

Scholar Explores Sonic Theology

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"I'm going to have to do like an accordion and squeeze my presentation together," said Tulane religious studies instructor Guy Beck, who then attempted to encapsulate in 45 minutes his career-long investigation into sound, word, rhythm and melody in the Hindu tradition.



Guy Beck, center, plays a concert at the American Center in Calcutta, India. His performance is accompanied by the tabla, left, a harmonium, right, and a drone instrument (tanpura) in the back. (Photo from Guy Beck)

Wearing a deep blue tunic for a recent lecture in Dinwiddie Hall, Beck spoke quickly, anxious to get to the demonstration part of his presentation to anthropology and graduate students. Waiting nearby was a harmonium, a small reed organ that is popular in Indian music, and two electronic devices to produce drums and drone while Beck chanted, sang and played the keyboard instrument.

"Silence may be golden in some religions, such as Zen Buddhism," Beck said, "but not for Hindus."

For Hindus, music is linked to spirituality. “Nada-Brahman,” the Sanskrit term for the power of sound in religious texts, is the cosmic sound associated with the creation and sustenance of the universe, [Beck](#) explained.

Two types of sound are described in sacred texts: “struck” sound that is manifest in the material world through voice and instruments, and “unstruck” sound that is perceived by yogis within deep meditation. Yogis listen for 11 internal, sacred sounds, such as a tinkling bell, a bamboo flute, the ocean, a waterfall and a thunder cloud.

“After singing or playing for one to two hours, a musician may access cosmic sound,” said Beck, who has released several [recordings](#) of his own.

Beck, who has studied Hinduism and music in India for many years, received a Fulbright-Nehru Senior Research Fellowship in 2010 to study vocal music in Calcutta. In the Hindu tradition, musicians venerate Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and music.

Beck related the myth of Saraswati's son, Narada, who felt human beings lacked something — music. “Narada instructed the human race in the art of music as a means to 'moksha,' the liberation from the sad, miserable world of old age, disease, death and, of course, tsunamis, earthquakes, diseases, oil spills, Katrinas. â€”