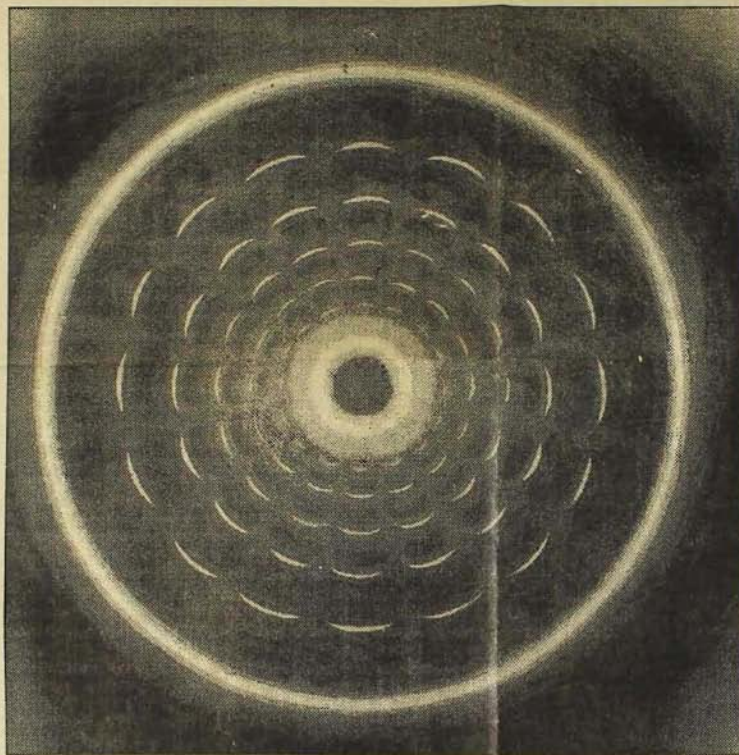


LIVING a life amidst crackling loudspeakers, the cacophony of motor horns, blaring video-cassette recorders or the Music Television next door, the tumultuous hum of humanity around you at work or in the chorus of the long line of political protesters on the street — mankind has robbed itself of the pleasure of listening to the subtle sounds of nature. An international seminar on *Dhvani* (Sound) held by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in the Capital recently, illuminated the vast canvas of sound as it applies to various fields — the philosophies of the world, poetic theory, sound as in music, in anthropology, mythical and cultural histories, social cycles, sound as communication, and then in modern science.

More than anything else, the seminar revealed the need to break up the areas of discussion in specific terms, as each question lends itself to deeper probing across the civilizations of the world, leading to awesome open-ended spaces for discussion. As scholars presented their papers, some as spontaneous lectures and others as prepared manuscripts, they revealed the wide-swinging allusions and applications of sound in its entirety. The rough categories of discussion went like this: Sound as the source of creation and sources of sound; Sound and the Senses; Sound and Time; Sound and Space; Symbols of Sound Sonic Design; Echoes and resonances.

The poetic connotations of *dhvani* were expostulated in India as early as the ninth century. Anandavardhana's text, *Dhvanyaloka*, is of central importance in any discussion on *dhvani*. His thesis on poetic theory that in the appreciation of literature, it is the *rasa* ("communicated sensibility") that decides its quality, and it is *dhvani* ("richness of undertones") that forms the essence of poetry (Example: the *mantras* that take their meaning and power through correct intonation.) takes off from the other major texts on Indian aesthetics, of Bharata, Udbhata, and others. The seminar did not dwell much on Anandavardhana's thesis, although the reference came through the discussions.

Among the other Sanskrit texts that deal with *dhvani*, Abhinavagupta's treatises present a whole structural definition of decibel levels in their subtle variations, applications in music, theatre, communication, varieties of inflections and so on. Ranga-



Resonances of Sound

THE FIRST EVER INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON
DHVANI THROWS UP INTERESTING QUESTIONS

by Ranjini Rajagopal

nyaki Ayyangar's paper went into these issues quickly, revealing the sophistication of the ancient scholar's thinking, relevant for all time and across cultures. The foreign delegates, Peter Pannke, Andreas Bosshard and Hildegard Westerkamp seemed somewhat at sea with the Sanskrit references. Pannke, who has lived in India for three years and has learnt *dhruv* for 30 years, felt that the *sastras* of the world essen-

tially said the same things, albeit differently.

B.N. Saraswati, anthropologist attached to the IGNCA, expanded on this idea and made a case for the comprehension of sound in tune with cultural origins. "Cognition is culture, specific. I listen to Western music but I cannot comprehend it. Comprehension of sound runs deeper than mere hearing or listening. Certain forms of sound such as the

nishads and the Australian aborigines, thousands of miles away, are essentially one and the same. "While one is sophisticated, speculative thought, the other is at the primitive level. Traditional science and modern science are saying the same things. The Upanishadic view of *Brahman* and the modern science theory of expanding universe are the same." While modern science needs mechanical equipment for its observation-based findings, traditional science or aboriginal worldview arrives at the same piece of truth through a different course. "There are many ways of knowing things."

The use of myth as technical language by tribes and aborigines has more than linear relevance. The Australian aboriginal concept of the world being covered with the web of song, approximates the modern science theory of the universe of sound. "The physical world becomes communicable through sound because of ether. It is the element of sound that facilitates this," explains Saraswati. "The Australian aborigines believe that everything has a life. They have a kinship with the whole universe. Their pre-historic ancestors sang about the physical world. They hear them through dream time." Saraswati has stayed with them for a few days while on a visit to Australia, adding that they are closer to the elements and understand nature quicker. The techno-centric world has bombarded their lives and cross-cultural interaction has created a white race among them as well. "Ultimately they will be extinct, through biological extinction. Many have died already. But the ideas will remain. Some day when we have destroyed ourselves, these ideas would be useful".

Talking about the Chinese concept of sound, Tan Chung, attached to the IGNCA, presented a neat sketch of its role in Chinese ideography. *Yin*, a word for sound is written in fact with three parts, of which the lower is the symbol of ear. The other word for sound, *sheng*, has the sketch of an instrument, and the physical use is implied in another. He detailed on the earliest concept of sound being the drum, and how the civilisation has derived the idea of sound from human speech. The ancient Chinese reliance on oral communication seems to have formed the basis for its ideography and Tan Chung's presentation drew many to the topic for further exploration.

Onkar Prasad presented an interesting paper on sound as harmony in the acoustic environment of the Santhals. He described with

examples, the suggestive religious, mythical, social, spiritual and linguistic significance of sound in the life of the Santhals. Prasad was the only representative of tribal sound-use in the seminar. A specialised, comprehensive view of the use of sound in the folk tradition would have been useful.

Pannke, the German musicologist who has lived in Vrindavan for three years, was an active participant in the seminar. He is currently involved in designing the sound gallery of the IGNCA, along with Andreas Bosshard, who has done some incredible work in sound. Bosshard makes his own instruments improvising generously and imaginatively on a combination of them. Pannke is also busy making a feature film based in Vrindavan, and Bosshard's contribution is something he has banked on. He has traced a sort of parallel—in terms of initiation — between *dhruv* and medieval music.

This led him to unearth the history of a poet-singer from the eastern part of Germany, in the 12th century. Heinrich von Morungen sang poetry of a high order, that has the spiritual connotation of *sufi* and *bhakti* poetry, and travelled to India. "The film is the story of an inner journey, a ritual journey, its different stages," says Pannke. "My interest in ritual theatre comes from Vrindavan. I conceived the story of this saint as a *leela*. He has collected singers from the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, Arab countries, and so on. There will be a love story as well, that of Krishna and Radha". Pannke has produced some of the music on compact discs (himself playing the *sarangi*). "There will be 50 people, and it will take a few months," he says, hoping to complete it in the Spring of 1996, on the full moon of *Holi* in March.

The seminar missed out on a full-fledged presentation on *dhvani* in literature. Another area that went unexplored with the depth it warrants, was folk culture in the Indian context that would itself need days-long deliberation. Experts from all corners of the country would have been able to contribute much to the seminar, besides other countries.

However, this is the first seminar on sound to be held in the country, and the Chairman of IGNCA, Kapila Vatsyayan, was only too aware of the inadequacy of a two-day seminar to address such an ocean of an idea. Her observation that more such seminars needed to be held, and in idea-specific terms, holds out the promise of stimulating discussions on sound in the future.

will hold this

hooting of an owl, the cry of a dog or a jackal are considered inauspicious. Certain other forms such as *ulu-dhvani*, produced by twisting the tongue, human imitation of the babbling of a he-goat, and sounds of *damru*, conch-shell, drums and gongs, bells and cymbals are auspicious for the Hindus, but not for the Muslims," he pointed out.

Saraswati holds that the cultural perceptions of the Upanishads