

The Essence of Indian Music: The Raga

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Abstract:

It can be derived from the Hindu mythology that music is originated from Naadbrahma or 'Om', the purest sound to be heard and it pervades and permeates the entire universe. Indian music is artistically fully developed, firmly rooted and a glorious history. A large number of common folk has been involved with it. It has rightly been said that the soul of Indian music is the 'Raga'. Hence, every student of India music must gather sufficient knowledge of what is called a Raga, its meaning and purpose. Here, in this paper attempt is made to focus on the Raga- the essence of Indian music.

Keywords:

Indian music, Raga, Naadbrahma, aroha, avaroha, Abhijnana Shakuntalam, Brihaddesi

Full Paper

Now-a-days, the art of music has been fast developing in all its aspects. In a broader sense, music includes vocal, instrumental, choral together with the art of dancing. A large number of common folk has been involving with the film, theatre, instrumental music, folk music and so on in a rapid pace. Surprisingly, among these increased numbers are the educated people, whose keen interest in music has given an impetus to a systematic, scholarly as well as scientific study of this art form.

According to Hindu mythology, music originated from the Naadbrahma or 'Om' – the first sound ever to be heard in the universe. This Naadbrahma pervades and permeates the entire universe and it is the divine manifestation of the Almighty God, the Supreme Power (or Brahma). Indeed, it is the purest sound to be heard. It is this purity that a musician attempts to achieve through his 'sadhana' – the music he is involved in.

It has rightly been said that the soul of Indian music is the 'Raga'. Hence, every student of India music must gather sufficient knowledge of what is called a Raga, its meaning and

purpose. It is not an exaggeration to say that the sole word that expresses everything worth knowing about Indian music is the Raga.

In Sangit Darpana, a Raga is defined as:

योयं ध्वनि वि शस्तु स्वर वर्ण विभूशितः ।
रंजको जन चित्तानां स राग कथ्यते बुधैः ॥

i.e., “A Raga is embellished with the color of musical notes, has its separate tune and import and is pleasing to mind.”

Etymologically, the word ‘Raga’ has been derived from Sanskrit ‘ranj’, meaning to color, to dye, to please, to cheer, to be agreeable, and so forth. In the literal sense of the term, anything that soothes, that pleases the mind would be a Raga. It is used in the literal sense of the act of dying, especially of red color. Red is the color of passion, hence Raga implies the emotional content of a song which delights the listener. A specialized sense of loveliness and beauty – especially of voice or song emerges in classical Sanskrit literature like the Panchatantra and also in Kalidasa. In its technical sense, a Raga is a word referring to a particular thing and hence is used to denote that particular thing and noting else. The summation of all that has been said above is that a Raga is an array of sounds in musical tones in a successive order and it pleases the ear of the listener and satisfies his mind too.

Defining Raga in a nutshell:

1. A Raga consists of a definite set of notes which could vary in number depending on the nature of that particular Raga.
2. Each Raga is associated with an ascending and descending order or pattern of notes, commonly known as the ‘aroha’ and the ‘avaroha’.
3. It is used in the literal sense of the act of dying, especially of red color.
4. Red is the color of passion, hence Raga implies the emotional content of a song which delights the listener.

A Raga consists of a definite set of notes which could vary in number depending on the nature of that particular Raga. Also, each Raga is associated with an ascending and descending order or pattern of notes, commonly known as the ‘aroha’ and the ‘avaroha’. A Raga must evoke a particular emotion or create a certain ‘mood’ which is hard to define, however. The basic components of a Raga can be written down in the form of a scale. By using a definite set of notes, by emphasizing certain degrees of a scale and by going from one note to another in ways peculiar to the Raga, the performer proceeds to create an atmosphere (rasa) which is unique to that specific Raga. As the term ‘Raga’ itself implies, it should color the mind, bring delight, move the listeners and stimulate an emotional response. Ragas are associated with a definite mood or sentiment that nature arouses in human beings. The ancient musicologists were particularly interested in the effects of musical notes – how it affected and enhanced human

behavior. For centuries, music has been used as a healer. Music has the power to cure: to get people rid of various mental disorders like anxiety, phobia, depression, hypertension and so on; to make us feel happy, sad, disgusted and so on. Music or Sangeet has thus been looked upon as a 'sadhana' – a medium for mental uplift. The 'therapeutic' use of music is today's coinage.

Melody is the basis of Indian music. Ragas are the melody-types or a melody-moulds in which the notes progress artistically. These Ragas or melody-types are vitalized by the spirit of joyful improvisation, and give ample scope for the exercise of the highest musical imagination. Each Raga has its own special characteristics and can be distinguished one from another. Different tunes express different emotions. Indian musicologists have deeply explored the psychology of Ragas and have ascribed even sex to these melody-moulds, some of them being Ragas, i.e., male tunes, and some being Raginis, i.e., female tunes. For example, you will mark the difference between Darbari and Ashavari. They have the same notes, but express different emotions. Each Raga has its own Rasa, i.e., aesthetic flavour, and it creates a definite ethos. This ethos contains not in a mechanical form but in the symphonic structure of the melody. These Ragas express not only different emotions but they have their own time and season to be sung. For example, Megh-malhar is sung in the monsoon while Vasant and Bahar are sung in spring. In this direction Indian music stands on a level where the West can furnish no parallel.

The very first reference to the word Raga in its technical sense has been made by the classical Sanskrit poet Kalidasa in the prelude to the opening act of his 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam', where the Nati is supposed to sing the song in Sarang Raga. Kalidasa's period is assumed to be the 4th century AD. In the time of Bharat Muni, the first recognized author on Indian Classical Music, of the magnanimous 'Natyashastra', reference to Raga was not made. Instead, the system of gram-murchhana-jati was prevalent during his times. It was Matang Mui, who for the first time, mentioned the definition of Raga in his famous treatise 'Brihaddesi' in the 6th century AD – "In the opinion of the wise, that particularity of notes and melodic movements, or that distinction of melodic sound by which one is delighted, is Raga". After Matanga, we find another important book on music, Geet Govinda, composed by Jaydeva. This book mainly deals with the love songs of Krishna and Radha with references to Raga and Tala.

To sum up, Raga is the fundamental element of Indian music. It is, in fact, the soul of Indian music, which is made of a scale, a mode, Shruti, Swara, Gamaka, grace, notes and other embellishments of music. The Raga came into being in and around 4th or 5th century AD. It gradually started replacing the age-old gram-murchhana-jati system. Under the gram-murchhana-jati-raga system, the classification of Indian music was done till the time of Pandit Sharangadeva and his Magnum Opus- Sangit Ratnakar, written in about 1230 AD, preparing gradually the ground for what is called the North Indian or Hindustani music.

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