



Reclaiming the Bhajan

Ancient musical styles of India transform modern worship of Christ.

—Chris Hale

The average religious Hindu man—hungry for an encounter with the Ultimate Reality—responds to song perhaps more than any other form of communication. He wants to experience the Truth, to feel it. He is not content with mere intellectual understanding. Music is one of the best bridges from me, as a follower of Christ, to this Hindu man.

All kinds of songs are sung in India. The average religious man on the city street loves the Indian film songs which are mostly about romantic love. Then you have your semi-classical *ghazal* and classical *raga* lovers—but they are a minority. The villagers, of course, appreciate their local folk styles which consist entirely of live performances during festivals which last all night long.

As far as Western music goes, about a half a million young people all over India love rock and roll, but through MTV and VTV that number

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is increasing rapidly. Something over a million may seriously love pop music. But the majority of India's upper class, though they would not go out and buy the CD, would love to dance at a disco to some good, fast, dance music from the West (along with their favorite, Hindi pop music).

When it comes to his devotional life, however, the Hindu religious seeker wants *bhajans*, repetitious songs with a simple melodic line which the leader sings and the devotees repeat. Bhajans can

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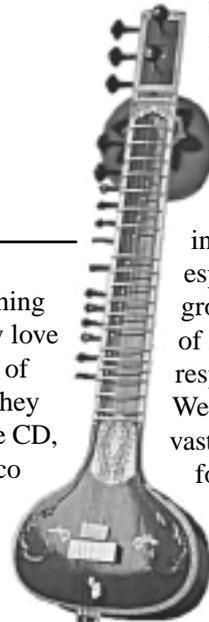
also take on complex classical forms and are available on cassette or CD. But, by and large, a bhajan is 'live' and sung in the context of a *satsang*, or religious meeting where a preacher expounds Scripture with bhajans interspersed throughout keeping the devotees actively involved. Satsangs are held at temples, ashrams and

outside wealthy devotees homes under *shamianas* (large tents) throughout the year but especially during festivals.

The average urban Indian is attracted to Western modern music and Hindi pop (which is influenced greatly by the West). It makes him loosen up and enjoy himself. But if you introduce this kind of music in a religious context he would likely find the experience confusing. He may well leave saying, "*Tan halata hain lekin man ko kuch nahin karta*" (or, "This music moves the body, but it does nothing for the soul").

Admittedly, there is an increasing minority in the cities especially from Christian background and an increasing number of Hindu young people who are responding spiritually to modern, Western worship styles. But the vast majority of Indians do not. As for the typical Western hymns and Western classical music, these do even less spiritually for the average Hindu than the modern Western choruses.

Translating the Western choruses into the local languages is only a minute improvement, because though the intellect can respond, the emotions are not touched by the Western melodies. Translating the



words of great Western hymns and putting Indian melodies to them is a vast improvement on the above, but this also has its weak points. One can easily imagine how difficult it is to take a Western poetical form and fit it into traditional Indian musical form. The majority of popular Christian worship songs have melodies that are reminiscent of Hindi film song melo-

dies of the last 20 years. This brings us back to square one, music that moves the body but not the soul.

Likewise, many of the Christian songs in North India are South Indian songs translated into Hindi. Though there is a far greater similarity between South and North than between West and East, it is clear that this is still very inadequate for use among North Indians. The translations are quite poor and lack the sweet poetical flow of North Indian verse.

Clearly, with Hindus, the bhajan is the most helpful musical form, especially in North India, where Christian and Western influence is most strongly opposed. These songs have Indian lyrics, Indian tunes and an Indian worship format. Historically, they are taken from Hindu devotional practice, but there is nothing unscriptural about these forms. The forms are conducive to Biblical meditation. First, there is the exposition of the passage by the preacher which enlightens the understanding through the Holy Spirit. Then there is the repetition of

the Biblical thought through the singing of the bhajan and the thought goes from the mind into the heart and touches the emotions and the will.

Of course, this style of worship is very foreign to most Indian Christians from traditional church backgrounds. Initially, many of them find such a format offensive because it reminds them of Hinduism. However, the use of bhajans is recommended primarily in evangelism or in churches that are actively seeking to make their worship service more appealing to Hindus.

Bhajans and satsang are primarily being used by church planters in the vast areas of India that are not being reached directly by the local church.

Finally it needs to be said that the modern, English-speaking, high class, secular, Hindu person may be more open to spiritual things through modern, Western worship formats than traditional Indian ones which he has already thrown out. We've found in the ministry we do among these people that they respond to the traditional bhajan format when presented using a combination of

Western and Indian instruments. This format is also appealing to Indians living outside India. From my experience with the bhajan worship group Aradhna¹ (meaning, "worship") in the United Kingdom during the last two summers I have found that this format appeals greatly to the large number of Indian emigrants. It is even welcomed in predominantly white churches who are seeking a multi-cultural worship experience.

What we need, then, is for people to begin learning and using the traditional forms and arranging them musically using a combination of Indian and Western instruments. By and large, the first part must be done by Indian poets and Indian musicians. Foreigners can help especially with the packaging because of their access to quality electronic musical equipment and their familiarity with its use. With God's help, there is much that can be done with music to communicate the message of the Gospel in India. 🌐

1. Our first CD, *Deep Jale* (Light the Lamp) is in its second production. See "Resources," page 27.

Worshiping Christ With the Best of East and West

-Chris Hale

In 1990, I went to India after graduating from Berklee College of Music with a degree in classical composition, jazz and rock guitar, with a vision to reach modern Indian youth with a rock band that sang songs in Hindi and English. Within the first year there I discovered Christian bhajans, devotional songs addressed to Christ that had a lyrical and melodic style that was truly Indian and that drew me into worship. Our rock band, Olio, which was performing in univer-

sity campus rock music festivals began singing some of these bhajans using the instruments in the band as well as Indian percussion. We found that the young people loved these songs the most although at that time it was not common to mix Western styles such as rock music with the traditional Indian styles.

Now, 10 years later, Hindi songs with Western instrumentation, both devotional and secular, are very popular. Andrew Lloyd Webber is presently

working on a new Broadway musical with India's top popular song composer, A.R. Rahman. Rahman popularized the use of Western instrumentation and rhythm in Indian songs.

Indians, both young and old, love their own melodies and poetry. The time is ripe for Christian youth to begin composing worship songs to Christ which blend Indian melody and lyrical style with Western instrumentation. There are many

composers of Indian music in the Church in India, but many of them feel that the younger generation is not interested in their music. What is needed is a freshness that will attract the young people to the Indian melodies, and that freshness is Western instrumentation and rhythm. There needs to be an exchange of musical ideas between the older and younger generations in the Christian church. 🌐