

A STUDY OF DEFINING THE RAGA IN PRESENT DAY CONTEXT

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Abstract

Raga is considered as a soul of Indian classical music. Indian classical music is known for its uniqueness world over. This uniqueness is due to raga as a core element of Indian Classical music. Many research works have been undertaken to explore the concept of raga and still we find many possibilities of research in future. Definitions of raga and experiences gained through the performances of raga have always been an important topic of discussions among the musicians and learned scholars. The concept of raga is being explained and discussed in various innovative manners in books written in recent times. Lecture demonstrations, seminars and interviews by eminent musicians and scholars of Indian classical music have contributed immensely in highlighting new perspectives regarding the concept of raga. Artists, audiences, critics, and dedicated learners of classical music everyone has experienced the uniqueness of raga in many different ways. The science behind the raga is just like a deep ocean which has always been a center of attraction for all. Various definitions of raga are very useful in understanding the raga deeply. This research paper is an attempt for studying some definitions of raga in the present times.

Key words: Raga, Swar, Indian Classical Music

INTRODUCTION

Ragas are considered as a soul of Indian Classical Music. It is believed that the meaning and purpose of the raga should be known to the learner as well as the listener of Indian Classical music. As per the evidences found in the ancient books on Indian music it is evident that *jaati gayan* was prevalent before the raga system of music. According to Pandit Ratanjankar the present day ragas have their origin in ancient *jati gayan*. The first reference of raga and its definition available in the *Brihaddeshi* written by *matangmuni* is considered as a milestone in the evolution process of raga from ancient to modern times. Raga has been defined in different ways in many books of the recent times. Each author has tried to evolve new dimensions of raga as per his or her intellect and understanding. As we study different definitions and experiences shared by eminent scholars and musicians of present times we find that the concept of raga is being explained deeply at an abstract level.

DEFINITIONS OF RAGA

Following definitions and experiences shared by eminent musicologists and performers will provide a different perspective regarding the concept of raga in Indian classical music in the present day scenario.

H. A. POPLEY

“Ragas are different series of notes within the octave, which form the basis of all Indian melodies and are differentiated from each other by prominence of certain fixed notes and by the sequence of particular notes. We may perhaps find in the term ‘melody – type’ the best way to transcribe raga in English”.¹

S. BANDOPADHYAY

“A raga is the combination of different notes that are contained in an octave, with ‘varnas’ that pleases the listeners”.²

ALAIN DANIELOU

“The notes which are to convey certain definite emotions or ideas must be carefully selected from the twenty-two interval of the *shruti scale* and then grouped to form a mode, a raga. Any artificially formed scale is not necessarily a raga, for its meaning may be confused and without appeal. The essential feature of the raga is its power of evoking an emotion that takes hold of the hearers like a spell”.³

PANDIT RAVI SHANKAR

“I think that most accurate definition (of raga) is that it is a scientific, subtle, precise and aesthetic melodic form with its ascending and descending movement which consist of either a full octave or a series of six or seven notes.”

“Araga expresses more than just musical statements; it is the means where by Indianmusicians conjure up the inner world that moves their beings”.⁴

SWAMI PRAJANANDA

“It has been stated before that the musicology states that the ragas are born of combinations and permutations of notes or tones and as they produce sweet and soft impressions in the mind of men and animals, they are termed as ragas. Ragas are of the aesthetic or sentimental character.

In music ragas are the prime things or live and as they are constructed out of different tones or notes, they create some sentiments and moods. The ragas of music are living and inspiring because of their specific sentiments and those sentiments saturate the minds of men animals and consequently minds are attracted towards ragas or melodies and this is the psychological interpretation of the ragas or sweet and soothing musical sounds”.⁵

B. CHAITANYA DEVA

“A Raga is basically incipient melodic idea. It has to be elaborated in bringing out its aesthetic potentialities, which procedure is often called improvisation. This necessitates various formal constructions rhythmically bound or free. However, these form themselves get slightly different colorings due to musical dialects, which in India are known as ‘Gharanas’ or ‘Banis’. Finally, of course, there is the style and the individuality of the musician himself “.⁶

RAGHAVA R. MENON

“A raga is somewhat like a rich and ornately carved door beautiful in itself but whose true value finally lies in its ability to open and let you glimpse another vista”

“The raga is thus a means whereby the singer may be able to give a sense of something living, magical and eternal in him to the audience. Taken in loose sense the prescriptions of time and seasons for each raga are only an aid, a propitious environment and atmosphere to help him give a sense of himself.”⁷

ATIYA BEGUM

“The Ragas display the most exquisite forms of musical conception. They are rich, heavy, melodious and of a highly classical order, and a devotional vein of spirituality is found in all of them”.⁸

A. H. FOX – STRANGWAYS

“Thus the raga may be best defined as a melody mould or the ground plan, of a song. Singers or players are to improvise upon the theme thus defined”.⁹

DR. PRABHA AATRE

“The concept of raga makes it possible to explore the highest aspects of Melody While Taal helps to explore rhythmic structures. These concepts have influenced the creation, progress and experience of Indian Music.

It is difficult to define raga in words. It is an abstract concept. One has to understand it by constant and conscious listening to its actual performances. Its meaning and identity grow slowly within oneself. Broadly speaking raga is a system of developing a melodic scheme based upon a scale in which each note is treated in a characteristic way in terms of duration, combination and ascending – descending movements”.¹⁰

DR. ANJALI SHARMA

“A Raga is a specific melodic form which serves to permit and determine as a matrix, the creation and contemplation of music on the basis of the quality, emphasis and relatedness of tones and rhythmic abidance or passage, with an eye to evoking the appropriate ‘rasa’, and inevitably in accordance with one’s individual capacities for technical grasp and aesthetic sensitiveness”.¹¹

DR. ASHWINI BHIDE

“As a performing Artist, finding a purpose for raga is as important to me as describing or defining it. What do I use my raga for? The raga is my vehicle for “my expression”

When I am “building” a raga, my raga needs to be structurally sound and strong, aesthetically, proportionate and graceful, functionally viable and meaningful.

Even after achieving all this, sometimes the raga structure fails to satisfy the artist and also touch the soul of listener. When I introspect why this happens, I find that even though all the structured elements are present in their place and aesthetic proportions, the idol of the raga – deity has not yet been established at the center of the structure! This establishment has to be intensely personal, or else the artist fails to touch the raga, is this centerpiece the ‘raga-tattva ‘difficult to say”.¹²

VIDUSHI KISHORI AMONKAR

“Raga itself is singing and not the performer this understanding should be developed by the performer. Raga itself is singing not the person. Till the point we are conscious about our own existenceragacannot sing by itself. Each raga has its own independent existence. The purpose of raga is *attama ranjan*”.¹³

PT. AJOY CHAKRABORTY

“Notes in a raga are connected to each other. This connection needs movements. Movements make these ragas living. Ragas are living entities”.¹⁴

STUDY OF DEFINITIONS

Various definitions of raga give us a vision needed for understanding the raga. Raga is said to be decorated with *swaras* and *varnas* with an inbuilt capacity to entertain the listener. As per the basic meaning of the word raga, raga has the capacity to color the minds of listeners (*man ko ranggana*). Raga can generate the feeling of happiness among its listeners. Definitions of raga mostly give importance to the relations of *swaras* with each other. The combinations of *swaras* used in a particular raga must attract the audiences; this is of a great importance as per various definitions. *Swar* used in raga are generally sung in a particular sequence. Ascending and descending order of notes of a raga give clarity about the structure of raga. Since many centuries raga presentation has been the core element of Indian classical music. In the *gharana system* it was observed that a single raga was taught to the *shishya* for couple of months or years. Raga gives various types of experiences to the *sangeet sadhakas*.

Early definitions of raga explain the basic structure of raga. The experiences of raga shared in the present times are helpful to give more clarity in understanding of raga. Most of the definitions considered the element of entertaining the listener as one of the important aspect of raga. But in a wider perspective what can be the basic intention of presenting a raga? Requires an in depth discussion. Many learner scholars and musicians believe that the basic intention of presenting a raga is for *attama ranjan*. Many musicians believe that raga has a living entity. While defining raga the basic structure, mood, nature and the experiences gained after the presentation of raga these factors have been considered as important. Each raga has an in built rhythm in itself. Raga is considered as an instrument for expressing the musical thoughts of the

performer. Sometimes musicians are not satisfied with their performances which indicate the depth of raga which can be still explored by the performer.

CONCLUSION

We can see that there is a change in the thinking process while defining a raga with an emphasis on abstractness and spirituality. The raga is a musical world in itself which is able to give various experiences to its followers. After studying various definitions of ragait'sclear that raga is made of inter-relations between *swaras* and with different combinations and permutations of *swaras*. Raga has the strength for generating emotions. Spirituality and raga are strongly connected. Raga is an abstract form which can enlighten the souls. Raga has a living entity. At times it can be difficult to define raga in its totality as it is a continuous and exploratory process.

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