

Music and Rhythms

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Introduction

It is now ungrudgingly accepted that there are many kinds of music. In fact the term 'kind' suggests that there are many categories of music. The question therefore is: are categories of music characterized also by corresponding and differing kinds of rhythms?

The categories of music referred to are: primitive, folk, popular, art (for classical) and lastly devotional. The five are known for their diverse musical appeals. It follows as a corollary that the musics concerned being so varied and also different in their respective impacts, their respective rhythms (being constituent entities) are bound to be qualitatively different. This is so notwithstanding the structural similarities, terminological parallels and the cultural tolerances they enjoy.

It needs to be appreciated that rhythmicity i.e. the quality of having rhythm signifies value-experience of a definable, affective capacity. The fact of its existence in the five expressions of the musical impulse should not obscure the categorial differences in their rhythms. Of course there are common traits to and the appeal of rhythms borders on the universal. Yet a deeper analysis would reveal differences that are critical because they are qualitative. Only a hazy critical sensibility would fail to notice the implications of the five different categories of musics and rhythms therein. Musics and Rhythms are not merely musical entities. They are summations of larger life experiences, educational, social as well as cultural. Very often such life experiences have an intercultural reach. The fact should only stress the need for a hard conceptual look at the phenomenon.

What is rhythm?

The concept is an essentially contested one i.e. it continues to be a centre of contrasting thought-processes, the core of the concept being a subject of repeated reassessments. It is therefore helpful to state how one views the concept. The best way

to achieve the end is to mention the commonly understood and generally accepted characteristics and move to a discussion of some not-so-commonly accepted positions.

1. Rhythm is a musicological as well as an aesthetic principle.
2. Rhythm is temporal in its musicological crystallization. However as an aesthetic principle it leaves the orbit of temporality though signs of its genesis are not entirely obliterated.
3. Musicological rhythms lay great stress on moving away from the chronological time.
4. To a large extent, tempo i.e. the condensation and rarefaction of time points determines the perception of musical rhythm.
5. In most of its manifestations rhythm needs to be translated from an idea to an instrumental idiom, at least in all conventional treatments.

At this point some doubts appear. If the doubts are valid, the generally accepted understanding of rhythm may have to be modified.

Firstly, the generally accepted notion seems to operate on a narrow aesthetic ground. The general position bases itself entirely on the data available in art-rhythms. That this is so becomes clear when other categories of rhythm are brought into discussion. Even if it is granted that art music traditions usually exhibit immense assimilative capacities they can hardly be assumed to exhaust other categories.

Secondly, and more importantly the established thinking treats rhythm as an exclusively structural phenomenon. Though rhythm has a structure it is not to be equated with a structure. The skeleton or a structure that any rhythm has needs a content. The content of rhythm is provided by the particular quality of sound. An interesting Indian parallel is metrics. Indian metres necessarily possess tunes which contribute to their identity. Similarly sound qualities bestow an identity on rhythmic structures.

Thirdly, the pervasive tendency detected in the thinking is to consider rhythm merely as an assertive, percussive breaking-up of melodic continuities. Is this not a rather negative way of describing rhythmic functions? Has every segmentation of the time-flow, its every division, the character of an interruption? To put it differently, is not rhythm (also) felt as dynamic changes in tonal continuities?

Fourthly, it is necessary to note that the concept of rhythm must be grasped at two levels. As a phenomenon related to performance, the concept possesses a core

common to performing arts. However each of the performing arts introduces in rhythm additional features exclusive to it. Therefore it is essential to consider separately each of the performing arts vis-a-vis rhythm. In the present context, melody-oriented rhythms need to be distinguished and evaluated on merits.

Fifthly, discussion of rhythm has been all along centred on the producer i.e. on the person or the instrument making the rhythmic idea concrete. But what about the perceiver? Does he not contribute to the ultimate musical products that all rhythms are bound to be? Explanations of rhythm remain woefully incomplete, unless perceiver's contribution is recognised. No performance can be a unidirectional traffic and least of all, those involving rhythm.

Sixthly, rhythm related thought has laid too much emphasis on precision and exactitude while rhythm-manifestations have always relied on flexibility and impact. In fact it is possible to generalise. Indian musicological thinking has followed literary and biological models in the context of melodic structures while it has depended on mathematical models in case of rhythmic structures. It is suggested that these respective reliances though relevant are inadequate.

Finally, a major portion of present thinking on rhythm is conditioned by formulations loyal to scholastic tradition than to the performing tradition. Therefore positions formulated and noted in earlier periods have received more attention. The process of change has been largely ignored. In other words attention has been focused on what the rhythms have changed into than on their way of undergoing a change. What happens while rhythms are changing is at least as important as their changed nature.

This is the background on which rhythm needs to be examined according to the category of music it belongs to.

It needs to be stated that the five musical categories are concrete and legitimate realities; but they do not display identical extra musical linkages. The five differ considerably in motivation, expression and reception. To compare them solely in musical terms may therefore prove less justifiable than it appears. One may of course assess the categories as more or less desirable value-experiences but the criteria employed cannot remain purely aesthetic. Aesthetics is only one of the three value disciplines, philosophy and ethics being the other two. The non-aesthetic disciplines are not likely to endorse aesthetic preferences. The truth of the matter is that the existing state of our societal consciousness and the available information on musical practices at large compel us to withhold final judgement. What is practicable and desirable at this

stage is to juxtapose and analyse the data to widen our musicological or better still, our cultural vision. On this background the tabulation of the characteristics of rhythm is to be examined.

	Primitive Rhythm	Folk Rhythm	Popular Rhythm	Art Rhythm	Devotional Rhythm
1	Percussive	Percussive and strummed	Highly functional	Multi-channelled	Percussive
2	Repetitive	Repetitive but allows virtuosity	Bound by the act of framing	Recurrent and generative	Repetitive but patterned
3	Displays minimal structural units	Occasionally complex structures	-	Highly Complex and intellectually conceived	Occasionally complex and allows variation
4	Prompt movements especially swaying	Prompt dancing	-	Non-physical	Prompts clapping and controlled swaying
5	Emphasises volume	Emphasises definition	Stresses variety of tonal colour	Tonal agreement	Atonal and well-registered
6	Independent of linguistic content	Occasional positive relationship with language	Functional relationship	Sophisticated and deliberate content-bias	Minimal content-bias
7	Elemental symbolism	Life-cycle symbolism	-	Abstracted from life	Minimally symbolic
8	Ritual association	Ritual and non-ritual association	-	-	Ritual Association
9	Sense of cyclicism	Sense of pattern	Sense of novelty of combinations	Sense of compositions	Sense of pattern

10	Psychoacoustic agitation	Motor excitation	-	Cerebral imagination	A framing experience
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It would be helpful to explain briefly how the rhythms differ in the ten aspects suggested.

1. Modality

The percussive modality of primitive rhythms is a well-marked feature. It is not possible to ascribe the quality entirely to the abundance of drums, (more precisely of membranophonic and idiophonic instruments). The 'tone' of primitive rhythms is stressful. They strike the listener irrespective of the rhythm-producing agency involved. Folk rhythms on the other hand explore additional channels of producing rhythms such as strumming, plucking, scraping and tapping etc. Rhythms produced via such modes sound softer. Popular rhythms are obvious results of the high assimilative capacity and functionality of popular music. In other words popular rhythms try to borrow idioms from every category but add to them an unmistakable finish. Effectiveness rather than appropriateness and easy acceptability than authenticity are the guiding forces.

Art music is characterized by a multi-channelled modality. Vocal line, melodic instrumental contours, recurrent syllabic formations, changes in tonal colours etc. are employed to express rhythms. Potentially it may have the widest rhythmic repertoire though it cannot be assumed that all possible modalities are explored by all art music traditions. In fact it is to be hoped that Indian musicians would be catholic enough to explore the possibilities with more acuity.

2. Repetition/Variety

Primitive rhythms are relentlessly repetitions for long durations. Accompanied by an atonal sonority they leave an abiding impression of a numbing power to obliterate subtler shades. In comparison folk rhythms are more varied and afford a scope for an individual performer to shine. Highly skilful displays usually presuppose basic frameworks with inbuilt variety. At the same the generally prevailing collective sensibility prevents excessive variety in folk music. Folk rhythms perform the trick of being diverse enough to be distinguished from the primitive rhythms and repetitious enough to miss the label of art! Popular rhythms once again prove their voracious tendencies! They are varied or repetitious according to the subject they 'frame'. In this context framing has two functions; to isolate the event, song or the

message from the preceding or the succeeding matter and secondly to provide a firm temporal base to the extra-musical message to ensure at least a minimal coherence. Art rhythms are recurrent instead of being repetitive and generative than being rigid. They are fertile grounds for improvisation and innovation. It is no surprise that art music is the only category to produce forms of rhythm-music. In appeal, excellence and potential art rhythms compete with the melodic aspect.

3. Structural Units

Primitive rhythms are specimens of minimal rhythms i.e. they are made of very few structural components. Added to its repetitiousness the minimal structural scope only gets more pronounced. Folk rhythms display more complex structures which can hardly be achieved if components are too few. In this respect too folk rhythms move away from the primitive to such an extent that the former are often described as *ardha tala-s*. Units in art rhythms are grouped/arranged to yield intricate patterns. They are often described as intellectually conceived. The plethora of *tala-s* and *theka-s* in Hindustani art music, the infinite development of the rhythmic ideas contained therein (as exemplified in their solo-presentations) illustrate their generative qualities.

4. The Physicality

Rhythm tends to elicit movemental responses from the receiving organisms on account of various biological and psychological reasons. For want of a better term 'physicality of rhythm' is used here to describe the quality. Such a response basically amounts to a deviation from a stable body-state. For example primitive rhythm may prompt a body-sway or a neck-movement etc. Folk rhythms on the other hand induce dancing, clapping etc. actions that constitute much more than deviations from basic body-postures. Art rhythms appear to be the least sensuous. The easier and the wider appeal of rhythm can be logically deduced from its physicality.

5. Accentuation

The narrowest of the acoustic parameters that of volume is brought to the fore in primitive rhythm and hence the broad duality it has. Folk rhythms shift focus to the infinite dimension of timbre though demands of the outdoor performing conditions and the collective expression bring sharp and high-pitched renderings into prominence. In this context popular rhythms enjoy an advantage over the other varieties of rhythm. They employ the widest spectrum of tonal colour to effect rhythmic accentuations with

novelty of source and timbre as the chief criteria. Art rhythms rate tonal agreement as main consideration and they suffer from paucity of tonal colour.

6. Relationship to the Linguistic Content

Relationship is not to be deduced from association and in this sense primitive rhythms do not maintain an affirmative relationship with the linguistic content. Hence meaning does not control them. Primitive rhythms are in fact directed at creating mental states usually beyond the controlling confines of meaning. In contrast folk rhythms display a more positive relationship, in fact a dual kind of it. They have the prosodic moulds to contend with in addition to meaning. In this context language and content need to be treated on different levels. Frequently folk rhythms correspond with the language (rhythm) but not with the content. Exigencies of performance are mainly responsible as are the non-aesthetic inclinations of folk expression of many types. Hence instances of fast tempi combined with sad narrations etc. abound.

Art rhythms follow a different logic. Their relationship with language is a result of deliberation and sophistication. Art rhythms tend to play a subdued and secondary role to language. Inter plays between scholastic and performing traditions, individual artists and gharanas make the picture complicated denying the luxury of a generalisation.

7. Symbolism

Primitive rhythms are a case of elemental symbolism in that they create equations with the working natural forces, disasters ascribable to superhuman powers and events such as births, deaths etc. All and such other occasions enjoy importance, stature as well as the unpredictability denied to 'routine human endeavours. Human beings can hardly claim a credit for them, hence the elemental nature of the Primitive rhythmic symbolism. Folk rhythms on the other hand maintain a closer relationship with the human life-cycle. Hence mundane matters such as raising a fire-alarm, crying 'catch thief', announcing arrival of kings etc. have rhythms associated with them. Art rhythms are entirely abstracted away from the day-to-day life.

8. Ritualism

Symbolism and Ritualism are closely related. Rituals are omnipresent in primitive life. In folk and art music a kind of secular rituality plays a role. In rehearsing or preparing for a performance or even during a difficult phase in a performance a ritualism appears its sole aim being co-ordination of the Psychophysical activities essential to make the venture a success.

9. Cyclicism

Primitive rhythms produce an unending curving line moving forward without a break. There is no sense of a beginning or an end. Folk rhythms however impart a sense of pattern not confined to a feeling of circularity. A flexible attitude to precision, a reasonable scope for solo performances, allowance for virtuosity and increasing measure of secularity create folk rhythms of arresting power. Popular rhythms borrow from every conceivable source to ensure novelty.

Art rhythms create a sense of composition to the maximum. A pattern emerges from both rhythms while a composition is created in art rhythms.

10. The Final Affect

Primitive rhythms produce a state of collective psycho-acoustic agitation paradoxically accompanied by a numbness of individual senses. Folk rhythms create a generalised motor excitement. Folk music occasions a feeling of pervasive nostalgia and presumably the age-old rhythms contribute their mite. Popular rhythms chiefly create a temporal framework for the associated non-musical messages. Art rhythms introduce artistry and craftsmanship to appeal to a cerebral imagination. They throw challenges to both innate and acquired capacities and to that extent enjoy a selective appeal.
