EPH–International Journal of Humanities and Social Science
Published by: **Southern Cross Academic Press**
ISSN (Online): **2208-2174**
Volume 11 Issue 04 September 2026
DOI:https://doi.org/10.69980/zjbqka18

A PRELIMINARY REVIEW OF INDIAN MUSICAL AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

Indian classical music is not only an art, but also a philosophy and an aesthetic practice. This article reviews the foundations of Indian musical aesthetics through various layers of Indian classical theories. It also focuses on regional musical traditions and recent scholarly interpretations. Rasa is the principal element of Indian aesthetic theory along with Nada. They describe the way music evokes feelings and arouses emotional responses in the listener. They also characterize music as having ontological and spiritual dimensions. The early theories, particularly those of the Natyashastra, refer to music as a medium that influences mental states and provides aesthetic pleasure. The paper also discusses the two main streams of Indian classical music, going beyond traditional theory to provide a comparative analysis of Hindustani and Carnatic music and assess the independent aesthetic attributes of each. It is useful for understanding the different ways in which common concepts are constructed in different cultural and historical contexts. The traditions share a similar philosophical lineage, but there are significant differences in their performance, aesthetic emphases, structures, and styles. In addition to this traditional and comparative approach, this paper surveys recent writings in the scholarly arena that approach Indian musical aesthetics from a contemporary standpoint. Scholars today study Indian music in an interdisciplinary way, linking classical theory with the present cultural, intellectual, and technological fabric of life.
This paper brings together all these viewpoints to provide a comprehensive review of Indian musical aesthetics as perceived, constructed, and re-framed in the 21st century.

Article History:

Article Type: **Research**

Received Date: **10/08/2026**
Revised Date: **02/09/2026**
Accepted Date: **20/09/2026**
Published Date **30/09/2026**

Keywords: Indian Musical Aesthetics, Nada, Rasa, Natyashastra, Hindustani, Carnatic.

1. Introduction

Indian classical music not only focuses on melody and rhythm. It is also a great art and philosophy. In Indian intellectual thought, music is associated with emotional experience, spiritual reflection, and the expression of inner awareness. Classical theories are the central element of Indian music, emphasizing the connections between sound, emotion, and artistry, thereby highlighting a key aspect of its beauty. The ideas are discussed in one of the earliest and most influential texts – the Natyashastra of Bharata Muni. This book presents the theory of Rasa that is the aesthetic emotion felt by the audience while watching artistic performance (Bharata Muni, trans. 1957).

Music is created in musical situations using the melodic lines of the Ragas, the rhythmic cycles, and the expressive performance of music, the creation of Rasa. All these elements combine to provide the listener with an opportunity to encounter subtle emotional sensations. Nada, the philosophy of sound is another important concept in Indian musical aesthics. It considers sound as basic law of the universe and a way to spiritual realization (Rowell, 1992).

Indian classical music has two major traditions: Hindustani and Carnatic music. These traditions differ in performance styles and structures but both remain deeply connected to the aesthetic principles of Rasa and Nada that shape the broader philosophy of Indian musical expression. (Rowell, 1992).

Modern writers now go beyond divine traditional music. They use neuro-aesthetics and critical theory to analyze how music impacts the brain and how the digital modernity reshapes the ancient tradition into a new native aesthetic tradition. When people encounter works of art or music, the brain processes the artistic stimuli through different sensory regions and emotional centers. This process produces feelings of pleasure, and aesthetic satisfaction. In the case of music, melody, rhythm, harmony, and tone stimulate auditory areas of the brain and activate emotional networks associated with enjoyment. As a result, listening to music can create powerful emotional responses and aesthetic pleasure. (Zeki,1999).

Objectives:

This review explores the multiple depths of Indian musical aesthetics through three core objectives.

- Traditional determinants: Defining and characterizing Indian classical music from the perspective of traditional aesthetics.
- Comparative modern framework: Critically analyzing the stylistic and philosophical dissimilarity between North and South Indian traditions independent of traditional theory of Indian musical aesthetics.
- Contemporary fusion: Evaluating recent scholarly works and new writings to examine how they bridge the gap between traditional musical theory and current globalized musical practice.

Traditional determinants:

Indian classical music focuses on traditional aesthetic theory which is originated in ancient Indian philosophy and artistic practice. These traditional elements emphasize the relationship between sound, emotion, and spiritual experience. Western musical systems mainly focus on harmony and compositional structure but Indian classical music focuses on the evocation of aesthetic emotion and the creation of a meditative musical atmosphere.

The most important theory of Indian musical aesthetics can be found in the Bharata Muni's Natyashastra. This classical book introduced the concept of Rasa, which refers to the aesthetic experience or emotional pleasure generated through artistic performance.

Bharata Muni famously states, "Rasa is produced from the combination of determinants, consequents and transitory emotional states."

(Bharata Muni, trans. Manomohan Ghosh, 1957, p. 55).

In musical performance, this aesthetic experience comes from the variations of melody, rhythm, and proper interpretation.

Another key element in Indian musical aesthetics is the concept of Nada or the philosophy of sound. In traditional Indian concept, sound is regarded as a fundamental principle of the universe and the basis of musical expression.

Lewis Rowell states, "In Indian thought sound is not merely a physical vibration but a manifestation of cosmic order." (Rowell, 1992, p. 27).

From this point of view, Indian classical music possesses a strong metaphysical element. In this context, music is used to communicate emotion and spiritual experience. The system of Raga also has an important role in defining classical music in India in terms of traditional aesthetic values. Raga is used to create a certain mood or atmosphere.

According to Aniruddh D. Patel, "Music has a remarkable ability to evoke strong emotional responses in listeners." (Patel, 2008, p. 305).

Through improvisation and melodic variations, musicians gradually show the emotional sides of a Raga. They provide an aesthetic experience to the listeners. Therefore, traditional elements such as Rasa, Nada, and Raga collectively shape the aesthetic identity of Indian classical music. These principles prove that music is not merely an expression of sounds but a powerful artistic medium of expressing emotional depth and spiritual awareness.

People not only hear the musical sounds but transcend their mind from reality to divinity and lose their self-ego. It is seen as a way of feeling, realizing, and checking ordinary emotions. It has power to evoke deep emotional and spiritual awareness along with its technical brilliance. Indian aesthetics is deeply connected with Indian philosophy. In India, music is not created merely for pleasure or entertainment. It leads the listener towards a higher state of awareness. Here the value of music lies in how it impacts the listener's minds. A classical music is successful when it transforms people, not when it impresses. (Rowell,1992).

Rabindranath Tagore also emphasizes the expressive and emotional nature of Indian music in his reflections on music and aesthetics. According to him, music fills the infinite between two souls. (Tagore, 1917).

Hence, Indian classical music in traditional aesthetics is known for its ability to elevate human awareness. It argues that the determinant of great music is not the artist's ego, but the artist's ability to unify into the Raga. It allows the Nada or sound to speak for itself. It is an art that values the inner realization over everything. So, Indian classical music becomes not only an artistic tradition but also a profound cultural and philosophical practice.

Comparative modern framework:

When the aesthetics of music is discussed independent of traditional theory, it explains the reason of why music felt elegant to us. This approach does not explain music through philosophical system or ancient concepts. It focuses on how music sounds, how it makes us feel, and how listeners connect with it in everyday experience. This point of view suggests that music is first and foremost an experience of sound. Its beauty comes from melody, rhythm, tone, pace, and silence. A piece of music may calm the mind, energize the body, or evoke emotion. To experience all these things, the listeners do not need to have knowledge of theory or cultural

background. Here the aesthetic pleasure is immediate and personal. It comes naturally from listening rather than from understanding in-depth meanings.

According to T.M.Krishna, the aesthetic experience in music is independent of the religious or spiritual baggage people often attach to it. A Raga's beauty lies in its internal melodic logic, not in the presiding deity associated with it. (Krishna,2013).

Hence, the aesthetics of music lies in its ability to connect with listener through sound itself.

Independent of traditional theory, there are two distinct types of music within India: the Hindustani tradition of North India and the Carnatic tradition of South India. Both share the same essence; Raga and Tala. A comparative analysis of Indian classical music highlights the stylistic and philosophical differences between these two traditions. Both share historical roots in ancient Indian musical theory but their evolution over centuries is noticeable. They have distinct approaches in performance practice, aesthetic pleasure, and philosophical thoughts. A modern comparative analysis allows these differences to be studied independent of traditional Rasa based aesthetics.

The Hindustani tradition developed under influences from Persian and Central Asian musical systems, which contributed to its emphasis on improvisation and melodic exploration.

Wade states, "Hindustani music places strong emphasis on improvisation and the gradual unfolding of the raga." (Wade, 2009, p. 84).

This approach allows performers to evoke delicate emotional variations and to create an aesthetic experience that evolves over the course of a performance. The tradition values freedom because the interpretation of a raga can vary depending on the musician's creativity and the performance context. The performers require high skill and efforts for singing Hindustani music. Here the aesthetic experience feels slow, spacious, and deeply expressive. The gradual unfolding of refined Raga allows the listener to settle into the sound. Long notes, gentle improvisation, and little changes in pitch create a feeling of emotional openness. A listener can feel calm, reflective, or emotionally touched without having knowledge of Raga theory. Hindustani music reflects its beauty through its sense of time and emotional depth. It encourages attentive and relaxed listening. Here the gliding melodic flow (Meend) is smooth and it continues transitions that blur the lines between notes. Performer expresses slow meditative expansion of the Raga's emotional landscape. It is called Vistaar. The structural focus of this music is on the Gharana (lineage) and the performer's spontaneous mood. (Wade,2009)

In contrast, the Carnatic tradition is more composition centered. Performances are generally structured around pre-composed lyrics. Here technicality and the rules of melody and rhythm are important.

Viswanathan and Allen note, "Carnatic music is highly composition-oriented, with elaborate rhythmic and melodic structures forming the basis of performance." (Viswanathan and Allen, 2004, p. 15).

Carnatic music reflects a philosophical focus on discipline, devotion, and the transmission of aesthetic and spiritual values embedded within the compositions themselves. Carnatic music is protected from external influences. It offers totally a different kind of aesthetic pleasure which reflects fine craftsmanship of the performer. Here the aesthetic beauty lies in the rigorous preservation of the composition (Kriti). The major features of this music are energy, precision, and rhythmic excitement. The fast melodic movements, complex rhythmic patterns, and lively connection between the performer and the traditional musical instruments create an atmosphere of intensity and joy. A listener can uplift himself by the tempo of the music. He can admire the skill of musician. Here the melodic flow is distinct 'heavy shakes' that define a note's identity. It is called Gamaka (oscillation). The audience can experience the rhythmic fast-paced Kalpanaswaram (imaginative notes) based on mathematical patterns. The structural focus of this

music is on the Vaggeyakara (composer) and the purity. Carnatic music is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging. (Viswanathan and Allen ,2004)

T.M.Krishna offers a sharp critical observation on this divergence. According to him, the aesthetic experience in Carnatic music is often tied to the structural integrity of the 'composition' but in Hindustani music, the 'composition' is often a mere peg to hang the expansive coat of improvisation upon. (Krishna,2013).

More important, the conceptual frameworks of musical methods vary. The two divergent paths illustrate the differences in aesthetics resulting from cultural, historical, and regional influences.

Rowell observes, "the northern and southern traditions developed different stylistic identities despite their common theoretical heritage" (Rowell,1992, p. 229).

Apart from traditional aesthetic ideas, both the music systems have unique ways to create pleasure and evoke emotions. Hindustani music centered the listeners with calmness and introspection. Carnatic music gives the listeners outward alertness and enthusiasm. So, none of them can be considered as superior or inferior. They offer different listening experience shaped by locational culture and history. According to the independent view, music does not need to focus on spiritual realization or follow specific emotional rules. A listener can enjoy a late-night Raga for its soothing quality. But he can also prefer a lively Carnatic music for its rhythmic excitement. Thus, the concept depends on personal feeling. Therefore, the aesthetic of music is flexible and inclusive as it allows space for subjective taste and affective response.

According to Biplab Munshi, Hindustani aesthetics is a slow-moving river reflecting the sky and Carnatic aesthetics is the intricate carving on a temple wall. It is precise, geometric, and profound. (Munshi, 2025).

Thus, the comparative study of the present time gives scholars an appreciation of the unique styles and philosophical identities of both Hindustani and Carnatic music. This comparison moves beyond traditional theory. It highlights the significance of the impact of history, artistic practice, and technique on the development of Indian musical aesthetics. So, the beauty of music lies in the connection that it creates with the listener through sound. Both North Indian and South Indian music create beauty with emotion, and attention. It not only gives importance to philosophy but also values the act of attentive listening and emotional response.

Contemporary fusion:

Contemporary fusion in Indian music represents a flexible space where classical theory blends with global musical awareness. Fusion is not simply a stylistic blend. It involves reinterpreting traditional structures like Raga and Tala while engaging with global harmony, electronic music, and world genres. This approach allows artists to preserve the emotional and aesthetic essence of Indian classical music with the innovative ideas within a globalized structure. In recent years, contemporary writings on Indian music aesthetics do not follow strict classical rules and rigid philosophy. They redefine the field by neuro-aesthetics and socio-political deconstruction. Raga-Anubhuti (the experience of Raga) is a neurological event, where microtones (shrutis) function as stimuli to align emotional equilibrium. (Zeki,1999).

According to modern scholars, Indian aesthetics is not a fixed system which follows only ancient texts. They feel music as a living experience which focuses on listening, performance, culture, and time. They evaluate the traditional ideas of Rasa and Nada and make them relevant to today's musical world. In contemporary thought, the writers shift their focus on lived musical experience. The great scholar Dr. Sthaneshar Timalsina expresses that music can be felt through the body and mind. He talks about the sound of Infinite and Vedic mantras. He does not think that it is an abstract philosophical concept. Listening is an active process that involves breath, attention, and awareness. (Timalsina,2008).

Thus, Indian aesthetics opens itself to exchange with modern ideas such as perceptual study and awareness.

The famous historian and cultural critic and professor Dr. Lakshmi Subramanian argues that modern "classical" aesthetics were "sanitized" during the colonial era to create a national, spiritualized canon. (Subramanian,2017)

Amanda Weidman talks about the marginalization of local, sensual, and vernacular elements. They think that music should be placed within its social and historical setting. According to him, music aesthetics depends on the performer, listener, and where it is performed. Audiences and contexts influence how music is valued. Therefore, aesthetic meaning evolves with cultural change. It is not universal (Weidman, 2006).

Subramanian argues that the modernization of Indian music involved a deliberate 'sanitization' of its aesthetics, stripping away the sensual and local elements to create a national, spiritualized canon that served the middle-class nationalist project (Subramanian,2017).

Gomathi Gowda suggests that the new aesthetic indicator is authenticity over purity, where ancient Ragas are translated into digital, global acoustic environment. People are witnessing a post-classical era where the aesthetic indicator is no longer 'purity' but 'authenticity' and it is the ability of the artist to translate ancient Ragas into the digital soundscapes of the modern world (Gowda,2025).

Peter Manuel explains that cross-cultural musical interaction creates spaces where different musical concepts coexist. He notes, "The diverse popular music of many regions function as sites for the mediation and negotiation of the dialectic conflicts of tradition versus modernity." (Manuel, 1988).

This emphasizes that fusion is a conscious negotiation between musical systems rather than mere stylistic decoration.

The famous Neuro-scientist Semir Zeki explains how fusion music can generate powerful aesthetic and emotional responses. Zeki argues that neuro-aesthetic studies help to understand the neural mechanisms that allow humans, regardless of culture, to experience beauty and aesthetic pleasure (Zeki,1999).

These neural mechanisms can be activated by contemporary fusion music, which combines familiar Raga motifs with elements from around the world. It allows listeners not only to have emotional continuity but also to experience innovative genres. The aesthetics of traditional interpretation are still applied in the modern context. From these observations, it is clear that contemporary fusion is an aesthetic and cognitive experiment in which classical theory merges with modern perception. In Worldbeat and other hybrid genres, traditional musical elements are used in new combinations with popular music genres (Worldbeat genre overview).

The well-known transformative leader and performance artist Rama Mani tries to find a balance between tradition and modernity. She shows that traditional aesthetic notions continue to influence musical practice but are not locked into rigid positions. Here, music is valued for its emotional depth and structured practice. She also speaks about innovation in music for new generations.

Therefore, it is very pertinent in the contemporary world and international artistic practice (Mani, 2002).

Professor Ananya Vajpeyi, on the other hand, is a broader cultural thinker whose impact on the understanding of Indian aesthetics today has been felt. Indian traditions have a close connection with modern intellectual and political life. She places music in the context of cultural interaction. Music and the arts were not just diversions for the pioneers of modern India, she says. They experienced profound 'Swaraj' or self-rule there. It is a means of recovering an interior life which colonialism tried to make invisible (Vajpeyi, 2012).

Therefore, music is studied along with literature, history, and philosophy. There is no prescription in contemporary writing about the manner of production of Rasa. It deals with the experience of music in the present day. They pay attention to differences among listeners, technological developments, and the global diffusion of Indian music. Thus, aesthetic music is perceived as being multiple, subjective, and situation-specific.

Hence, Indian musical aesthetics have been preserved and transformed in contemporary fusion. Fusion music plays with these classical elements as well as other music from around the world, captivating the listener's brain. It respects tradition but also establishes new aesthetic modes in the context of globalized culture. That is why contemporary writings are more open, flexible, and easier to understand. They value a place for change, a place for subjectivity, and a place for present-day experience. In response, Indian musical aesthetics is becoming a dynamic living sensibility and cultural legacy.

Conclusion: Indian musical aesthetics shows the emerging fusion of tradition and modernity as well as culture. The theory is common to both Hindustani and Carnatic music, but they have evolved their own styles and philosophies. The key in Hindustani music is improvisation, while in Carnatic music there is greater stress on the structure of the composition. Fusion music is a fusion of classical music with other musical cultures and a fusion of tradition and modernity. Neuro-aesthetics and cultural studies stress the importance of aesthetics in music and the way it can stimulate emotions and thoughts. Indian musical tradition is a living and evolving entity, with old traditions and new innovations intertwined. The preservation of cultural heritage and its transformation into new forms can be seen here. Ultimately, musical aesthetics in India show that tradition is not a regressive process. It is about carrying a bridge forward with every new concept. It has an influence in both the temple and the concert hall. Musical aesthetics have diverse effects in today's digital age.

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