

[To Save a Soulful Art Form](#)

Category : [January/February/March 2005](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2005

CULTURE

To Save a Soulful Art Form

Pandit Hindraj Divekar, one of the last surviving Rudra vina masters, talks about its history, its music and its plight

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The rudra vina is considered the father-mother of all stringed instruments. Believed to have been used by the rishis for contemplation, no other instrument but the human voice can match the Rudra vina's deep, subtly nuanced, sustainable spiritual tones. Sadly, its incredible sound is on the verge of extinction. In this interview for Hinduism Today, and in his book Rudra Veena, Pandit Hindraj Divekar of Pune, the last remaining khayal style Rudra vina master, shares in his own words the history and challenges facing the future of mankind's oldest classical stringed instrument and appeals to all for help.

History of the Rudra Vina

References are made to the vina in our scriptures that are over four thousand years old. It has existed since pre-Vedic times. It is said that Lord Siva created this world by dancing for Parvati to the music of the Rudra vina. Rishis and hermits played this instrument in remote Himalayan caves. Over time in North India it was called "Beena " and then "Been." Its musicians are known as "Beenkars." During the middle ages, the Rudra vina flourished under the patronage of the Hindu Maharajas and Mogul rulers. But the music was hidden from the masses, experienced only by royalty and the wealthy. With the advent of British rule, the centuries of elite patronage of India's great cultural arts came to an end. Today Indian musicians must find new ways to survive. After independence and with the global distribution of audio technologies, there has been a resurgence and worldwide interest in Indian classical music. Unfortunately, many ancient instruments that fell into disuse remain hidden from the world. The Rudra vina is the most prominent among them.

Most great Beenkar maestros have died off. My second guru after my own father, the world famous Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagarji, has passed away. Karnataka's brilliant Pandit Bindu Pathak died in February of this year. This leaves only a few of us: the respected Ustad Asad Ali Khan, of Delhi, who is nearing 70, and his son, who keep the ancient dhrupad style, and myself--the last khayal Rudra vina artist.

I have taught two to three hundred students. Only twenty to thirty were trained in Rudra vina, the others in sitar. The other maestros have a few students as well. How much they will practice and take it forward is their responsibility. Indians are fast asleep to this musical heritage. It is ironic that Rudra vina, the father, is being ignored while sitar and other instruments, which are the children, are more prominent. Foreign students are taking more interest. The Netherland's Amsterdam University is providing scholarships for students in Europe to come to India and study with me. But, it remains to be seen if there will be any Rudra vina masters in the future.

The Instrument and Its Sound

The shape of Rudra vina is totally different from sitar. Its two round tumbas are made from giant pumpkin gourds. The connecting rod between them used to be of bamboo. Now people are getting that made of wood. But the sound that you get when you use the bamboo rod cannot be expressed. The frets of a sitar are made of brass and are tied down with thread. But from ancient times, the frets of the vina were fixed in a compound of glue, wax and kajal powder. Frets that were fixed in my father's time are still strong. But the compound used to fix the frets today breaks up after a few months, which shows what a perfect job our ancestors did. This mixture makes the frets so strong that they never loosen up during performance. The sound that is derived after this treatment is given is just incomparable. The moveable, tied-on metal, frets of the sitar and modern vinas produce a more metallic sound. That is not the original sound of the vina, the vina of Lord Shiv Shankar.

On a perfectly fitted, immovable fret, when I pluck the string once, it reverberates for at least twenty seconds. But the sound of the sitar can resonate only for five or six seconds. So the length of the Rudra vina sound is the kind of length that one could produce only from one's throat. And when we play a raga on this vina, people feel as if it is being sung. We can produce on the Rudra vina the same beautiful effect that comes with the vocal singing of alaap (slow, improvisational exposition of a raga's key notes and melody.)

Pandit Hindraj Divekar's Life and Mission

My first guru was my father, the late Pandit Hindhagandharva Shivram Buva Divekar. We belong to Gurav caste in Maharashtra. This caste has been there since the ages of Samaveda. We have been musicians from that time. As the son of a farmer becomes a farmer, so the son of a musician becomes a musician. To us this music is a social responsibility. Guravs are also priests whose duty it is to perform puja (worship) at Lord Siva's temples all over Maharashtra. When my grandfather came here in Pune, he had an interest in drama and vocal music, so the traditional work of taking care of temples is now being done by our relatives. But my father focused on instrumental music. He started me on vina when I was just five years old. Now I am 50 and have been playing for 45 years, serving the music and teaching others. But there is no comparison between myself and the other great Beenkars. I consider them my elders, who have guided me. I am still a student of Rudra vina.

Even though my father possessed a soft and caring heart, he was very strict. In 1965, I was just ten and he made me wake up before dawn and get ready for learning by 4am. At that time it was so silent. We only listened to the sound of music, that is Brahmanada. There just was no other sound. I just listened to him quietly in utter silence. I was too young to know the value of what he was playing. Now I realize the value of that silence. He used to play the music of God.

Today the position of silence has been totally disturbed. If a train passes close by, we do not listen. Those were the times when we could even hear an ox cart passing two kilometers away. Does this type of silence exist today? Because we are un-silenced now, this has disturbed our body and nature. It is very essential that all this should be corrected. To bring that silence back, Rudra vina is the instrument we can count on. We can play the Rudra vina in concerts, festivals, recordings; people will listen, enter the world of Brahmanada and forget everything else.

The Future of the Rudra Vina

I have given twenty or more concerts for the foreigners of the Osho-Centre in Pune. In a recent program, 25,000 people listened to my performance in pin-drop silence. In 2001, Paris, France, 40,000 attended my concert. Europeans hearing Rudra vina for the first time say they have never heard anything like it. But a few concerts will not suffice. Rudra vina will have a bright future only if we get committed disciples, and more organizations and individuals who can organize good concerts. Only if all this is there can we pass on Rudra vina music knowledge to our future generations.

Publicity is crucial to bring up the public awareness and inspire more youth to take up the Rudra vina. I have approached Doordarshan, India's national TV station, for over 25 years, but they continue to ignore the Rudra vina, because I am not famous and popular. The media follows celebrities, and their instruments enter the limelight. But any sitar player should realize that if he starts playing the Rudra vina his stature as a musician will definitely go up.

It is true the instrument is challenging. It is heavy and difficult for a beginner to hold for long periods of time. It is difficult to transport. Its strings are harder to press and it has a low volume which must be amplified in today's noisy world. But there is no sound like it in the universe. I have played many times in the ancient Siva temple of Sri Ghrineswar, Maharashtra, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas. The kind of Brahmanada experience I have cannot be explained in words. I want the world and our future generations to have this experience.

Television, recording companies, state and central cultural authorities, universities providing scholarships, concert promoters, music academies, ashrams, etc., need to give more coverage of the Rudra vina, not for my sake, but to save this divine music from extinction. For the Rudra vina to survive, there must be means to provide the artists with a livelihood. I am getting by financially, but a new generation of artists will need a much broader platform of support. I am appealing here in Hinduism Today for anyone interested to come forward and contact me to save the Rudra vina--at the very least, to arrange for recordings for posterity--in service of the Divine Brahmanada.

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