

Manifestation of Buddhist Iconography on the Evolution of Modern Musical Instruments in India: An Organological Study of stringed instruments through South Asian Buddhist Art

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Abstract:

This study examines how musical instruments are depicted in Buddhist art in South Asia and how these representations influence the design and performance practices of modern Indian musical instruments. The methodology combines a qualitative iconographic analysis of Buddhist art, focusing on sculptures, frescoes, and engravings that feature musicians and musical instruments in selected Buddhist sites where the climax of the Buddhist art is evident. Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Sanchi, Bharhut, Mathura, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Gandhara (Pakistan), and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) are selected based on the peak. In parallel, a historical and contextual study of Indian musical instruments provides deeper insights into the evolution of their physical design and playing techniques. Evidently, ancient sculptures from Bharhut, Mathura, Gandhara, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Pitalkhora, Sanchi, and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) and the murals and ceilings of Ajanta depict a wide variety of stringed instruments. The representations of stringed instruments in selected Buddhist artworks are categorized into two types: arched or bow-shaped design, with the neck curving from the body, fingerboard resembling that of the modern Sarod or Rabab. The study concludes that these depictions offer valuable insights into the history, structural design, playing techniques, and cultural and religious contexts of modern Indian musical instruments.

Key words: Buddhist Art, Iconography, Musical iconography, stringed Instruments, Indian Music

Introduction and background

Music iconography focuses on the study of the visual representation of musical subjects. Its primary materials include portraits of performers and composers, illustrations of instruments, instances of musical composition, and the use of musical images for metaphorical or allegorical purposes. It

is therefore so vital that the study of both music and the visual arts, including questions of patronage, reception history, social and intellectual history, philosophy, and aesthetics, as well as more rigorous technical matters such as organology, music theory, performance practice, and context, since they all compound together to study of historic landmarks and achievements of the artistic styles and symbolic meanings of the instruments (Ann Buckley, p.5)

From the simple, spherical mounds enshrining the relics of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, to the emergence of monumental Stupa depicting, with exquisite fluidity and lyricism, his life and previous incarnations (Jataka stories) and scenes from every aspect of life in ancient India, Buddhist art has gone against the tenets of the principles that gave rise to it - austerity, simplicity and the principle of non-symbolic worship. Ironically and dichotomously, although the scriptures state that the historical Buddha never imposed any restrictions on the representation of figurative art, Buddhist art eventually began to depict the life that the Buddha had abandoned - dance, music, court life, and a luxurious lifestyle (Nilofar Shamim Haja, p.4).

Buddhism has a rich artistic and cultural heritage and has significantly influenced various aspects of South Asian societies, including music and musical instruments. Buddhist iconography, which includes sculptures, paintings, and other visual representations, often includes depictions of musical instruments played in religious rituals, ceremonies, and daily life. The evolution of musical instruments in India is a complex process, influenced by various cultural, religious, and social factors. Although India's classical musical traditions are often studied in isolation, the influence of religious iconography, especially Buddhist art, has been perceived by limited scholarly attention. The musical instruments depicted in ancient Buddhist art forms reveal not only the diversity of instruments used during the period but also the underlying religious and cultural philosophies that shaped their design and use. This study will focus on the iconographic representations of stringed instruments in Buddhist art. It will explore the continuity of these traditions and their influence on contemporary Indian music.

This research takes place at the locations where the peak of the Buddhist art have been occurred, namely, Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Sanchi,

Bharhut, Mathura, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Gandhara (Pakistan), and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) and it addresses following research question.

1. What musical elements or instruments are depicted in Buddhist art across different regions?

And how have these depictions influenced the design, aesthetics, and cultural significance of modern Indian musical instruments?

Methodology

This research mainly bestows with Erwin Panofsky's method (1892-1968) of Iconology- Iconography (Erwin Panofsky, 1972, p. 5-7)

1. Primary, or natural subject matter – pre-iconographical description
2. Secondary or conventional subject matter – iconographical analysis
3. Intrinsic meaning, symbolical values – iconological interpretation

From the Iconographic Point of view, it achieves a fusion of anthropomorphic and abstract elements that fulfill the aesthetic requirements of the literate and socio-cultural background of contemporary society (Mishra, 2015, p. 1). Iconographic studies are of two types.

- (1) The descriptive study is concerned mainly with the formal and physical features of the image studied concerning the prescription corroborations available from tests'
- (2) The Historical study, which considers the various factors giving rise to and contributing to the gradual evolution of the different iconographic concepts (Mishra, 2015. pp2). Thus, this study is concerned with both descriptive and historical approaches.

This qualitative research study followed the survey of literature and examination of archaeological information. The literature survey included library surveys, map studies, Tripitaka, Jataka, and scholarly studies. The archaeological examination was performed on structural (shape) evidence to identify and analyze the structure of Musical Instruments and other musical evidence in relevant locations namely, Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Sanchi, Bharhut, Mathura, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Gandhara (Pakistan), and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka).

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the reflection of Buddhist iconography on the evolution of modern musical instruments in India, particularly through an organic analysis of South Asian Buddhist art. In addition, this research aims to examine the Role of Musical Instruments in Early Buddhist Art, Explore the Regional similarities in Buddhist Musical Traditions across South Asia, and Examine the Interaction between Buddhist Iconography and the Design of Musical Instruments.

Literature review

Music in Buddhist Literature

The Buddhist literature like Tripitaka, and Jataka stories, provide abundant of evidence about music. The birth stories of Buddha, called Jataka were assumed to be compiled between the 3rd – 2nd Centuries BCE., exists in various versions, depending on the particular cultural context spread over South Asia, some of which are linked to music. As revealed in the Jataka Stories, the Prince Siddharatha who later became the Lord Buddha namely Gautama, was consistently immersed in music. As a young prince, he was confined to three palaces, as his father King Suddhodana wanted him to become the Universal King (*Chakravarthi*), where he was surrounded by all the luxuries that accompanied by sensuous female musicians and danseurs.

'passed the time with the noble music of singing women.. . with tambourines whose frames were bound with gold and which sounded softly beneath the strokes of women's fingers, and with dances that rivalled those of the beautiful Apsarases. There the women delighted him with their soft voices, charming blandishments, playful intoxications...' (Johnston, p.13)

The *Sona Sutta* in the *Anguttara Nikaya* uses the analogy of tuning a harp (veena) to explain the Buddha's philosophy of the middle path. Since Sona was a veena player, the Buddha taught him about the middle path through the method of tuning the instrument, illustrating the balance required in life (*Sona sutta-Bikkhu Sujato, AN.6.55*). The dialogue between the Buddha and Sona goes as follows:

“What do you think, Soṇa? When you were still a layman, weren’t you a good player of the arched harp?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When your harp’s strings were tuned too tight, was it resonant and playable?” “No, sir.”

“When your harp’s strings were tuned too slack, was it resonant and playable?” “No, sir.”

“But when your harp’s strings were tuned neither too tight nor too slack, but fixed at an even tension, was it resonant and playable?”

“Yes, sir.”

“In the same way, Soṇa, when energy is too forceful it leads to restlessness. When energy is too slack it leads to laziness. So, Soṇa, you should focus on energy and serenity, find a balance of the faculties, and learn the pattern of this situation” (Sona sutta-Bikkhu Sujato, AN.6.55).

The *Sakka Panha Sutta* in the *Digha Nikaya* tells the story of Panchasikha, the divine musician of King Sakka, who visited the Buddha. Panchasikha took his lyre of red vilva-wood (AN.6.5: Sona Sutta; *verse II*) played his veena and sang, sharing his music with the Buddha during their encounter (AN.6.5: Sona Sutta; *verse V*). The significance is that Panchasikha has alluded the name of the Lord Buddha, Dhamma and the Bhikkus and was able to control his voice and the strings simultaneously so that he was able to please the audience. The elbow conversation between Panchasikha and the Buddha proves to that

“From here it will be neither too far nor too near for the Bhagavā to hear the song,” and he stood aside. Standing aside, Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, let his lyre of red vilva-wood be heard and a song alluding to the Buddha, the Dhamma, to Arahants, and to love.

The song being over, the Bhagavā addressed Pañcasikha, the young Gandhabba, “The sound of your strings, Pañcasikha, harmonizes with that of your song, and the sound of your song with that of your strings; but, verily, Pañcasikha, your strings neither go beyond your song, nor does your song go beyond your strings. But when, Pañcasikha, did you compose these stanzas alluding to the Buddha, the Dhamma, Arahants and to love?”

Similarly, in Jataka No. 243, the Guttala Jataka, it is narrated that the Buddha had once lived as a renowned musician, playing the veena (arched harp) at the court of Benares. According to the story, the Veena he played had seven strings, as described in the text (BO LAWERGREN, p.228).

The first chapter of the *Lankavatara Sutta* is titled 'Ravanadhyesana.' It begins by recounting how King Ravana, along with his retinue, visited the Buddha and performed on musical instrument *Veena* (lute) (*Lankavatara Sutta*, 2002. Dharmasiri, Gunapala, (ed.), p.69).

The empirical sources as mentioned above, reveal that music plays a significant role in Buddhist literature, particularly in the depiction of the Buddha's life and teachings. Various texts, such as the Tripitaka, Jataka stories, and Suttas, intertwine music with spiritual lessons, showcasing how the Buddha's experiences with music from his early life as a prince to his use of musical analogies helped convey philosophical concepts like mind balance and the middle path.

Pioneers of the study

Bo Lawergren's 1994 paper, *Buddha as a Musician: An Illustration of a Jataka Story*, published in *Artibus Asiae*, explores the role of music in the life of the Buddha and his previous lives as depicted in the Jataka tales. The paper provides a survey of various Buddhist literatures, highlighting the connection between the Buddha and music, especially in his past lives. However, it does not delve into visual representations or offer detailed descriptions of musical instruments. The seven-stringed veena described in Buddhist literature closely aligns with Bharata's *Chitra veena*, as presented by Dr. Thakur Jaidev Singh in 1960. While Singh notes this correlation, he does not provide further details to substantiate his claim, nor does he discuss the specific shape of the veena. Swami Prajnanananda, in his works *A History of Indian Music* (1963) and *A Historical Study of Indian Music* (1981), examines the historical context of Indian musical instruments, including references to the Pitalkora Veena engravings. However, Prajnanananda does not focus on the shape of the veena or its resemblance to the veena concepts found in Buddhist literature. In *Ajanta Part I* (1930), G. Yazdani provides a comprehensive study of the Jataka tales and the related paintings in the Ajanta caves. His

detailed descriptions of the artwork offer musical evidence, with several depictions of musicians and instruments in the paintings, thereby linking music to Buddhist teachings and iconography. Peter Stewart, in his 2024 paper *Gandharan Arts and the Classical World*, includes depictions of music in Gandharan art. Although Stewart presents visual representations of musical themes, music is not the central focus of his work, and he does not explore the musical evidence in depth. Tauqeer Ahmad's research paper titled *Musical Instruments as Depicted in Reliefs of Gandhara Art* (2013) specifically examines musical instruments in Gandharan art. Ahmad's study provides a detailed analysis of the musical depictions and instruments, offering insight into how music was represented in Gandhara's Buddhist art.

The above review curtails the existing studies where no comprehensive analyze has been undertaken reflecting the Buddhist iconography on the evolution of musical instruments in India through an organological lens. By focusing on South Asian Buddhist art, this research could explore how ancient musical instruments, as depicted in Buddhist iconography, have evolved into their modern forms, shedding light on the cultural and artistic continuity across centuries.

Results and discussion:

Prince Siddhartha was a musician and played the harp (veena?). Evidence supporting this is found in the archaeological site of Loriyan Tangai (**fig.01**), dating back to the 2nd century C.E. This picture shows a person seated on a bench or chair, holding a harp on their lap. With their right hand, they pluck the strings, while their left hand makes contact with them. The same style of instrument depiction and playing techniques can also be found in the Ajanta Caves (**fig.2&3**), Amaravati (**fig. 4**), Nagarjunakonda (**fig.5**) and Gandhara (**fig.6 &7**) where similar representations of the instrument and its playing method are shown.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8

The playing techniques depicted here are similar to those used in the modern Indian Sarod (**fig.8**) and Kashmiri Rabab (**fig.9&10**), with the instrument positioned in a way that closely resembles their setup.



Fig.9



Fig.10

The stringed instruments depicted in Buddhist art at sites i.e. Pitakhora Caves, Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka), Bharhut, Mathura, Sanchi, and

certain features from Gandhara resemble the bow- shaped harp. The bow-shaped harp, along with its plectrums, has been found in several sculptures from Cave No.4, Pitalkhora caves. There are three such sculptures: two depicting male figures (**Fig.11&12**), and the third portraying a female figure (**Fig.13**). In Fig. 11, the male figure holds a harp against his left shoulder, while in Fig. 12, the male figure positions the harp between his right and left hands, plucking the strings with his left hand. Notably, the male figure in Fig.12 holds the plectrum with his left hand and is adorned with bracelets on his left wrist and a double-robed garland around his neck. The female figure in Fig. 13 is playing a harp, which rests on her lap. She plucks a string with her right hand, holding the plectrum (Kona) between her thumb and forefinger.



Fig.11

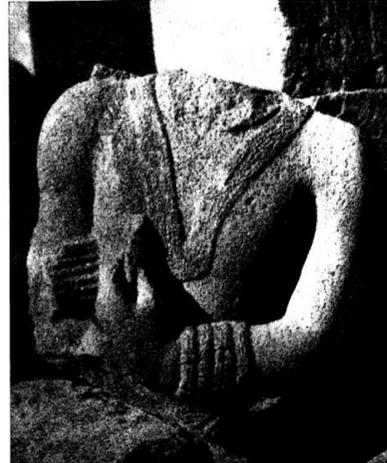


Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14

According to the engraving of a harp found at Lohaprasada, Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka), the harp features an elliptical body. Its shape is bow-like, being semi-curved, similar to a bow (**Fig.14**)

Similar bow-shaped harps are depicted on the Sanchi Stupa (**Fig.15&16**) Bharut stupa (**Fig.17**) and Matura (**Fig.18**). These representations show resemblance to the modern Indian harp and swarmandal. Additionally, this type of harp bears similarities to the South Indian instrument, the Yaal (or yaaz); a variant of harp with gut strings that stretch from a curved ebony neck to a boat-shaped resonator.

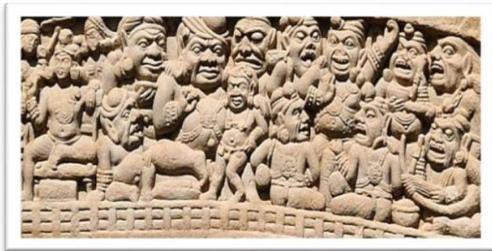


Fig.15

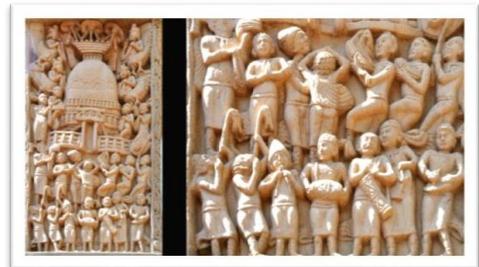


Fig.16



Fig.17

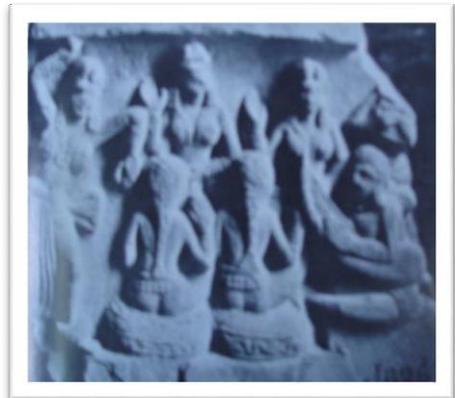


Fig.18

Conclusion

The study of Buddhist iconography and its reflection on the evolution of modern musical instruments in India reveals a fascinating interplay between art, culture, and technology. The examination of

South Asian Buddhist art has shown how symbolic representations and religious narratives, particularly those related to Buddhist teachings and practices, have influenced the design and development of stringed instruments throughout history. From the early depictions of divine figures holding instruments to the more intricate, functional designs of contemporary instruments. The transformation of musical tools also reflects the broader cultural and spiritual shifts within Indian society.

This study further highlights the organological characteristics and the significant role that the Buddhist iconography played in shaping the aesthetics and functionality of stringed instruments, integrating artistic expression with sound production. Buddhist symbols, motifs, and philosophical ideals were not only reflected in the physical appearance of instruments but also in the way music was envisioned as a vehicle for spiritual and meditative experience. The continuous evolution of these instruments demonstrates the adaptability of Indian musical traditions, illustrating how they have incorporated influences from religion, art, and cultural exchange.

In conclusion, the fusion of Buddhist iconography with the evolution of musical instruments in India underscores the complex relationship between art forms and material culture. The legacy of Buddhist art, through its visual and symbolic influence on music, continues to enrich the cultural tapestry of South Asia, serving as a testament to the enduring connection between spiritual beliefs and artistic innovation.

Table of Figures

01. Gautama Buddha playing on a harp (veena?), Lorian Tangai-Pakistan: schist stone (National museum, Calcutta)
02. A Kinnara is playing a string Instrument (Kachhapi Vina?), depicted in Padmapani (also known as the “Beautiful Bodhisattva”: before enlightenment Buddha was known as Bodhisattva) panel, Cave No.1, Ajanta caves
03. The Kinnara with the Lute or Vina is depicted behind the figure of Padmapani in cave No.1. (Similar figure can be seen in a stone sculpture in cave No.4, Ajanta caves).
04. Harp player, Amaravati (National museum, Calcutta).

5. Harp Player, Nagarjunakonda, National museum, Calcutta
6. **Chakhil-i-Ghoundi Stupa**: a stone slab depicts Prince Siddhartha enjoying worldly life where we have representation of the drum, flute and the harp; Peshawar museum Suchandra Ghosh, p.48
7. Man playing a veena. By Smith, Vincent Arthur, 1848-1920 - Book: "A history of fine art in India and Ceylon, from the earliest times to the present day", page 117. (a scene from the life of Gautama Buddha, and a man playing the vina, from the Yusufzai district near Peshawar. Greco Buddhist (Gandhara School), Pakistan, 1st to 3rd century.)
8. **Ustad Ali Akbar Khan in a concert | courtesy: Raghu Rai**;
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11. 12 & 13. Harp Players from Pitalkhora, Cave no.4, A History of Indian Music by Swami Prajnananda (1963), p.129-130
14. Harp Players from Anuradhapura Buddhist site, captured by author.
15. Harp player in the right corner: Temptation of the Buddha with Mara and his daughters and the demons of Mara fleeing Sanchi Stupa 1 Northern Gateway. Jhon Marshall p.55
16. Gangulybiswarup - Wikipedia Commons File:Foreigners Worshipping Stupa - East Face - West Pillar - North Gateway - Stupa 1 - Sanchi Hill 2013-02-21 4287.JPG Reformated photograph and highlighted desired portion.
17. Harp playe, Bharut. National museum Calcutta, captured by author.
18. Harp player women, Matura, Nilofar Shamim Haja; DakshinaChitra, p.73,
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