

CARNATIC ADAPTATION OF SONGS BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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Abstract: A noteworthy aspect of Rabindranath Tagore's (1869- 1941) songs is that they mark expansion of musical exploration in many musical genres of different parts of the world while staying grounded to the basic tradition. Innovating new rhythm patterns, combining them with existing ones and using in the adaptations of melody are some unique experiments a musicologist could rarely think of at the time of Tagore. From personification of nature in appreciating the beauty of it to demonstrating the "religion of humanity"¹, the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore, composer of more than two thousand songs, establishes a sense of philosophic reflection in the minds of the audience. There are many songs of Tagore that are inspired by Carnatic Classical compositions as well. This study aims at understanding the compositions of two songs of Tagore that are made after their Carnatic Melodies- "Needu Charana Mule" and "Meenakshi Me Mudam Dehi". The background context, the literature, the nuances of melodies and the musical changes that occurred after taking the compositions to the audience of Bengal are some aspects this study will analyze in detail.

Keywords: Songs of Rabindranath Tagore, Tagore's Tappa, Musical analysis

INTRODUCTION

Tappa, as a genre, is widely popular in India and Pakistan where the connotation of the term 'Tappa' is associated to the folk genre practiced. The popular legends associate the form of melody structure of Tappa with the body movement of 'camel riders'² who were believed to sing and roam riding on the camels that cause vocal jumps on the standing notes of their songs. In Hindusthani classical music practices, the tappa compositions are very similar to the raga *bandishes* (compositions) except having the fast-moving ascending and descending taana patterns and the patterns of cyclical notes phrases in the tappa compositions that create an effect of vocal jumps and jerks.

Comparing to the tappa practices of Northern region of India, the singers and composers of Bengal had developed some subtle developmental changes in the vocal jumps in the Bengali tappas. Oscillation on one single note is a key feature in Bengali tappas that can be noticed in Nidhu Babu's tappas (for example, "Onugoto Jene Keno"³) and other tappa style Bengali compositions of various other composers like Kazi Nazrul Islam, Rabindranath Tagore, Atul Pasad, Rajanikanta Sen and also in old *Shyama Sangeet*, *Polli Geeti*, *Baul* songs, *Puratoni Gaan* etc.

However, Rabindranath Tagore's tappa compositions varies widely comparing to the popularly known characteristics of Tappa of North India. The later year researches on "Rabindrik Tappa"⁴ advocate about the inspirational factors behind the Tagore's songs that carries features from many different music systems like "western"⁵ and many more. Therefore, Rabindranath Tagore's compositions, many a times, are successful to set an identity even though they are composed in Hindustani music system.

In this study, two compositions of Tagore that are influenced by Carnatic Classical compositions- song 1: "Baaje Koruno Sure" and song 2: "Basonti He Bhubono Mohini" are chosen for musical and lyrical analysis to understand-

- The factors that make the Bengali compositions sound different than their original sources,
- The catalysts for the wide acceptance of the unique Carnatic melody structures of the songs in the Bengali music community.

Background context (song 1): *Baaje koruno sure* is inspired by the Carnatic composition “*Needu Charanamule*” of Swami Thyagaraja. The song is categorised under the *Prem Paryay* (Love songs). Tagore’s South Indian music exploration occurred in between 1896-1903 and thus, the song 1 was composed in 1931⁶. Unlike the tappa compositions of Tappa, Tagore’s tappas mostly expressed remorse⁴ⁱⁱ, the compositions were unique in terms of metre, but the style of composition is Indian. *Baaje koruno sure* is a rhythmless tappa. As the song derives from a system of music unique to the then Bengali popular melody and rhythm structure, the song is also categorised as under *Bhanga Gaan* (meaning broken from original structure).

To analyse the literature of song 1, the translation goes-

“Sad, tormented notes echo through distance,
 Lute of a traveller, the road, kisses bottom of your feet,
 Reasons I do not know for why my explorer mind is restless
 Frantic air carries aroma of the Jasmine-
 Anxious expression of joy
 Indifferent is my mind, hence
 In the night of impressive estrangement.”⁷

The use of language is classical Bangla, the lyrics expresses the remorseful yet restless state of mind, however, in the lyrics the source of the pain is not expressed. The theme of lyrics is vastly different than the original Tamil composition as it (*Needu charanamule*) is a verse written in praise of Lord *Rama*. Although the song is categorised under *Prem paryay* (section- Love), the lyrics carry meanings in philosophy of human life and expression of a thought process; and thus, the lyrics carry the scope of touching the wider range of audience.

The nuances of melodies and changes (song 1): The Carnatic Raga *Singhendra Madhyam* has its Hindusthani equivalent Raga *Kirwani*, but the movement of *Kirwani* differs widely as *Re* has special emphasis in *Kirwani* (for example, an alaap in *Kirwani* can be - Sa... Re Ga Ma Pa dha Pa ... Pa dha Ni Ś Ğe...Śa dha Pa Ma Ga Re...). Moreover, the phrase “Ma^l dha Ni Śa’ Ğe Śa’” (as ...*haay dure*... in song 1) does not project *Kirwani* Raga according to traditional practices, *Teevra Madhyam* is not used in *kirwani*. The movement of the Raga *Singhendra Madhyam* in the song is kept mostly as it is in the Carnatic system. The common style of oscillation on single notes in *Rabindrik Tappas* is missing in the song 1. For gamakas, only sapat taans and firat taans are used (ascending and descending) in fast phrases-

|... Śa | NiŚa Ğeġa ġa Ma | - ġa Ğe Śa|

|... ni |shi- -- - the | - du - re |

The composition is set in Tala *Kaharwa* which is similar to Adi Tala of Carnatic System (1 2 3 4 | 5 6 7 8)

Background context (song 2): the song “*Basonti He*” is categorised under the section *Prakriti-Basant* (Category- Nature, Spring season), set in Tala *Kaharawa* and the melody is set in Raga *Basanta Pancham*. The song is composed in the 1931 as well and notated by DinendraNath Tagore. Savitri Govinda Krishnan⁸, a noted Carnatic and Rabindra sangeet performance artist (at her age of 12) was brought to Shantiniketan as her singing skills of Carnatic music made Tagore to derive the compositions and re-compose for the lyrics in Bangla. Song 2 is also a *Bhanga Gaan* and it is set in *Taal Pherta* style means the system of using different tempos of same tala, or use of multiple talas in one melody composition. In *Basonti He*, Tala *Kaharawa* is used in different tempos, which is similar to the Carnatic performance practices of 1st speed, 2nd speed and 4th speed in one melody.

To analyse the literature of song 2, the translation goes-

“O’ grandeur of spring, you’re wonderful.
Your exquisite beauty spreads across-
All directions, the woods, green fields, mango orchards,
In the wetlands and their banks,
Blue horizon and the gentle breeze,
Cooing, dance, music and aesthetics makes the world merry all through
Towns, villages, arbours- day and night.
Veena- symphony echoes from each hut.
Each soul rejoicing having sweetly soothed,
Rejuvenated lives spring out,
Feverish exuberance and zest-
Resulting rhapsodic tingling of anklets.”⁹

The use of Language is classical Bangla and the lyrics addresses the season Spring as a lady or a goddess who enchants the world by her fascinating beauty. The Carnatic lyrics is about the divine features of Goddess *Meenakshi*. The word ‘*Basonti*’ is elaborated by the features of the season Spring, personifying it as a goddess with all her distinctive characteristics.

MUSICAL NUANCES

Raga *Basant Pancham* uses both the *Madhyam* notes- *Shuddh* and *Teevra*. Original composition is “*Meenakshi Me Mudam Dehi*”, composed by Shri Muthuswami Dikshitar, set in Raga *Poorva Kalyani* and Adi Talam. The Raga *Puriya Kalyan* is prominent in some phrases in the song 2 in the lines- *byapilo anonto tobo madhuri*-

| Ga - re Ga | Ni Ni Dha Pa | Ga M¹a Ga re | Ga M¹a Ga re | Sa...

The musical composition is kept mostly as it is in original. There are subtle changes in joining phrases that adds in to the native performers’ comfort. *Ba... so...nti* (underline denotes melody bridge).

In the traditional Carnatic composition, the tempo increases by stanzas after stanzas (doubles the speed as 1st 2nd 4th speed). The similar pattern is kept in the Bengali composition as found in the notation¹⁰. This feature is unique for Bengali and Hindusthani practitioners.

CONCLUSION

Both of the songs were given words from general human life practices. The melody patterns are kept mostly same which creates scope for attention to the overall compositions for non-Carnatic audiences and practitioners. The movements of Ragas were not altered much. This brings new melody to the audience. The derivation of Carnatic composition to the Bengali audience created scope for exchange of cultural expressions, and thus, appreciation of the form as well as the “anthropocentric attitudes... under different conditions”¹¹ of a different culture.

The *Bhanga Gaanas* of Rabindranath Tagore may not ideally appear familiar to the audiences of the music system of the original compositions, whereas, the melody and rhythm are mostly kept as same as the original, a point to observe in this matter is that every colloquial musical voice has its own musical accent, be it is a human voice or an instrument. Use of language also matters widely in this regard. Some minor changes in the musical phrases to fill the gap in melody is done in notations and in practices which gives performers’ comfort.

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