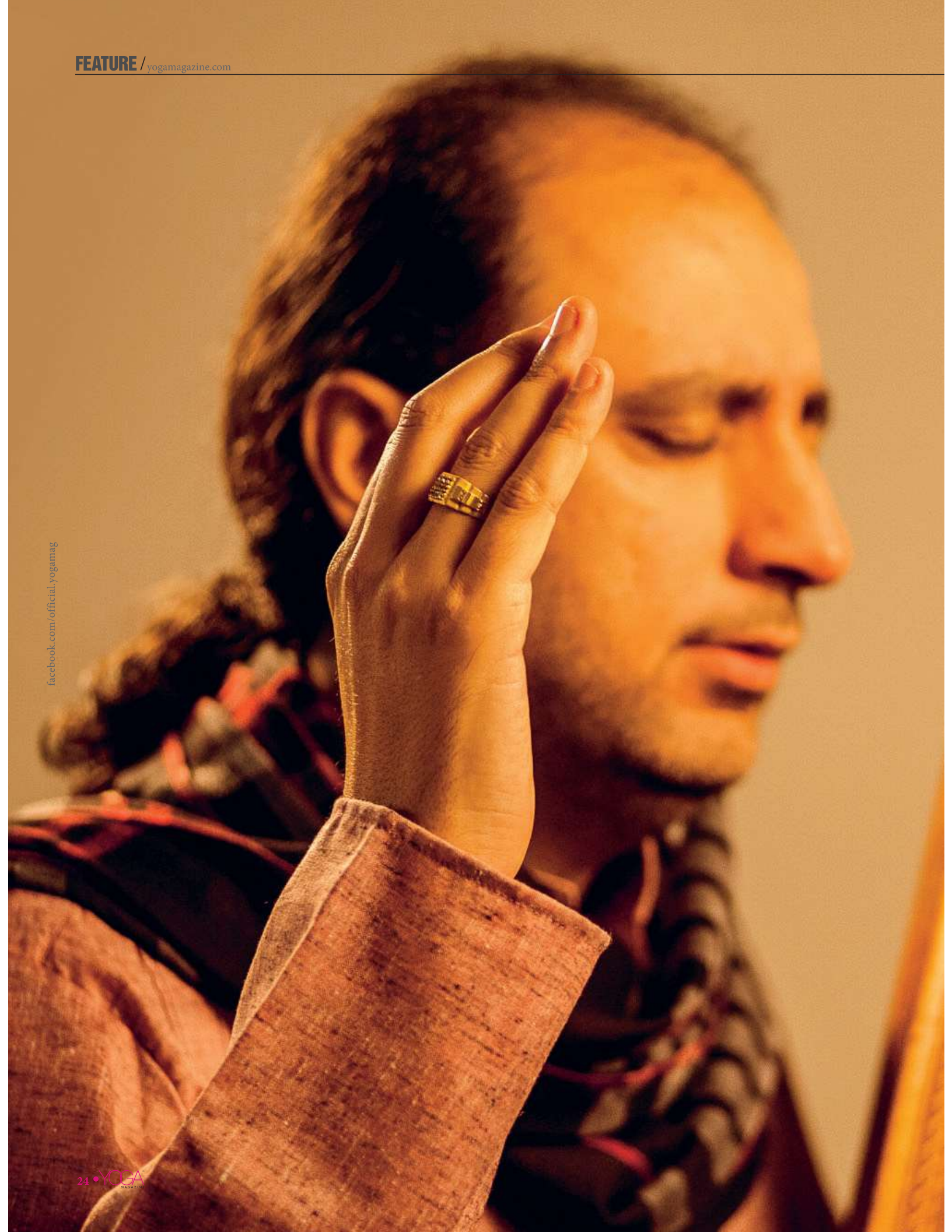


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THE AUTHENTIC TRADITION OF MANTRA & SACRED MUSIC FROM INDIA

Words: Manish Vyas

THE RELEVANCE OF AUTHENTICITY

There is a famous story called “The naked king.” A wealthy king was once approached by some weavers who offered to create the best dress possible for him. They also claimed that the uniqueness of this dress was that it would be only visible to smart people. The king gave away a lot of his wealth for this so-called miraculous dress and finally when it was ready, he ‘wore’ it.

There was a procession on the streets to show the dress which ‘could be only seen by intelligent people.’ Since no one wanted to be ridiculed, everyone was praising the dress saying how amazing the king looked. Apparently a child on the father’s shoulders got a glimpse of the king and screamed loud: “The king is naked!” Everyone tried to silence him, but the child had no fear of the truth, so he revealed the truth saying that the king was naked.

This is a witty illustration of what happens to people like me, who have grown up in India surrounded by an amazing diversity, languages, food, music, colors, festivals, traditions, rituals... when observing how our culture is represented in the west. Somehow one discovers that the same culture that one had absorbed and assimilated over so many years, is displayed completely differently and rather “disgracefully” generating consternation and sadness. Sadness about the superficiality of such a wealthy tradition. If one is genuinely interested in ancient sciences from mystical India and has studied them for years, one will not only be overwhelmed by their depth, beauty and power, but one will also feel utterly humble, feeling that one has entered a bottomless ocean, which begins but never ends.



Twenty years ago, as I had started touring the world as a musician, I came across the growing scene of western bhakti music and initially was good news to see the interest in our tradition, but as the sounds of this bhakti music started flowing towards me, I became more and more stunned. As an Indian growing with bhakti around me, I could not relate to this presentation where one cannot distinguish the bridge between the content and the music. The whole perspective of its roots, history, beauty, authenticity and above all its sacredness and grace was absent. I

tried to explain people and many of them would still not see it – I was like that child who showed the truth about the naked king.

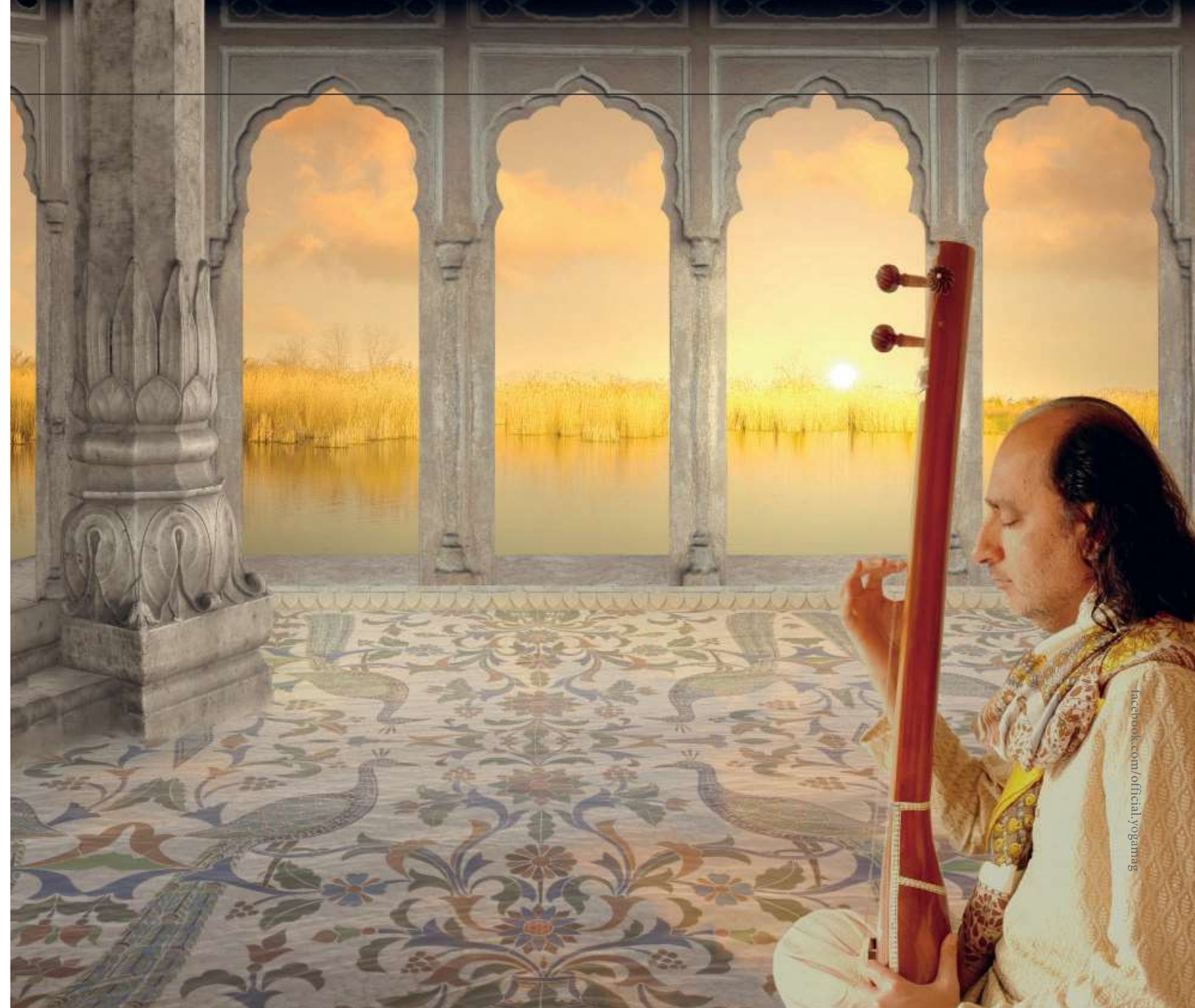
In a market which can be susceptible to unserious representations, it seems that a distorted form of mantra and kirtan practice has been developed without checking its origins and the legitimacy of the sounds, without raising the discerning sense between genuine and distorted being the outcome that many words like mantra, yogi, kirtan, naad, bhakti... are being widely used without reflecting what they truly are.

SCIENCE, NOT TREND

Mantra is a science, the science of sound: a natural practice which helps to protect the mind from its compulsive, repetitive thoughts. Mantra is a sound which has immense potential to take the practitioners to the depth of their being, helping them to discover the true nature of the Self, being this its ultimate purpose.

Mantra had nothing to do with a new-age trend, where concerts and entertainment have become the center. Like any science, it is important to learn it properly from a reliable source in order to make it effective and at the same time maintain the respect and sacredness it deserves. Every science needs a certain understanding which if applied correctly it may give great benefits, but if applied wrongly the same science leads to no-result or wrong-result – one can see this for instance in nuclear science clearly.

In mantra the first aspect is the pronunciation, the meaning comes later. Each syllable represents an element or a form, so it must be firstly pronounced exactly, to connect to the energy one is willing to awake. Therefore knowledge of Sanskrit and pronunciation are key: it's like with an e-mail address: if you spell even one character wrong, it will reach nowhere. There are many more rules in Sanskrit: accentuation, length of syllables, separation, prolongation, sound differentiation, etc. So imagine how important it is to know accurately the alphabet phonetics and rules, so that the right vibration will be there.



MANTRAS DON'T NEED MUSIC

In the traditional Vedic chanting there are only three notes, which shows that mantras are complete in themselves. But if a musician is lucky enough to create music for a mantra, then firstly one has to consider their sacred nature. According to that, the musician connects to the deity giving the right music for the mantra. The raga (music scale) and the rasa (spirit) have to be given accordingly. For example, a Shiva mantra cannot be too romantic while a Krishna mantra cannot be too fiery

– it would not go with their nature thus making a wrong call, like trying to sleep a baby with heavy-rock music. So based on its energy, one finds the right elements in the Indian music and when doing that, the body and the soul of the mantra come together; this is attained by using the right ingredients. In this way, one can see that a hip-hop version of Om Namah Shivay simply won't work – on the contrary it's like an insult to its divinity. Nothing wrong with hip-hop, but it suits to a certain

kind of lyrics and culture, certainly not to mantra. How hilarious would it sound if I sing the famous song from Queen, "We will rock you" in Indian style? It will lose its soul completely. So all this melange is going on in the west with public presentation of sacred music from India. This is also the reason why in India we don't find mantra singers, but well-trained musicians who also compose and sing mantras, so they know how to deliver the right product.

INTENTION IS NOT ENOUGH

I come across various so-called mantra-singers who hide their shortcomings behind the justification of “having good intentions.” First one needs to understand that not any singer is qualified to present mantra in the public domain. Anything that is delivered professionally has to be professional: proper training, years of practice, skills and knowing the culture in depth. Just like one cannot be a heart surgeon with good intentions only, this is also so.

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Upcoming album
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manishvyas.com/mantra

**TRADITION IS NOT THE
WORSHIP OF ASHES BUT
THE PRESERVATION OF FIRE**

In this way, over the last 20 years, with the guidance and blessings of my musical and spiritual teachers, I have created music with the sole intention that it may take the listener to deeper spaces of being, where one connects with the divine within. The love and reverence for this ancient science of Mantra also led me to work on a documentary “True World of Mantra and Sacred Music of India,” involving musicians, Sanskrit scholars and spiritual masters who have been a

lifetime genuinely working in this field. The film will showcase the depth of these traditions offering India-lovers the authentic fragrance of this inexhaustible world (manishvyas.com/movie).

The interest in this subject has developed widely in the west; now the time has come to discover the real, embracing the powerful benefits this ancient Indian traditions can offer to the world when approached with sincerity, reverence, humility and gratefulness.

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MANISH VYAS

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