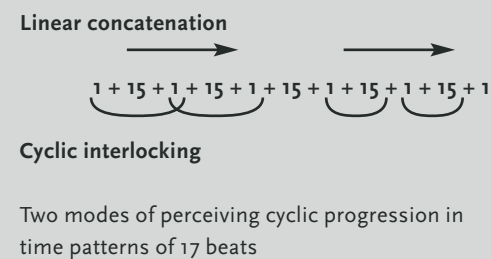




Courtesy of Kern Institute

+ fifteen + one structure, where the last beat always coincides with the first beat of the following cycle. The total number of beats in a pattern thus remains constant (sixteen), whereas the 'seventeenth' beat occupies an axial or transitory position; it assumes the dual function of concluding and opening two successive cycles.



As a strong concluding beat, the *sannipāta* carries the main accent and is responsible for creating the sensation of cadence and cyclicality. By shifting the point of conclusion from the sixteenth to the seventeenth beat (the first of the following pattern), the cadence or rhythm is extended to the following cycle. The interlocking of the initial and final beats of successive patterns creates the typical flow or continuity of a cyclic procedure.

The function of the *sannipāta* proves that the ancient compositions described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* were performed in a cyclic manner. Notably, the characteristic nature of the *sannipāta* resembles that of *sam* in modern Hindustani music.²

One may conclude, at least from a musicological point of view, that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the first source to explain rhythmic cyclicality in Indian music. Even though this is not done explicitly, the description of certain songs shows that the author was familiar with the idea of cyclic procedures. It therefore seems plausible that elements of the older cosmic notion of cyclicality found their way into the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and thus also into the subsequent tradition of the performing arts in South Asia. ◀

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Notes >

- 1 The name *āsārīta*, or 'extended' (song) itself indicates that with the employment of new techniques such as cyclic repetition, the given melodies were 'extended' or 'expanded' as desired.
- 2 *Sam* is the first and most important beat in a rhythmic cycle and figures as the pivotal beat in creating the sensation of cyclicality by exploiting (i.e. by easing and building) the tension between beginning and finality, expectation and fulfilment.

Beating Time

Concepts of Rhythm in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

Research >
South Asia

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* occupies a unique position in Sanskrit literature as the earliest extant source on drama, dance, and music. Alongside its value as a historical document, this encyclopaedic work has left its mark on the subsequent development of the performing arts in South Asia. It thus contains clues that shed light on hitherto unexplained aspects of the performing arts, past and present.

By Narinder Mohkamsing

Traditionally ascribed to the legendary sage Bharata and dating from around the beginning of the common era, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* covers almost all aspects of dramaturgy, including such subsidiary themes as the origin of drama, stagecraft, ritual preliminaries, and poetics. Several editions and translations are available, though hardly any meet the standards of modern scholarship. Given its intrinsic value, and the necessity of reliable editions, it is imperative that new efforts be made to publish a truly critical, fully indexed, and newly translated edition. With the proper approach and determination, this should be possible, for its individual chapters as well as for the work as a whole.

Ever since the (re)discovery of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in 1865, attention has focused on its theatrical and literary chapters; those on music and musical instruments have drawn little attention. To make matters worse, the entire section on music (chapters 28-33) is the most difficult part of the work, within which the *tāla* chapter is generally considered the most impenetrable. Focusing on the latter chapter, which treats *tāla* or rhythmic organization, my study addresses one of the most challenging issues of contemporary music, viz. the origin of the notion of cyclicality, or the cyclic progression of time (Mohkamsing 2003).

Musicological relevance

Because of its antiquity and obscurity, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is usually considered of no or little value to understanding

contemporary performing arts. This applies particularly to music, which has passed through numerous phases of remarkable change and development, especially in the last three to four hundred years. Despite the hiatus of two millennia, some remarkable parallels can be drawn between ancient and modern musicological notions of time and action. Notable in this regard is the similarity between the notion of cyclicality so clearly observed in contemporary Indian music, and the rudiments of a comparable mode of progression in early musical compositions such as the *āsārīta*-songs ('extended' songs).¹ As will be seen below, the cyclic procedures present in these *āsārītas* are described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

The presence and origin of the idea of cyclicality of time, both in ancient and in modern Indian music, has yet to be satisfactorily explained. Usually, however, the origin of this idea is traced back to the doctrine of cosmic cycles, which measures the periodic creation and destruction of the universe in units such as *yuga* (age), *kalpa* (aeon), and *manvantara* (fourteen aeons). According to the cosmology of the Epics and *Purāṇās*, these processes continually repeat themselves in fixed patterns (Bäumer 1992:40 f.). Since this doctrine appears to have developed in post-Vedic periods, but before the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it may safely be assumed to have influenced the music theory of the latter.

The basic idea of repetition is present in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in such notions as *nivṛtti*, *upavartana*, and *parivartana*. Most of these terms, however, refer specifically to repetitions of parts of a

pattern, involving variation of tempo through acceleration or deceleration and do not explain the phenomenon of cyclicality from a musical and rhythmical point of view.

Passing on the rhythm

Evidence proving the presence of cyclicality in ancient Indian music is concealed in the nature of a beat called *sannipāta* in ancient rhythmic theory. The study of its role and position in the *āsārīta*-songs has unearthed hidden clues that ultimately reveal the cyclic procedures in ancient music. The *Sannipāta* is the strongest beat in *tāla* cheironomy. It usually occurs at the beginning of a basic *tāla*-pattern, but when the pattern is expanded, the *sannipāta* moves to its end. This seems to imply a transposition of accent, but closer analysis reveals that it is only a matter of perception and sensation: the beginning and end of successive patterns coincide on the punctuation of *sannipāta*.

The 'short' *āsārīta*-song is described as a composition of seventeen beats, where the last (or seventeenth) beat has to be a *sannipāta*. In reality, the song has only sixteen beats and under 'ordinary' circumstances the sixteenth beat carries the accentuated *sannipāta*. Here the enigmatic description of the *āsārīta* as having seventeen beats is particularly meaningful. The last *sannipāta* appears to be 'extra-structural' as it falls outside the actual structure, coinciding with the first beat of the following rhythmic pattern. The song thus has a sixteen + one beat structure. Once the song progresses, its beats assume a one