



Exploring Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas: An Indian Classical Music's Perspective

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Abstract

This research examines the potential of cinema music as a culturally accessible medium for stress management through the Indian philosophical framework of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. It explores how these three gunas, understood as distinct psychological and behavioural tendencies, may be associated with emotional balance, stimulation, and withdrawal in contemporary Indian society. The study particularly considers the influence of media exposure and peer pressure across different age groups, including children, adolescents, adults, and older adults. It discusses how excessive digital exposure, social comparison, conformity, and cyberbullying may contribute to psychological stress, while appropriately selected cinema music may support relaxation, motivation, emotional expression, social connectedness, and reflective awareness. The paper proposes age-specific approaches involving mindful music listening, parental guidance, peer-supported musical activities, relaxation practices, and community engagement. It argues that integrating cinema music with media literacy and culturally grounded well-being practices may provide a complementary approach to promoting emotional balance and stress resilience.

Keywords: Cinema Music, Sattva, Rajas, Tamas, Stress Management, Media Exposure, Peer Pressure

Introduction

Indian classical music represents a distinctive aesthetic tradition in which sound is not understood merely as an organized sequence of pitches and rhythms but as a medium capable of influencing the emotional, psychological and contemplative dimensions of human experience. Its theoretical foundations have developed through a long interaction between musicology, philosophy, spirituality and aesthetics. Concepts such as naad, swar, raag, taal, bhaav and rasa therefore acquire meanings that extend beyond technical musical terminology. Within this philosophical framework, the three gunas—sattva, rajas and tamas—provide an interesting conceptual lens through which the affective and experiential dimensions of Indian classical music can be examined. The Bhagavad Gita describes sattva as associated with clarity and illumination, rajas with activity and desire, and tamas with inertia and obscurity.¹ Although the guna theory was originally articulated within philosophical and psychological contexts rather than as a formal theory of music, its conceptual vocabulary offers a useful way of examining the contrasting moods, energies and states that may be generated through musical performance.

The Indian aesthetic tradition does not treat art merely as an object of sensory entertainment. The Natyashastra by Bharat Muni, places rasa at the centre of aesthetic experience and establishes an important relationship between emotional determinants, representation and aesthetic relish.² Later, Abhinavagupta developed the theory of rasa by emphasizing the transformation of ordinary personal emotion into an aesthetic experience that can be contemplated without the limitations of individual circumstances.³ This philosophical understanding is particularly relevant to Indian classical music because raag performance is based not simply on the accurate reproduction of notes but on the gradual evocation of a particular emotional and aesthetic atmosphere. Contemporary scholarship similarly observes that Indian classical music has traditionally been connected with aesthetic experience, emotional expression and, in some interpretations, spiritual realization.⁴

The three gunas can consequently be approached as interpretive categories rather than rigid musical classifications. Sattva may be associated with luminosity, balance, serenity, inwardness and contemplative awareness; rajas with dynamism, movement, intensity, ambition and emotional stimulation; and tamas with heaviness, inertia, darkness or withdrawal. These associations should not be understood as establishing a fixed correspondence between particular ragas and individual gunas. A raga cannot scientifically or universally be labelled sattvic, rajasic or tamasic because musical experience varies according to performer, listener, cultural context, tempo, register, improvisational strategy and performance environment. Instead, the gunas can be used as a philosophical framework for investigating how different musical characteristics may influence states of consciousness.

The concept of nada occupies an important position in this discussion. Indian musicological traditions frequently connect musical sound with broader metaphysical ideas. Sharangdev's Sangeet Ratnakar provides an extensive treatment of Swar, Shruti, Raga, Taal and other dimensions of musical practice and theory.⁵ The text is regarded as one of the major historical treatises connecting earlier Indian musicological traditions with later Hindustani and Carnatic systems.⁶ Its discussion of sound demonstrates that Indian music theory has historically been concerned not only with measurable musical structures but also with the origin, production and experiential significance of sound. Modern scholarship on the text continues to emphasize its detailed treatment of the physical and energetic dimensions of musical sound. The idea of sattva becomes particularly meaningful when considering the contemplative dimensions of raga performance. Sattva, in philosophical literature, is associated

with clarity, equilibrium and illumination.⁷ In musical experience, these qualities may metaphorically correspond to an atmosphere of tranquillity, concentration and inward reflection. Slow elaboration of a raga, sustained svaras, subtle meend, carefully controlled intonation and spacious alap can create conditions in which the listener's attention becomes increasingly concentrated. Such musical experiences are often associated with ragas traditionally performed during quieter periods of the day, although the association should be regarded as culturally developed rather than scientifically absolute. The aesthetic importance of silence, resonance and sustained tonal relationships can be interpreted as contributing to a sattvic mode of listening.

Prem Lata Sharma's scholarship is particularly significant for understanding the relationship between Indian musicology and aesthetics. Her collected writings discuss Indian aesthetic experience, rasa theory, the historical development of Indian music and the relationship between traditional theory and contemporary musical practice.⁸ Her work demonstrates that Indian music cannot be adequately understood by examining musical grammar independently of its aesthetic and philosophical foundations. The contents of her collected writings explicitly include studies of "Levels of Aesthetic Experience in Music" and "Rasa Theory and Indian Music." (Rmrl)

Rajas, by contrast, may provide a useful metaphor for the energetic and kinetic dimensions of musical performance. Rajas is traditionally associated with activity, desire, movement and emotional stimulation.⁹ Indian classical music contains numerous musical processes capable of producing heightened energy: rapid tans, complex layakari, accelerated rhythmic passages, forceful bol patterns, energetic gamakas and dramatic dynamic development. In instrumental music, rapid taans on the sitar, sarod or violin, or intense rhythmic dialogue between tabla and soloist, may generate an experience of excitement and heightened attention. In vocal music, the transition from vilambit to drut presentation can similarly transform the energy of a performance. Rajas therefore need not be regarded negatively; it can signify creative movement and expressive vitality.

The rajasic dimension is particularly evident in the relationship between raga and tala. Whereas the sustained melodic development of alap can encourage concentration and contemplation, the entrance of rhythmic cycles introduces another level of kinetic organization. Tala establishes temporal architecture, while improvisation creates tension between expectation and surprise. The listener becomes attentive to rhythmic resolution, syncopation, acceleration and interaction between performer and percussionist. Ashok D. Ranade's work on Indian music emphasizes the importance of examining music as a complex cultural phenomenon rather than reducing it to isolated technical components.¹⁰ His writings on Hindustani music examine raga, tala, bandish, techniques of elaboration, musical forms, gharanas and the contributions of major theoreticians. (Open Library) Tamas presents a more complex interpretive possibility. In philosophical terminology it is associated with inertia, darkness, obscurity and heaviness. Such an interpretation would oversimplify both guṇa theory and Indian classical music. Instead, *tamas* can be understood phenomenologically as a condition of heaviness, repose, darkness or inward withdrawal. Low-register sounds, sustained mandra notes, subdued melodic movements and sombre emotional atmospheres may, depending on context, evoke qualities metaphorically related to *tamas*. Yet the same musical elements can also generate profound tranquillity and therefore acquire a sattvic interpretation. The meaning of musical sound is consequently relational rather than mechanically determined.

This point is important because Indian aesthetics does not generally establish a simplistic one-to-one relationship between musical elements and emotional effects. *Rasa* emerges through a complex interaction of determinants, consequents, transient states and the receptive capacity of the audience. A raga associated traditionally with *Karuṇa* or *Shringar* *rasa* may be experienced differently by different listeners. A performance of *Bhairav*, *Darbari Kanada*, *Malkauns*, *Yaman* or *Todi* cannot be reduced to one psychological category because interpretation depends on musical treatment, stylistic lineage, performer and listening circumstances. The same *rāga* may move between states of serenity, gravity, emotional intensity and introspection.

The work of Omkarnath Thakur is particularly relevant to this perspective. His *Pranav Bharati* addresses important theoretical dimensions of music, including *svara*, *raga* and *rasa*.¹¹ His approach represents an attempt to connect technical musical knowledge with aesthetic and expressive experience. Contemporary descriptions of his scholarship similarly identify *Pranav Bharati* as a theoretical work dealing with these three interconnected areas. (Rajan Parrikar Music Archive) Such an approach strengthens the argument that Indian classical music should be interpreted through both structural and experiential categories.

Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande contributed another important dimension to the modern understanding of Indian classical music. His extensive work on Hindustani music involved collecting compositions, examining historical sources, developing systems of notation and organizing theoretical knowledge.¹² His *Kramik Pustak Malika* became an important pedagogical resource, while his *Hindustani Sangit Paddhati* attempted to systematize contemporary musical practice. Modern scholarship describes Bhatkhande as a major musicologist whose work sought to standardize music theory and education while engaging extensively with both textual sources and living performers. (Springer) His contribution is important for the present discussion because the *guṇas* should be applied as interpretive philosophical concepts without confusing them with the systematic classification of *rāgas*. The connection between *guṇas* and musical aesthetics can also be considered through the relationship between performer and listener. Indian classical performance is not simply a one-way transmission of musical information. The performer interprets a *rāga* through personal understanding, training, improvisational imagination and emotional sensitivity, while the listener participates through attentive reception. S. K. Saxena's writings on Hindustani music and aesthetics emphasize the need to approach musical experience as an aesthetic phenomenon rather than as a purely technical exercise.¹³ The *Sangeet Natak Akademi* catalogue recognizes his *Hindustani Music and Aesthetics* Today as a significant publication in this field. (Sangeet Natak Akademi)

The *guṇa* framework may therefore be useful in music education as well. Students of Indian classical music often spend considerable time mastering *svara*, *tala*, *raga* grammar and compositions. However, technical accuracy

alone does not guarantee aesthetic communication. Musical performance requires an understanding of phrasing, silence, emotional restraint, improvisational proportion and the relationship between sound and meaning.¹⁴ A teacher may therefore encourage students to recognize different qualities of musical energy: when a phrase should remain calm and spacious, when it should become more dynamic, and when restraint or gravity is aesthetically appropriate. In this sense, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* become reflective tools for developing musical sensitivity rather than prescriptive labels.

The concept also offers possibilities for interdisciplinary research. Music psychology can investigate how tempo, pitch register, timbre, rhythmic complexity and musical expectation influence attention and emotional response. Neuroscientific studies can examine physiological and cognitive reactions to different types of musical stimulation. Ethnomusicology can investigate how communities culturally interpret particular ragas and performance practices. Indian aesthetics can contribute philosophical categories for describing the subjective and contemplative dimensions of these experiences. Such interdisciplinary research would avoid the danger of claiming that ancient philosophical categories are scientifically identical to modern psychological constructs.

The relationship between music and spiritual experience is also historically significant. Indian musical thought has frequently connected *nada* with transcendence, devotion and self-cultivation.¹⁵ The concept of *nada-brahma*, while interpreted differently across traditions, expresses the idea that sound may become a means of approaching a deeper reality. Prajnanananda's historical studies of Indian music demonstrate how ideas concerning sound, spirituality and musical practice have interacted across Indian traditions.¹⁵ Similarly, scholarship on sacred music in India notes the close relationship historically established between musical practice, aesthetic experience and religious experience. (MDPI)

Nevertheless, contemporary interpretation requires caution. The *guna* theory should not be presented as an empirically validated system for predicting the emotional effect of a particular raga. Nor should ragas or musicians be ranked according to supposedly higher or lower *gunas*. Such an approach would contradict the nuanced nature of Indian aesthetics. Instead, the *gunas* can be understood as three interacting tendencies that may coexist within a single musical performance. A contemplative *alap* may contain *rajas*ic moments of increasing intensity; a highly energetic *taan* may ultimately resolve into a *sattvic* feeling of equilibrium; a grave *mandra* passage may move from heaviness toward profound contemplation.

The most productive interpretation, therefore, is dynamic. *Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* may be regarded as three dimensions of musical experience rather than three fixed categories of music. *Sattva* represents clarity, equilibrium and contemplative openness; *rajas* represent movement, intensity and expressive activation; *tamas* represents gravity, stillness, darkness and withdrawal. Indian classical music possesses techniques capable of articulating all three dimensions, and the artistic achievement of the performer lies partly in balancing them according to the aesthetic requirements of the raga and the unfolding of the performance.

This perspective also reinforces the central importance of *rasa*. The ultimate purpose of Indian classical music is not simply to reproduce theoretical rules but to transform musical material into an aesthetic experience. Bharata's *rasa* theory, Abhinavagupta's philosophical interpretation, Sarngadeva's musicological synthesis and the writings of modern Indian musicologists collectively demonstrate the importance of relating musical structure to human experience.¹⁶ Modern scholarship likewise identifies *rasa* as a central principle for understanding Indian classical music and its aesthetic dimensions. (Vilnius University Press)

Through music, abstract concepts become tangible experiences, allowing individuals to encounter the principles of resonance, harmony, and interconnectedness directly. Although scientific rigour demands a clear distinction between empirical theories and metaphysical interpretations, the parallels between these traditions offer valuable insights into humanity's ongoing effort to understand the universe and our place within it. Whether viewed through the mathematical language of quantum physics or the contemplative wisdom of Indian spirituality, reality appears less like a collection of separate objects and more like an immense symphony of energies, frequencies, relationships, and resonances¹⁷.

In conclusion, the concepts of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* provide a productive philosophical framework for exploring the psychological and aesthetic dimensions of Indian classical music, provided that they are used interpretively rather than dogmatically. *Sattva* may illuminate the music's capacity for serenity, concentration and contemplative awareness; *rajas* may explain its kinetic energy, dramatic development and emotional stimulation; and *tamas* may provide a language for understanding gravity, darkness, repose and inward withdrawal. These tendencies are not mutually exclusive and should not be attached permanently to specific ragas, instruments or styles. Indian classical music is fundamentally an art of transformation: *svara* becomes melodic meaning, raga becomes emotional atmosphere, rhythm becomes embodied movement, and sound becomes aesthetic experience. The *gunas* can therefore be understood as complementary dimensions within this transformative process. Their study may enrich contemporary musicological research by creating a dialogue between classical Indian philosophy, aesthetics, music theory, performance practice and emerging interdisciplinary approaches to the psychology of music.

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