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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FROM VEDIC CHANTING TO CLASSICAL MUSIC PEDAGOGY: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MUSIC EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper examines historical approaches to music education in India, focusing on the relationship between oral transmission, theoretical learning, disciplined practice and teacher-student apprenticeship. It traces selected pedagogical features from Vedic chant traditions to later forms of Hindustani classical music, including the Guru-Shishya parampara and the development of gharana-based stylistic lineages. Using a qualitative historical and textual approach, the discussion draws on secondary writings identified in the working bibliography and considers how musical knowledge has been transmitted through listening, memorisation, demonstration, repetition and guided performance. The paper argues that Indian classical music pedagogy cannot be understood through either textual theory or repetitive training alone: it has historically depended on the interaction of conceptual understanding, embodied practice, stylistic enculturation and sustained mentorship. At the same time, the historical record should not be read as evidence of one uniform or unchanged system across all periods and regions. The article concludes by considering the continuing relevance of individualized instruction within contemporary institutional music education, particularly where diverse learner aptitudes must be accommodated alongside shared curricular goals.

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Introduction:-

Education involves the transmission, interpretation and creation of knowledge. In the arts, learning also requires the development of perception, technique, expressive judgement and the capacity to apply knowledge in performance. Music education therefore encompasses more than the acquisition of theoretical information: it includes listening, imitation, repetition, reflection and the gradual formation of an individual artistic voice. In Indian classical music, the concepts of shiksha (instruction), taleem (specialised training), riyaz (regular practice) and sadhana (sustained disciplined engagement) describe related but distinct dimensions of learning. The Guru-Shishya parampara has historically provided an important framework for this process. Through close contact with a teacher, students learn not only compositions and musical concepts but also stylistic conventions, interpretive choices and modes of practice. Oral and aural transmission is particularly significant because musical nuance—including intonation,

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ornamentation, phrasing and timbral control—cannot be fully conveyed through notation alone. This paper examines selected historical stages in the development of music pedagogy, from Vedic chant traditions to the lineage-based teaching associated with Hindustani classical music. It asks how oral transmission, textual knowledge, practical demonstration and individual mentorship have interacted and what these historical practices may contribute to contemporary music education. The discussion is interpretive rather than exhaustive; it does not assume that a single pedagogical model remained unchanged across all periods, regions and musical communities.

Methodology and Scope:-

The study adopts a qualitative historical-textual approach. It synthesises the secondary sources listed in the working bibliography, including writings on traditional music education, historical pedagogy and vocal lineages. The material is organised thematically around oral transmission, Vedic chant learning, epic and medieval accounts, the development of gharanas and the pedagogical relationship between instruction and practice. Since the available bibliographic details for several sources are incomplete, the claims and quotations attributed to those sources must be checked against the original publications before final submission. The paper does not present new empirical data; its contribution lies in bringing these themes together to discuss the pedagogical implications of historical practices.

Music Education and the Guru–Shishya Tradition:-

The Guru–Shishya parampara is commonly described as a personal and practice-centred mode of learning in which the teacher guides a disciple over an extended period. In many settings, learning involved close observation of the teacher, repeated listening, memorisation, correction and gradual participation in performance. The relationship could extend beyond formal lesson time, allowing students to absorb aspects of musical style that are difficult to codify in written form. Historical accounts frequently contrast this individualised apprenticeship with modern classroom teaching. Such a contrast is useful but should not be overstated: traditional systems varied and collective instruction, written treatises, courtly teaching and institutional settings also played roles at different times. The key pedagogical feature of apprenticeship is not simply that it took place outside institutions, but that instruction could be adapted to a learner's voice, aptitude, progress and stylistic goals. Ratanjankar's discussion of traditional music education is cited in the source material as emphasising the importance of individualised Guru–Shishya instruction (Ratanjankar, 1984, p. 9). This perspective provides a useful starting point for considering the place of oral transmission, while requiring comparison with other historical evidence before it can be treated as a comprehensive account of music education in ancient India.

Pedagogical Features of Vedic Chanting:-

The Vedic tradition offers an early and significant example of highly disciplined oral transmission in South Asian knowledge systems. Musical recitation is especially associated with the Samaveda, in which selected verses are organised for chanting. The accurate preservation of text, accent, pitch movement and recitational procedure depended on careful listening, memorisation and repeated oral practice. The working sources describe a staged process in which students first acquired command of the textual material and subsequently learned its musical realisation. This sequence suggests a pedagogical principle that remains relevant to vocal training: secure memorisation of a composition can provide a stable basis for attention to melodic shape, phrasing, ornamentation and expressive variation. However, similarities between Vedic chant learning and later Hindustani bandish training should be understood as pedagogical parallels rather than proof of a direct, uninterrupted line of descent. The source material also refers to scholarly assemblies and discussions of textual and ritual matters. Such accounts point to the coexistence of oral practice and intellectual debate. More precise claims about the role of parishads and Pratishakhya texts should be supported with verified editions and specialist scholarship in the final version.

From Epic and Medieval Contexts to Lineage-Based Pedagogy:-

Narratives associated with the Ramayana describe Lava and Kusha performing and transmitting the story in a musical form. Later discussions interpret these accounts as evidence of the integration of text, pitch, rhythm and performance. Epic and Puranic narratives are important sources for cultural understandings of music, but they must be distinguished from contemporary documentation of teaching practice. They offer insight into ideals and representations of musical learning rather than a complete record of historical curricula. Across subsequent periods, musical knowledge was transmitted through multiple settings, including religious institutions, temples, courts and teacher-led lineages. Textual treatises contributed to the articulation of musical concepts, while performance remained essential to the learning of sound and style. Chaturvedi's account of traditional instruction, as cited in the working bibliography, emphasises face-to-face teaching, memorisation, service and disciplined living (Chaturvedi, 1962, p. 27). These features should be understood in their historical and social contexts rather than generalised to every student or tradition. Court patronage contributed to the visibility and development of specialised musical

practices. Regional centres and hereditary or professional lineages helped sustain distinctive approaches to repertoire, voice production, raga development and performance. The emergence of gharanas, however, was a gradual and complex process; it should not be reduced to a single historical moment or explained solely through political change.

Gharanas, Vocal Styles and the Transmission of Taleem:-

In Hindustani classical music, a gharana is generally understood as a lineage or stylistic tradition associated with characteristic approaches to musical training and performance. Its identity may be reflected in raga treatment, voice production, ornamentation, tempo, repertoire and the balance between composition and improvisation. Gharanas are not merely geographical labels: they are maintained through teaching relationships, performance practice and the selective transmission and adaptation of stylistic knowledge.

Dhrupad, Bani Traditions and Khayal:-

The four Dhrupad banis—Dagar, Gauhar, Khandar and Nauhar—are conventionally discussed as stylistic categories in accounts of Dhrupad history. Later Dhrupad lineages, including Dagar, Darbhanga, Bettiah and others, have preserved and developed distinctive approaches to alap, composition, rhythm and vocal production. The relationship between banis and later gharanas is historically significant but should be described carefully, since stylistic categories, family lineages and modern gharana identities do not always correspond in a simple one-to-one manner. Khayal developed through multiple historical influences and became associated with several prominent lineages, including Gwalior, Agra, Kirana, Jaipur-Atrauli, Patiala and Rampur-Sahaswan. Other recognised traditions are also important to the wider history of Hindustani vocal music. The number and classification of gharanas differ across scholarly accounts, so any definitive list should be supported by a clearly identified source.

Thumri and Regional Stylistic Idioms:-

Thumri has developed through diverse regional and performance contexts. Discussions often associate Lucknow with bol-baant and bandish-oriented approaches and Banaras with an expressive bol-banav style, while other centres contributed their own emphases. These distinctions are useful as broad descriptions, but they should not be treated as rigid boundaries: artists frequently combine stylistic resources and the terminology used to classify Thumri traditions varies among authors.

Taleem, Riyaz and Sadhana:-

Taleem involves guided acquisition of technique and style, while riyaz refers to the learner's regular practice through which musical skills are consolidated. Sadhana can describe the sustained commitment and reflective discipline associated with artistic development. In vocal pedagogy, these processes may include work on breath coordination, tonal stability, intonation, range, resonance, diction, raga grammar, composition and improvisation. The teacher's demonstration and correction are complemented by the student's independent practice; neither alone is sufficient for mature performance. The often-cited saying 'Karta ustad, na-karta shagird' expresses the importance of practice in musical learning. It is best treated as a pedagogical maxim rather than as a substitute for evidence. Effective practice also depends on appropriate feedback, achievable goals, rest, vocal health and the learner's understanding of what is being practised.

Individual Learner Differences and Contemporary Music Education:-

Learners differ in their prior musical exposure, auditory memory, motor coordination, vocal characteristics, pace of acquisition and confidence in performance. Traditional apprenticeship can create opportunities to adapt exercises and pace to the individual. For example, a teacher may vary the tempo, range, repetition, or complexity of an exercise according to the student's needs. Such flexibility is particularly important in vocal music, where technique must be developed in ways suited to the individual voice. Institutional music education, by contrast, often works within shared syllabi, fixed contact hours and assessment requirements. These constraints need not make individual attention impossible. Differentiated exercises, listening assignments, small-group demonstrations, individual feedback, reflective practice logs and flexible performance tasks can help teachers address varied learning needs while retaining common learning outcomes. The historical traditions discussed here therefore offer principles rather than a model to be copied without modification. Contemporary pedagogy can combine the strengths of oral demonstration and mentorship with documented learning outcomes, accessible learning resources and critical engagement with historical and theoretical sources. Such an approach also makes room to examine the social conditions of traditional apprenticeship, including access, hierarchy and the diversity of learners' experiences.

Discussion:-

The historical overview suggests that music pedagogy in India has repeatedly brought together sound-based learning and conceptual knowledge. Vedic chant traditions illustrate the importance of accurate oral preservation; textual and courtly sources indicate that theoretical explanation and practical demonstration could coexist; and gharana-based teaching highlights the role of stylistic enculturation through sustained mentorship. These are related pedagogical patterns, but they do not establish that Indian music education followed one continuous or uniform trajectory.

The most relevant contemporary lesson is the value of integrating listening, demonstration, guided repetition, independent practice and individual feedback. Historical approaches can inform current teaching when they are critically contextualised and adapted to present-day educational settings. Further research could compare specific lineages through interviews, archival materials and observation of current teaching practices, thereby testing how these pedagogical principles operate in practice.

Conclusion:-

From Vedic chant traditions to the lineage-based pedagogy associated with Hindustani classical music, oral and aural learning has played a significant role in the transmission of musical knowledge. Yet this transmission has not depended on imitation alone: it has interacted with textual learning, theoretical reflection, practical demonstration, disciplined practice and mentorship. The Guru–Shishya parampara and gharana traditions offer important insights into how technique and stylistic understanding are cultivated over time. For contemporary institutions, the challenge is to retain the strengths of close listening, individual guidance and sustained practice while ensuring that music education is critically informed, inclusive and responsive to diverse learners. The historical claims in this paper should be read as a thematic synthesis and require further verification against primary sources and specialist scholarship.

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