

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture – 32
Tala – An introduction to the concept

Now we are talking of temporal dimension, temporal discipline, organizing music in time. Now time, is perhaps the most mysterious aspect of our experience. But, we experience time, only as the gaps between different events, because there are many events happening, there are gaps between these events you experience time.

That is how time is experienced, which is why perhaps sometimes when nothing is happening, you feel the time to drag, drag on and on and on. Or when too many things are happening, actually long period, might, you may experience it as, a very short period. So, the experience of time happens as, gaps between events.

Now, that is laya, for instance, the laya of my speech, my talking to you, is the gaps, that are there between each word that I utter. Sometimes there are longer gaps sometimes, there are very shorter gaps. But overall there is a certain, an overarching laya, speed that informs the performance. In music, these events between which, you can experience time, are the accents, the stresses. Now in music like, rock performance or film music, these stresses are very apparent. They can be very easily heard; but in classical music, the stresses are not that apparent.

Let us listen to the speech and you will be able to see, what I am talking about. Classical music, even western classical music or even Indian classical music, the music is created such that, the beats are not always heightened. Let us listen to Sanjay Subramaniam, singing a composition of Shyama Sastri, “Mayama ane ni pilichidhe matladaradha”. Please try to see, what you feel about the stresses of the song whether you can see the beats of the composition.

(Music Starts: 3:31) (Music Ends: 11:49)

“Mayama ane ni pilichidhe matladaradha”, these are the words of the composition. So, see how long it takes me to utter it “Mayama ane ni pilichidhe matladaradha”. But, how is it, organized

the composition? How are these words organized? How are they spread out in time? It was something like this: (Singing Starts: 12:21) (Singing Ends: 13:56). So “Maayama ane ni ne pilichidhe”, this is how the words are distributed or spread out in time.

So, this is where the concept of Tala comes in; how are the songs, compositions of carnatic music? How are they bound? How are they tied in time? What is the kind of temporal order that they are given in compositions of carnatic music?

This is where, the Tala comes in; tala is the principle of ordering composition, ordering the music itself in time. And Tala is essentially, a certain time frame, a time unit, that is recurrent and the composition is spread over this recurrent Tala cycle.

So, this time frame, that I spoke about, over which, over recurrent such frames, there is a time frame; there is a time unit of time. And that recurs and the composition is spread over it, and this time frame, that one cycle, that one unit, is cycle of the Tala.

In this case, what I sang just now, “Mayama ane ni pilichidhe”; this is an Adhi Tala, called Adhi Tala. And the time frame here, the time unit is of eight beats. Now eight beats, is not like one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, not like that. This is a small cycle, a short cycle which you can actually, selectively easier to follow; to maintain. Even with just the sense of rhythm: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, clap; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven and eight.

Here we are talking about a much longer time unit, one clap, two clap, three clap, four clap and so on, till eight. Now that is one unit of the Tala. That is one cycle of the Tala, as it is called. And how is this Tala cycle marked? How do you, how, what is the reference, this Tala unit? because it is going to be such a long duration, it would not be easy for us to just keep it in the head.

That is where the hand gestures come into play. This Tala cycle is expressed, it is performed actually by hand gestures and not just any arbitrary vague or changing, changeable hand gestures.

These are specific; specified and explicit hand gestures; it is not like, just something like this (sound in fingers) one, two, three, four, five, six, seven; waving of the hand anyway or beating like this or anything else its, it is not a vague unspecified hand gestures; these are very specific codified hand gestures.

Let me in this case, Adhi talam which is the most commonly used (Singing Starts: 18:26) (Singing Ends: 18:42). This is end of one Tala cycle or if I take this, is a slower composition; the Tala cycle duration is much longer.

If for the purposes of demonstration, I take a shorter Tala cycle, this is a very well-known composition in Hamsadhvani ragam (Singing Starts: 19:07) (Singing Ends: 20:03). So, this is Adhi tala, a cycle of eight beats; as you could see, the hand gestures are repeated continuously. (Singing Starts: 20:16) (Singing Ends: 21:13).

So, irrespective of whatever happens, in the composition, the Tala will be maintained continuously, as long as, the composition is being sung. So, this how the temporal organisation of compositions in carnatic music happens; it is not just a simple matter of four beats or three beats; one, two, three; one, two, three beats; one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four;

These are relatively simpler rhythms, which do not need this kind of support; but because our, the temporal units, are longer or of longer duration, we need a reference, external reference; just as we need an external reference for the drone; just we have the tambura for. So, also we have the external reference for the temporal aspect, the rhythm, if you want to call it that.

Now, Tala is not the rhythm, translated frequently as rhythm, but tala is actually the temporal unit, within which the composition is spread out, within which is organized. So, just as I said we have a external reference for the drone, which with, whose support we can seek sruthi. We can seek the pitches in carnatic. So, also the external reference, tala being performed by the hand with the help of which we can seek to achieve a good laya.

Of course, an internal sense of the pitch is also indispensable just as the internal sense of laya is indispensable, if you do not have internal sense, no amount of outside reference can help you, but outside external reference helps you maintain, it helps you maintain your pitch, helps you maintain your laya.