

A Scientific Analysis of The Stringed Instrument: Rabab

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ABSTRACT: *As Civilizations flourished, musical instruments came into existence with it. And as time passed, the inventions and alterations of these instruments increased in number and peaked during mediaeval period. At that time, instruments suitable for accompaniment were being forged. The ancient instruments were being developed along with their playing techniques and structures. One of these instruments is Rabab which is modified form of Veena. The credit of making this instrument suitable for accompanying vocals goes to Shri Guru Nanak Dev. He needed an instrument capable of portraying the central concept of Baani.*

1. INTRODUVTION

Rabab is said to be the one of the earliest instruments played in tradition of Gurmat Sangeet. Shri Guru Nanak Dev was accompanied by Mardana on Rabab. Legend holds that this instrument was a creation of Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji and he taught Rabab Bhai Mardana.

Though, an instrument with the same name is also mentioned in Persian literature far before the time period of Guru Ji. It is possible that Shri Guru Nanak Dev modified this foreign instrument to make it more suitable for Baani Gayan. The author of 'Qanoon e mausiki' Saadik Ali Khan writes, "*Baaj ka qaul hai ki yah Rabab ijaad kiya hua Guru Shah Nanak Fakeer ka hai. Yah Ilm unko nihayat dakhil tha. Apni jidat tabay se Rabab ijaad kiya tha...*" ("..It is a common belief that Guru Nanak Shah Faqeer invented Rabaab, He had a great command on this knowledge...; With His innovation He invented Rabaab")

'*Baaj ka qaul*' refers to common belief. Therefore, Saadik Ali Khan has only written on the behalf of people but has not presented any clarification.

'Rebec' was an instrument once popular among Europe. It was a kind of Rabab and was brought from Faaras and Arab to Spain by Moor tribe. It's origin that can also be traced back to Aryan civilization which also shows throws light on the fact that Rabab, as according to ancient texts, is derived from Veena. This proves that Rabab is the instrument of Aryans. Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji must have further improvised it. Given that Sikh Kirtan is based on Indian classical music, these modifications must have been made to meet the requirements of raga elements in Baani Gayan. Mardana was always with Shri Guru Nanak Dev during his visits to foreign countries. Mardana accompanied Guru Ji during Kirtan.

According to some scholars Guru Nanak Dev Ji invented Rabab. As 'The mirror' magazine's issue of may 1980 states that "The Rabab played on seems to have been designed from another instrument of similar type, by Guru Nanak himself." Captain Day, assuming Rabab to be an instrument related to Punjab, has stated in his book 'The music and musical instruments of southern Indian and Deccan' that Indian Rabab is played prominently in Punjab and Northern India.

Some scholars believe that Tansen was an exponent of Rabab.

Tansen, the historically revered composer and musician was born in Gwalior and later adorned the Mughal Court of Akbar (1556-1605). He was renowned for his performance on the Rabab. Indian Rabab is said to have originated in Middle East and was first played in India by Tansen of Akbar's court.

It is a possibility that the invention of Rabab must have involved the contributions of Tansen and his descendants, however the very name of the instrument is chiefly associated with Bhai Mardana. He was the accompanist of Guru Nanak Dev in 15th century CE. It is believed that Bhai Mardana descended from an Arab family and his excellence in Rabab has ended up becoming a proverb itself. The Rabab he played was reformed by Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. In 19th century CE Saadik Ali Khan wrote that Rabab has 5 main strings and 22 tarab strings to produce echo. One other kind of Rabab exists but it carries 6 six strings made out of silk instead of 'taant'. It is believed that this Rabab was made by Shri Guru Nanak Dev. He possessed vast knowledge of this subject and it is a result of his genius. When Shri Guru Nanak Dev sang while in the depths of a trance-like state and Mardana played Rabab, the strings sounded "Nirankar... Dhan Nirankar..." - "Formless... Hail Formless."

In all the pictures depicting Shri Guru Nanak Dev and Mardana, he's shown to be playing Rabab by striking the strings of the instrument. Several mentions of Rabab several can be found in Shri Guru Granth Sahib like:

- *Kab ko bhale ghunghroo taala kab ko bajawe Rabab,
Aawat jaat baar khin laage hao tab lagu samrau naam.*
- *Tuti tant na baje Rabab,
bhool bigariyo apna kaaj
Feelu Rababi baladu pakhawaj kauya taal bajawe,
Pahiri cholana gadaha naache bhainsa bhagati karawe.*

Structure of Rabab:

Rabab is a lute musical instrument. It's shape and form resembles that of Sarod. It's neck is a long hollow wood. For the resonator, there's hollow body attached to it under the neck covered with sheep skin called Maand. There's a bridge set on Maand called Ghudach-Ghani. The bridge on the other side of Maand is called Taar Ghani. Rabab has six strings made up of Taant. First string is known as Zeer. It is tuned to key of Pancham of Madhya Saptak. Second string is Myaan, tuned to Risabh of Madhya Saptak. Third string is Sur tuned to Shadaj of Madhya Saptak. Fourth string or Mandra, as name suggests, is tuned to Pancham of Mandra Saptak. Fifth string is tuned to Madhyam of Mandra Saptak and is called Ghor. Sixth string is Kharaj, tuned to Shadaj of Mandra Saptak. The portion where strings are pressed to be played is known as 'Sthaan'.

Rabab is played with a Jawa or Jarab, which is usually a piece of wood or ivory. To play Rabab, Jawa or Jarab are to be held using first and second finger of one's right hand. Strings are to be pressed using the left hand. Initially, Rabab was played using a bow. But then it gradually turned into a plucked instrument.

"Sometimes it has a few a cat gut frets placed at diatonic intervals. It is a beautiful instrument and has a very pleasing tone, somewhat sweeter than that of Sarangi. **It lends itself to the groces better than the sitar, as it has no frets.**" says H.A. Popley.

In the tenth century AD, Al Farabi of Arabia described a Rabab which could have been a bowed instrument but the Rabab of Kashmir and Afghanistan is plucked one and has been known to North India for over 500 years now. The Mirror, may 1980.

Celebrated Rababis:

Rabab maestros are called *Rababis*. Mardana was first Rababi in Sikh tradition. He belonged to Mirasi caste. His son Shahzada was also a Rababi himself.

"He too was a skilled player of Rabab and Guru Nanak appointed him as the successor of Mardana. He often accompanied the Guru Ji during the latter's travels." Writes Dr. A.S Paintal in his book: The nature and place of Music.

Some of the other prominent Rababis were Satta, Balwand, Atra, Bujha, Chaand, Dhanna, Khera, Laal, Moti, Sai Ditta, Sundar, Taaba, Desa, Mukhtyar, Aruda, Buda, Inayat, Aaga Faiyaz, Naseera, Hamad Baksh, etc.

Historical evidences suggest that Rabab flourished in Arab, northerner and European countries.

It was played by wandering traders. Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji had a special kind of Rabab made for Mardana prior to Udaasis. This Rabab was created by Firanda. According to Kahan Singh Nabha, Firanda was a savant in the subject of Raga Vidya, who, upon the request of Shri Guru Nanak Dev, taught Mardana and gifted this new Rabab to him in Satguru gaon Bhairuana (where today, Manji Sahab Gurudwara is located).

This Rabab differed from the others. It was to be played using Jawa. It's resonator was not exactly flat, but comparatively spherical. The Rabab depicted in paintings of Mardana resembles the one of Shri Guru Gobind, which now graces a museum in Himachal Pradesh, Mandi.

The technique used to play this Rabab was different as well. The resonator is wider and larger. It bears four strings. Only traditional strings are used. The first string is '*Zeel ka Taar*'. This string was used since the beginning. Shri Guru Gobind Singh's Rabab is displayed in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. All its strings have broken but the *Zeel ka Taar* can still be seen. The above mentioned Rabab is Firandiya kind, unique to Gurmat Sangeet, is truly a blessing of Shri Guru Nanak Ji to the world music.

Importance of Rabab in Sikh Tradition:

The Rabab used by Shri Guru Nanak Dev holds immense value to Kirtan in Sikh tradition. Its sound does not linger, thereby making it ideal for accompanying vocals. It has little to no scope of Gamak, murki, and meend etc. This is advantageous as it makes lyrics (which hold enormous value in Sikh tradition) clearer, more impactful and capable of leaving a sublime impression on human mind.

Very convenient for travelling, this instrument's euphonious, mellifluous sound is capable of echoing in boundless panoramas. It's aesthetically pleasing sound, touches every human heart. It invokes a more tranquil, reflective atmosphere than an alluring one.

It is a perfect match for the spiritual and esoteric nature of Gurmat Sangeet. During the Udaasis, Shri Guru Nanak Dev sang, while Mardana played and thus resulting meld of music and philosophy calmed the mind of the listeners.

Significance of Rabab - A Scientific Viewpoint

Gurmat Sangeet has 31 chief ragas and several Uparagas. The compositions of Bani is based on them. According to Raga parampara, the Raaga tradition, these Ragas have varying notes. For example komal, ati komal, aandolit, chadhe hue ya utare hue (Flat or Sharp notes [b, #]). These deviant forms of notes are important for differentiating Raagas. When we look into Raga system, the Rishbh of Raga Bhairav and Gaudi are different. In the same way the Gandhar in Raga Kannada and that in Gaudi's many other forms are different, and an instrument like Rabab is very suitable To render these variations. In Rabab, 'Sthana' makes these alterations in notes possible since it is not confined to mere twelve notes like that in Harmonium's scale. Hence, the true and typical form of notes can be maintained and rendered. This unique quality of Rabab brings forth the true essence of Raga so that its purity remains untouched. When raga form is used in Shabad, it conveys the intended sentiments of baani.

Alaap based on ragas in shabad and other aesthetically pleasing elements are only possible on an instrument like Rabab. Other than that, it's capable of accurately portraying the essence of a raga, thus enhancing and enhancing the merits of Rabab.

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