ The concept of atoms is the basic physics

Saint Tyagaraja says “Mōkṣamu galada bhuvilō jīvanmuktulu gānivāralaku”

Saint Kabir says “khāya pīya sukh se sōya nāhak Janam khōya, kahat kabir suno bhāyi sādho, āya veysehi gayā tum”

This paper presents narratives of Indian music deeply rooted in the ecosystem, environmental awareness, and cosmological views. In this paper, an attempt is also made to explore compositions from Indian Classical Music from a lyrical and melodic perspective, the content of which relates to nature and environment.

Anthropocene Lifestyle:

The Anthropocene way of life, where the earth is shaped according to the needs of humans. *‘From the standpoint of human origins, the starting point in thinking about the Anthropocene is that we live in the world by altering it⁵.’* Says

Rick Pott. He also quotes this Anthropocene Age as *The Human Era*. One can understand that the Earth’s role is to give, and the Humans’ role is to take it, like the relationship between a mother and her children. The word *Anthropocene* was first coined by Crutzen and Stoermer⁶. The discussion of when this age began, whether it is formalized, the reasons for its start, etc., is not addressed in this paper. Accepting the term as it is and moving ahead to examine its positive and negative effects are the focus of this paper.

Understanding Anthropocene as an emergency to act:

Many research studies view the Anthropocene as a warning, a danger, and a time for change. Scientists across all disciplines view the term as a serious issue to be addressed immediately. The immense damage humans are causing to the environment and ecosystem is the point of concern. The effect of the selfish orientation and overutilization of the earth’s resources gave rise to the condition of caution.

⁵ Living in the Anthropocene: Being Human in the age of Humans

⁶ The Anthropocene concept in Ecology and Conservation

The use of natural resources is necessary for human beings to live happily on planet Earth. The technology we enjoy, the rapid movement across the globe in a shorter period, and the evolution from need to luxury, which has now become a basic comfort in the 21st century, reflect the Anthropocene age. Everything seemed to be the result of a successful attempt by humans in the process of evolution and development. But the key point to note is the suffering caused by the side effects. Humans couldn't realize the other side of the coin. Environmental changes, ecological damage, species extinction, and other factors directly affect human lives sooner or later. This is the point of concern and caution. In fact, it has already turned to today's reality.

Understanding Anthropocene as a chance for a better life on the Sacred Earth:

*'Happily, in response to our negative impacts, many humans are engaged in repairing historical and ongoing ecological damage'*⁷ says David Suzuki, which comes up as a welcoming statement. It is never too late to take a good action; one should understand that the Anthropocene is a boon to humans, as nature has given us the opportunity to use resources safely while protecting the sacred earth and all living beings. This is the point at which the studies of Environmental Humanities and Spiritual Philosophies begin to play their role. Humanitarian and philosophical theories often work together to provide solutions beyond the limits of human logic. The notion of the Sacred Earth serves as a foundational concept for shifting human thinking from self-oriented to holistic development. Thus, the never-tiring, working humans who are shaping the environment toward a positive, balanced outcome reflect an optimistic understanding of the Anthropocene Age. Here, too, comes the role of our ancient Indian Knowledge

Systems to influence the globalized world in a positive way. The caution calls to change will be answered with the insights and solutions produced by our Spiritual Scientists. Indian Classical Music

⁷ Anthropocene means we hold the key to our future

is thus a central focus of this paper, as we seek solutions and view the Anthropocene age as an opportunity to build a sacred earth.

The above introduction provides background for the research paper, and it now moves to the body of the paper, which describes the position of Indian Classical Music in the Anthropocene.

Objectives of the study

- To explore the ecological imagination embedded in Indian Classical Music, particularly in the context of the
Anthropocene, on an optimistic note, to realize and understand the term Sacred Earth.
- To understand how music articulates a cosmological worldview that sacralizes nature and expresses elemental harmony
- To undertake textual and musicological analysis of selected compositions, supported by the insights from environmental humanities and Indian philosophy.
- To position Indian Classical Music as a cultural resource for ecological thinking in the age of the
Anthropocene.
- To extend a dialogue between indigenous aesthetics and contemporary environmental discourse, offering new pathways for integrating art and ecological responsibility.

Literature Survey

The author has undertaken an extensive survey of the literature to refer to, quote, understand, and research the term Anthropocene and its connection to the environment and art, especially music. The power of communicating through any Art form is unparalleled, and through the process of surveying literature, it was very evident. The concept of the Anthropocene was examined in the literature from Western and Indian perspectives. An attempt was made to search through ancient texts on Indian Classical Music from the perspective of music and its interconnectedness with the environment, nature,

and human consciousness. The entire list of the literature survey was provided in the references section to provide a broader understanding of the resources surveyed for this brief study.

Methodology

Qualitative, Interpretive, and Analytical Methodology:

The study is conducted using a qualitative, interpretive methodology. Various resources on the concepts of the Anthropocene, Music and the environment, Indian music's interconnectedness with nature, etc., are thoroughly searched, and a study is produced that compares the concepts and interpretations to gain a deeper understanding of the topic.

The research points are explained under the following headings:

□ Ecological Imagination and Cosmological Worldview:

The origin of musical sounds in India is said to have originated from the sounds of nature. The interconnectedness with nature and the surrounding ecological systems led man to recognize the sounds, and thus musical tunes originated. There was always a deeper connection maintained with the natural world. In fact, it is a fundamental aspect of being in association with nature. This imagination sprouts with the feel of Sacred Earth, but not as a mere piece of land to live on. The sapta svarās of Indian Classical Music are said to have originated from the sounds of birds and animals⁸.

Sa: Śādja – Peacock's sound, Ri: Riṣabha – sound of a bull, Ga: Gāndhāra – bleating sound of a goat, Ma: Madhyama – Heron's cry, Pa: Panchama – Cuckoo's call, Da: Daivata – Horse's neigh, Ni: Niṣāda – Elephant's trumpet.

The combination of different varieties of sounds was put together to form a tune, and thus the concept of Rāga emerged. There is also a system of practicing raga at specific times of day and in certain

⁸ Physics of Sapta Swaras: A Benefit of Music to the Brain

seasons. The concept of singing Bhauḷi, Bhūpāla, Malayamārutam rāgās in the early morning is very popular. The svara vibrations and the emotions emanating from each raga are said to affect all living beings, including humans, trees, and the entire ecological system.

According to Indian Philosophy, the Creation is said to be born from the Nādam called as ōmkāram and thus the Creation itself starts with musical sound. This cosmological view of the formation of the world from a Praṇava Nādam indicates the strong interconnectedness of music with the environment.

Saint composer and one among the Trinity of Carnatic music, Sri Tyagaraja also mentions in his kriti mōkṣamu galada

– praṇava nādamu sapta svaramulai baragē, which explains that the sapta svarās are derived from the praṇava nādam.

Arts embrace the concept of humanities, and the Artists who have undergone the right type of kaḷā sādhana are said to have a very subtle nature of sensitivity and compassion, except only when their power, name, and fame override them and the ego starts to conquer them from their soul nature. Artists are said to be very closely associated with nature.

Many compositions, especially in Hindustani music, are structured lyrically around elements of nature. Just the explanation of the season: feelings of a rainy day, a beautiful scenic nature picture, etc. In Carnatic Music, major emphasis will be on the appreciation of the divine masters inspired by ancient Indian philosophical texts, but there is also a blend of environmental aspects reflected in them. The aspects of ecological imagination and cosmological worldview were there from the beginning of the evolution of Indian Classical Music, and this age of Anthropocene gives another chance to revive the core aspects of the Sangeetha sastra to be utilized for enlightening humans to assimilate the concept of Sacred Earth and live a holistic life embracing all living beings together.

□ Ecological Consciousness through raga system, lyrical content, and performative context:

Ecological Consciousness is evident throughout the system of Indian Classical Music, which was unfortunately not properly followed in later stages. The reason might be because of the over perfection of the scientific principles, and the notion that only the blessed with talent can perform well, restricting its reach to only the elite group. The concept of utilizing the sounds of raga for the betterment of living beings is the very base foundation of the purpose of Indian Music. The ragas are solutions for every situation appearing in nature or in the lives of living beings.

Every living being on the earth communicates through sound. Many experiments are being conducted to show how plants also respond to sound⁹. There are many instances also, such as how a snake responds to music, the shepherd's flute music for the cow herds is helpful. Music is always a solution for any problem.

The Raga system in Indian Classical Music is structured around a combination of different types of svarās, and the purpose of singing the ragas is associated with the type of God depicted as the rāga dēvata. In turn, the deity's quality reflects something related to the environment. For example, the ragas Amṛtavarṣiṇi and mēgh malhar are closely associated with rainfall. The compositions composed by the composers also reflect the same purpose in the lyrical content. The composition Ānandāmṛta karṣiṇi amṛtavarṣiṇi, composed by Sri Muttuswami Dikshitar, is a perfect example. In that kṛti, the composer conveys the words as salilam varṣaye varṣaye, praying the rain god to pour rain in a condition of drought. There should be something related to the svara frequencies that matches the environmental vibrations to alter the condition from drought to rainfall. The performer should play the raga with the correct svara frequencies, without deviating into another raga, and with immense devotion, fulfilling the emotional aesthetics, i.e., the rasa ecstasy to the fullest. With an enlightened feeling that something great should manifest, along with spiritual surrender for the sacred earth.

⁹ Beyond Chemical Triggers: Evidence for Sound - Evoked Physiological Reactions in Plants

Likewise, many ragas are structured to help humans stay in alignment with nature. The sound frequencies of each raga directly affect the frequencies of nature, the environment, and surrounding ecosystems. This implies the significant role of Indian Classical Music in the Anthropocene.

□ Conveying elemental harmony: Sri Dikshitar's Panchabhūta Linga Kṛtīs:

Coming to the central part of the study, explaining real examples of compositions that show how Indian Classical Music can act as one of the tools in the age of the Anthropocene. These compositions are from the Carnatic Music tradition, one of the two genres of Indian Classical Music. Sri Muttuswami Dikshitar, one of the Trinity composers of

Carnatic music, has composed many compositions that are treasures of knowledge on planets, the cosmos, the Elements of nature, philosophical aspects, etc. Among those many compositions, the Panchabhūta linga kṛtīs reflect the concept of the five elements of nature: earth, fire, water, space, and wind. Each composition reflects each element, depicting the qualities of the Siva Linga at the pilgrimage places.

Each element reflects on how the divine Siva linga is formed with a particular element, and thus the composer, through his compositions, explains the greatness and qualities of the divine Siva linga. A brief explanation of each composition in five elements is given as follows, which is researched and collected based on a few studies¹⁰.

1. Ānanda natana prakāśam in the raga kēdāram depicts the space element, and the composer praises the deity at the Chidambaram temple, reflecting the space element in this composition. The pace or rhythm of the composition also reflects the vastness of the space and aptly chooses the raga kēdāram, a ghana rāgam, and the ghanatva is reflected throughout the composition.

¹⁰ Pancha Bhuta Kritis of Muttuswami Dikshitar
<https://sriramv.com/2008/11/14/pancha-bhuta-kritis-of-muttuswami-dikshitar/>

2. In the raga Hussēni, Sri Dikshitar composes Sri Kālīahastīśa, reflecting the wind element. The divine Siva manifests as a Vāyu element, and in this composition, the pace reflects the movements of the wind.
3. The next composition was based on the fire theme and was praised of deity Arunachala Siva. This composition, Aruṇāchalanāṭhaṁ smarāmi, composed in Sāranga raga, reflects the movements of an ever-lightening lamp. The Arunachala hill is said to have been formed by a volcanic eruption
4. Jambūpate māmpāhi, composed in the rāga Yamunā Kalyāni, is a composition resembling fluid movements in its sangatīs, praising the deity at Tiruvanaikka temple. The deity reflects the water element with the constant flow of the river Kaveri beside the temple.
5. The composition based on the earth element is Chintaya mākanda mūla kandaṁ in the raga Bhairavi. The deity is situated in the Kanchipuram kshetra, and it is said that goddess Parvati prayed to Siva in the form of a sand linga; thus, it reflects the earth element.

The above briefly explains the Panchabhūta linga kritis composed by Sri Dikshitar, which show how composers of Indian Music tried to merge environmental concepts with devotion towards the supreme, highlighting the greatness of Indian spiritual aspects. The chosen ragas will also depict a vibrational frequency match with the elements, and this is an entirely analytical study.

In this age of the Anthropocene, when Musicians come forward to perform these compositions with a deeper intention to balance the ecological system, one can surely observe the elemental harmony manifesting. The focal point should be that the intentions behind performance are purposeful and truthful in establishing the Sacred Earth.

□ A cultural resource for ecological thinking in the age of Anthropocene:

From the beginning of the creation, our Indian music has been a tool of communication and a storage of solutions. Indian culture is so closely connected to the Indian music system that many aspects have

been passed down from generation to generation through musical compositions. There is a great need for humans to restart their thinking processes to save Earth's ecological systems. Music has the power to communicate, conveying the message beyond language. The effect of music on the emotional lives of living beings helps revive thought about the sacred earth.

Conclusion and Findings

Traditional musical practices, especially from India, serve as tools for environmental awareness and cultural preservation. The practice and performance of musical forms, both abstract and lyrical, help reflect on ethical aspects and sustainability. Dialogue between indigenous aesthetics and contemporary environmental discourse: Integrating Art and Ecological Responsibility.

- This study helped in understanding the science of Indian Music from the perspective of Environmental Humanities.
- The interdisciplinary approach of research kindles the thinking process of traditional concepts to merge with the needs of modern issues.
- This research supports the thought process of musicians to change themselves as Enlightened Musicians and take a major part in developing the condition of Humans in the age of Anthropocene.
- This research paper shows the need to reframe the structure of Music concerts more for the purpose of addressing environmental issues and making use of scientific studies to address the issues of the Anthropocene Human era.

To conclude on a positive note, the practice of Indian Classical Music is called a yoga sadhana, and it is of great need today to bring back that yogic concept in our music. Only an ***Enlightened Musician*** will have the intention and energy to practice and perform Indian Music to raise the energies in and around the Earth.

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