

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture - 19
Raga – Some basic expectations

Now in the last few sessions, we have discussed some important aspects of raga. We have seen, how each raga, admits of certain swaras. So, each raga is, associated with some swaras and those swaras are treated with certain gamakas, and the melodic expression, the melodic movement, followed certain established phrases, that is how the ragas are explored.

Now, when we say that, composition in Thodi ragam or it is in sankarabharanam or that he sang alapana in Begada, what we mean is this that, the composition, or the alapana had only those swaras with those gamakas. And the exposition followed use the established phrases, that bring out particular raga. That is, what we mean by saying piece of music, whether the composition or in improvisational segment. When we say that this is in certain raga, this is what we mean.

It is much like, what we mean by saying that, for instances, I am right now speaking in English, or certain that is book in English a particular language, the analogy raga between language is, has captured the imagination many. Actually, many people have try to explores, this parallels between raga and language, there are obvious limitations to the analogy.

But it is quite interesting to see how many different aspects, when compare raga and language. Now like language, raga also has, we can say that raga also has vocabulary and we could say that vocabulary is its swaras. Swaras in it and immediately, we can see the limitations of the analogy languages is vocabulary grows. Whereas ragas vocabulary, if it is the swara, obviously cannot grow and you have grammar, grammatical rules, rules of composition in language. We have similar rules in case of ragas.

The one glaring limitation of, analogy between raga and language is, that raga does not have meaning, raga cannot have meaning for the phrase. Raga cannot have meaning in the way, that

language does. There are scholars, there are music colleges argue that in the case of raga, we can speak different kind of meaning.

But even so, we can, when we just talk of certain ragas, when we take a raga like sankarabharanam or begada or kalyani. There are dozens of compositions in this raga, and possibly hundreds, and if we were to think of alapana or other kind of improvisation in the raga. There would have been thousands, of such expositions, of that raga, and each of them, will be very similar to each other. In certain respects, and yet they never be identical, that is the power of raga. That there is a frame work, there are rules, there are bounds and there are limits, anyhow within this limits and bounds, while following all these rules, there is still immense scope for creativity, immense scope for improvisation.

There are some expectations or requirements of raga. One is, that raga should have a minimum of five swaras, less than five swaras, will probably, while, we can quite imagine that, scope of raga less fewer than five swaras, the scope will be pretty limited. The scope of creating melodic movements, melodic patterns, if the raga has less than five swaras, that will be quite limited.

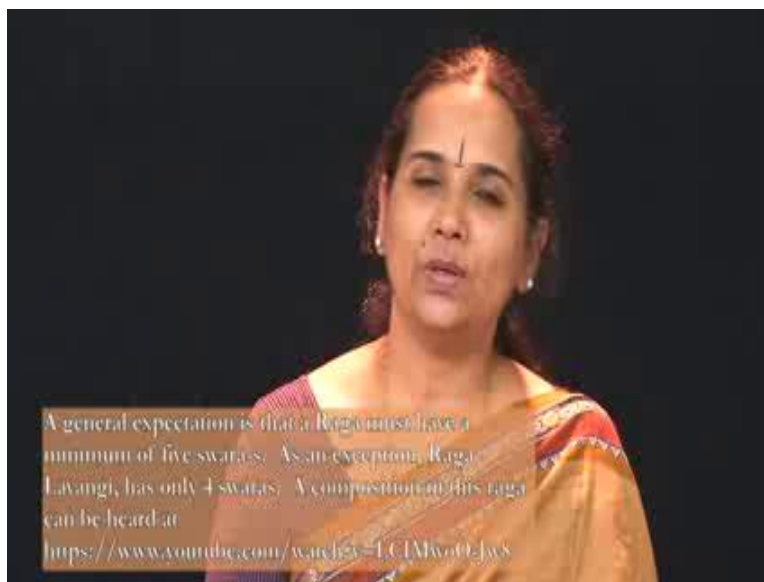
So, it is expected, four group of swaras to possible become a raga, there have to be at least, five swaras. The question could be, whether new raga can be created? And yes, they can be and they are, created all the time, and we will be think of that phenomenon. And also, when we look at the actually extent actually available ragas. This is a fairly common place, expectation, that the raga would have a minimum of five swaras.

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But there are musical minds, who like to test boundaries. And we have Vidhvan Balamuralikrishna, who almost, has to challenge this expectation, that raga should have five swaras.

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He created this raga called Lavangi which has only four swaras sa ri ma dha and he has given created the composition in this, you can hear the rendition of this at this you tube link

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Another general expectation, of raga is, that should have either pa or ma, one of the two notes. It cannot skip both pa and ma and ninety-nine-point nine percent of ragas, obey this and again we have challenges to this expectation.

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Muthiaya Bakhavather created a raga called Niroshtha, pa and ma, both are called labials, they can be pronounced with the in the lips are brought together. So even ragas name niroshta, has no place for a labial and this raga, has neither panchama nor madyama, sa ri ga dha ni sa. That is the, those are the swaras in this raga.

Again, rendition of composition by Muthiaya Bakhavather can found at this link, its a rendition by Priya sisters.

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So, there are but, even though, we have this exception of ragas, one or two ragas here and there, with lesser than five swaras. Swaras I know only, one raga has neither panchama nor madyama by and large, rest of the ragas admit of at least five swaras and they would have either pa or the ma.

So, we have ancient ragas like sankarabharanam and begada and kedaragowla, on the one hand and we have newer creation like lavangi and niroshata and many other. Even as we speak ragas has been created it is possible because, if we think of a raga, as essentially, a melodic fabric with some notes and not some others. Then it is possible to think of, a completely new melodic combination, and try to create a viable raga out of it, in this sort of thing happens, it is not easy. But it is very possible.

And as we see later, there was a rigorous system, rigorous methods of generating scales. That was put in place, some in the beginning from the fifteen to the seventeenth century or eighteen centuries. We have development in the Lakshna Grandha traditions, where a system for generating scales was evolved.

So, when we have that, it is not a herculean task to think of a completely new, either to unknown combination of swaras. A computer could do it, but what then is the difference, between what do

we make of this music, of this tradition, carnatic music, which on the one hand have ancient ragas and on the other hand has ragas, that are being created ever onium.

Is that difference between, raga like sankarabharanam and raga like niroshta, or even a raga like sunatha vinodhini, which is also completely, which is the combinations of swaras, and it was handled by musician like composers like Mysore Vasudevachar, is there difference. I would say there is a world of difference between a raga like niroshta and raga like sankarabharanam.

Along with many musicians say, there is world of difference, because tradition raga like sankarabharanam or reethigowla or anandabhairavi, they have been handled over centuries, by great musical minds, and these ragas have certain characters. They have gain many dimensions, and to engage with such ragas.

There were so much more dimensions to that musical endeavor to try to sing a sankarabharanam. It is a completely different deal, from trying to set raga like niroshta. Because in sankarabharanam, you need have grasped and the raga swarupa. The phraseology, the gamakas, you need to absorb all the musical effort, that on into this raga over these decades, over the centuries, where as with raga like niroshta, is just a combination of swaras is up to you, to work patterns out of this set of swaras.

In fact, with raga like niroshta or sunatha vinodhini, we would not even speak of raga swarupa. There is no raga swarupa or raga bhava, that is associated with such scalar ragas is called scalar. Scalar as in scale the raga is just a scale of swaras.

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So, these two types of ragas are world apart, but both of them, find place in contemporary carnatic music. Though of course, we have musicians, hope prefer one kind of ragas over the other. and some musicians were tolerant of both kind of ragas.

So today, in the context of contemporary carnatic music, we can speak of broadly one kind of pacifying ragas. With the talk of two kind ragas, one is ragas like sankarabharanam or kedaragowla or surutti with long history of evolution. And other would be ragas of new frankle ragas, of new creation. We have nothing more than, a combination of swaras, and there is nothing more, about their personality of form. There are no expectations regarding phraseology or even gamaka for that matter.