

STUDY OF RĀGA ŚĀHANA IN THE DĪKṢITĀR SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Kottapenta Mugdha

Research Scholar, Department of Music and Dance, College of Arts and Commerce, Andhra University.



ABSTRACT

Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitār, one of the stalwarts of Carnatic music and one of the Carnatic musical trinities, composed nearly five hundred works during his lifetime. He was a staunch follower of Advaita philosophy. He adhered to the Asampūrṇa Mēla Paddhati in his compositions, a system which is carefully preserved in Subbarāma Dīkṣitār's Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśinī, along with detailed notations and sañcāra-s. These compositions stand as authoritative sources for understanding the rāga paddhati employed by Dīkṣitār and followed throughout the Dīkṣitār school. Through them, one can study the structural framework of rāga-s, the characteristic prayōga-s, and conduct comparative analyses of the Asampūrṇa and Sampūrṇa Mēla systems. The rāga-s in these two schemes often differ significantly, even altering the very aesthetic and emotional character of a rāga. A careful study of Dīkṣitār's rāga structures and their faithful rendition in practice enables both the Asampūrṇa and Sampūrṇa Mēla traditions to retain their rightful importance within the Carnatic musical repertoire. This article primarily focuses on an in-depth study of the Rāga Śāhana, examining its characteristics within the Asampūrṇa Mēla Paddhati, the distinctive prayōga-s employed by Dīkṣitār in his compositions, and the sañcāra-s and rāga-lakṣaṇa documented by Subbarāma Dīkṣitār.

KEY WORDS: Śāhana, Asampūrṇa Mēla Paddhati, rāga, Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitār.

INTRODUCTION

Maṭaṅga, who belonged to the 4th century A.D, first introduced the term *rāga* in the Bṛhaddēśī, in which he equated the earlier concept of *jāti* with what later came to be known as *rāga*. From this point onward, the term *rāga* gained prominence, and the theoretical framework that eventually evolved into the *mēla* system began to take shape. Rāmāmātya, in his Svaramēḷa Kalānidhi, identified approximately twenty *mēla*-s in the *Mēla Prakaraṇa*. Sōmanātha, in his Rāgavibōdha, revised this list by modifying some of the earlier *rāga*-s, adding a few more, and presenting a total of twenty-three *mēla*-s. Until the period of Vēnkaṭamakhi in the 17th century, no standardised number of *mēla*-s existed in Carnatic music.

Vēnkaṭamakhi was the first to formulate the complete set of seventy-two *mēla*-s based on the *ṣōḍaśa svarasthāna* scheme, asserting explicitly in his treatise that it was impossible to construct more than seventy-two fundamental *mēlakarta* scales. However, in the Caturdaṇḍi Prakāśika, he discusses only nineteen *mēla*-s that were in practical use during his time, designating the remaining fifty-three as *kalpita mēla*-s, further classified into *Kalpāyamāna* and *Kalpāyuṣyamāna* groups. It was only later, in the appendix to the Caturdaṇḍi Prakāśika published by the Madras Music Academy and attributed to Muddu Vēnkaṭamakhi (Vēnkaṭamakhi's maternal grandson), that those complete details of all seventy-two *mēla*-s, along with their *janya rāga*-s, were systematically documented. Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitār composed extensively in these *rāga*-s as enumerated by Muddu Vēnkaṭamakhi. This scheme is referred to as the *Asampūrṇa Mēla Paddhati*, as the principle of absolute scalar completeness (*krama-sampūrṇattva*) in both *ārōhana* and *avarōhana* was not yet rigidly established.

Subsequently, the system was further formalised by Govindācārya in his Saṅgraha Cūḍamaṇi, where he laid down three essential criteria for classifying a scale as a *mēlakarta*. Within the Carnatic musical trinity, Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitār adhered to the *Asampūrṇa mēla* tradition, which he inherited from his lineage, whereas Tyāgarāja Svāmi and Śyāmasāśtri followed the *Sampūrṇa mēla* system. This divergence explains the numerous differences seen today in *rāga* nomenclature, scalar patterns (*paddhati*), *gamaka* traditions, and even the *svara*-s employed in specific *rāga*-s. Several *rāga*-s performed in contemporary practice display significant deviations from the *Asampūrṇa mēla* scheme; examples include Vasanta, Śāhana, Bēgaḍa, and Hindōḷa Vasanta.

STUDY AREA

This article highlights the distinctive interpretation of Rāga Śāhana within the Dīkṣitār school of music, an interpretation that differs significantly from that of other Carnatic traditions. By exploring these divergences, the study aims to bring out the unique aesthetic, structural, and melodic principles that shape Śāhana in the Dīkṣitār lineage. The central focus is on analysing the variations of Śāhana as articulated in both the *Asampūrṇa Mēla Paddhati* and the *Sampūrṇa Mēla Paddhati*, with particular emphasis on the characteristic musical phrases (*prayōga*-s) employed in each system.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary methodology of this study is qualitative, utilising an analytical approach to investigate the variations in the Rāga Śāhana. The chief source referenced is the Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśinī of Subbarāma Dīkṣitār, published in 1904, which remains an authoritative treatise on traditional Rāga lakṣaṇa-s and compositions in the Dīkṣitār school.

Primary and Supporting Sources

- The core material is drawn from Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini, offering notated examples, Rāga lakṣaṇa, and critical commentary reflecting the *Asampūrṇa mēla paddhati*.
- Valuable supplementary insights were gathered from lecture demonstrations by eminent artists such as Dr. R. S. Jayalakshmi and T. M. Krishna, who have both explored the nuances and phrase variations of Śāhana in their respective presentations.
- For modern perspectives on the rāga within the *Sampūrṇa* system, Saṅgīta Śāstra Sāramu by Dr. S. R. Janakiraman was referenced, providing comparative analysis with contemporary approaches.

ORIGIN OF THE RĀGA ŚĀHANA:

The Rāga Śāhana's earliest documented mention is generally attributed to the treatise Rāga Lakṣaṇa of Muḍdu Vēnkaṭamakhi, where it is described and assigned to a parent mēla, the 22nd. However, in a lecture-demonstration, Dr R. S. Jayalakshmi noted that Śāhana appears even earlier in the lakṣaṇa gīta of Pydāla Gurumūrti Śāstri, where the *gīta* describes Śāhana as a janya of the Kāmbhōji mēla and details its musical features - *Śānā Rāgam Kāmbhōji Janyam Kampita Gāndhāram, Dīrgha Madhyamam, Dhaivata Vakra, Niṣāda Kampita Lasitam Vakra Sampūrṇam Guru Mūrtē Cidrūpārjuna Śāradē Bhāṣāṅga Rāgam Śṛṇu Jaya Kṛpālō*. This *gīta*, according to Dr. R. S. Jayalakshmi, was published in the book Saṅgītānanda Ratnākaramu, and demonstrates that the rāga's structure and parentage may have differed at that time from what is now considered modern Hari Kāmbhōji mēla.

Additionally, the claim in Hema Ramanathan's Rāga Lakṣaṇa Saṅgraha is that Śāhana is indeed first formally documented in Muḍdu Vēnkaṭamakhi's treatise, verified by multiple musicological sources.

STUDY OF THE RĀGA ŚĀHANA:

Muḍdu Vēnkaṭamakhi, while describing the janya rāgas of the Śrī Rāga Mēla (the 22nd mēla), lists Śāhana as a janya rāga and provides the following lakṣaṇa śloka:

Sahanā Rāgastu Pūrṇaḥ Śadja Graha Samanvitaḥ |

Ārohe Tu Pa Vakraśca Gīyate Lakṣya Vēdibhiḥ ||

This describes Śāhana as a complete *rāga* (pūrṇaḥ), taking Śadja as the starting note, with a vakra (zig-zag) use of Pañcama in the ascent and identifies its performance as best learned through practical experience by those proficient in *rāga* interpretation (*lakṣya vēdibhiḥ*).

Subbarāma Dīkṣitār, in his Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini, classifies Śāhana as a *bhāṣāṅga rāga*, a classical Carnatic *rāga* that imports foreign notes to its parent mēla. He gives its *mūrchanā* (scale structure) as follows:

ĀROHAṆA: S R bG M P M D bN Ś

AVARŌHAṆA: bN bN D P M bG bG R, bG R S

Careful observation of the *mūrchanā* (scale) of Śāhana reveals the incorporation of flat signs (b) before the svaras Gāndhāra and Niṣāda. In Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini, Subbarāma Dīkṣitār employed the Western scale notation system, where he did not mark natural notes of the major diatonic scale, corresponding to the 29th mēla Dhīra Śankarābharaṇam in Carnatic music. He indicated alteration signs (such as flats and sharps) only for svaras deviating from this major scale.

The flat signs before Gandhāra and niṣāda thus indicate the use of Sādhāraṇa Gandhāra (minor third) and Kaiśiki Niṣāda (minor seventh), respectively, in Śāhana. Accordingly, the svara sthānas (note positions) in this rāga are:

- Śadjam (S)
- Catusṛti Riṣabham (R₂)
- Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāram (G₂)
- Śuddha Madhyamam (M₁)
- Pañcamam (P)
- Catusṛti Dhaivatam (D₂)

- Kaiśiki Niṣādam (N₂)

In modern practice, Śāhana is typically classified as a *janya rāga* of the 28th *mēla* Hari Kāmbhōji, where Antara Gāndhāra (G₃, major third) replaces the Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāra, significantly altering the *rāga*'s mood and emotional flavour. This modification results in differences in the characteristic phrases and overall aesthetic of Śāhana as rendered today compared to its older Asampūrṇa form.

In the Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini, it is clearly noted that the avarōhaṇa (descending scale) of Śāhana features *janta* (doubled) Niṣāda and Gāndhāra, as well as prolonged (*dīrgha*) Rīṣabha. These three notes, Niṣāda, Gāndhāra, and Rīṣabha, are thus established as the *jīva svaras* of the *rāga*, according to this tradition. The description also highlights the use of the *vaḷi gamaka*, particularly in the *janta* usage in the characteristic phrases N N D P and G G R S, marking them as essential to Śāhana's expression.

Within the Dīkṣitār school, the Gāndhāra used predominantly is Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāra (G₂), with Antara Gāndhāra (G₃) appearing only occasionally in selected phrases. Notably, in the notations throughout the Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini, Subbarāma Dīkṣitār does not use a flat sign before Gāndhāra in any Śāhana composition. Instead, a natural sign (♮) is sometimes applied to the Gāndhāra in certain phrases, indicating a return to Antara Gāndhāra, the “natural” third in the major diatonic (Western) scale.

Subbarāma Dīkṣitār consistently follows this notational convention in all Śāhana pieces. According to his observations, Antara Gāndhāra most frequently occurs in the following melodic phrases:

- R ♮G M P
- ♮G M ♮G R
- ♮G R S N
- M ♮G M P
- P M ♮G R
- P R ♮G M

Throughout these compositions, *janta* usages of Niṣāda and Gāndhāra are regularly marked with the *vaḷi gamaka* symbol (◡) above the note pairs, underscoring their stylistic importance. Though Madhyama is sometimes subtly heard as a passing note in the *janta vaḷi prayōga* on Gāndhāra, the specific sequence G M R is not explicitly notated in the compositions. In contrast, this phrase can be seen widely used in today's *rāga* structure. According to the Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini, the most commonly used gamakas in the Rāga Śāhana are mentioned as tirupamu, vaḷi, pratyāhata, kampita, and spurita.

The compositions notated under the Rāga Śāhana in the Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini include the following:

- Śrī Kamalāmbikāyām Bhaktim Karōmi – set to Tripuṭa Tālam, composed by Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitār
- Īsānādi Śivākāra Mañcē – set to Trīsrā Ēka Tālam, composed by Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitār
- Vāśi Vāśi Vāśi Vāśi Yanucu – set to Ādi Tālam, composed by Rāmasvāmy Dīkṣitār
- Vārijākṣiṇī – a tāna varṇa in Aṭa Tālam, composed by Subbarāma Dīkṣitār
- Śancāri in Maṭhya Tālam, composed by Subbarāma Dīkṣitār

In these notations, the *rāga* ranges from the *Maṇḍra Sthāyi* Madhyamam (lower octave madhyamam) to the *Tāra Sthāyi* Madhyamam (upper octave madhyamam), covering an expansive melodic range reflective of the *rāga*'s aesthetic depth in the Dīkṣitār tradition.

Govindācārya, in his Saṅgraha Cūḍāmaṇi, classifies Śāhana as a *janya rāga* of Hari Kāmbhōji, the 28th *mēlakarta rāga*. He provides the following *lakṣaṇa ślōka* for Śāhana:

Harikāmbhoji Mēlācca Śahanā Rāga Iṣyatē
Ni Nyāsam Aṁsakam Caiva Niṣāda Graham Ucyatē |
Ārohepyāvarohēca Sampūrṇam Vakramēvaca
Sarigamapamadhānī Sanidhapamāgāmārī ||

This ślōka explicitly describes the *mūrchana* (scale) as:

S R G M P M D N - Ś N D P M G M R

The svarasthāna-s (note positions) involved here are:

- Śadjam (S)
- Catusṛti Riṣabham (R₂)
- Antara Gāndhāram (G₃)
- Śuddha Madhyamam (M₁)
- Pañcamam (P)
- Catusṛti Dhaivatam (D₂)
- Kaiśiki Niṣādam (N₂)

Significantly, this *mūrchana* includes the phrase G M R, which is a characteristic phrase in today's structure and develops the aesthetics of the *rāga* and is explicitly mentioned here but is not found in the Dīkṣitār school's rendition of Śāhana. Instead, the Dīkṣitār tradition typically favours the phrase R G R S in its *prayōga*, a phrase that imparts a subtle flavour reminiscent of Śrī Rāga.

The treatises Saṅgīta Sāra Saṅgrahaṃ by Tīruvēnkaṭa Kavi and Mahābhārata Cūḍāmaṇi, which are dated close, next to the period of Saṅgraha Chūḍāmaṇi, mention the Rāga Śāhana as a *janya rāga* of the 29th *mēḷa* Dhīrā Śankarabharāṇam. The Saṅgīta Sāra Saṅgraha by Tīruvēnkaṭa Kavi describes the *rāga*'s *ārōhaṇa* (ascent) and *avarōhaṇa* (descent) as straightforward sequences similar to *rāga* Śankarabharāṇam.

In contrast, the treatise Rāga Lakṣaṇam from the 18th–19th century classifies Śāhana as an *upāṅga janya rāga* of the 28th *mēḷa* Hari Kāmbhōji. Professor Hema Ramanathan, in her Rāga Lakṣaṇa Saṅgraha, states that the Rāga Śāhana entered the Carnatic music repertoire during the 18th century. She opines that within a relatively short span, it was identified as a *janya rāga* of multiple *mēḷa*-s, namely the 22nd, 28th, and 29th *mēḷa*-s, reflecting various interpretative traditions and adaptations.

In Hindustani music, Śāhana (or Śahana) is recognised as a late-night *rāga*, typically placed under the Kāpi thāt, and is noted for its shared features with *rāga*-s like Kānadā and Bāgeśri. It is commonly referred to as Śāhana Kānaḍa within the Hindustani tradition, reflecting the blend of melodic characteristics it shares with both families.

The *ārōhaṇa* and *avarōhaṇa* (ascent and descent) of this *rāga* in Hindustani music are typically given as:

- Ārōhaṇa: Ṇ S G M P N D N Ś
- Avarōhaṇa: Ś N D N P M P G M R S

This structure features Kōmal Gāndhāra and Kōmal Niṣāda corresponding to Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāra and Kaiśiki Niṣāda in Carnatic music terminology. The usage of these softer notes, along with curving, expressive phrases, enhances the *rāga*'s emotional mood, creating similarities with *rāgas* such as Kānaḍa and Bāgeśri.

Crucially, in the Hindustani system, grouping Śāhana under Kāpi thāt is analogous to the placement of Śāhana under the 22nd *mēḷakarta* Śrī Rāga (in the Dīkṣitār school), where Kāpi thāt is equated with the *rāga* Kharaharapriya in Carnatic music. This cross-system alignment may help explain why Muḍdu Vēnkaṭamakhi and Subbarāma Dīkṣitār grouped Śāhana as a *bhāṣāṅga janya rāga* of Śrī Rāga in their works, showing both historical and theoretical continuity between the two musical systems.

PRESENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RĀGA:

In contemporary *rāga lakṣaṇa*, Śāhana is mentioned as a *janya rāga* of the 28th *mēḷakarta* Hari Kāmbhōji. The prescribed *mūrchana* (scale) is:

S R G M P M D N Ś – Ś N D P M G M R G R S

with the svara sthānas listed as Śadjam, Catusṛti Riṣabham, Antara Gāndhāram, Śuddha Madhyamam, Pañcamam, Catusṛti Dhaivatam, and Kaiśiki Niṣādam.

Śāhana is considered an *upāṅga rāga*, meaning it traditionally uses only the notes within its *mēḷakarta* and excludes foreign notes (*bhāṣāṅgas*). Notably, the *prayōga* of Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāra is absent today.

However, Prof. S. R. Janaki Raman, in his book *Saṅgīta Śāstra Sāramu*, points out that the Gāndhāra in the *prayōga* R G R S is intoned slightly lower than the exact pitch of Antara Gāndhāra. Due to this microtonal variation, several scholars consider the *rāga* to be an *Artha Bhaṣāṅga Rāga* ("partially foreign note" *rāga*).

Characteristic phrases that evoke the *rāga*'s *bhāva* include G M R and R G M P, while Ṇ R S Ṇ Ḍ is identified as a *viśeṣa prayōga* (special phrase). The *rāga* predominantly employs *ēka svara* (single-note) *prayōgas* to maintain its *bhāva*, which contrasts notably with the rich *gamaka* and *prayōga* complexity described in earlier sources, such as the *Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini*.

It is mentioned that despite the Gāndhāra being considered a *jīva svara*, it is generally not used as a *nyāsa svara* (ending note) in this *rāga*.

Śāhana is extensively employed to depict the *karuṇā rasa bhāva* and features in many compositions. A notable example is the *kṛti* by Śrī Tyāgarāja Svāmī—*Vandanamu Raghunandana* from *Prahlāda Bhakti Vijayam*, which elegantly portrays the ninefold devotion path (*nava viddha bhakti mārga*) of worship (*vandana*).

Another special *prayōga* mentioned is R G M P D N Ś Ṛ, an *ārohaṇa-krama prayōga*, famously heard in Tyāgarāja Svāmī's *kṛti* *Giri Pai Nelakonna*, set in *Ādi Tālam*.

CONCLUSION

The *rāga* under discussion, Śāhana, is a rare and fascinating example of a melodic entity that holds a respected place in both the Hindustani and Carnatic classical traditions of India. In the Hindustani system, Śāhana has retained its traditional identity, continuing to employ the *Sādhāraṇa Gāndhāra* (minor third), which contributes significantly to its gentle, wistful melodic contour.

In the Carnatic tradition, however, Śāhana underwent a gradual transformation. Influenced by allied *rāgas* such as *Kānada* and *Śrī Rāga*, its melodic framework evolved, eventually adopting the *Antara Gāndhāra* (major third) as its central *jīva svara*. This shift marks an important point in the *rāga*'s stylistic development, illustrating how regional practice, lineage-specific aesthetics, and historical context shape the trajectory of a *rāga*'s evolution.

Examining such transformations, particularly through a comparative study of *rāga-s* across musical schools and traditions, reveals the subtle nuances that define their melodic structures, characteristic phrases, and expressive potential. For performers, this understanding is crucial: it enables them to render compositions with stylistic integrity, honouring the grammar, aesthetics, and intent embedded in the tradition from which the composition emerges.

Ultimately, by acknowledging and preserving the distinct phrases of each musical lineage, we ensure that the richness of India's classical music, its diversity of styles, interpretations, and histories, continues to thrive. Such respectful scholarship and informed performance practice help sustain these traditions meaningfully and harmoniously for future generations.

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