

# ASPECTS OF MUSIC COMPOSITION IN THE POETIC WORKS OF DR D.V.GUNDAPPA – A DANCER’S PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

*The multifaceted art form of Dance is highly dependent on music for both its inspiration and execution. In the process of adapting literature to dance, a dancer first begins the journey with selection of a suitable theme available in the Kāvya (poetry), and in the process she/he also begins to visualise the characters, emotions, and situations. The very next requirement for its actual execution is the visualisation of music! D.V.Gundappa’s poetic works are a storehouse of variety, both in terms of their content and structure, thus revealing itself to many possibilities for musical exploration. While the concepts of music are universal, their applicability takes on different modes as per the requirement of the other forms, in this case Dance. Exploring the perspectives of Sāhitya - Saṅgīta - Nṛtya is indeed an elevating journey.*

**Keywords:** DVG, Sāhitya, Rāga, Music, Dance

## INTRODUCTION

Devanahalli Venkataramanayya Gundappa or DVG as he is fondly known is a poet extraordinaire of the Kannada literary world. Inspired by poets like Vyāsa, Vālmīki, Kālidāsa, John Keats and the like, DVG found his poetic genius spread over multiple themes and structures of poetry. He has written poems as simple couplets, quatrains, songs of the typical structures (i.e. in the format of Pallavi, Anupallavi and Caranās), elaborate musicals, and many more. A dancer choosing to adapt such poetic compositions to her/his art form needs to have a multilayered approach and an all-encompassing outlook towards all three forms of Sāhitya – Saṅgīta – Nṛtya (i.e. Literature, Music and Dance).

The first step thus, is the availability of wonderful poetic Sāhitya. DVG’s poems span across 12 to 14 categories covering a variety of themes such as nature (bāhya-prakṛti), culture (saṃskṛti), human behaviour (antaḥ-prakṛti), hero-heroine relationships (śṛṅgāra), devotion (bhakti), aspect of beauty in art forms (saundarya) and many more such themes...all with the undercurrent of Philosophy (Adhyātma). Such a variety of Sāhitya is inspiring and challenging to a dancer from all perspectives of execution.

They are rich in emotional content thus catering to Sāttvika-abhinaya (expression through intense emotional involvement) and they offer plenty of scope to explore through Āṅgika-abhinaya (expression through embellished body language); both of which are the primary requirements for dance adaptation. Ensured of this, the dancer is prompted to the next step, and it is here that all aspects of Melody and Rhythm, technically known as Rāga and Laya, become the essentials for a dancer’s vision.<sup>1</sup>

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach with Descriptive and Analytical methods of discussing select poems. Observations are made based on the literary study of the poems and performance experience of the researcher. Primary data is collected by way of personal interview with select dance-musicians and their insights have been included. Secondary data and reference sources of treatises such as the Nāṭyaśāstra have been relied upon for theoretical basis.

<sup>1</sup> If we look at the entire Nāṭyaśāstra for the music aspects, we find that Bharata has dedicated close to 10 to 11 chapters for Literature and Music. While the concepts of literature have seen tremendous developments in the specialized area of ‘Alaṃkāra-śāstra’, a large part of musical elements are yet to find practical exploration with the present systems of Karnataka and Hindustani music genres of Bhārata. However, while speaking of the most significant 11 elements of Nāṭya in the 6th chapter he mentions the terms Svara (notes), Ātodya (instrumentation) and Gāna (musical rendition); and a perusal of these clearly reveals the two elements that are the preliminaries of any music at any given point in time, and those are Melody and Rhythm.

## STUDY AREA

For this research work, the subject is further narrowed down to discuss only one of the aspects of visualisation of music for dance adaptation, 'Melody' i.e. from the perspective of 'Rāga-saṃyojana' and 'Gāna'. While Laya is also an integral part of the music composition of a Sāhitya, this concept would warrant an independent discussion since it is innately connected to the concept of Chandas (prosody). This metrical aspect of literature is of prime importance when we consider poetic works (Kāvya) for adaptation; that is to say, they are not always written from the perspective of music/dance, they are not written 'for' these art forms and hence their structures may pose some challenges when they need to be translated into the fixed Tāla patterns of Indian music. However, the feel of the Sāhitya and the dancer's visualisation of the Sāhitya alone suffices for the aspects of melody. Hence, the scope of this paper is limited to this discussion.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The observations made during the research process have been classified<sup>1</sup> as follows –

- DVG's insights on music composition (based on researcher's observation)
- Rāga-saṃyojana: choice of Rāgas for DVG's Kāvya (based on experts' opinion & researcher's observations)
- Gāna: vocal rendition of the Kāvya Sāhitya and its impact on the dancer (based on stage experience)

### DVG'S INSIGHTS ON MUSIC COMPOSITION

Being an ardent sahrdaya (connoisseur), along with knowledge of the subject, DVG himself has given suggestions regarding the rendition of poetry which are noteworthy. In many of the works such as, Antaḥpuragītē, Gīta Śākuntalā, songs of Śrīrāma Parīkṣaṇam on Vālmīki/Vyāsa, a section of Nivedana titled 'Hāḍugaḷu', songs in the various Nāṭakas, the opera section titled 'Līlāvibhūti' of Śrīkrṣṇa Parīkṣaṇam and so on, he has given Rāga and Tāla suggestions. Himself a connoisseur of music and having close associations with many musicians of his time who also sang many of his poems, DVG has ensured that the Rāga he found very suitable for the feel of the Sāhitya has been given as options. However, they are but suggestions, and not rules. It is indeed rare to find such clarity in the vision of the author of the work itself!

In the preface of the Antaḥpuragītē work<sup>2</sup>, there is lovely note on this concept titled 'Hāḍugaralli binnaha' (An appeal to singers). Although it is said with reference to that present work, some statements have universal appeal! Here are some samples<sup>3</sup>,

- 'Let the nature (svabhāva) of the poetry (kṛti) be kept in mind'.
- 'Infusing delight and enjoyability (svārasya) in the choice of Rāga is dependent on the singer's proficiency.' With reference to Śrīngāra-kāvya he says, 'the quality of singing required here is charm (lālitya) and not an exhibition of scholarship (pāṇḍityavalla)'
- Qualities needed to bring out the best in a Sāhitya as – Śārīra-śuddhi (refined musical quality of the voice), Padaviveka (propriety while separating and conjoining the words/phrases) and Sphuṭavāda uccāraṇē (clarity in pronunciation).

<sup>1</sup> This classification is made only for the purpose of analysis and since all the aspects of music are interconnected, some overlaps are unavoidable.

<sup>2</sup> DVG gratefully acknowledges that this work was accepted and appreciated by people, singers have sung them in Akashvani radio, in wedding celebrations and other cultural gatherings, and some performing artistes have presented them on stage as well. All this gave him the confidence that these compositions have reached the sahrdayas.

<sup>3</sup> This section has been paraphrased from the original text in Kannada.

## SVABHĀVA OF THE KṚTI

This is a key aspect for picking the most appropriate musical melody. The overarching emotion of the composition and its theme provide the first dominant clue for choice of Rāga/Rāgas. In the second section of Vasanta Kusumanjali, we find a poem by DVG which is a translation of Bankim Chandra's classic 'Vande mātaram' into Saṃskṛta-

‘vande mātaramamalām | sujalām suphalām susasyasaṃpannām |  
bharaṇīm bhāratadharaṇīm | tvām ripuharaṇīm sutārtiparihariṇīm ||’ (Carāṇa 1)  
‘karma tvam marma tvam | saddharmastvam tathaiva śarma tvam |  
bharma tvam varma tvam | tvām vande mātaram vidyām ||’ (Carāṇa 4)

The words of the poem<sup>1</sup> are glorious adjectives addressing Bhārata-mātā by different qualities such as the one who is brimming with joy and prosperity, the one who is a symbol of dynamic activity, the who is the abode of righteousness, so on and so forth. Simple in thought but expressing such profound emotions of love and gratitude towards the nation, thus giving abundant scope for dance exploration both in ideas and emotions. In this particular theme, knowing that the svabhāva of the kṛti is of ‘patriotism’, it would be most appropriate to pick a Rāga suitable to this emotion; the most obvious choice is Deś-rāga which is well established for deśabhakti songs (it is a siddha-rasa!). The dancer will already win the hearts of connoisseurs with the choice of this Rāga for this poem, and thus the journey of art experience would get a joyous take-off!

Vanasuma is another popular composition of DVG's where this concept of svabhāva of the kṛti is debated upon. The theme of this poem of DVG says that one must be like the flower in a forest, that grows, shares its fragrance and withers away without any disturbance to/from the world outside, without being bothered by anything else...such must be our prayer.

‘vanasumadōlenna jīvanavu vikasisuvantē | manavannanugōḷisu guruve – he deva ||’  
‘kānandi malligēyu maunadiṃ biridu nija saurabhava sūsi nalaviṃ ||’

DVG himself has suggested the Aṭhāṇa Rāga for this song. Aṭhāṇa is a melody very popularly used for emotions such as valour, anger, and the like since its notes and characteristic phrases have the ‘uddhata’ (masculine) touch. Scholars opine that this Rāga may have been suggested since it has the possibilities of intricate gamakas (melodic fluctuations in the transition of notes), while some debate that the tenderness of a flower suggested in the composition must be rendered through a Rāga which is more ‘sukumāra’ (feminine). Here, we can justify DVG's suggestion by observing a more suggestive tone of the poem. While the simile is of a tender flower, the quality of the personality being suggested here is of a fierce spiritual fighter! For a tender flower to remain unaffected by the ambush of the vehement forest... for a spiritual seeker to remain unaffected by the ups and downs of the world, the quality required is nothing short of immense valour and steadfastness – which can be beautifully and powerfully brought out in depiction through the Aṭhāṇa Rāga!

## SVĀRASYA

This aspect mentioned by DVG is also an element of Gāna, i.e. the manner in which the singer chooses to infuse the relishable aspects of music. The structure of the Sāhitya and the choice of Rāga as per the dancer's visual well planned do ensure some minimal guarantee of enjoyment, however, without strength in rendition and on the spot variations, real ‘svārasya’ that DVG is mentioning is hard to experience. Researcher's

<sup>1</sup> Extraordinary scholar, R.Ganesh mentions that this poem is set to Āryā-chandas which is typically used for songs (geya racanē); a feature of this metre is also to elongate the last word such that there is sustenance in the feel of the word.

participation in the music ensemble of the performance of the Antahpuragītē ‘Puṁ viḍaṁbini’<sup>1</sup> observes this aspect. Key refrain of the composition-

‘āra nagisuve-mattāraṇaḷisuve | āra katadi puṁ viḍaṁba-kāriyāgiḥè ||

Are you (whom are you) trying to make anyone laugh? Are you (whom are you) trying to make anyone cry? For whose sake have to donned this satirical male-form?

Here, the dancer explored the comic aspect of the heroine trying to imitate a male form with many masculine attributes, thus causing delight, amusement, mockery and many such fleeting emotions to an onlooker. As the dancer explored this throughout the presentation; in the rendition of this phrase multiple times, the singer made skilful and apt voice modulations as delightful embellishments – the singer (being a male), imitated a female voice in a shrill tone, added a soft chuckle, cleared his throat, dragged the notes, transitioned from a rough to a soft voice, and many more such variations in the rendition of the said phrase. It is worthy to note that Bharata has mentioned a Sāttvika-bhāva for this called the ‘Svara-bheda’ (change/break of voice). Thus, such aspects of the rendition added immense svārasya to the composition. DVG’s suggestion of ‘lālitya’ being the prime quality for a Śṛṅgāra-kāvya was also aptly adhered to here.

## QUALITIES

The qualities mentioned by DVG is an important read for singers in general and the musicians who are a part of the dance performance. It is also of great value to dancers who wish to understand and explore some guidelines on how to work with her/his musicians while picking up such poetic works for adaptation.

## RĀGA-SAMYOJANA

We have thus observed that composing music for Kāvya is a challenging task, more so when it needs to accommodate the requirement of a dancer’s perspective. On this matter,

## EXPERT OPINION OF DANCE MUSICIANS

*Balasubramanya Sharma* opines that the Rāga suggestions given by DVG are interesting, however the choice and selection of the Rāga must primarily be based on the dancer’s requirement. Knowing the intent behind the suggestion of the Rāga becomes important if we need to follow that recommendation, else the Sāhitya alone suffices to guide the composer to choose the appropriate Rāga. He opines that one must keep a very broad spectrum of Rāgas such that depending on the need of the lyric and that of the dancer, all varieties of music can be explored...and this is possible only when they work for a dancer’s vision or they themselves visualise dance. In an inspired mood he even says that sometimes there is no need to define any Rāga, and one can just go with the feel of the Sāhitya and the Abhinaya of the dancer which will guide the musicality of the composition into a variety of appropriate musical notes...

*D.S.Srivathsa* shares a similar thought that the Rāga choice is quite subjective and dependent on individual artiste’s taste and requirements. He mentions that while there are Rakti Rāgas such as Kharaharapriyā, Cārukeṣī and the like suitable for Śṛṅgāra, Pentane Rāgas like Revatī, Valacī, Mohana, Ābhogi that can be very catchy tunes...the real choice is only based on the feel of the lyric and the vision of the dancer.

## OBSERVATIONS BY THE RESEARCHER

In scholar R.Ganesh’s lecture on DVG’s musical works, he sings a phrase of an Antahpuragītē titled ‘Vāsantī’ in the Rāga Vasanta as suggested by DVG. It is truly astonishing to note that musician, Balasubramanya Sharma in his own manodharma (spontaneous inspired rendition) has composed it in the exact same manner

<sup>1</sup> This was a part of the documentation series, ‘Antahpuragītē Nāṭyaśreṇī’ performance at Gokhale Institute of Public Affairs, by danseuse Shobha Shashikumar.





with similar phrases set to Vasanta Rāga! The Sāhitya also indicated the same by its key phrase – ‘vāsantakeṭīrate’, i.e. the one who is immersed in the play of Vasanta/spring season/season of love. Thus, we see that the Sāhitya-bhāva, the Rāga suggestion by DVG, the humming of the tune by the erudite scholar and the music visual of the singer...have all found sādharmaṇīkaraṇa (a universalised experience)!

In quite a contrary experience – for the Antahpuragītē titled ‘Nīlāmbarē’, the Rāga suggested by DVG has been Nīlāmbārī. The musician initially composed the song in that particular Rāga; however, during the practice session it was the experience of both the dancer and the singer that for the feel of this Nāyikā (heroine), the choice of Rāga did not seem appropriate. While the word ‘nīlāmbarē’ was aptly chosen by DVG for the sculpture suggesting that she is the one wearing the sky as apparel (the one in dark clothes that are not perceivable to the obvious eye, hinting at her disrobed state), the situation in the song was such that the Nāyikā having seen a scorpion on her clothes, in tremendous fear discards her clothes and stands unclad; the Sāhitya too indicated the poet asking her the reason for her fear and agitation (key phrase – ‘enī bhayabhrāntiye nīlāmbarē’). The Nīlāmbārī Rāga is slow, soothing, and most often chosen for a lullaby associating the main notes and characteristic phrases with relaxation and silence, quite contrary to the emotions of the song and the heroine! Eventually, the musician picked the Rāga Ṣaṇmukhapriyā which could bring out the emotions of fear as well as shades of philosophical silence that the dancer’s visualisation of the song demanded.

## GĀNA

Another key aspect of the music and dance relationship through the Sāhitya, is to do with the manner in which the word is recited/sung and what impact it creates on the dancer during the performance. We have already seen how DVG has given the term ‘svārasya’ to explain this alongside the many ‘qualities’ a musician must possess. At a time prior to performance exploration, the Sāhitya forms the basis for moulding a concept or the character; however, during the performance, the journey of the Sāhitya takes on a very dynamic shade between the music ensemble and the dancer...ideally the one where it is mutually inspiring and thus constantly going up the ladder of Rasānubhava (artistic experience)!

It is possible to say that there are two ways that a dancer would ‘receive’ the Sāhitya during the performance–

- Sāhitya as a point of inspiration for dancer’s expansion of ideas
- Interconnected journey of dancer and singer through the Sāhitya

## SĀHITYA AS A POINT OF INSPIRATION

In this case, just a mention of the word or a phrase of the poetry becomes an inspiration for the entire characterization or expansion of emotion by the dancer. At this point, the singer’s primary responsibility is to render the Sāhitya with the right diction (and of course with the required musical impact) and then allow the dancer to explore the piece. From here on, the music ensemble follows the dancer’s journey in supportive ways of vocal singing and instrumentation; sometimes with the help of the Sāhitya if relevant at that point either as repetitions or progression of the lyric into the next thought or with other elements of music like Ālāp, Svāra, Tāna etc. Here, the role of the lyric is to become a springboard for the dancer, and she/he is not completely dependent on/directed by the Sāhitya thereof. This often happens in the pieces where dramatic exploration is of greater demand.

An example for the above points would be from the Case study of Śrīrāma Parīkṣaṇam of DVG<sup>1</sup>. In the exploration of Sītā’s questioning of Rāma is a line by DVG,

‘esukaṣṭagaḷa nīm paṭṭē, ravikularanna | esanēnagāgi nīm sairisidē, manadanna ||’

<sup>1</sup> This performance by danseuse Shobha Shashikumar for Gokhale Institute of Public Affairs has been documented as a DVD and is available for public viewing. The researcher having witnessed two performances live, has been able to discuss this as a case study for the present topic.



Oh, how many countless difficulties you faced, O' the gem of the sun-dynasty  
Oh, how much you endured for me, O' my beloved

Here, with just the utterance of the word 'esukaṣṭa' by the singer, the dancer imagines and relives all the trials and tribulations that Rama had to face, just for her...thus capturing all key episodes of the Rāmāyaṇa! In a heightened moment of Sāttvikābhinaya (the Sāttvika-bhāva of Aśru {tears} being manifested) the dancer is able to capture Sītā's pain of Rāma's endurance in her eyes! The dancer does explore the stories of Śivadhanurbhaṅga, Mārīca, Rāma's viraha and so on with support from the Sāhitya later on in the performance. In this case, we clearly see that with or without the rest of the Sāhitya, this word and the subsequent phrase being clearly and melodiously rendered suffices for a dancer, as it has become a springboard for the artiste's depths into the character of Sītā.

### INTERCONNECTED JOURNEY

The other possibility is when the dancer and the singer have to be closely connected through the Sāhitya itself. In such cases, it is the lyric that leads the dancer into various thoughts, shades of emotions, ideas to explore and so on. At such times, the role of the Sāhitya and its rendition by the singer with the right diction and musical quality is of utmost importance since the entire dance journey is dependent on the song. This is often seen when the exact meaning of the lyric is unmissable for understanding the dance itself (like in the case of Padārtha-abhinaya/word by word rendition). This is also helpful when many layers of interpretations are being explored for the same emotional idea (like in the case of Vākyārtha abhinaya/elaboration of thought).

Here is an example from the Researcher's exploration of an Antaḥpuragītē, 'Nāṭya Sundari'.<sup>1</sup> Here, we find that DVG addresses the sculpture as the embodiment of beauty ('sundari nīne') and describes her beauty in many ways –

‘vadanādhara hāsagaḷeṃ | mṛdunayanavikāsagaḷeṃ | hṛdayaṅgavilāsagaḷeṃ ||’

Oh what are these lovely smiles emanating from your lips...what is this blossoming of your tender eyes...what are these charming heartfelt movements of your body...

For each of these lines, different perspectives of Śṛṅgāra were touched upon. For example,<sup>2</sup>

In 'vadanādhara hāsa' – Smita-hāsa of the Nāyikā at the thought of Cennakeśava, a wide smile with radiance filling the face when he sees her is compared to the Kavi-samaya (poetic convention) of a lotus blossoming for the sun etc.

In 'mṛdunayanavikāsa' – Sāci-dṛṣṭi with Unmeṣa-puta when she looks at him bashfully, Sama-dṛṣṭi full of her love for him compared to the wick of a steady flame etc.

In 'hṛdayaṅgavilāsa' – Karaṇas like Vakṣasvastikaṃ, Parīvṛttaṃ, Nisumbhitaṃ to suggest how her entire body was soaked in love for him!

In all these occasions, it is only the expression of the emotion of love addressed at (through the smile once, through the eyes once and finally through the entire body) and hence the singer extraordinarily supported by repeating the same phrases multiple times with different musical tonalities till the ideas were completed! The dancer too had the experience of being in connect with the singer's repetitions. Here, the interconnected journey between the singer and the dancer is a must and the Sāhitya of the composition itself becomes the fundamental thread on which the emotions/situations are built.

<sup>1</sup> This was a part of the documentation series, 'Antaḥpuragītē Nāṭyaśreṇi' performance, under the direction of danseuse and guide Shobha Shashikumar.

<sup>2</sup> The technical terms mentioned here are specific to a dancer's perspective and are available in the Nāṭyaśāstra treatise.

## CONCLUSION

We have thus far seen how the various melodic aspects of music are perceived under different circumstances. By way of all the suggestions given by the poet himself, DVG has provided the basic tenets of how the melodic aspects to a Kāvya Sāhitya must be approached, and finally concludes that a capable musician can certainly conceive it differently based on his own skills and tastes... While all these aspects may be discussed and analysed and planned to the maximum extent possible, the actual music visualisation and its suitability to dance becomes evident only on the performance stage as it evolves through the process of art creation! The coming together of melody and lyric, more so for dance visualisation, is not a linear journey but is based on so many factors of shared experiences!<sup>1</sup> Here the dancer's familiarity with the aspects of music too plays a significant role. She/he need not be an expert musician, however, must at least be able to appreciate the nuances of melody. For a complete artistic experience, the dancer must feel inspired by music! Inspired to create more embellished movements and inspired to delve deeper into the emotions of the characters... Through the sample cases and the expert opinions, we thus see how it is possible for a dancer to benefit from the creative explorations of musicians as also ensure that her/his dance is such that it inspires music!

It is wise to recollect the words of the artistic legend, Padma Subrahmanyam who in her inspired moments proclaimed that she '*hears dance and sees music*'! What more glory can these two forms experience if not for this...with Sāhitya as the mutual connect...into the wholesome process of Rasa. The dancer along with her expert music ensemble must thoroughly envision the elements and process of Sāhitya-Saṅgīta-Nṛtya with discretion and propriety, and with the sole purpose of Rasa...!

DVG poetically expresses this in his Antahpuragītē 'Nṛtya Sarasvati',

‘padamātra tānentu – hrdayeṅgitaṅgaḷa | viditavāgipudārtha – cyutiyaḡadantē ||  
odavi kūḍirē rāga – hadadināṅgikasamjñē -| yudipudāgaḷē pūrṇa – vidhadindātma vilāsa ||’

With the coming together of syllables and metrics, the intent of the heart is brought out through the word-meaning without any loss (of meaning/emotion); and when this is supported by melody (music) and adequate elements of dance... it is only then that a thorough experience of Self-unfoldment emerges forth!

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Reference – Personal interview of eminent dance musicians (vocalists and music composers) was conducted to arrive at the expert opinion. Interviewees included Balasubramanya Sharma and D.S.Srivathsa.

<sup>1</sup> It is important here to note that while all the discussions are based on Vocal rendition, the contribution of the melodic instruments is invaluable! As this warrants a detailed independent discussion it is not taken up here. However, the entire music ensemble has the utmost role to play for the success of a dance performance.