Seeing the Divine: Music’s Role in Hinduism

Mesha Arant ‘12

We use music in every aspect of life and one of music’s most prominent and most important roles today lies, just as it always has, within the realm of religion. In various world religions, whether it be Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism, music plays a significant part in the way that the believers relate to their gods, to other believers, and in how they understand and pass down their religion. Music works as a means of expressing passion and gratitude to the subject of worship and for religious adherents to convey their feelings to the deity of choice. The meaning behind Hindu music, the way it is used and the frequency of its use combine to make the role of music in Hinduism particularly interesting.

This summer I have visited various Hindu temples in the southeast, including BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir1 in Atlanta, Georgia and the Vedic Center in Mauldin, South Carolina. I have also interviewed a number of Hindus currently living in the southeast, in addition to consulting a variety of academic works on the role of music in Hinduism. On the basis of this work, I was able to conclude that music plays a central role in the Hindu faith.

The most important texts in Hinduism are the Vedas. The Veda “is regarded by some Hindus as a timeless revelation which is not of human authorship (apaurusya), is eternal, and contains all knowledge, while others regard it to be the revelation of God.”2 The original four Vedas, the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda are all comprised of hymns, songs, and mantras. The Vedas are believed to have been revealed to a group of men known as "seers," those were seeing the divine. Many Hindu mantras and chants are taken from these four holy books that have been passed down for generations.

One of the most important aspects of Hindu music is the mantra. A mantra is a syllable, word, or phrase of words that are chanted and meditated upon. Mantras are at the beginning and end of chants and are used as meditations, as prayers, and in yogic practices. Mantras are believed to cause a transformation within oneself by focusing the mind and spirit on God. Not only do they focus the self on God, but they connect the soul to God as well. Mantras in Hinduism in India are used constantly and represent a continuous connection to the divine.

1 Mandir: is the name for a Hindu place of worship and prayer.
The Om is the most basic and most important mantra and every other sound or mantra is encompassed in this sound. The syllable Om is comprised of three separate Sanskrit letters aa, au, and ma, and for this reason, the syllable has been used to represent a vast number of trios\(^3\). The Om can bring to mind the Hindu Trinity (Brahma, Visnu, and Shiva) and the creation, the maintaining of, and destruction of the universe. It can also point to the triad of birth, life, and death. Om represents all sounds of life being combined into one, it represents every undertone, and brings peace to one who meditates on it.

From mantras we go to the chant. Chants make up a great majority of the Hindu worship service. Every puja, aarti, festival, and ritual are filled with chants. Hymns and chants were also used in India to determine social classes and social norms. One of the most famous and important hymns, Purusha-Sukta, comes from the Rig-Veda. This hymn describes the sacrifice of the cosmic man, Purusha, and describes the complexity and beauty of the human being, as well as the creation of the universe. This hymn is the source of the caste system. Each part of Purusha’s body is believed to be representative of a respective caste. Chants like Purusha-Sukta have been used to define Hindu society, but they are also used in the simple worship of the gods. The repetition of chants is used to focus the mind on God, they tell the god that you are there and that you are coming before them, and they begin to bring you into communion with your god.

One important way that music in Hinduism is used is by being a tool of preservation of the religion. The history of Hinduism, the beliefs of Hinduism, and the practices of Hinduism can all be passed down in chants. Children learn and begin to chant stories of their gods even before they know the meaning of the words and sounds. Many parents believe that by teaching Hindu children songs about their gods, the children will develop a sense of their religion. This is especially important for Hindus that do not live in India. If you took music out of Hinduism generations and generations might lose a sense of Hindu traditions and beliefs.

My research left me asking the question: What if music was to be taken out of Hinduism? If chants and mantras were removed would the same religious connection exist? I believe that music plays such a role in this religion, that without it the connection between believer and God wouldn’t be as strong, and that the road to moksha would be significantly more difficult. Without mantras believers would fail to understand the nature of the cosmos and would fail to clear their minds before worship. Because of these facts, I view music as having a vital and enduring role in Hinduism.

\(^3\)SUBHAMOY DAS, “OM: SYMBOL OF THE ABSOLUTE,” ABOUT.COM, HTTP://HINDUISMABOUT.COM/OD/OMAUM/A/MEANINGOFOM.HTM