

Currently practised terminologies of musical notes in North Indian Classical Music: Suddha and Vikrut

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Abstract

Indian music assigns various labels to the musical frequencies, namely, Shadaj, Rishabh, Gandhar, Madhyam, Pancham, Dhaivat and Nishad. Further, some of these musical notes are subdivided into Suddha and Vikrut forms, creating an impression about their characters being pure and impure. Although, the primary function of nomenclating a musical sound is to ensure that there is no ambiguity concerning the musical frequency that is being referred to, it is equally important that the label assigned does not create misconceptions in the musical minds. On one hand, one finds references that claim the sound being the best possible means to meditate and attain liberation i.e., Naad Yoga and on the other hand, the same sound is being tagged as impure. The article is an attempt to highlight the grey areas that are perceivable in the labels assigned to musical sounds, namely Suddha and Vikrut (Pure and Impure/ Superior and inferior).

Keywords: Suddha, Vikrut, Swar, Shruti, musical centre

Introduction:

Indian classical music is one of the most sophisticated art forms that has flourished in the Indian subcontinent and passed over generations (primarily *via* oral tradition) for over 2000 years [1]. Unlike in any other music system, Indian music system recognizes 22 musical sounds, colloquially referred to as Shrutis. Although the number is debatable and a matter of constant controversy, these 22 sounds are generally labelled as different shades of the following 12 musical notes:

Shadaj, **Komal** Rishabh, **Suddha** Rishabh, **Komal** Gandhar, **Suddha** Gandhar, Madhyam, **Teevra** Madhyam, Pancham, **Komal** Dhaivat, **Suddha** Dhaivat, **Komal** Nishad, and **Suddha** Nishad.

It is well recognized that the musical notes employed in Raga renditions surpass the number 12; however, for all practical purposes, only these 12 principal nomenclatures of the musical sounds are unanimously accepted and practised by the scholars and practitioners of music [2]. In the current practice, except Shadaj and Pancham, all musical notes are addressed as “Suddha” (Pure) or “Vikrut” (Impure/deviated from normal). The “Vikrut” notes are subdivided into Komal and Teevra. The usage of these terminologies is predominant in the system as a kind of musical law, conditioning one’s mind to a state that even asking a “Why” for this logic appears to be a taboo. One may even argue, why is it relevant to look for such answers when anyway, in a musical recital, these swaras are wrapped under specific musical expressions, e.g., syllables in a Dhrupad recital or an alaap/bandish in a Khayal recital or lyrics in semi-classical forms’ recital and so on. What makes the nomenclatures so significant? Here, it is essential to remind ourselves that it is the nomenclature of musical sounds that allowed our musical ancestors to preserve/ document and communicate their musical ideas succinctly. Nomenclating a musical sound or frequency is analogous to assigning a scientific name so that it is comprehensible by everyone, unambiguously. Just like assigning a scientific name bears a specific logic, it is sensible to assume that the musical nomenclatures must have had specific explanations. As per the current practise, it is seen that a musical note is addressed with first name and last name, e.g., Komal Rishabh. In this article, we intend to focus on the first name, i.e., Suddha, Komal, and Teevra. The logic for the second name (i.e., Rishabh, Gandhar, Madhyam, etc.) is been documented as being derived from the sounds of birds and animals, e.g., Rishabh, Gandhar, Madhyam, Pancham, Dhaivat, and Nishad are said to be produced by the peacock, ox, goat, crane, blackbird, frog, and the elephant, respectively [3]. However, the references that answer the reason for the first name, i.e., labelling these levels as Suddha and Vikrut, are not available in the literature, to the best of our knowledge. It is unclear why certain notes are referred to as Suddha and others as Vikrut. Are these labels consciously chosen? If yes, what is the basis for the same? If no, what convinced the practitioners of Indian classical music to preserve these terminologies and pass them over the generations?

The present article is an effort to highlight the grey areas—perceptible in the traditional terminologies—Suddha and Vikrut. Along with the philosophical viewpoints, the present work also envelops an analytical approach to highlight the symmetrical arrangement of the musical notes in an octave and hence, presenting the oneness of the so called “Suddha and Vikrut” swaras.

Suddha and Komal Swaras:

The present section concerns with the labels “Suddha” and “Komal (subdivision of Vikrut)” swaras.

The frequency levels that are tagged as “Suddha” are Rishabh (10/9), Gandhar (5/4), Madhyam (4/3), Pancham (3/2), Dhaivat (5/3), and Nishad (15/8). The frequency levels that are tagged as “Komal” are Rishabh (16/15), Gandhar (6/5), Dhaivat (8/5), and Nishad (9/5) [4]. It is important to note here that while referring to Shrutis, these labels are retained along with an addition of “Ati, Utra (lower), Chada (upper)” etc. For instance, to address a lower shade of Komal Rishabh, the label employed would be “Ati-Komal Rishabh,” and so on. What is so special about certain frequency levels to be labelled as Suddha and the other ones as Komal? Is the effect produced by the so-called “Suddha” swaras superior to those labelled as “Vikrut?” Even if one argues that the Komal notes evoke a melancholy effect, why should the melancholy effect be considered Vikrut (or abnormal or Impure)? What is not Suddha seems to be a disqualification and ill-treatment to the other notes (i.e., the frequency levels labelled as Komal). These labels appear to color the minds with an impression that what is not “Suddha” is “ASuddha” or impure.

As far as the label “Komal” is concerned, it means “Delicate.” If we consider this label as our reference and try to reassign a label for the so-called “Suddha” swaras, then is it right to assign a label “Kathor” to the so-called “Suddha” swaras? Extending the thought further, being delicate is generally considered a feminine trait. So, does it mean Suddha swaras be considered as masculine?

Now, let us try to question more analytically! Are the so-called “Suddha” swaras more dominantly produced by the Tanpura over the “Vikrut” ones, which is why they are termed as “Suddha”? One of the notable experimental works to investigate the musical notes obtained from a Tanpura has been carried out by Paritosh K. Pandya [5]. The results suggest that not only Suddha but certain Komal swaras (e.g., Komal Nishad) are also easily perceivable in a

Tanpura. The Komal swaras are nothing but samvads of the so-called Suddha swaras with Taar Shadaj, e.g., Samvad of Suddha Rishabh and Taar Shadaj gives rise to Komal Nishad, etc. This fact has been elaborately presented in our earlier work [6], where we have concluded that as soon as the so-called “Suddha” set of notes are produced, the set of so-called “Komal” notes are accentuated automatically. If one contemplates further, this conclusion can also be extended to yield more appreciative observations, as shown in Fig. 1. Please note that here we have considered the “frequencies of Suddha and Komal swaras,” as mentioned in the research work by Dr. Vidyadhar Oke [4], for the reference. The following conclusions can be drawn from Fig. 1:

- (i) The Suddha and Komal swaras appear to be mirror reflections of each other around the musical mirror—placed at the geometric mean of Shadaj and Taar Shadaj i.e, at $\sqrt{2}$ [7]. It can be seen that the same coloured notes are equidistant from the musical centre and hence, the mirror images of each other, e.g., the musical distance of Suddha Rishabh (red-coloured) and Komal Nishad (red-coloured) is equal w.r.t the musical centre. The same fact can be verified for all the other notes.
- (ii) The Suddha and Komal swaras hint at the oneness of these musical notes, despite their musical differences.

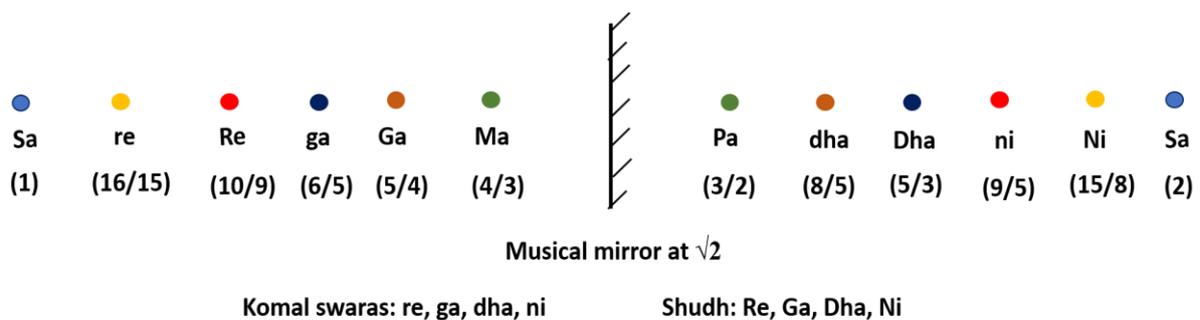


Fig.1. Symmetrical arrangement of Suddha and Komal swaras about musical centre $\sqrt{2}$.

Hence, none of the musical notes should be deemed superior or inferior. It is essential not to allow these terminologies to mislead our minds and deceive us to assign a pure and impure character to the musical notes.

Teevra swar:

Madhyam is the only note that is assigned the stature of being “Teevra” (sharp). Hence, the first and foremost question that is born in one’s mind is, why not the musical note Madhyam

also assigned the stature of being Komal and is ostracised to have a Teevra variant? Is there no space available between Gandhar and Madhyam to accommodate a Komal variant of Madhyam? This is partly true in the sense that the space between Gandhar and Madhyam is the smallest, followed by the musical space between Rishabh and Gandhar, further followed by the musical space between Shadaj and Rishabh (Fig. 1). As shown in the Fig., the musical space between Madhyam and Pancham easily allows the accommodation of one more note (both musically and analytically), which is why the musical ancestors would have accommodated a musical note between them. But why did they label it as a Teevra variant of Madhyam and not “Komal Pancham,” remains unanswered. This appears to be an injustice inflicted on Madhyam by assigning it a subordinate status of being a “Chal” swar. Madhyam and Pancham being the mirror reflections of each other, should be assigned an equal status. If Madhyam is considered as a Chal swar, one should have no obligations to consider Pancham as a Chal swar too and hence, rename the so-called “Teevra Madhyam” as “Komal Pancham.” If this is not acceptable, then the musical frequency should be named something else, neither associated with Madhyam nor Pancham. Hence, Madhyam should be assigned as dominant a status as Pancham.

It is important to note that Teevra Madhyam is not the same as the musical centre. The frequency designated to Teevra Madhyam in the research works of eminent music scholars is lower than $\sqrt{2}$. One such notable works include the research of Dr. Vidyadhar Oke [4], where he assigns a frequency $(45/32)$ to Teevra Madhyam.

Conclusion:

Although the tradition has assigned specific labels, namely “Suddha” and “Vikrut,” to the musical notes, there is no particular rationale that is available in the literature (to the best of our knowledge) for the same.

- (i) The so-called Vikrut (Impure) swaras get accentuated as soon as the so-called Suddha (Pure) swaras come into existence. Both these sets of notes exist together and bear equal status, with none of them being superior or inferior, pure, or impure, in relation to each other. The so-called “Vikrut notes” are as sacrosanct as the so-called “Suddha notes.”
- (ii) The so-called “Komal swaras” can be considered mirror reflections of the so-called “Suddha swaras” about the musical centre $\sqrt{2}$.

(iii) Madhyam is as equal in status as Pancham. However, there appears to be an injustice inflicted on this musical note by assigning it the status of being a “Chal swar.” If “Madhyam” can be considered as a “Chal swar,” so can be Pancham. Hence, one should have no obligations to consider renaming Teevra Madhyam as Komal Pancham, for all practical purposes. It is worthwhile to note here that some maestros do consider Shadaj and Pancham as “Chal swaras,” unlike the other maestros who consider these swaras to be “Achal.”

From its inception to the present state, Indian classical music has gone through various transformations and transitions. In its ever-evolving journey, it has embraced and rejected many features while maintaining an absolute balance with the old age tradition. It is expected that the experts and critics in Indian music would give due consideration to the rationale expressed in the present work on the misleading terminologies (Suddha and Vikrut) of musical notes. Any viewpoints and critics on the subject are most welcome.

Authors’ contributions:

HS contributed to writing, presentation and designing of the manuscript under the guidance of GKB.

GKB contributed to conceptualisation of the subject matter and critical evaluation of the manuscript.

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