

Folk Music in Mahabharata*

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Mahābhārata is a monumental work of Maharshi Vyāsa. It is written to instruct, inspire, amuse, and to lead. Vyāsa's handling of the topics is masterly and his observations and analysis shed piercing light into the different aspects of the life and culture of ancient India. A powerful and brilliant branch of this ancient culture is music and the Sage handles it with inexorable skill and understanding.

Three distinctive styles are described in this great epic, viz., the music of the gods, the music of the high class people and the music of the masses. The music, at the highest level was called Dēva Gāndharva¹ (13-19-47) or Celestial music and it was performed by the Gods (13-14-89), Sages (6-6-20) and the Dēvāpsara gandharva-s² (2-7-24). At the higher level, the music was called "Nānā-dēśa gīta" or, the music of the different Kingdoms (7-85-20) which was patronised by the Kings (1-143-9) and performed by the Sūta-māgadha-vandi-s³ (7-7-9) and the Vaitālika-s⁴ (2-4-7). Vyāsa considers these two styles as the two branches of the age old Gāndharva śāstra⁵ (13-104-187)

* (The Mahābhārata edited by the Gita Press, Ghorakpur, has been followed here. The references to Parva—Addhyāya—and ślōka are given in their respective order at appropriate places within brackets. Parva = Part; Adhyāya = Chapter; ślōka = Verse).

1. This music denotes the triad forms of art, viz., dance, vocal and instrumental music.
2. Professional musicians of the Heaven.
- 3, 4. Professional musicians of the Earth.
5. Science of Music.

which was originally the creation of Gods (12-210-21). Only traditionally trained masters could impart these styles (3-91-14) and that too to the Āstikas (13-17-17) or the faithfuls—who devotedly followed the professions sanctioned by the *jāti* or caste (3-85-30).

Along with such orthodox sets of people called the Āryans, there existed a few unorthodox sects who were not very keen on following the caste restrictions and professional disparities (9-44-92). Since anybody among them could practise any Dharma or profession because they could belong to any *Jāti* or caste (8-45-6, 7, 8), they lost their social status and came to be considered as *nīca-jāti* or low class people. The high class people who vehemently observed the *Jāti*-Dharma principles, refused to include or admit them in their social, religious and cultural activities. The folk, according to the “High brows” were born, not out of Gods (8-44-42) but were born out of Devils (9-44-41). They were not only *pāpa dēsōdbhavā-Mlēsčā-Dharmāpāma-
vicakshaṇāh*⁶ (8-40-43) but *Kshudrakāh, Durātmāh*⁷ (8-40-23, 24) *Kukarmāh*⁸ (8-40-42) without any sense of morality (8-40-35) honesty (8-40-24) and dignity (8-44-14). They were proud (8-44-15) and sometimes indulged in criminal pursuits (8-40-21; 8-45-11). As such they were unqualified to do Dharma *kārya-s*⁹ and their offerings were refused by Gods and priests (8-44-34). The privilege of practising the classical styles of singing also was denied to them and so they had to develop a style of their own which gradually became an equally prominent style as the *Gāndharva*. Though it was not recognised by the society people or practised by the traditional artists, it had imbibed many of the essential qualities of the classical music. Like the *Gāndharva*, it also was a harmonious combination of dance, song (8-44-12) and instrumental music (8-44-19). It too had a varied stock of songs (8-44-13) meant for different moods and occasions (8-40-27; 8-44-16). In spite of the fact that there were neither professional teachers nor initiated students, there were brilliant musicians and dancers. Royal patrons ignored it, but the enthusiastic public cherished and nourished it.

This was the music of the masses, and through alluring

6. Natives of the condemned states—barbarians—out-laws.

7. Wicked—malicious.

8. Corrupt.

9. Traditional duties.

verses, Vyāsa brings out a colourful picture of the same. The different kingdoms of ancient India had a vast repertoire of folk songs and artists, and the regions of Śākala (8-44-10), Mādra (8-44-5), Āraṭṭa (8-44-41), Kēraḷa (8-44-83), Gāndhāra (8-44-47), etc., were exceptionally noted for their rich traditions of the art. To some of these places Vyāsa gives direction (8-44-17) while for some others, location (8-44-7, 32, 40). The origin and other whereabouts of certain tribes like Vāhika are also given (8-44-41).

The folk as a whole were a set of simple people who followed the matriarchal system (8-45-13). Their women were famous for their sturdy build (8-40-40) and buoyancy (8-44-18) which perhaps were the gifts of their natural surroundings. They enhanced these charms by applying Manaśila¹⁰ on their faces (8-44-18), Anjana¹¹ on their eyes (8-44-18), and some local lepana¹² on their bodies (8-44-12). Being middle class people with limited income they could not afford to have any costly dress and ornaments like the artists of the heaven and the palace. They had to be satisfied with cheap similar things like the Kambalājina¹³ (8-40-40), Śankha Kēyūra-s¹⁴ (8-44-18), Vanya-māla-s¹⁵ (8-44-12), etc. Yet like those Apsara-s or the Celestial lady artists, they also were fair complexioned (8-44-27), charming (8-44-19) and graceful (8-44-18). As everywhere else here too there were a few exceptions who were huge enough to wear 'Mahōlūkhala' (a wooden mortar) as Mēkhala or belt (8-44-44) and to be called female giants (8-44-26).

Being sarvānna kshīra bhōji-s¹⁶ (8-44-37) and Madya-māmsa-bhōji-s¹⁷ (8-44-11), it is just natural that these folk had a wonderful variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals, and milk and drinks. The vegetarian diet consisted of Apūpa (bun), Dhāna (fried or powdered rice), Sakta (barley meal), Palāṇḍu (onion), Piṇḍam (rice balls), etc. (8-44-21) and the non-vegetarian meal consisted of different kinds of fish preparations (8-40-27) and curries cooked with the flesh of Aaiḍikam (a kind of goat),

10. Red arsenic.

11. Black pigment used to paint the eye lashes.

12. Paste.

13. Woollen dress.

14. Armlet made of conch shells.

15. Garlands.

16. People who eat all kinds of rice and drink all sorts of milk.

17. People who drink liquor and eat meat.

Varāham (pig), Kukkuṭam (cock), Ga (cow), Gardabham (donkey), and Ushṭikam (camel) (8-44-28). They were very fond of the milk of sheep, camel, and donkey (8-44-36) and they used drinks like the Gauḍamadya (8-44-2). They prepared and ate their food in vessels made of clay and wood (8-44-35).

The enthusiastic folk flocked together during some festivals and spent their time in singing and dancing along with foods and drinks (8-40-24, 25, 26). The festivals included religious and social ceremonies (8-44-13) and household activities (8-40-26). Sometimes they met to congratulate birth, (6-3-7) or to condole death (11-25-8) through appropriate music. The singing consisted of solo recitals and chorus. The solo pieces were performed by male (8-44-16) or female singers (8-44-25) and the group songs were sung either by men (8-44-29) or by women (8-44-13) or by both (8-40-28).

The songs, being the spontaneous expressions of their life, sentiments, rites and customs, were characterised by an unusually emotional glow and this made them so moving inspite of their being set in simple tunes.

Here is a touching love song that depicts the pangs of separation. Vyāsa records this as the outpourings of a lonely young Vāhika who left his beloved ones to serve the kingdom of the Kurus.

Sā nūnam brihatī gaurī
 Sūkshma Kambala vāsinī |
 Mām anusmaratī śētē
 Vāhikam Kurujāngalē ||
 Śatadrukāmaham tīrtvā
 tām ca ramyāmirāvatīm |
 Gatvā svadēsam drakshyāmi
 Sthūla śankhāh śubhāh striyāh ||
 Manah śilōjvalāpāngyō
 Gaurya stri kakudānjanāh |
 Kambalājina samvītāh
 Kūrdantyah priyadarśanāh ||
 Mr̥dangānaka śankhānām
 Marddalānām ca nih svanāih |
 Kharōshṭrāśvataraiścaiva
 Mattā ya syāmahē sukham || (8-44-16 to 20).

(Clad in woollen garments the fair complexioned damsel

goes to sleep thinking of me. When am I going to cross those rivers Irāvati, etc., to meet her at my native place? When shall I embrace those charming brides in their best attire and ornaments amidst songs and music from the drums like Dundubhī Mr̥danga, Ānaka, etc.)

Through the words of Karna, Vyāsa brings to us the picture of a women of the Śakala regions who used to sing in the stillness of those Kṛshṇa caturdaśī nights¹⁸ (8-44-25) when there would be no moon and stars. Her solo recital was accompanied by her own playing on the drum "Dundubhī" (8-24-26) and except for the subdued sound of the same, there was nothing but gripping silence and solitude.

While the songs of passion were more often rendered thus by single male or female singers, the songs of devotion and social occasions were performed by groups of men and women. May be because the folk were considered as scheduled castes and were kept away from the similar activities of the high class people, they had to hold their carnivals away from the citizens and outside the city limits. Vyāsa illustrates one such social activity through the verse:

Gāyantyatha ca nrityanti
 Striyō mattā vivāsasah |
 Nagarāgāra vaprēshu
 Bahir malyānulēpanāh || (8-44-12).

(Decked in garlands and cosmetics the women sing and dance exuberantly outside the city limits).

Besides the songs of sentiments and festivals, there were songs to suit the natural happenings of the day-to-day life such as birth, death, etc. Since these were personal affairs, they were conducted in private houses or in some particular spots which were directly connected with the events.

A happy household ceremony has been described by Vyāsa in which persons including:

Pitā putraś ca mātāca
 Śvaśru śvaśura mātulāh |

18. The fourteenth day of the lunar fortnight.

Jāmātā duhitā bhrātā
 Nāptanyē tē ca bhāndhavāh ||
 Vayasyābhya gatāścānyē
 Dasīdāsam ca samgatam |
 Pumbhirvimiśra nāryaśca
 Jnātājnātāhsvayēśchayā || (8-40-25, 26).

(Father, son, mother, mother-in-law, father-in-law, uncle, son-in-law, brother and other relatives, friends, guests, female and male servants, educated and non-educated men and women) assembled to dine, dance, and to sing.

In the words of Gāndharī¹⁹ in Strīparva (a part), there is a hint to those “Vilāpa gāna-s”²⁰ sung by women at times of death. The grief stricken queen mother while moving around the battlefield with Srikrshṇa²¹ happens to listen to a group of women mourning melodiously by the side of their dead lord. Gāndharī is very much moved by their touching tones and tells Kṛshṇa:

Āsāmāyata nētrāṇam
 Susvaraṇām janārdana |
 Manaśruti harō nādō
 Manōmōhayatīva mē || (11-25-8).

(Oh (Lord) Janārdana! I am moved by the melodious lamentation of these women gifted with long eyes and sweet voices).

It is worthwhile to point out here, that in several parts of India, the practice of singing *vilāpa gāna-s* or funeral songs is still in vogue. The songs are collectively called “Oppāru” in South India and are performed by village ladies when kings, queens, lords, chiefs of villages and the eldest of the families die. Sitting or standing in a circle, the woman folk with spreaded locks and careless dress, sing these songs with *stōbhākshara-s*²² and *stōbha*-phrases²³ like “Ammāḍī, tāyārē, Ō, Ayyō,” etc. in be-

19. The mother of the Kaurava-s.

20. Funeral songs.

21. King of the Yadava-s.

22, 23. Meaningless syllables and words that are inserted in a song in order to stimulate the emotional content.

tween. The compositions can be a lament in praise of the departed soul, or a prayer for its salvation. The singing starts as the person dies and continues for a few days at a particular time, till all the funeral observances are over.

The "Sūcana" songs which predicted auspicious and inauspicious times formed an interesting variety in the field of folk songs. The songs sung by the mothers who gave birth to more than five girls in successive years denoted a period of calamity (6-3-7). The songs and dances of the Kshudraka-s preceded a state of alarm and anxiety (6-3-8).

Being unsophisticated and uncultured, the behaviour and expression of the village people sometimes crossed the limits and levels put up by the torch bearers of the "High" society on the pretext of cultured thinking and civilized living. The songs being the voice of their life in all its varieties and diversities incidently became reflective of these elements too and the puritan mentality of the top class people did not hesitate in putting a sort of social stigma over these songs and in tarring them as "Asabhya gāna-s"²⁴ (8-44-13) and "Abaddha gāna-s"²⁵ (8-40-27).

In the following slokas Vyāsa gives us a glimpse of a typical "Abaddha gāna". This is mentioned as a favourite group song of the Śākalites:

Gavyasya tr̥ptā māmsasya
 Pitvā gauḍam surāsavam |
 Gurībhih saha nārībhir
 Br̥hatībhih svalamkr̥tāh ||
 Palāṇḍugamdūshayutān
 Khādanti caḍakān bahūn |
 Varāham kaukkuṭam māmsam
 Gavyam gardabha maushṭikam ||
 Ēḍam ca yēna khādanti
 Tēshām janma nirarthakam ||| (8-44-27, 28, 29).

(Meaningless is the life of those who do not chew onions and eat the flesh of camel, goat, cow, pig, cock, donkey, etc., and drink liquor from the Gauda regions in the company of fair complexioned, well dressed and decorated seductive women).

24,25. Vulgar and nonsensical songs.

The songs of the Mādri-vanita-s²⁶ too were subjected to the prejudice of the élite which is reflected through the words of Karṇa²⁷ when he tells Śalya:

Pitva sīdhu gōmāmsam
 Krandanti ca hasanti ca |
 Gāyanti cāpyabaddhāni
 Pravartantē ca kāmatah || (8-40-27).

(They drink intoxicants, eat beef and dance, singing vulgar songs).

Rhythm played a significant role in all these songs and hence the maximum prominence for percussion instruments in this field of music. Mṛdanga, Marddaḷa, Ānaka (8-44-19) and Dundubhī (8-44-26), etc., were some of the drums that accompanied the songs. Quite often Śankha (conch) also was used (8-44-19). But the Veṇu (flute) and the varieties of the Vīṇā (lute) which were inseparable from the classical music "Gāndharva Vēda" were rarely used, if not completely avoided.

Not only in the regional singing of those times, but in most of the genuine styles of the present-day rural India also this is the case. Reasons are many.

Thus in the scattered references of Mahābhārata, is hidden a glorious representation of the simple art of the ancient Indian village. The expressions of the mastermind are so powerful and realistic that they often transport the reader to the very situations described there in to be an eye witness to them.

26. Women of the Mādra regions.

27. The King of Anga and a friend of Kuru-s.