



## THE INFLUENCES OF THE INDIAN MUSIC ON WESTERN MUSIC (With Particular Reference to Early Postmodernism)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influences of Indian music on western music –rock, pop and jazz- in the early postmodern age that is, in the decades of 1950s and 60s. It begins by highlighting the principal similarities between the Indian and western music and then proceeds on to tell how in the early postmodern age the Indian music started making its place in the domain of the western music. It throws light on the contribution of Indian artists such as Pandit Ravi Shankar in popularizing Indian music in the western world particularly England and America. It also discusses the efforts made by the western artists in amalgamating Indian elements in the western music. By naming significant western composers and music bands, such as Beatles, and also their popular songs, it relates different kinds of experiments made by them in western music under the influence of Indian music.

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### INTRODUCTION

Music is a natural art form which, being partly social and partly biological, is common to human beings across all civilizations. It is a natural instinct and innate urge inside human beings to go with the beat or rhythm. Although art is natural to human beings and its attributes are common across all human cultures, every society has certain features that are characteristic to it. For instance, painting, song, dance exist in all the cultures but the subject matter, techniques, and style differ from culture to culture. Drama originated independently and at different times across the world. It was there in Greece 2000 years ago, in vogue in India as early as 1st century AD and started germinating some 1000 years back in England. It was common in key principles yet different in strategies. Similarly, Indian and Western music both resemble and differ in many respects.

One of the key differences between the modern western music and the Indian music is the modal system prevalent in the latter. The modern western music follows tonal system which has the standard major and minor scales. But prior to this, it too followed modal system in which there existed eight modes in total – four authentic (Dorian, Hypodorian, Phrygian and Hypophrygian) and four plagal or derived (Lydian, Hypolydian, Mixolydian, Hypomixolydian) modes. Medieval music, music of the Middle Ages and even Gregorian chant (the monophonic, unaccompanied sacred song of the western Roman Catholic Church) were all composed in the modal system. There are some similarities between Indian and modal western music as some western church modes resemble Indian *thats* in some ways. For example, the *Kafi that* is similar to the

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Dorian mode, the *Kalyan that* is similar to the Lydian mode, and the *Khamaj that* is similar to the Mixolydian mode. The modal system was replaced later by the major/minor system, but it is still used in folk music and in third world countries like India.

The term *postmodern* as an adjective is often applied in the sense of a period which began with the end of modernism and the Second World War. The postmodern age in art was an age of fusion, amalgamation and acceptance. This was the age when different cultures came together and when the dividing line between 'high' and 'low' art was rejected. The increasing appeal of popular music in the western world initiated the return of the modal system to the western music, and also triggered the inclusion of folk as well as Indian music elements in western music. It began in 1955 when the Indian Sarod maestro Ali Akbar Khan released his debut album *Music of India: Morning and Evening Ragas* (1955, Angel Records) which was also the first released album of Indian classical music ever. Ali Akbar Khan later founded his College of Music in San Rafael, California. Inspired by the success of the visit of Ali Akbar Khan, his brother-in-law Pandit Ravi Shankar also visited Europe in 1956 performing in Britain and Germany. With this started a period of influence of Indian music on western- pop, rock and Jazz- music.

## The influence of the Indian Music on Western Music

In the times when the rise of modal system had started taking place in western music such as jazz, the shift in style of playing music was adopted by the beat artists who moved from the west to the east in different aspects including music. In 1964 Pandit Ravi Shankar came in contact with Philip Glass, the American minimalist composer. At that time Glass was doing, assigned by Ravi Shankar, a film score transcription of music with into western notation for Parisians. This coming in contact with Ravi Shankar heavily influenced Glass's music style, rather it shaped a distinctive new style for him wherein he perceived rhythm in Indian music as being entirely additive. Glass realized and then began to believe that in the west, time was divided like a slice of bread whereas Indian and other cultures took small units and strung them together. Under the Indian influence he began composing pieces based on repetitive structures of Indian music. Similarly, the American Jazz composer John Coltrane- who is associated with the emergence of the modal Jazz - was also inspired by the Indian music. Coltrane's meeting with Ravi Shankar took place in 1965. Indian influence can also be seen in the later music of Coltrane such as the album *Kulu Sé Mama* (1965). The first recorded collaboration between Indian and Jazz musicians took place in 1961 when Pandit Ravi Shankar and the West Coast American flutist and saxophonist Bud Shank played together in their album entitled *Improvisations* (1962) which had just one track *Improvisations on the Theme Music from Pather Panchali*. Apart from Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar, other important influences were of Nikhil Banerjee for the sitar and later Brij Bhushan Kabra for the Indian slide guitar. Kabra is the first Indian musician to play *raga* on the guitar which was rarely used in Indian classical music before he popularized it. His guitar gained popularity in the hippie culture of the 70s.

Beatles contributed greatly to popularize Indian classical music in west and that is also one of the reasons that there appears a noticeable influence of Indian Classical Music on western pop music. Beatles were the group of young Liverpool musicians - Paul McCartney, John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—which became highly popular by 1964 and were considered "a kind of spirit-level for trends in popular music, and were widely imitated in dress, attitude, and musical style" (Bellman, 1997). George Harrison came in contact with the legendary Indian Sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar and with the Indian spiritual teacher Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1967. As a result of these influences there appeared John Lennon's song *Norwegian Wood* in the LP *Rubber Soul* (1965) which had inclusion of Sitar but, as Gerry Farrell (1998) puts it, sitar here

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was 'employed in a purely colouristic manner' though 'It was inevitable that it would unleash an avalanche of such experiments in the pop world...'

George Harrison extensively used Sitar in his songs, like *The Inner Light* and *Within You Without You* and in his album *Wonderwall*. He popularized sitar in the western world for a decade or so and enriched the contemporary pop music with Indian elements. Indian influence can be seen in The Rolling Stones' *Paint It Black* (1966) and also in The Monkees' debut album *This Just Doesn't Seem to Be My Day* (1966). Modified electric guitars which simulated the sound of sitars were also made by the Danelectro Company around 1967-68.

The Indian influence on western music resulted in a new type of music- a fusion music and a hallmark of postmodernism –*raga rock*. Formed of two terms- *raga* from the Indian context of music and *rock* from the western context of music, the term *raga rock* was coined by The Byrds, though it was first used in print by journalist Sally Kempton who was reviewing The Byrds' *Eight Miles High* (1966) and used the term to describe the fusion of eastern and western music. This music was, in a nutshell, rock (or pop) music heavily influenced by South Asian, chiefly Indian Classical Music. This Indian influence appeared either in its construction, its timbre, or its use of Indian musical instruments, mostly sitar and tabla. The beginning of raga rock is often attributed to the July 1965 release of The Kinks' *See My Friends*, though just before that The Yardbirds' *Heart Full of Soul* had featured a sitar-like instrument by guitarist Jeff Beck. This was later promoted by the Beatles *Norwegian Wood*. Modeled after North Indian classical music and based on Rag *Kafi* that, Harrison's *Love You To* was composed entirely on the sitar by Harrison himself and had inclusion of tanpura and tabla. His *Within You without You* (*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, 1965) featured Sitar, Dilruba, Tabla, Sarangi and Jaltarang. The number indicated a significant departure from the Beatles' previous works; musically, it highlighted the Indian devotional tradition, and in spiritual aspects, the lyrics showed Harrison's liking for the Hindu and Vedic philosophy. Harrison admitted that the tune for *Within You without You* came about through his regularly performing musical exercises *sargam*, and employed the same scales as of Indian *ragas* (Harrison, 2002). About the influence of the song, Juan Mascaró, professor in Sanskrit studies at Cambridge University, wrote to Harrison that the song was quite moving and it could move the souls of millions and added that 'there is more to come, as you are only beginning on the great journey' (Harrison, 2002). Gerry Farrell (1997) said that in the song several disparate strands of Indian music were woven together to create a new form and the song was 'a quintessential fusion of pop and Indian music'

Apart from Harrison's songs there many other songs that had Indian elements in them, prominent among which are *Tomorrow Never Knows* (1966), *Strawberry Fields Forever* (1967), *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* (1967) and *Here Comes the Sun* (1969). Of these *Strawberry Fields Forever* employed the use of a swarmandal whereas *Here Comes the Sun* and *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* employed the rhythm features characteristic of Indian Classical Music. In *Tomorrow Never Knows* there is a tanpura drone playing throughout the song in addition to sounding of a sitar like instrument and a brief playing of violin in the style of Carnatic Music.

Contemporaneous with the influence of Indian music on western music was the influence of Indian culture and Indian philosophy on western philosophy. According to Farrell (1997) 'the importance of Indian culture in the west during that time went beyond musical style: ...the sitar did not come alone as a musical sound; it also brought with it an ambience, a pseudo-philosophy, that was a central ingredient of the magical, mythical mix which combined Indian religion and culture and objects with hallucinogenic drugs, and which became an integral part of youth culture in the 1960s'. This Indian influence was visible not only in the use of

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musical instruments and rhythms and patterning of western music along Indian lines but also in lyrics where the Indian thought was the best evident.

## Conclusion

Fusion was one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. As a natural outcome of the age, both the Indian and western cultures came together in terms of music and this was the time when the Indian element dominated the western music. The Indian influence registered its presence considerably in the rock, pop and jazz music categories in England and the US. The credit for this fusion or coming together can largely but in equal measures be given to Pandit Ravi Shankar and the Beatles, particularly George Harrison. This influence did play a further influential role in popularizing Indian culture in the west.

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