

**Appreciating Hindustani Music**  
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**Lecture 15**  
**Defining Raga**

[Music]. The world of raga is a complex one. It's a world of notes and microtones, of ornament and phrasing, dynamics of light and shade, virtuosity, emotive depth of joy, and epiphany. There is a range of things that can be said of a raga and its performance.

We can say things like for instance the raga that we just heard Raag Durga- we can say things like the note ga is not allowed in Durga, and also we can say that Raag Durga is sung in the second part of the night, the second prahara of the night. We can also say things like Raag Durga has angular phrases and it has very zigzag movements.

And of a performance of Raag Durga we can say things like the bandish was beautiful or that it was very tuneful you know, surila, or that was very virtuosic or that a certain stylistic or a gharana- features of a certain gharana were there or not there. All these things we can say of a performance of Raag Durga and we can also say the most important and elusive thing that it created rang or that Raag Durga descended. The deity of that raag descended and sparkled in the performance.

Now, there is a range of epistemic trust in these various statements that we can make about the Raag Durga and its performance from the verifiable to the unverifiable. Now, as a matter of fact Raag Durga does not have ga and Raag Durga is explored in a very zigzag manner that is the chalan of the raga. But to talk of rang or to talk of the deity of the Raag Durga descending, that is clearly of a very different level right, but both these kinds of sentences are very much part of this world.

The point here is that raga- the world of raga- is very complex. There is of course, the melodic aspect, that we have the melodic elements swaras ornaments phrases and so on- rules regarding their use. There is the performance aspect of it, which is a world in itself, which involves mastering many, mastering the techniques of presentation right you have to master the raga that is one thing, but how you present it that is a different animal altogether. And ultimately all this is for an aesthetic outcome. So, the world of raga has all these three aspects and a definition of raga must do justice to all these aspects and that is generally hard to come by. Now, one of the earliest definitions of raga is found in Brihaddeshi, I have had occasion to refer to this text earlier also. This is a very important text- this is Brihaddeshi which was written by Matanga Muni somewhere in the 7th or 8th century of the Common Era. And this is where we find one of the earliest definitions of raga. Though raga- the word raga is found in much earlier texts also even in Natya Shastra, but you see raga is one of those things that has evolved and changed

considerably the very idea of raga, what raga is, that itself has undergone changes through the centuries. And the definition that we find in Brihaddeshi- first he talks about the vyutpatti of the word raga. Vyutpatti is etymology. Vyutpatti of- Vyutpatti is etymology- that is, how is the word raga derived.

And he says it is from the word ranj I refer to this in the previous video Ranj which means to color or to please.

So, he says this [--] and that is- raga is born from the act of coloring or delighting and this is said to be its etymology. And then we have the famous definition, one of the most widely quoted definitions of raga is this [--]. That which delights the minds of people- ranjako jana chittanam Through swaras and varnas embellished by swaras and varnas- that is Swara varna vibhushitah.

Varna is melodic movement swara of course, we know what swara is notes and varna is movement when melodic movement. You can either go up or you can go down or you can stay in one pitch or you can have a combination of these three. that is varna arohi avarohi sthai and sanchari. These are the four varnas.

So, quite obviously, what else can you do right melodic movements these are the four melodic movements possible either you can sing the same pitch or you can have ascending phrases or descending phrases or a combination of these. Now, this, that is that which delights the minds of people through embellishment by swaras and varnas, that is said to be raga by the wise- ragah kathyate budaih.

Now, raga you know basically as I said it means color, it means passion. So, it is as applied to music, a musical entity, it is a metaphor and since then since this metaphor, there have been many more metaphors, many more analogies with people trying to define raga adequately. Now, some have drawn the analogy of chess right in a game of chess we have different coins we have different pieces and each piece has a certain way of moving right it cannot move in any way and it has certain powers because of the way it moves. So also in raga we have swaras and they have different powers and they move, the phrases move in different ways so, we have moves that are forbidden and so on.

Another analogy is that ragas are spoken of as spaces for melodic motion, it is knowing a raag, knowing a raga is knowing its paths. That is simply moving up and down the scale of a ragas and flattens it right there is no texture then and that is not the raga. So, now, each of these metaphors takes care of one or the other aspect of raga. it is hard to capture all of them. For instance here, this analogy addresses the presenting of raga. The analogy goes like this- that presenting a raga is like oration.

You perform, you practice various elements of the performance and then when you actually perform you bring them all together. Now, to some extent we practice the compositions we practice elements of improvisation tans and various things and we do bring it together in performance and in that sense yes it is like oration. And another analogy is that every raga is like a melodic seed it is a seed, it is a idea of a melody.

And if and this when it is nurtured it evolves into a, or it grows into a beautiful musical form.

Now, just as if you sow a mango seed you cannot get a banyan tree. So, also if you have the idea of Raag Durga you cannot get Raag Yaman and every trees different, every tree of the same variety- every mango tree is different so, also every performance of Raag Durga is different. So, this is another analogy. And then we have this metaphor; this is the analogy that raga is a melodic recipe. It is like a recipe.

Adrian McNeil in a recent essay has argued that a more accurate depiction of raga would be one that can equally accommodate its technical performative and aesthetic dimensions and these dimensions can be mapped onto the way a typical recipe of a North Indian dish works. That is every recipe mentions the ingredients, how to use them in what proportion to use them, how to cook them, and all these we can think of as having counterparts in raga, right? we have swaras which are the ingredients, how the strength of each swara is, how to use them and so on. And most importantly, finally, the point of the whole dish is that it should be savored, it should be relished. So, also in the point of performance is that it should be relished. So, there is a link to this essay is given at the end of the lesson. Those of you who are interested, you can read it. So, we have a recipe right the recipe of a dish. So also we have the raga lakshanas, but then the actual cooking of the dish is a different deal altogether it is not just enough that you know the ingredients and the recipe, it is not enough that you have the ingredients and you know the recipe translating it into a palatable dish is a its a different task altogether. So also you may know the raga lakshanas and on that, but to actually perform it effectively is a different matter. And finally, what is the outcome? Everything is taken care of in this analogy or so Adrian McNeil claims. it's certainly an interesting essay to read. Now, let us look at a definition of or a description of raga by Deepak raja. It is a conversational kind of definition it is not a very formal definition. He says- Deepak raja is a leading writer on Hindustani music- “even a casual listener is aware that the word raga is used to describe the melodic facet of a piece of music, he also knows that a raga is not a precomposed melody the same raga performed on different occasions can sound entirely different while yet retaining a strong basis in familiarity. She also knows that there are hundreds perhaps thousands of ragas in circulation and that experienced listeners can distinguish one raga from others. From this most listeners can infer that a raga is broadly a melodic structure tight enough to remain distinct and identifiable and yet loose enough to form the basis for considerable individual freedom.” Here we have another definition by a western musicologist Bruno Nettl he says “Raga is a melodic framework for improvisation and composition. Raga is based on a scale with a given set of notes a typical order in which they appear in melodies and characteristic musical motifs. By using only some notes by emphasizing certain degrees of the scale and by going from note to note in ways characteristic to the raga the performance sets out to create a mood or atmosphere (rasa) that is unique to the raga in question.” Now, this takes care a lot of the aspects of raga that we have been discussing. We have the scale and notes the typical order and all that which is the raga lakshana and we also have the outcome which he says is creation of a mood or atmosphere and rasa.

Now, rasa is a technical word really, it is a charged word and it is problematic when applied to anything outside its original field of application which is theatre and literature. It is a very

technical concept and when applied outside that world of theatre and literature it is a very casual application and it suggests a heightened sense of emotion and aesthetic experience that sort of thing, but its best to avoid the word rasa outside these fields of theatre and literature. But moods you see many many definitions of raga especially by western musicologists- they include reference to moods. Now, see all music evokes moods right, even just a percussion or a jazz solo or an Irish Celtic folk song everything, all music evokes moods. And you see- what does it mean to talk of moods? A mood is different from emotion right? One of the basic things about basic differences between mood and emotion is that emotion is associated with bodily behavior whereas moods are not necessarily associated with bodily behavior.

So, when you say a person is moody you are just saying that we do not know what is going on with him or her . If a person is sad then the person will have that expression some bodily behavior to suggest that she is sad, but when you say a person is moody you're not saying anything specific. So, now, you see music can evoke in us mysterious states and it does create a mood right.

Though the our inner world is touched we do not go about expressing it in any not always at least it does create a mood one can say that definitely, but why do we mention it specifically in the case of raga it is an interesting its a question that I leave you to think over. Now, when you listen certainly to say that every raga each raga is associated with a unique mood that seems very problematic to me, when when you listen to a raga performed by different musicians on different occasions does it always evoke the same mood? the same unique mode mood? I would not think so.

And this is not something, for instance, when a musician is performing we are not concerned about the mood that we are creating the mood should be created as a collateral you know, its a bonus, we are only concerned with presenting the raga. So, also when a master teaches the raga it is very rarely if I told we talk about mood of the raga and how we may create it. Because it is music of course, it will create moods, but that is not something that merits a mention when you define raag.

We do speak of bhava- the raga bhava is different bhava as an emotional suffusion, that we do. But it is quite absurd to map every raga to one particular mood. Now, Dr. Saxena whom I have quoted earlier is here guarded in referring to- you see everybody feels, but you know when see musicologists feel compelled to refer to something beyond the rules right raga is yes a set of rules, but it is not just that there is something beyond that.

That is what they are probably trying to capture when they speak of mood or rasa which is needless really. Now Dr. Saxena here uses the word rasa, but in a very guarded way. He says "Raga is a specific and in a way living melodic form which serves to permit and determine as a matrix the creation and contemplation of music on the basis of the quality, emphases and relatedness of tones, as also with the help of rhythmic abundance or passage possibly with an eye to evoking an appropriate rasa but always in accordance with ones individual capacities for technical handling and grasp visualization and aesthetic sensitiveness. A raga is a matrix in the sense that it is being a specific ground mass which is not only the regulative and individuating

principle, but the very material of an essay in musical creation.”

So, these are some of the attempts to define raga, in the next video we will look at classification of ragas which is another important aspect of the world of raga.