

MARTIAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF ANCIENT INDIA

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The study of our ancient musical system brings to light numerous conceptions which are nowhere found in the modern trends of Indian music. From the limited sources available to us of the ancient musical system, we discover that music pervaded all departments of life and was closely associated with social, religious, cultural, martial and other aspects of life. As the history of ancient India is one of almost continuous warfare, the importance of music for battles and battlefields cannot be over-emphasised. Vedic literature, the later vedic *samhitas* and the epics, bear testimony to this fact. However crude the music may have been it was indispensable for warfare, as it infused courage and enthusiasm and enabled the warriors to undergo great exertions with the least strain. Shantiparva in *Mahabharata* (100, 46) refers to various tunes such as *Ksvedah*, *Kilakila*, and *Krakaca* played mainly to encourage the soldiers.

It is generally assumed that the history of military music dates back to paleolithic times, where prehistoric man is said to have used primitive types of instruments and shouted in ecstasy to celebrate his victory over his foes in his struggle for existence. But we do not have any trustworthy account of its beginnings, as it antedates man's records, and music alone reached too far into the past, in fact to the very beginnings, so that no explanation for it could be given.

The earliest authentic human product of what we may term literature dealing with this aspect of music are the vedas. According to them *dundubhi* and *adambara* were the instruments commonly used for warfare in ancient days. In the hymns of *Rigveda* (VI, 47, 29-31) an inspiring and beautiful account of the battle drum — *dundubhi* — is given in which it is hailed as “accordant with Gods”; “thundering out strength”, “filling the warriors full of vigour”, “The first of Indra”, and so on. There is a similar verse in *Atharvaveda* (V, 20-21) which is full of praise for the battle drum and glorifies its powers. Apparently the war drum must have been looked upon with great veneration and regard by the Hindus, because its capture meant defeat.

The same idea is expressed in some of the great Tamil works. In song 62 of *Puram* the Poet Kazhathalaiyar laments over the plight of the Cheera and Chola kings saying “*Uraisal Chirapin Murei Cherizhintanave*”. Song 63 of the same work speaks of the destruction of the Murasu. In *Patthu pattu* (312) it is said “*Innisai Murasu Mi-Thozhiyapa*”. Similar references are offered in *Takkaiyakkabharani* (745) and *Moovarula* (Erasavoola).

Needless to say music continued to be an essential and important feature in epic warfare, at a much later period. In fact a great variety of instruments were put to use, as elaborated in the two celebrated Epics. Nowhere do we find battle scenes more clearly portrayed than in *Mahabharata*, where the army marches to the continuous blare of trumpets, thundering of drums, blowing of *sankhas*, twanging of bow-strings, tinkling of bells, clapping of hands etc. This tumultuous uproar continued from sunrise to sunset, but with a moment's break whenever a great hero fell during the course of the battle.

In the *Dronaparva* (88, 1) the army marches into the field to the music of *bheri*, *mridanga* and *sankha*. “*Tadyamanasu bherisu mridangesu nadatsu ca Pradhamapitesu Cankhesu*”. In *Bhismaparva*, (99, 11,) *bheri*, *mridanga* and *panava* are mentioned and *bheri* and *anaka* in *Dronaparva*. In *Virata parva* (72, 27) *gomukha*, *sankha* and *adambara* are mentioned. Out of these instruments the *gomukha* is said to be a cow-faced drum, as its name suggests. Again in *Bhismaparva* (43, 7-8) it is said that sea-shells were blown and drums beaten thunderously in order to produce a

loud and powerful din to encourage the soldiers in their advance. Four kinds of instruments are mentioned here "*tata bheryasca, pesyasca, krakaca, govinshanikah*". Out of these the last mentioned is presumably a cow-horn. The other drums *pesi* and *krakaca* seems to have been very popular with the ancients and was commonly played along with *bheri*. The drum *dindima*, named after the din it produces, was played at the commencement of the day's battle, as illustrated in *Karnaparva* (32, 42).

In *Bhismaparva* 5 drums are mentioned along with horns and shells. They are *bheri*, *mridanga*, *panava*, *pushkara* and *dundubhi*. Out of these the *pushkara* or the *bhanda vadya*, as it is known, is often mentioned in great Sanskrit literary works. The kettledrum, *muraja*, is also referred to in the same *parva* (58, 46). Prof. Hopkins in his treatise on "ruling caste" (J.A.O.S. P. 319) erroneously identifies this as a tambourine for in fact this is a single-faced drum.

Kumbha is another instrument which is usually found played along with *bheri*, *panava*, *anaka*, *gomukha* and *sankha*. This is referred to in *Ramayana* (VI, 37, 52) as *kumbhamukha*. Unfortunately the details furnished in the epic are so meagre that we are not able to come to a singular conclusion respecting its shape, construction, technique etc. But judging by its name it must be a pot-mouthed, spherical drum, beaten strongly with sticks.

Similarly there are other instruments mentioned in various texts about which we get very limited information. The *Agnipurana* refers to an instrument by name *tanku*. In the 7th chapter of *Harsha-carita kahala* and *konika* are also mentioned in *Manasollasa* (P. 137, V. 1209) as sounded at the commencement of the battle. Judging from the context we conclude that the above mentioned three instruments should be of the *sushira* type.

Thus a great variety of instruments representing all types were used in epic warfare. These instruments were grouped into some distinct units which formed a sort of band by itself, based on their tone-colour. This was designed mainly to have an harmonious effect when the instruments were sounded together. The ancients exhibited a

highly developed taste in handling the instruments and used them with great discrimination.

The *Jataka Tales* provide us with stray references to military music while dealing at length with the campaigns. In *Mugapakka Jataka* (translation by Cowell VI, 14) orders are issued to sound the conch and tabour and wake the loud-mouthed kettledrum; to rattle the drums and sound the tom-tom with force and fill the air with its music. In *Sonanadha Jataka* (V 120) music is provided by drum, tabour and conch to cheer the King who returns back triumphant. *Indian Antiquary* (Volume VIII) refers to a Calukyan grant of King Kirtivarman II which described the *dakka* as a lotus-mouthed drum. In the Nagpur Stone inscription of the Malava Kings both *damaru* and *jharjhara* are mentioned.

Out of the varied and numerous instruments that were put to martial use the *dundubhi* is of the greatest antiquity. The great variety of drums that we have today are all its progeny. This instrument has derived its name from the sound it produces, but a mythological origin is attached to its name as enumerated in *Matsyapurana* (13-14) where it is said that the sound of the drum caused death to *Dundubhi* and consequently from thence took this name. Though this instrument was considered of great importance and excellence in the vedic period, it seems to have been superseded by the *bheri* at a much later period.

The *bheri* is a fear-infusing instrument as its name explains. This is synonymous with the *murasu* which is frequently mentioned in Tamil texts. The instrument was usually made out of wood, equipped with the skin of the cow or that of an antelope, and anointed with *ghee* (*Atharva*, page 130, 132). This was particularly sounded as a hero entered the chariot before starting on a campaign (*Ramayana* VI, 31, 28). The *Bhismaparva* of *Mahabharata* (54, 85) refers to *mahabheri* as accompanied by white conches. This evidently must be a little bigger in proportion than the ordinary sized *bheri*. Vasudeva Krishna is said to have possessed four kinds of *bheri* as mentioned in verse 356 of *Nijjuti* (Bhasa) namely *kaumudiki*, *sangramiki*, *durbhutika*, *asivopasamini*¹. Periya-

1. Journal of the Oriental Institute, Baroda University March 1953.

puranam (493) refers to five kinds of *bheris* but the names are not furnished in the texts.

The *bheri* is said to have possessed medicinal powers so that whoever sounded the instrument got cured of the diseases he had. An interesting episode is narrated at length in the *Nalayagiri Suri* (Page 107) which speaks of the custodian of the *bheri*, who sold its pieces to well-to-do persons on receiving bribes and replaced them with ordinary pieces as a result of which the instrument lost its potency in due course. Lord Krishna on seeing this observed a fast for 3 days and at last succeeded in getting another one.¹

Conches too were held in high esteem by epic warriors, each of them carried a drum as well as a conch of their own. Krishna possessed a gold adorned shell, named *Panchajanya*, Arjuna had *Devaddata*; Bhima had *Paundra*; Yudisthira, *Ananthavijaya*; Nakula, *Sughosha*; and Sahadeva, *Manipushpaka* (M.B. VI, 24).

In the *Rigveda*, *Samhita* we meet with an instrument by the name *bakura*. This is said to have been employed by *Asvins* in their expeditions against the *Dasyus*. As we judge from the circumstances we understand this instrument solely to have been employed for war purposes. Kautilya in his celebrated work *Arthashastra* makes mention of *turyakaras* — the trumpet blowers, and assigns them double wages compared to an ordinary musician.

Purananooru and other *Sangam* classes provides us with useful information regarding the military principles and practices of the ancient Tamils. The commonest of the instruments mentioned in these works are *murasu*, *muzhavu*, *parai* and *sangu*, about which we get references in profusion. Out of these instruments the *murasu* was hailed as one of the sacred objects of royalty. In *Kalithoghai* (5th Naidel, 15) the King Pandya is hailed as the possessor of *cheera*, *chola* and his own *pandya murasu*. Thereby indicating his supremacy over the other two Kings. This was considered not only to be sacred but in fact as divinity itself. An inspiring account of this drum is given in the 50th verse

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of the *Purananooru* wherein the drum is taken out for a sacred bath and decked with fragrant flowers, beautiful peacock feathers and also with a necklace studded with sapphires. A special seat is assigned to it which is also looked upon with the same amount of devotion and care. Sacrifices were offered in its honour.

The *mayirakkan murasu* is said to have been made out of black wood with leather straps tied fast. (*Jeevakachintamani* S. 2152). The face was covered with the skin of a dead bull without the hair being removed from it or with the skin of a she-elephant which had vanquished a tiger (*Patthu Pattu* 334) and (*Perunkadhai* 1.38). This was anointed with black mud and had a black spot or "eye" as it is referred to in these books. (*Paditru Pattu* S. 50; *puram* 63). It was struck with sticks (*Puram* 143).

Kinai or *tudi* is another instrument of great military importance which is supposed to have possessed a clear and distinct sound. This is a double-faced drum played out on the left face as enumerated in *Naladiyar* (S. 388). This instrument is designed in the shape of the footprints of a female elephant (*Kalithogai* P. 954). This is particularly played for 'Vetchi' which is a sort of prelude to the actual campaign, during which the enemies' cows were captured. The person who played on this was known as *Tudiyar* or *Kinaiyan*, the post of which was held to be hereditary (*Purapporal Venbamalai* 19). It is tied fast with leather straps and has a *Karanai* or black spot.

Kodumparai is another instrument used for this purpose. It is so known because of its usage in war which means the death of many. *Pandil* — a cymbal, and *neduvayir* are also frequently referred to. The *Villiputhurar Mahabharatam* refers to some of the war instruments such as *karadikai* — which sound like a bear, *perumaram*, *muradu* and *pedu parai*. Similarly we get frequent references to many kinds of *parai* and *murasu*. The fact that two or more of them are often mentioned together probably shows that they were not merely different names of one and the same instrument.

Camp music differed vastly from that of the battle-field music. The soft and melodious music of the camp is a pleasant contrast to the harsh and fearful music of the field. In the evenings the warriors were

greeted by milder notes of the lyre and that of *panava* and *mridanga*. (M.B. VI. 99, 18: VII, 39, 31) which is a clear proof of their artistic sense and advanced knowledge in music.

The military commanders and chiefs who had won laurels on the battlefield were rewarded with titles and distinctions and were given the right to appear in public with a special band in attendance known as *Panchamahashabda* — comprised of five primary musical instruments. *Silapadigaram* (P. 339 L. 144) refers to the *muzhavu* being presented to the warriors in recognition of their chivalrous and brave deeds.

Another interesting and noteworthy usage of the instruments on the battlefields is for sending signals, military orders and other confidential messages. The commencement and the conclusion of the days battle, the fall of a chief and similar other matters were communicated by means of these instruments. We get references about this in *Sukraniti* (P. 243) and *Arthasastra* (P. 140) wherein there are instances of the battle orders being communicated through bugle sounds.

These facts make clear the highly developed and rich musical system of ancient Hindus and also the immense interest and consistency with which they practised this art.