



Research Paper

A Primer to Prof. S. K. Saxena's Speculations on Rhythm

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ABSTRACT: Prof. Sushil Kumar Saxena is a well-known name in the fields of aesthetics, musicology, and art criticism. Prof. Saxena has provided an academically stimulating opening into the treasure of art and philosophy through his various works. He combined the Indian art forms of music and dance with Western aesthetic theories. In doing so, he has been able to pique the interest of Western scholars in the rich art form, while Indian scholars have seen it through new eyes. He has dedicated his life to clarifying key concepts of aesthetics. According to him, Art always appears to be higher than the person envisaging it, and it is perhaps only through this humility of self-opening to what is felt to be benign, rather than merely useful, that an authentic component of the aesthetic as revealed can be said to pervade everything. This paper aims at introducing young minds to one of the most important works in the field of Indian aesthetics in the latest years so that they can further delve deeper into the topic discussed herein and move forward with the legacy of such a dedicated and diligent scholar.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, Musicology, Philosophy of Music, Rhythm

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I. LIFE AND WORKS OF PROF. S.K. SAXENA (16.07.1920- 06.04.2013)

Late Prof. Sushil Kumar Saxena, an internationally and nationally acclaimed scholar, was a master of an astonishingly sharp mind who understood the most complex concepts of Philosophy and Indian art. He had a knack to dive deep into every dimension of a subject and bring out jewels from its deep sea. He has been regarded as one of India's foremost experts on Indian art and Western aesthetics. People who came in contact with him, remember him as a professor of par excellence, a great human being. The Government of India awarded him the third highest civilian honour of the *Padma Bhushan*, in 2008, for his contributions to Indian music. He also received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 2007. Among several eminent scholars and professors that the University of Delhi has seen in the previous hundred years, the Department of Philosophy in the University has had the profound honour to have Prof. Saxena as its faculty. He joined the Department of Philosophy, North Delhi Campus in the year 1964 as a professor of Aesthetics and Religion; and remained there until moving to South Campus as professor and Head of the Department. Along with that he also served the University Court as a member. 1986 marked Prof. Saxena's retirement.

He has been an inspiration and a true guide to students of philosophy, artists-art lovers and those interested in aesthetics. The Indian Classical music and dance fraternity respected him and appreciated his presence thoroughly. They were fond of showcasing their art to him, as they knew in their hearts that he was a true connoisseur of art and performing in front of him was truly an honour for them. The *Hindustāni* Classical Music's Delhi *Gharānā*'s stalwarts such as the Late *Ustad Chand Khan*, *Ustad Hilal Ahmed Khan*, *Ustad Naseer Ahmed Khan* and *Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan* were dear and close to him. The famous *Dagar Gharānā* of *Dhrupad* was just like his family, Late *Ustad Rahimuddin Khan Dagar* was just like his father and Late *Ustad Fahimuddin Khan Dagar* was like his brother and he treated *Ustad Wasifuddin Dagar* like his own son.[1] He was closely associated with and had a profound impact on many Indian Classical musicians. These are only a handful of names in the field of Indian art, but the actual list goes a lot longer.

His unabashed eclecticism can be seen in his numerous writings in which the theories he chose and applied view art in all of its forms as the result of the human spirit exercising its freedom of imagination during the act of creation as well as during the encounters between direct experience and performance. He has authored several books and articles on music, philosophy and aesthetics. His works such as *Studies in the Metaphysics of Bradley* (1967), *Swinging Syllables-Aesthetics of Kathak Dance* (1991), *Art and Philosophy: Seven Aestheticians, Croce, Dewey, Collingwood, Santayana, Ducasse Langer, Reid* (1994), and *Hindustani Music and Aesthetics Today* (2009) are critically acclaimed works. His lectures have been included in a book, *Indian*

Music: Eminent Thinkers on Core Issues; Discourses by Premlata Sharma, S. K. Saxena and Kapila Vatsyayan. Among his thirteen books and countless articles, some selected works are mentioned here:

- Aesthetics of Hindustani Music, Sangeet Natak, 1973.
- The Winged Form: Aesthetical Essays on Hindustani Rhythm (1979).
- Aesthetical Essays: Studies in Aesthetic Theory, Hindustani Music, and Kathak Dance (1981).
- Ever Unto God: Essays on Gandhi and Religion (1985).
- Aesthetics of Hindustani Music in Independent India, Sangeet Natak, Volume no. 119, January-March 1996.
- Hindustani Sangeet and a Philosopher of Art: Music, Rhythm, and Kathak Dance Vis-à-Vis Aesthetics of Susanne K. Langer (2001).
- Avenues to Beauty: Eight Essays in Aesthetics (2009).
- Aesthetics: Approaches, Concepts, and Problems (2010).
- Hindustani Sangeet- Some Perspectives, Some Performers (2010).

II. BASICS OF RHYTHM

There are various components and pillars to *Hindustāni* music of which rhythm is one of the most important elements that makes up its beauty. The basic components of the *Hindustāni* rhythm (In the realm of Indian Classical Music, the term *Hindustānī* refers to North Indian.) are- *Laya*, *Tāla*, *Mātrā* and *Sama*.

There appears to be some ambiguity about what we mean by *laya*. Generally, the term *laya* somewhat covers the semantic field of rhythm and tempo. It is sometimes debated that whether by this term we mean the perceived rate of the metric structure, the rate of rhythmic events or the ratio of the two. In this case, context comes in handy. Now *laya* has types which are as follows:

Table 1: Types of *Laya* in *Hindustāni* Music

<i>Laya</i>	Tempo
<i>Ati-Vilambit</i>	Very Slow
<i>Vilambit</i>	Slow
<i>Madhya-Vilambit</i>	Medium-Slow
<i>Madhya</i>	Medium
<i>Madhya-Drut</i>	Medium-Fast
<i>Drut</i>	Fast
<i>Ati-Drut</i>	Very-Fast

Finally, *laya* is that specific pace (of singing or playing) that assists in bringing out the distinct and unique character of a composition. It is said that Vocal music "blooms," as we say, only at its required pace, which is not always easy to determine.

The term *Tāla* is another common musical term for rhythm. That is how it is often described - as something that is signalled and measured by clapping. A clap is an emphasis that occupies a single moment, but also clapping - where it moves in time with the rhythmic flow of music - is both the act of having to attend to or having to hold on to a flow by means of regular, clear, and successive strokes. It is a series of beats. It has its own components such as *Vibhāga* (a rhythmic phrasing duration in Indian classical music made up of a specific number of beats), *Khālī* (a conscious negation that occurs at one or more points in each *tāla* where a beat would be expected), etc. The *Hindustāni* music tradition accepts 108 *Tāla*-s, the popular ones are as follows:

Table 2: Famous *Tāla*-s in *Hindustāni* Music

Name	Beats
<i>Tintāla</i>	16
<i>Tilwāḍā</i>	16
<i>Jhūmrā</i>	14
<i>ĀḍāChautāla</i>	14
<i>Dhamāra</i>	14
<i>Dīpacandī</i>	14
<i>Ektāla</i>	12

<i>Jhaptāla</i>	10
<i>Sūla Tāla</i>	10
<i>Keherwā</i>	8
<i>Rūpaka</i>	7
<i>Tivrā</i>	7
<i>Dādrā</i>	6

Further, A *Mātrā* is both a mark and a measure because it represents a basic-equal subdivision of *laya*. But, again, it is a measure because it is a measured occupancy of time, which is manifest only when the *Mātrā* is recited. The first *Tāla* beat is called the *Sama*. It is also referred to as the musical metre in the Indian Classical Music System.

III. IS RHYTHM AN INDEPENDENT ART FORM?

Prof. S.K. Saxena being a renowned musicologist and a professor of aesthetics dealt with various subjects related to Indian Music. Yet, one of his finest and most discussed as well as most needed works was on rhythm. It is true that the *Hindustāni* rhythm system has received very little scholarly attention. Not only in scholarship but in performances too, the rhythm instruments are thought of as mere accompaniment by laymen and neophytes, not the star of the performance. However, due to its own internal organisation it has the potential to be so engrossing that it might lead to self-forgetfulness in knowledgeable listeners or *rasika-s*, so much so that they may reach *tadātmaya*. Perhaps for the first time in history, Prof. Saxena broke that pattern by bringing forth the subject of rhythm in scholarly circles and also used the aid of modern aesthetics in discussing North Indian rhythm. In doing so, Prof. Saxena demonstrated the capacity to speak to both Westerners and Indians.

In his book *The Winged Form* (1979), he addressed the intriguing question of whether rhythm might be regarded as a separate art form rather than just another component of music. Out of many of his works and theories in aesthetics, this is probably the most groundbreaking suggestion he has made in the field of Indian music. However, the musicologist could counter, using the well-known integrative word, *Saṅgīta*, to establish their point. It is true that it includes both dancing and music (vocal and instrumental), and it doesn't leave out the rhythm. Nonetheless, Prof. Saxena points out that using the same word for many things does not prevent them from performing those functions separately. To exemplify, he points out that despite the fact that they are all considered *saṅgīta*, there isn't any dancing or drumming that goes along with a singer's *alāpa* (*Alāpāis* a free-form portrayal of a raga that demonstrates the *rāga's* structure and scope within its general framework. The concerned raga is performed during the *alāpa* using a variety of speeds, patterns, and combinations of different notes. *Alāpa's* main section is rhythmically free rather than metric.)

Now that the basic opposition is dealt with, the question arises, what is rhythm? A rhythmic recital consists of several different patterns as well as a cycle. A specified number of beats flowing at an even tempo make up the cycle as a whole. Here, the initial beat serves as the focal point, called the *Sama*. The cyclical nature of our rhythm simultaneously favours the idea of wholeness. "It is indeed quite easy for a duly played cycle to appear a miniature of what Dewey calls "an experience"-marked out and self-complete." [2]

But the question is why should one consider rhythm as an independent art? what characteristics distinguish truly autonomous art? Prof. Saxena employs the views of Susanne Langer to justify his claim that *Hindustāni* rhythm can be seen as an independent art form. Since it demonstrates two main characteristics that are required for an art form to be considered autonomous- firstly, the art should have its own substance/material or "peculiar primary creation" and secondly, it should have some distinctive creative principles. The *Hindustāni* rhythm satisfies both criteria, which are explained further-

A) It has its own substance:

The substance of rhythm is peculiar, as, the goal of mnemonic syllables, also known as *bols*, is to remember the style and nature of the sounds made by striking the drum(s) in a particular way. Their beauty comes from the way they are grouped and how they are executed clearly. *Bols*, in themselves, are meaningless but are referents of actual sounds. Also, when the *bols* are played, they are not merely mimicked but rather just absorbed into the rhythm, much like the words in poetry. Further, Prof. Saxena mentions that some philosophers like Herbert Read rank art on the basis of the condition that its medium not be utilised for any other purposes (non-aesthetic). And rhythm satisfies that condition since it is non-representational in nature, so no one really uses the *bols*, for example in their daily conversations or writing.

Fig. 1 *Bols* of Tabla [3]

Drum struck	Nature of sound	Bol names
<i>Bayan</i> (bass)	Resonant	Ghe/ Ghi/Ga
	Damped	Ke/Ki, Kat
<i>Dayan</i> (treble)	Resonant	Na/Ta, Tin,Tun
	Damped	Ti,Ra,Te Tak, Dhe, Re
Both	Resonant	Dha, Dhin
	Resonant	Thin

B) It has idiosyncratic creative principles:

Prof. Saxena declares that “The primary creation of rhythm is the seemingly automotive and essentially articulate symmetry of pure pace.” [4] A crucial element of rhythm is articulation. Here, even in the case of fast-paced patterns like *relā* (Relā is a collection of distinct “*bols*” (phrases) that are performed at a medium- or extremely-fast speed.), clarity of the syllables is insisted upon without, of course, accentuating them to the detriment of the necessary fluency. The *bols* typically need to be carved out in a clear and sharp manner. Another key aspect of rhythm is that it has an automotive feel to it. Not that rhythm somehow seems to move on its own, but rather that the length or brevity of the very initial word or beat as played or recited, or its own temporal character, immediately defines whether the entire succeeding playing is to be leisurely or fast.

Further, when the drummer plays a well-planned integration of bols, it frequently occurs that the pattern, so to speak, accumulates and activates itself perceptibly, tends towards, and ultimately flowers forth at the *Sama* in exquisite self-completion of its own shape. Perhaps in no other work of art is the specific region of the structure, or the predominating pattern so readily apparent as in *Hindustāni* rhythm. Sometimes the rhythmic patterns reach their conclusion a little before or after the *Sama*. The divergence in this instance is willed and required by the structure's very vivacity. The *Sama* is overstepped or simply left alone, but its exact placement is enhanced in thought by its controlled defiance.

Now, one may ask how is the rhythm related to modern Western aesthetics. Prof. Saxena uses certain key concepts of aesthetics as per the modern importance and tries to show how rhythm relates to them. We can discuss some points associated with this, as put forth by him in relation to Susanne Langer's theory used in *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967).

a. The patterns that temporarily wander from the fundamental beat in order to create motions of various designs can redefine the idea of a living form as viewed by Langer.

But is *Hindustāni* rhythm also subject to the idea that art is a form of symbolic expression?

b. Can one say that a rhythmic presentation is symbolic? Prof. Saxena disagrees. According to him, anything that is a symbol enables the inquiry, "What does it symbolise?" But this is the only thing that cannot be requested in terms of rhythm. However, if we must consider it to be a symbol in some way, it would be appropriate to refer to it as a presentational symbol in Langer's understanding. It is just impossible to separate what good drumming says (or how it looks) from its syllabic substance as we listen to it. [5]

c. Neither is expressiveness any more authentic to the rhythm. Neither a drummer nor a reviewer has ever claimed that rhythm is expressive of anything. Fluent, fluid, meticulous, bright, and brilliant are the most frequently used adjectives in this context, while clarity and syllable arrangement are crucial components of rhythm.

IV. CONCLUSION

The infinite ground for thought provided by Hindustani rhythm to the philosopher of art is perhaps the clearest way in which Hindustani rhythm is relevant to aesthetic theory. The aim of this paper was to introduce the readers to one of the most significant works in the field of Indian aesthetics in the past decade or so. The author hopes that the readers got motivated to delve deeper into the topic discussed herein and research more on the basis of this preliminary introduction.

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