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*Commemorating 90 years
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Demystifying the complexities of Ragas in Carnatic music for the untrained Rasika

An article by

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What is a raga?

While this is something a listener of Indian classical music would intuitively know, the raga concept is not necessarily apparent to those who are uninitiated to our music. Understanding ragas is indeed a profound topic that has been explored in scores of doctoral dissertations. In this short article, I make a humble attempt to share perspectives and shine some light on this very common (in the Indian context) yet complex term.

When I think of a raga, I think of it as a musical expression of a unique melodic entity. To draw a parallel, think of a specific, well-defined and unique entity one sees in the material world - say, the Bruhadeeshwara temple, the Mona Lisa or the Niagara Falls. We are all aware that these entities are special and unmistakably distinctive in their identity. In the world of the abstract, and more specifically, in the world of music, a raga has similar attributes. Each raga has a form and contours like no other.

Change is the constant here!

Another remarkable aspect of the raga system, which is a hallmark of our Sanatana dharma itself, is the ability to flow, change and adapt to the passage of time. New phrases get added, some get discarded and sometimes, a raga gets more popular while another loses favor. For example, it is believed that the raga Balahamsa was a commonly heard one during the times of the Trinity. It is now considered rare. Similarly, Bhairavi raga is considered to have evolved greatly over time, so much so that it has cannibalized phrases that earlier belonged to Maanji and Huseni thereby diminishing the importance of these two ragas. Ancient ragas such as Kambhoji and Kalyani continue to evolve through

compositions and exploration by musicians. When a new raga is created in modern times, it is usually a mere scale to begin with. As more compositions are added in this new raga, its form gets more sophisticated over time. This is a very important aspect which explains why it is much easier for a skilled musician from another genre to explore a newer raga like Mohanakalyani than a traditional phrase-based raga like Bilahari. The latter has evolved into a sophisticated form while the former is still largely scale-based.

How does one learn about each raga's unique characteristics?

In the context of Carnatic music, I would say this a three-part answer: 1. Learn and study a large body of compositions over time 2. Listen to renditions by master musicians 3. Work on swara gnanam (ability to break down a phrase into its underlying notes). When one delves deep into all of these three aspects, the mind starts joining the dots to understand each raga in depth. Indeed, the immeasurable contribution of the Carnatic Trinity (Saint Thyagaraja, Sri Muthuswamy Dikshitar and Sri Shyama Shastry) needs to be applauded and celebrated here. Together, they created an amazing body of work that forms the backbone of Carnatic music as we know it today. The contribution of many other composers (both pre-Trinity and post-Trinity) such as Sri Purandara Dasa as well as genius musicians who have taken various ragas to new heights also deserves special mention.

How are ragas classified?

There are numerous ways in which ragas have been organized to facilitate their study. It should be borne in mind that these classification methods are merely tools or aids to help one learn about ragas. The raga, in itself, is bigger and beyond any such confines. Some ways in which ragas are categorized include 1. Janya - janaka (mela) which is a child - parent relationship 2. Based on number of swaras in the scale as audava (5), shadava (6) and sampoorna (7). Again, janya ragas are further classified in ways such as Upanga (no foreign note or anya swara) - bhashanga (with a foreign note or anya swara that is not present in its parent), vakra (non-linear scale), Nishadaantya (scope limited to swara Ni), Dhavantaanya (scope limited to swara Da) etc.

Here comes the fun part – raga recognition!

All of us who enjoy Carnatic music have had “aha moments” when we recognize a raga. A few years ago, which I presented a lec-dem on this topic (available at <https://www.youtube.com/user/VidyaSubramanian>), I realized that it is a very nuanced topic. Here is a brief framework I wish to share on how one goes about raga recognition:

1. **The fool proof way** – would be get super strong in understanding the technical aspects of Carnatic music by learning, listening and honing one's swara gnanam
2. **The layperson's way** – would be try to mentally map similarities in a raga's musical flow by listening to multiple compositions in a given raga. This could be a “hit or miss” method as there are several allied ragas such as Darbar – Nayaki and Arabhi – Devagandhari that may not be easy to tell apart in this manner
3. **Adopt your own technique** – what works for one person need not work for another! Film music aficionados often use film songs as a means to start their foray into raga recognition. Others start off with the major ragas like Todi, Kambhoji, Kalyani, Shankarabharanam, Khaharapriya and Bhairavi, then continue onwards to other well known ragas like Mohanam, Madhyamavathy, Hindolam, Ritigowlai, Sahana, Nattai, Begada and Anandabhairavi before attempting to recognize less often heard ragams like Bindumalini, Bahudari and Gowrimanohari.

Where does one start with raga identification?

For an entirely lay listener, I would recommend starting off with rakti ragas. Most of us strike a chord when listening to these ragas which have a distinctive emotional appeal. Ragas like Ritigowlai, Surati, Sahana and Anandabhairavi fall in this category. They are not scale-based but phrase-based and therefore easier to identify over time even if one lacks technical knowledge. Once one gets familiar with these ragas, move on to other major ones. Over time, challenge yourself with allied and minor ragams. Needless to say, evolution of one's raga identification skills takes time and requires much perseverance, patience and passion!

Tap into the power of the internet

In the current pandemic scenario, the internet has emerged as the most powerful aid in our musical journey. With thousands of concerts as well theoretical notes and musical records being available at the click of a button, let us begin our exploration of the world of ragas from the comfort of our homes today!

About the author: Vidya Subramanian is a Carnatic vocalist and disciple of Padmabhushan Lalgudi Sri Jayaraman. She is currently under the guidance of eminent vocalist, Dr. Vijayalakshmy Subramaniam. Vidya is also a Chartered accountant with an MBA in Finance from Boston College, USA. She is founder of Vidya Subramanian Academy (www.vidyasubramanian.com), an online portal that imparts training in Carnatic music and other traditional arts to students from all over the world. Vidya's exemplary work in the online teaching of Carnatic music has led to her being featured in a special documentary on BBC World News. Awards won by Vidya include CA Entrepreneur Award 2019, Kalaimamani Award 2018, Homepreneur Award (2018) as well as Vocational Excellence award by Rotary Club of Chennai Spotlight (2016). Vidya was also recognized as an inspiring woman entrepreneur in the technology / social impact space by NITI Aayog and FICCI in their prestigious Road to Global Entrepreneurship Summit 2017 event. Vidya can be reached via email at vidyasubramanian.music@gmail.com.

