

THE ALAP IN DHRUPAD: UNRAVELLING ITS STRUCTURE, TECHNIQUES, AND AESTHETIC QUALITIES

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the Alap, the opening section of a Dhrupad performance, within the context of Indian classical music. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Alap's structure, significance, and role in Dhrupad. Drawing on historical and contemporary sources, as well as musical analyses, this paper explores the elements, techniques of the Alap. The research highlights the Alap's unique contribution to the aesthetic qualities of Dhrupad, and its ability to create a transformative experience for both musicians and listeners.

Keywords: Alap, Dhrupad, Indian classical music, raga, melodic exploration, ornamentation.

INTRODUCTION

Dhrupad, an ancient form of Indian classical music, holds a prominent place in the rich cultural heritage of India. Rooted in deep spiritual and meditative traditions, Dhrupad offers a transformative musical experience that transcends mere entertainment. At the heart of this profound art form lies the Alap, the opening section of a Dhrupad performance.

The Alap serves as a gateway to the soul of Dhrupad, establishing the melodic framework and setting the mood for the entire performance. It is a mesmerizing improvisational exploration of the raga, characterized by its slow tempo, absence of rhythmic accompaniment, and focus on the melodic structure and nuances. The Alap allows the musician to delve deep into the core of the raga, gradually unfolding its subtle intricacies and evoking profound emotions.

Alap is a traditional practice that developed separately from written or composed music. Although dhrupad and alap are inextricably linked to each other, Dhrupad and alap are two singing styles that exist in two dimensions and separate existence. According to Ritwik Sanyal — “It has some claim to a separate existence as genre that can be performed on its own, this is the case with the rudra vina, surbahar and other instruments that are or formerly played mainly in alap.”¹ So it can be said that Alap is not a specialty of Dhrupada, it extends beyond the boundaries of court music tradition to religious and folk music. The practice of alap in vocal or instrumental music is as old as the concept of raga, with the early development of the raga system coinciding with this alap in historical sources. The references to 'alap' in Matanga's 'Brihaddeshi' and later texts and examples of preserved notation show that alap was a systematic presentation of the structure and distinctive features of selected ragas. The first clear description of Alap can be founded is in the 13th century Sarangadeva's memoir 'Sangeet Ratnakara'. He said—

¹ Sanyal, Ritwik. And widdess, Richard. Dhrupad (Tradition and performance in Indian music), p. 141

"Grahangsha Mandra Taranag Nyasapnyasyostotha 23

Alpatwasya bahutwasya Sadaboudaduboyoropi 24

Abhibyaktiyatra drista sa ragalapa uchyate"

Here he defined the Alap of Raga as the arrangement in Sharava and Aurava swaragrams with lakshmans like Graha, Ansha, Mantra, Tar, Nyasa, Apanyasa, Alpatva, Bahutva etc.¹

CONCEPT OF ALAP IN OLD TREATISE

Alap is considered to be an evolved form of 'Alapti' of ancient Indian music. Theorists says that there are two genres of Indian music. The first is the rhythmic, i.e. subject to language, which is called the Nibaddha. The second is language neutral, which is called Anibaddha. 'Alap' is an a Anibaddha, everything else is Nibaddha. A detailed account of this Nibaddha music can be found in the Sanskrit Prabandha Sangeet of ancient Indian music. which is recorded by Sarangadeva. Therefore, the gradual logical growth of the Dhrupas has been possible only through the amalgamation of Anibaddha and Nibaddha Sangit directly from Prabandha gaan. Prabandha gaan were prevalent before Hindustani Music. Before singing that Prabandha, Bastu or Rupak a kind of Alap was used, it was called Roopalakapti. if alapati sang without Rupak or Prabandha , then it was called ragalapti. Sarangadev in his 'Sangeet Ratnakar' also says about this-

“Ragalaptistu sa yasyadanprakshaiva rupakam. 190

Swasthanai Sa Chaturvi Sayaditi Gitbido Vidu.”

In other words, according to him, Alap is dually Ragalapti and Rupakalapti. In this case Ragalapti is to be produced by the four Swasthanas. “Alap or alapti as he terms it in the context, is a process of melodic expansion, based around a tonic (sthayi) and extending as far as the octave about it (dviguna). The expansion is gradual, and divided into four sections (svasthana), in each section the melody reaches a higher point than in the previous section, before returning to the tonic, Sarangadeva states that this process may be applied in all ragas, and refers elsewhere. in his tretise to the four swasthanas as the standard method of singing or playing in alap.”²

So, in Ragalapti, the manifestation of Alap is done in four stages, which are called Swasthanas. These are—first, second, third and fourth. The alapti Framework thus lies at the heart of modern alap performance. The development of a raga in alapti is said to comprise four sections, the Swasthanas, in each of which the melody emphasizes a higher pitch – let us

¹ Nag,Gautam. Bharatiya Sangeet, p.68

² Sanyal, Ritwik. And widdess,Richard.Dhrupad (Tradition and performance in Indian music), p.144 23, 24, 190 Prakirnakadhaya , Sangeet Ratnakar. adeyar Sanskaran.

call it the 'goal pitch'- than in the previous swasthana. According to Sarangadeva the goal pitches are:

First Swasthana: When a raga is established in a tone it is marked as Stathai Swasthana or permanent. Any one of the seven notes can take the role of a sustained note or Angsa Swara. It is the first constituent vowel or part vowel of the first position. This part ascends to the third note and descends to the lower octave (Astak) part tone by the appropriate gamaka. Of course, keeping the intermediate notes together (from the third to the first of the middle or lower octave) and ending with the initial tone is called Mukhachalana. In other words, when a Swara is eliminated in the ascending order by counting the Swara which the fourth Swara is twice subordinate to, the move is called Mukhchal, this Mukhchal is known as the first Sasthan.¹

Second Swasthana: A Swara placed fourth from the initial Swara is called a Dvyardha Swara. The 'half-way note' (Dvyardha), defined as the fourth degree, but in practice either the fourth or the fifth depending on the structure of the raga(Widdess 1995:366) A raga develops gradually in an ascending-descending order based on the characteristic features of the raga, naming it as the second stage of the composition, with the combination of the swaras of the first position, accompanied by appropriate gamakas such as sphurita, kampita etc. The fourth Swara is in this case taken as the Samvadi Swara of the primary.

Third Swasthana: The Swara placed in the eighth order from the Sthayi Swara is called double. The Swara that lie between the above double and Dvyardha Swara are called Ardhassthita swaras. If on this Ardhassthita swara, the nyas will placed on the Sthai , it is the third Swasthana.² A note in the upper part part of the scale, between the 'half-way note' and the upeer tonic.

Fourth Swasthana: The upper tonic (dviguna). The resting place at the final stage is the fourth Swasthana if you move the eighth vowel i.e. the double vowel continuously. A series of ascending and descending movements within the range of the octave may rest on the eighth note, or gradually descend to the first note, or extend the eighth note higher as part of a higher octave.

Illustrated with a short example, where each syllable is replaced by a single melodic phrase. A flute performance is illustrated by this example. The most important aspect in this example is the development of a continuously higher pitch or pitch area.

On the other hand, the other part is Rupakalapti. Rupakalapti is the alpati based on fixed raga and taal. It has two stages, 1) Pratigrahanika 2) Bhanjani. In the first step i.e. Pratigrahanika the singer expresses the raga structure of a particular (Composition) through. The next stage

¹ Nag, Gautam. Bharatiya Sangeet, p.69

² same

is Bhanjani, which is again arranged in two stages, Sthayi Bhanjani and Rupaka Bhanjani. In Sthay Bhanjani the singer divides the verse into small parts and sings each part in different ways whereas in Rupaka Bhanjani the entire verse is sung as a part in different ways.¹

Sarangadeva's description of this alap or alapti of raga is very important in the context of ragalap even today. At present, the structure of these four states of raga is at the center of the discussion of the Sthayi, antara, sanchari, and abhog stages of classical music.

ALAP IN DHRUPAD

It has already been said that Alap is sung before singing Bandish. As an exception only the Haveli Sangeet, during singing pada compositions Alap are occasionally sung. In the case of Dhrupad, the performance begins with a Alap. In this style of singing, the Alap plays an important role and an attempt is made to portray the overall form of raga over a long period of time. Alapa with Dhrupadas has been going on for a long time. According to the statement of Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar- "Alap involves the exploration to get the most perfect pitch of every note. It gets you into a nature of meditation in which you are lost in the waves of sound and stop thinking about everything. Only sounds remain there."² Again Ritwik Sanyal said about Alap – "Alap is not just an improvisation and elaboration, it is a thought, a destination, a philosophy of life, abstract, enriching beauty, subtle expression of feeling, worship and a reflection of the universe ... It is not just a tool of improvisation but a system and genre in itself that meltifariouly manifests the soul of the raga in Indian classical music."³

It is universally accepted that Drupada Alap consists of many sections or stages which are similar in melodic structure but differ from other vocal styles by rhythmic style. Similar stages in instrumental music are called alap, jor and jhala. But no such definite division or name is found in vocal music like the Dhrupads.

BANI OF ALAP

According to Ustad Rahim Fahimuddin Khan Dagar, "Vedas are like vidhi, the sangeet (the upveda) can be taught as kriya or the practical form of the vedas." The main mantra of Alap is – "*Om Antaram Twam, taran taran twam, ananta hari narayana om.*" If we observe, we will see that the conversation starts with 'Om' and ends with 'Om'. This Alap is sung through the transliteration of this motto and the scientific pronunciation of *talū, oṣṭhā, jihvā, danti, maurdhani, nasika, anunasika and niranāsika*. The alap has no text and usually syllables like *ri-na, ri-ra-na, te-te-ra-na, a-ra-ra-na, ri-ra-ra-na-na, ta-na-tom* etc. These meaningless words are collectively called 'Nom-Tom'. There are also five Vidhis to present the alap in the nadatmak form- *e-kar, o-kar, na-kar, sa-kar and ta-kar*. Basically, the formula 'Om Ananta Narayan Hari Om' is used as the main mantra, the underlying meaning of which is somewhat

¹ Sarangadeva, Sangeet Ratnakar, Vol. II, Chapter.3, Verses 199-201, P.195-196

² Chatterjee, Dr. Arnav, a comprehensive study of Dhrupad and Bengali padavali kirtan with Special Reference to Tala, p. 51

³ Ibid.

like this—“This mantra is a simple invocation to the deity by means of the epithet immortal and two of the names by which Vishnu is commonly known, Narayana and Hari (these names may reflect the influence of Vaisnava devotional religion on the Dhrupad tradition). It provides most of the syllabus that are used in dhrupad alap—*na, ta, na, ra, ri* and of course, *OM*. Other variants are encounters such as these :

"Nita Taran Taran Narayana Hari Om"

Here 'Nita' (skt mitya), constant, perpetual, parallels antara in the other formulation, Tarana—tarana means deliverance by choosing the ocean of birth and rebirth and these words, of course very aptly preserve the *ta> ra> na* sequence of consonants that we have already noted.¹

The sequence of Bani can be arranged as follows. For example² –

- 1) Ek- akshara : ri na num—only one note is used in this part.
- 2) Dwi- akshara: ra no, rana nom ri na, Ri nom
- 3) Tray- akshara : ra na na, ra na na , ra na nom, ri ri na (na nom), ta ra na (na nom)
- 4) Chatur- akshara: ri ra ra na (na nom), ta ra ra na (na nom), ti ta rana (na nom), te ta rana (na nom)
- 5) Panch-akshara: ri ra ra nana (na nom), ta ra ra na na (na nom)
ti ta ra na na (na nom) te ta ra na na (na nom)
- 6) Shad- akshara: ri ra ra, ra na na (na nom)
Ta ra ra, ra na na (na nom)
ti ta ra, ra na na (na nom)
- 7) Saptakshara: ri ra ra , ra na na (na nom)
ta ra ra, ra na na na (na nom)
ti ta ra, ra na na na (na nom)
te ta ra, ra na na na (na nom)
- 8) Asht- akshar: ri ra na na, ra na na na (na nom)
ta ra ra na, ra na na na (na nom)

¹ Sanyal, Ritwik. And widdess, Richard. Dhrupad (Tradition and performance in Indian music), p.157

² Dhrupad Barsiki, Ritwik sanyal, Editor-Premlata Sharma, p.25

ti ta ra na, ra na na na (na nom)

te ta ra na, ra na na na (na nom)

MUKHARA

This is a short segment common in the Alap structure, which marks the end of each stage of Alap. The artist use this type of mukhara from time to time to organize or subdivide a multi-staged alap into stages. Structurally, it combines the important features of raga and rhythm.

Basically Mukhra is divided into two parts; The first is organized on the repetition of notes or the prolongation of the middle 'sa' while the second touches briefly on the notes around the middle 'sa'. It again depends entirely on the choice of raga, first on the lower side of the middle 'sa', then on the upper tone, before finally returning to the middle 'sa'. It totally depends on the selection of a Raga.¹ Besides being one of the main features of mukhra, to boil down the whole structure of a raga through a short section in rhythmic motion.

Apart from the distinctive rhythmic structure, the 'mukhra' part also has a specific phrasing which is usually ended with the words nom, tom, tum and tom, while some singers also employ the phrasing 'ananta nom'. Muhammad Hafiz Khan Talbandibale again the 'Tero Naam' verse to this mukhra and sings this 'mukhra' part with only two 'beats' instead of three 'beats' as an exception to other classical singers.

Alap singers are followed by a series of special signs, also called Merukhand Alap, which consist of twelve signs or key decisions of tone. These are respectively— 1. Akar 2. Dagar 3. Duran 4. Muron 5. Kampit 6. Andolita 7. Gamak 8. Lahak 9. Hudak 10. Meend 11. Sut 12. Sphurti

METHOD OF PRESENTATION

The alap currently in vogue is the Ragalapti existing in Sangeet sastra. The Alap is served in four steps. Alap or alapchari first brings out the form of Raga in slow motion. The first phase involves singing notes in a lower register, while the next steps include singing notes in progressively higher registers. The next step is to feel the rhythm, the pulse. In the third step, the speed becomes faster and flaking occurs. As mentioned earlier, Alap, Jor and Jhala are three stages of consolidation in the totality of Alap. Initial Alap again has many sub-phases. E.g.—In 'Jor' anga the laya can be slow, medium, fast. In the same way, the 'Jhala' Anga can also have sub-stages according to these three rhythms. Usually, a stroke upon Pakhawaj is given in the different stages to mark the end of each stage.

So the artist first performs the alap in a slow tempo, then gradually increases the tempo. This growth does not happen continuously but happens in steps like a staircase. Represents acceleration in multiples of 2, 3, 4, 1 1/2, 1 1/4 or 7/6 and so on of the basic tempo which is

¹ Sanyal, Ritwik. And widdess, Richard. Dhruvad (Tradition and performance in Indian music), p.158

thaha. Three times again four means four times the amount. Similarly if $1\frac{1}{2}$ i.e. one and a half times it is half and if it is $1\frac{1}{4}$ of thalyoy then it is kuad and if it is $\frac{7}{6}$ it is defined as biad. Since the rhythm is fixed only the tempo accelerates, so the singer has to connect more and more syllables or words within a measure (nom-tom in the case of alap or pada of the bandish in classical singing). With each shift of the laya, the laya doubles, triples, quadruples, etc. An illusion of increasing tempo is created for the audience through the application of an increasingly large number of syllabus or words. Although the rhythm is constant here, it is possible to display it with sufficient measure and precision only when the artist has an accurate knowledge of the beat or dimension. This is not an easy art, hence traditionally the classical style has put a lot of emphasis on this anga called the 'laykari'. In short, Dhrupad singing begins with the alap of Thay laya. Its motion is retarded to settle down. The singer performs the delayed melody over a period of time depending on the mood of the raga and the audience. Step by step the singer moves into a medium and fast rhythm. Having reached the fastest laya (the drut laya), the singer to the thaha laya on which it is customary to end the alap. Only the tanpura is used as an accompaniment during the alap. Only an infrequent stroke is made by the Pakhawaj to signal a change in laya during the alap.

CONCLUSION

The Alap in Dhrupad stands as a testament to the timeless beauty and spiritual depth of Indian classical music. Throughout this research paper, we have explored the various facets of the Alap, shedding light on its structure, musical techniques within the larger framework of Dhrupad.

The Alap serves as a captivating introduction to a Dhrupad performance, setting the stage for a profound musical journey. Its unhurried tempo, deliberate exploration of the raga, and absence of rhythmic accompaniment create a contemplative atmosphere that draws both musicians and listeners into a state of deep introspection. As the musician embarks on the improvisational exploration of the raga, the Alap gradually unfolds its melodic intricacies, evoking a range of emotions and sentiments.

The structure of the Alap, with its distinct phases such as the Vilambit and Drut sections, provides a well-defined narrative arc within the performance. Starting with the alapti, where the fundamental notes and their ornamentations are introduced, the Alap progresses through the Jor, adding a light rhythm, and culminates in the Drut section, which heightens the tempo and intensity. This carefully crafted progression builds anticipation and creates a sense of catharsis, leading seamlessly into the subsequent sections of the performance.

Musical techniques and ornamentations play a vital role in enhancing the melodic expression of the Alap. The skilled use of meends, gamaks, and andolan adds depth, richness, and emotional resonance to the music. These ornamentations, meticulously woven into the melodic phrases, create a tapestry of sound that captivates the listener's senses, transcending the boundaries of language and culture.

Beyond its musical aesthetics, the Alap carries deep spiritual and meditative significance. Rooted in the Indian philosophical concept of Nada Brahma, the Alap becomes a conduit for connecting with the divine essence. Its slow tempo, deliberate exploration, and profound emotional resonance create a sacred space where the boundaries between the physical and spiritual realms dissolve. The Alap invites both musicians and listeners to embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery, contemplation, and connection with the divine.

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