

**ISSN 2523-4684**  
**e-ISSN 2791-1241**

ҚАЗАҚ ҰЛТТЫҚ ХОРЕОГРАФИЯ АКАДЕМИЯСЫ  
KAZAKH NATIONAL ACADEMY OF CHOREOGRAPHY  
КАЗАХСКАЯ НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ АКАДЕМИЯ ХОРЕОГРАФИИ

ҒЫЛЫМИ  
журналы

scientific  
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научный  
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# ARTS ACADEMY

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**2 (2) 2022**

Маусым 2022

June 2022

Июнь 2022

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2022 жылдың наурыз  
айынан шыға бастады /  
published since March 2022 /  
издается с марта 2022 года

жылына 4 рет шығады/  
published 4 times a year/  
выходит 4 раза в год

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Nur-Sultan city  
город Нур-Султан

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**ISSN 2523-4684**

**е ISSN 2791-1241**

Қазақстан Республикасының Ақпарат және қоғамдық даму министрлігі Ақпарат комитетінің мерзімді баспасөз басылымын, ақпарат агенттігін және желілік басылымды есепке қою туралы **02.02.2022 жылы берілген**

**№ KZ77VPY00045494 куәлік.**

Шығу жиілігі: жылына 4 рет

Тиражы: 300 дана

Редакция мекен-жайы: Нұр-Сұлтан қ., Ұлы Дала даңғылы, 9, 470 офис

Тел.: 8 (7172) 790-832

E-mail: artsballet01@gmail.com

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**Scientific journal of the Kazakh National Academy of Choreography**

**ISSN 2523-4684**

**e ISSN 2791-1241**

Certificate of registration of a periodical, information agency and online publication of the Information Committee of the Ministry of Information and Public Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan **No. KZ77VPY00045494, issued 02.02.2022**

Frequency: 4 issues per year

Printing: 300 copies

Editorial Office: Nur-Sultan city, Uly Dala avenue 9, 470 office

Phone: 8 (7172) 790-832

E-mail: artsballet01@gmail.com

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**Научный журнал Казахской национальной академии хореографии.**

**ISSN 2523-4684**

**e ISSN 2791-1241**

Свидетельство о постановке на учет периодического печатного издания, информационного агентства и сетевого издания Комитета информации Министерство информации и общественного развития Республики Казахстан

**№ KZ77VPY00045494, выданное 02.02.2022 г.**

Периодичность: 4 раза в год

Тираж: 300 экземпляров

Адрес редакции: г. Нур-Султан, пр. Ұлы Дала, 9, 470 офис.

Тел.: 8 (7172) 790-832

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## **IDENTIFYING THE SPACE OF SHIVA'S RUDRA VEENA: A QUEST TO EXPLORE MYTHS, BELIEFS, AND FACTS IN THE DISCOURSE OF THIS ANCIENT MUSICAL INSTRUMENT**

### **Annotation**

*Rudra Veena, an ancient musical instrument is believed to be most widely used in North Indian Classical Music. Being one of the first musical instruments in Hindustani Classical Music, it has a significantly interesting history of its own, which is intertwined with various captivating facts, myths, and beliefs. My goal in this paper is to explore the intricacies involved in the making of this extravagant instrument, the myths and the stereotypes related to it, and the efforts of some prominent Rudra Veena players who have fought with time and defied a change that's inclined to modern musical taste in the quest to keep the tradition of Rudra Veena alive. In my opinion, it is significant to trace these elements that are now rooted in an unspeakable silence and demand a voice of their own.*

**Key words:** *Hindustani Classical Music, Gharana, Dhrupad, mythology, Vajrasan, Khyal, Sukhasan*

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## **РУДРА ВИНА ШИВА КЕҢІСТІГІН АНЫҚТАУ: ЕЖЕЛГІ МУЗЫКАЛЫҚ АСПАПТЫҢ ДИСКУРСЫНДА МИФТЕРДІ, НАНЫМДАР МЕН ФАКТІЛЕРДІ ТАБУ**

### **Аннотация**

*Ежелгі музыкалық аспап Рудра Вина Солтүстік Үнді классикалық музыкасында кеңінен қолданылады. Хиндустанидің классикалық музыкасындағы алғашқы музыкалық аспаптардың бірі болып танылады және де оның түрлі фактілермен, мифтермен және нанымдармен сипатталатын өзіндік қызықты тарихы бар. Бұл мақалада осы экстравагантты құралдың өзіндік ерекшеліктері және де оған байланысты мифтер мен стереотиптер қарастырылған. Сонымен қатар Рудра Вина музыканттарының кейбір көрнекті өкілдерінің заманауи музыкалық өзгерістерге қарсы болғандығы, олардың Рудра Вейн жайлы дәстүрді сақтап қалғысы келгендігі жайлы да сөз қозғалады. Біздің ойымызша, қазіргі таңда осы мәселелердің басын ашып алу маңызды деп ойлаймыз.*

**Түйінді сөздер:** *Хиндустанидің классикалық музыкасы, Гарана, Дхрупад, мифология, Вайрасан, Хял, Сухасан*

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## ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВА РУДРА ВИНА ШИВЫ: ПОИСК МИФОВ, ВЕРОВАНИЙ И ФАКТОВ В ДИСКУРСЕ ЭТОГО ДРЕВНЕГО МУЗЫКАЛЬНОГО ИНСТРУМЕНТА

### Аннотация

Считается, что *Rudra Veena*, древний музыкальный инструмент, наиболее широко используется в североиндийской классической музыке. Один из первых музыкальных инструментов в классической музыке Хиндустани, *Rudra Veena* имеет свою собственную интересную историю, которая переплетается с различными увлекательными фактами, мифами и верованиями. Моя цель в этой статье – исследовать тонкости, связанные с созданием этого экстравагантного инструмента, связанные с ним мифы и стереотипы, а также усилия некоторых выдающихся музыкантов *Rudra Veena*, которые боролись со временем, бросали вызов изменениям, отражавшим влияние современного музыкального вкуса, стремясь сохранить традицию о *Rudra Veena* живой. На наш взгляд, важно проследить эти составляющие истории, которые в настоящее время погружены в невыразимое молчание и требуют проговаривания.

**Ключевые слова:** Классическая музыка Хиндустани, Гарана, Дхрупад, мифология, Ваджрасан, Кхьял, Сукхасан

**Introduction.** Scholars tend to believe that the word *Veena* is derived from its forerunner word *Vana*, a string instrument mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. Katyayana, a *Vedic* priest, further uses *Vana* in *Atharva Veda* to denote an instrument with hundred strings. *Vana*, in its literal sense, means to produce sound (*shabda*) and speed (*gati*). Therefore, *Vana* was considered to be the stringed instrument that gave birth to *Veena*. One of the major types of *Veena*, *Rudra Veena*, is widely known as a traditional instrument in *Hindu* mythology. This ancient instrument is found in various parts of North India and is majorly played in *Hindustani* classical music for its deep bass resonance. It is played in the ancient musical style, *Dhrupad*. Its sound can be either deep and meditative, or fast and ecstatic, according to the player's will and ability.

This large plucked string instrument's deep tonal quality allows austere expansion of the *Raaga* when explored by vocalists who practice *Dhrupad*. The instrument has sociological and cultural connotations and dimensions. Its playing connects with the artist's breathing rhythm and is traditionally played in *Vajrasan*. This instrument is divine in every form which connects a listener to the cosmos. To respect the unique instrument, the Indian post issued a commemorative stamp in the year 1998.

Therefore, in the hierarchy of divinities, the *Rudra Veena* enjoys a special place. It is the instrument that symbolizes the Indian ethos throughout the country. The king of all instruments, it is the role model for all other string

instruments in line after it. Being one of the first musical instruments in *Hindustani* Classical Music, it has a significantly interesting history of its own, which is intertwined with various captivating facts, myths, and beliefs.

**Methods of Research.** In my research paper, I have done a historical reading of Shiva's Rudra Veena to problematize, unwind and fill the gaps in the discourse of this Ancient Musical Instrument. In this study, the research method that I have used is Literary and Interpretive. The interpretive method analyses interpret and evaluate literary texts and writing styles, perception of social reality, and development of thought. Because my paper stands on Identifying the Space of Shiva's Rudra Veena and exploring Myths, Beliefs, and Facts to interpret a conservative social matrix given culture, I have used the Interpretive method and not other literary literature research methods. I have further used Bibliography as a tool for my research paper out of the various tools available for literary research.

*Veena* finds its mention in history in 276 BC for the first time, through a coin that had in it imbibed the visual of Samudragupta Maurya playing the instrument. The Rudra Veena, on the other hand, was initially called *Bin*, which was used by some ascetics during their meditation, and scholars hold the opinion that the Rudra Veena was first seen in the 10th century, through compositions from the same period that talk about *Bin*.

Talking about the advent of string instruments in general, scholars find that the oldest preserved portrayal in temple architecture is from around the 5th century, which shows a simple, one-stringed instrument, consisting of a bamboo cane with a gourd as a resonance body, which, hence, can be understood as a prototype of *Veena* itself.

Later, around the 16th century, Rudra Veena developed its actual shape with frets and two symmetric resonance bodies. At this time, it evolved into one of the most important melody instruments in aristocratic court music and later became the main solo instrument of the primary vocal *Dhrupad* music style.

According to ancient beliefs, Rudra Veena was believed to be played along with the *Veda Mantra Pathan* (Vedic recital) and also during the *Yagna* (Vedic rituals) performed by the *Rishis*. Considered sacred, Rudra Veena was equivalent to a *Shank* as its sound was accompanied by worship rituals. However, historically, Rudra Veena seems to have come into being in the 13th and 14th centuries. The earliest written record that finds mention of the Rudra Veena is from the court records of Zain-ul Abidin (1418-1470), which establishes that Rudra Veena attained significant importance among Mughal court musicians. The Mughal court rendered this instrument a changed lyric, tempo, and style of performing. Previously used to perform the *Varnanas* of deities, Rudra Veena later found its new place in the Mughal court in praise of Emperors.

Other scholars hold the opinion that Rudra Veena evolved in the 11th century from an older string instrument called the *Laghu Kinnari Veena*. Its

grammar and principles are based on the *Dhrupad* style of music, which itself evolved through the *Sama Veda*'s chanting.

Throughout the entire history of Rudra Veena, the 8th to 16th centuries saw its maximum popularity and therefore this period is considered a golden period for Rudra Veena. Its pinnacle also witnesses the contribution of great musicians like Swami Haridas, Miya Tansen, Baiju Bawara, etc. to its great success.

Henceforth, this universally acclaimed musical instrument has quite a few versions of its history which are accepted by various sects of scholars. Now, after having discussed the history of the Rudra Veena, I will explore a handful, but varied scholarly opinions on its creation as well.

According to the interpretation of academicians on the making of Rudra Veena, it is believed to be an invention by Shiva himself. In fact, *Rudra*, in its literal meaning is a synonym of Shiva. Rudra Veena is in a way, a symbol of love, devotion, and dedication of Lord Shiva towards Goddess Parvati. It is also firmly believed by scholars that this instrument was inspired by the form and shape of Goddess Parvati herself. A tribute to her beauty, the instrument is believed to be first played by Shiva himself in praise of the beauty of Parvati, which in turn is believed to impart certain spiritual powers to the instrument. While contemplating the perfect beauty of his wife Parvati, Shiva shaped the *dandi*/bridge of the instrument in resonance to the hand of Parvati, the frets as her bangles, and the strings as her hair. Moreover, the two *Tumba*/gourds represented the two beautiful eyes of Parvati.

Other versions of the tale acclaim that Shiva created Rudra Veena for the entertainment of other gods as he is known to enjoy the art forms of dancing and singing. Thus, as per this version of Rudra Veena's story of creation, the pegs of the instrument symbolize the *Sapta Rishis* and the *dandi*/bridge symbolize Goddess Saraswati. Moreover, the two gourds depict Brahma and Vishnu.

More researches on the formation of the Rudra Veena also state that Shiva held Rudra Veena during the creation of the Earth and thereby, used his intestines to make the strings of the instrument. This is one of the claims as to why the Rudra Veena is said to resonate with the cosmos and thus possess spiritual powers. In this version, the *dandi/merudanda* represent both the human spine and the cosmic axis. To maintain the equilibrium of the instrument, the length of the *dandi* measures as much as our nine fists combined, which also exactly equals the distance from our navel to the top of our skull.

Another legendary myth that registers itself to the creation of this traditional instrument revolves around *Ravana*, the primary antagonist of the epic, Ramayana. *Ravana*, the son of the sage *Vishrava* and grandson of *Pulastya* (one of the *Sapta Rishis*) is believed to be the great-grandson of Lord *Brahma*. It is strongly believed that he was a great scholar who had divine expertise of all the 4 *Vedas*, 6 *shastras*, and 64 ancient *Vedic* arts.



What is noteworthy here in the context of Rudra Veena's creation is that *Ravana* was an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva, and in pursuit to impress him and attaining boons of undisputed power, *Ravana* created Rudra Veena. Mythology has it that *Ravana* used two of his heads to create a new form of *Veena* and used his veins as strings to play devotional music in praise of Shiva, hoping to win the god's favor. *Ravana* then named it Rudra Veena; an instrument created as a tribute to Shiva. This way, Rudra Veena came into existence as an instrument of incomparable power, as per this mythological tale.

According to mythology, the last tale around the making of Rudra Veena also affirms that while *Ravana* was playing Rudra Veena to sing songs of praise for Lord Shiva, one of the strings of the instrument broke. As he did not want Shiva to be disturbed, he continued to play the remaining strings. It was when Lord Shiva was too engrossed while listening to *Ravana's Veena* that *Ravana* replaced the broken string with one of his nerves from his body. By not breaking the melody of the *Veena*, *Ravana* won Shiva's favor as his ardent devotee and this was when Shiva granted a boon of invincibility to *Ravana* against the *Devas*, *Gandharvas*, and wild animals.

Despite various interpretations of Lord Shiva being the creator of Rudra Veena, what is certain is its association with the *Yogis* and Ascetics. For them, playing Rudra Veena was ritualistic and meditative. *Hindu* mythology registers the fact that Shiva himself was the creator of the universe and therefore, the music produced by Rudra Veena possesses the power to purify the mind of the musicians and the listeners alike and uplift their consciousness into a transcendent and spiritual space.

This offers multiple stances to the reader on the creation of the invincible musical instrument, Rudra Veena. One fact which should be religiously accepted from these interpretations is that this instrument has a sacred thread attached to it which makes it worthy of worship.

From the times that the history of musical instruments can be traced, Rudra Veena hence finds acknowledgment with utmost dignity and reverence by numerous classical musicians, whose efforts to fight with time to keep the ancient tradition of Rudra Veena alive should never be forgotten. The history of this instrument records a handful of players who defined the excellence of this instrument, modified it along with the changing times, and tried to popularise it in India and other countries of the world.

Ustad Bande Ali Khan is said to be one of the greatest Rudra Veena exponents of all time. He was a court musician of Indore and played Rudra Veena in both *Dhrupad* and *Khyal* styles. His contribution to Rudra Veena has given this instrument the form that is seen today.

Another prominent name to contribute significantly to the modification of Rudra Veena is Zia Mohiuddin Dagar. It was in the 20th century that he modified and redesigned Rudra Veena by using bigger gourds, thickening tube/*dandi*, and the steel playing strings (0.45-0.47 mm), and closing *Javari*

*That*, a part of the instrument. This resulted in the production of a soft and deep sound when played without a plectrum/*mihrab* (the device used to play the instrument).

Other well-known Rudra Veena players who contributed, and some of who continue to contribute as dedicated and ardent musicians of this instrument are Abid Hussain Khan- Lucknow, Rajab Ali Khan- Seni, Krishna Rao Kollapure- Gwalior, Asad Ali Khan- Gwalior, Wazir Khan- Rampur, and Bahauddin Dagar- Dagar. Additionally, some prominent *gharanas* of Rudra Veena are – Seni, Jaipur, Indore, Kolkata, and Dagar.

There is a reason why we do not have any female players added to the above list. It is because the grandeur of Rudra Veena unfortunately has a gripping stereotype that throws light on the gender variance of the instrument. It establishes that women are not allowed to play the instrument because they would, by doing so, ruin its sacredness. It is also believed that Rudra Veena is too heavy for a woman's frail shoulders and the mere touch of the instrument can impair a woman's reproductive system and render her infertile. Thus, women have been kept away from playing it for centuries.

Mythology has it that the Rudra Veena was crafted by Shiva as a tribute to the beauty of Parvati as she laid in repose, an arm thrown across her breasts. But over time, the icon of female divinity became a tool of exclusion and patriarchy took over everything else. Thus, women were not allowed to play the instrument because and hamper its sacredness.

Despite the rudimentary stereotypes, there are a handful of female Rudra Veena players who didn't comply with what was expected from them and followed their passion blindly. The modern era today witnesses a few female players who have single-handedly fought for their right to play the ancient instrument and proved their mettle as extraordinary artists. The first woman in contemporary times to master this instrument is Jyoti Hedge. Other prominent female Rudra Veena players to emerge in this space are Tejaswini Kolhapure and Madhuvanti Pal.

It has taken these female players a decade of backbreaking work, a lot of heartaches, and small and big battles against superstition, cynicism, patriarchy, and sexism to become the most sought-after Rudra Veena artistes in India, and abroad.

Ironically enough, the first instance of a female playing Rudra Veena dates back to the 17th century. In the Venugopala Shrine in the Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam, an ancient sculpture of a maiden playing Rudra Veena can still be observed. The sculpture is still visible to the general eye today and leaves the visitors in strange awe, as the relatively recent stereotype of women not allowed to play Rudra Veena stands in juxtaposition to the stories depicted by the sculptures in India's ancient temples.

Despite the stereotypes associated with this ancient instrument, what remains as a universally accepted phenomenon is that Rudra Veena is

ultimately a symbol of love and love has no gendered barriers. However, while on one hand, the Modern world has proved to be flourishing for Rudra Veena to witness quite a few powerful female players, on the other hand, the same modern world also witnesses the slow death of this age-old musical instrument.

With passing time, this rare instrument is almost on the verge of extinction and faces an identity crisis. Consequently, we are left with only a handful of Rudra Veena players across the country, who thankfully refuse to give away this talent that's long-drawn for centuries.

For almost 400 years, Rudra Veena dominated Hindustani music as an accompaniment to vocal music, as well as in solo performances. However, it was in the early 19th century that it started losing its position with the introduction of instruments like the *Sitar*, *Surbahar*, and *Sarod*. It also led to the decline of the *Dhrupad* genre and gave rise to *Khyal*, which ultimately replaced Rudra Veena.

It is also noteworthy that the rich tradition of Rudra Veena saw a downfall with the end of the patronage system. Before Independence, Rudra Veena players, as *Dhrupad* practitioners, were supported by the Princely States. Whereas, after Independence and the political integration of India, this traditional patronage system ended. With the end of this traditional support, *Dhrupad's* popularity in India declined, and so did the popularity of Rudra Veena. It is, therefore, quite difficult today to find craftsmen who create this instrument as well as those who have the skill to play it.

This instrument also observed changes in its manufacturing process, its posture, and its pattern of playing along with its social status, all in compliance with the demands of the changing times.

It is noted that traditionally, Rudra Veena was played in the *Vajrasan*, placed diagonally, where the upper gourd rested upon the left shoulder and the lower gourd rested upon the right thigh of the player. The fingerboard was held close to the chest. This posture was considered quite troublesome by the players as it was difficult to play Rudra Veena for long hours in this posture. It was Zia Mohiuddin Dagar who is credited to experiment with a new posture and pattern of playing to ease the recitals of the Rudra Veena. Inventing the posture of *Sukhasan*, he kept the instrument half diagonally. This ultimately relaxed the players as they now did not have to hold the instrument in its entirety, but partially.

While manufacturing, previously the stem or the fingerboard of Rudra Veena was made of bamboo. Because bamboo had a very short span of life, it had to be changed every alternate year. Lately, bamboo was replaced by teak wood, which gave longer life and also a better tone to Rudra Veena. This change in the manufacturing of Rudra Veena is attributed to Sadiq Ali, which is also confirmed by his son Asad Ali Khan.

Rudra Veena has therefore undergone prominent changes in the modern era, many of which add to the longevity of the instrument, but sadly enough, we witness a drastic fall in the players, audiences, and makers.

**Conclusion.** The rich heritage of Rudra Veena has seen a contrast in its condition from a glorifying past that stands in juxtaposition to its bleak present. It is now devoid of the dedicated players with their extreme subtle playing techniques and aesthetics which required a lifetime of devotion and self-discipline for mastering the art to play it. Rudra Veena has now become an ambassador of the past times because one can rarely find it today on musical platforms.

Those who have come across this instrument are truly treasured as they have by now realized that Rudra Veena is not just a musical instrument but instead, represents the philosophy of life. This instrument forms a beautiful part of our classical music which is nothing but *Naad Yog*, a wonderful method of connecting with the within, to reach a goal that is abstract, subtle, inspiring, and mystical.

Moreover, Rudra Veena is like an instrument of measure. A compass, which can be used to study the *Swar Bhed* (minute and microtonal detailing and exploration of individual notes). It gives *pramaan* (validation) to the musical elements. In a way, it is used to study music itself. For musicians, it is a valuable instrument to study the sound and understand how their voice can be enhanced and applied to study the structure of the *Raaga*. Rudra Veena helps one to get into greater depth of sound and understand the smallest nuances.

It has taken a mountain of effort for some prominent Rudra Veena players to fight the battle for Rudra Veena against time, which is now dying a slow death. Their ardent endeavor has defied a change that's inclined to modern musical taste and they are still in the quest to keep the tradition of the now plaguing Rudra Veena alive. Their efforts have made sure that Rudra Veena has to be a thoroughly living art form and not just an antique piece of instrument.

The ancient and rich musical heritage of Rudra Veena is facing an existential crisis, which has a rich past, an endangered present, and possibly, an arbitrary future.

This ancient verse on Rudra Veena sums up its primordial beauty and ultimate power, which also confirms that Lord *Shiva* held Rudra Veena during the creation of this Earth. The verse is a translation by Navamalati Neog Chakraborty-

### *Prelude to Creation*

On the day of that violent upheaval,  
Oh Lord you held in your hand  
Your Rudra Veena.

None seem glad  
For all were quiet, the sun and the moon,  
There burnt over the horizon  
Great excitement  
The day you held in your hand  
Your Rudra Veena.

The moon had left its sphere  
On the bare neck hung the garland of light  
The sky was dark  
The day you held in the hand  
Your Rudra Veena.

The sky was overcast,  
With not a ray of light on the Earth,  
Creation was over-spread  
Over-filled with water,  
And overflow Oh Lord  
Your Rudra Veena!

In the darkness there arose again  
Clusters of stars,  
The destruction had created  
A flower-decked Earth,  
Where creepers grew  
New tones, new words  
And our hearts were filled with  
The germ of creation.  
That day, you laid down  
Your Rudra Veena.

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