

A COMPREHENSIVE DISCUSSION ON RASA IN MUSIC THROUGH MELODY, RHYTHM AND DRONE

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ABSTRACT

The Carnatic Music that has evolved in South India expresses Rasa and Bhava in many ways. The inner subtle emotions are amplified by the 'Anubhava' or experience. This article studies the nuances of these triggers of emotions that are expressed artistically with different moods. It discusses the theoretical aspects of Rasa and bhava with instances of rendering of Carnatic Music system from the perspectives of Vocal Music, Instrumental Music, Percussion and also drone. The study also examines the manner of expression in the elements of performances in Carnatic music, in which rasa and bhava are conveyed through instant melodic or artistic creations and expressions like Manodharma and Kalpita. With the limitations of experimentation, the study attempts to examine the concepts with secondary data and existing literature. It concludes with an understanding of the mood of drone sound, along with the other modes of music, to comprehend the discussion.

Keywords: Carnatic music, Rasa, Bhava, Manodharma Sangita, Raga

Introduction

The term *Carnatic* refers to the southern regions of India, namely Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Odisha. Carnatic music is a classical system that progresses from basic lessons to the level of *kirtana*, which demonstrates and transmits its rich musical nuances. It is propagated through various modes such as media, online platforms, concerts, lecture-demonstrations (lecdems), seminars, festivals, research activities, articles, journals, publications, magazines, periodicals, newspapers, treatises, and textbooks.

Music is the central element of this tradition, while *bhava*, the expression of emotion, enables the listener to connect with it. The experience of this emotional response is often referred to as *Anubhava*. Carnatic music is structured around *Melakarta* and *Janya ragas*, through which listeners can experience *rasa* (aesthetic emotion). This experience is formed by several factors, including nature, feeling, expression, literature, and poetry.

This paper focuses specifically on how music contributes to the experience of *rasa* and *bhava*. While it is easy to describe theoretically that a particular *raga* evokes a certain *rasa*, it is also difficult for listeners to perceive and internalize these emotions. This depends greatly on the singing techniques of vocalists, the performance styles of instrumentalists, and the tonal qualities of different instruments such as vocal, wind, string, percussion, metallic, and drone instruments, especially the *tambura* and *sruti* box.

Both *rasa anubhava* and *sahitya bhava-anubhava* are present in *kalpita* (composed) and *manodharma* (improvised) music. In music and dance, various *rasas* are expressed and maintained, including *hasya* (humour), *sringara* (love), *bhayanaka* (fear), *bibhatsa* (disgust), *raudra* (anger), *adbhuta* (wonder), *karuna* (compassion), and *shanta* (peace). (Pakkiriswamybharathy, 2012)

The analysis in this study is structured through key factors such as understanding the fundamental concepts of Carnatic music, detailed illustration, and the identification of elements that generate *rasa* and *bhava*. Moving beyond a purely descriptive approach, the study examines how these elements function in practice through the elaboration of *ragas* and *svaras*, contributing to *sahitya bhava* and *rasa anu-bhava*. For example, a *raga* like *Kalyani* is often associated with grandeur and devotion, whereas *Neelambari* evokes calmness and a lullaby-like serenity.

The analytical framework is divided into three components: vocal music, melody-based instrumental music, and *tala*-based percussion instruments. In vocal music, the distinction between *kalpita* and *manodharma sangita* is significant. *Kalpita* involves structured learning through the *guru*, where compositions such as *kriti-s*, *kirtana-s*, and *varnam-s* provide a foundation for expressing *rasa*. For instance, compositions of Tyagaraja sometimes reflect *bhakti rasa*, with meaningful *sahitya*. (Shriramkumar, 2017)

In contrast, *manodharma sangita* expands emotional depth through creativity. Forms such as *raga alapana* allow exploration of a *raga* without rhythmic limitation, while *niraval* enhances *sahitya bhava* through melodic and rhythmic variation. In *kalpana*

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svara, patterns like *kuraippu* and *korvai* create tension and resolution, which leads to *rasa anu-bhava*. The structure of *ragam tanam pallavi* integrates both discipline and creativity. (Shanthanagopalan, 2022)

Instrumental music complements vocal expression. Instruments like the violin and veena sustain *gamakas*, and the flute emphasises continuity. The *tambura* plays a crucial role by maintaining *sruti*, while modern tools like electronic *tambura* and *sruti-box* extend this function.

Percussion analysis focuses on *tala* and *laya*, where *konnakol* and *upa pakka vadyas* such as *ghatam*, *kanjira*, and *morsing* enhance rhythmic vitality. Techniques like *yatis* and traditional *prayogas* further define the structure and emotional identity of *raga*. Thus, *rasa* and *bhava* emerge through the interaction of structure, creativity, and perception.

Aims and Objectives

This work aims to develop an appreciation of music through expression and direct experience. It focuses more on practical aspects than on theoretical concepts, emphasising how music is perceived and felt rather than merely explained.

The study also considers how music influences emotions, not from a therapeutic or purely technical (oral or aural) perspective, but through lived experience. Since such responses are deeply personal and experiential, they are often difficult to convey fully in written form. Instead, they are better understood and explored through listening and audio-based examples.

Scope and Limitation

Carnatic music offers a vast field for analysis, including areas like composers, compositions, concerts, *manodharma* (improvisation), and *kalpita* (composed music), etc. However, the scope of this article is limited to understanding and experiencing the intrinsic emotions evoked through music.

Rather than examining all aspects in detail, this study focuses specifically on how music facilitates emotional expression and allows listeners to connect with and experience these inner feelings.

Methodology Employed

The methodology of this work is based on a combination of theoretical understanding and practical engagement. It includes the study of treatises and relevant literature to understand the fundamental concepts of music.

In addition, listening to audio recordings and analysing suitable illustrations form an important part of the approach. The process also involves observation, interpretation, and analysis of the art through primary, secondary, and tertiary sources.

Challenges

The study of *rasa* and *bhava* in Carnatic music presents significant challenges due to its subjective and experiential nature. It is difficult to make precise or universal statements, as emotional responses vary among listeners. For example, the sound of the *tambura* is often considered meditative, yet it may also evoke *sandha rasa* depending on context and perception. This shows that musical effects cannot be fixed or generalised.

Another challenge lies in linking specific *raga-s* to definite *rasa-s*. While theory suggests such associations, practical experience differs based on rendition, composition, and listener sensitivity. Some compositions inherently express particular *rasa*, but their impact is not uniform.

Music travels through the air as sound, yet *rasa anu-bhava* remains intangible and cannot be directly observed or measured. It is skill-oriented and must be experienced. In forms like chanting, where *raga* is less elaborate, identifying *rasa* becomes even more difficult.

Analysis

Rasa in Music

Carnatic music conveys *rasa* through multiple dimensions, functioning as an inner amplification of emotion shaped by experience. This concept is closely linked with *bhava*, where *rasa* may be understood as the aesthetic emotion experienced by the listener through musical expression. Rather than being a fixed outcome, *rasa* emerges through the interaction of musical elements such as *raga*, *svara*, *sruti*, and performance technique.

Unlike theoretical definitions, the experience of *rasa* is dynamic and subjective. It depends on how the music is rendered and perceived. Thus, Carnatic music serves not merely as a system of structured sound but as a medium through which emotional states are communicated and internalised.

Vocal Music

Vocal music forms the core of Carnatic tradition and is inherently connected with instrumental music. Many compositions explicitly refer to vocal expression, such as “soga suga mridanga talamu” of Tyagaraja in Sri Ranjani, “balagopala” of Muttusamy Diksitar in Bhairavi, and “tamburi mititava” of Purandara Dasar in Sindhu Bhairavi. These compositions highlight the integration of voice, rhythm, and melody.

The concept of vocal music is traditionally referred to as *gaathra vina*, *saarira vina*, *midatrisai*, and *kuralisai*, (Pakkiriswamybharathy, 2012), which indicates that the human voice itself is considered a primary instrument. Training in Carnatic music begins with vocal practice, emphasising control over pitch, tone, and expression through the vocal cords. (TRB, 2017)

In *manodarma sangita*, *rasa* is created through improvisational elements such as *alapana*, *tanam*, *niraval*, *trikalama*, *kalpana svara*, *raga malika svara*, *kuraippu*, and *korvai*. For example, in *alapana*, syllables like “ta da ri rin rim mm nn la” help articulate *gamaka-s* and *bruga-s*, enabling the performer to convey *bhava*. The movement across *stayis*, from *anumantra* to *aditaara*, further enhances emotional depth.

Tanam represents a higher level of improvisation, performed in multiple speeds to intensify *rasa*. In *niraval*, emphasis is placed on *sahithya bhava*, where a single lyrical line is expanded melodically and rhythmically. Similarly, *kalpana svara* introduces structured improvisation, culminating in *kuraippu* and *korvai*, creating tension and resolution that contribute to *rasa anu-bhava*.

Raga malika svara and *ragam tanam pallavi* demonstrate the creative capacity of the performer to shift between *ragas*, allowing listeners to perceive contrasting emotional states within a single structure. *Vruttam* singing, derived from *sloka-s* and literary texts, further enhances expressive depth. (TRB, 2017)

Rasa in Vocal Music

The creation of *rasa* in vocal music depends on the integration of voice and mind. Elements such as *raga*, *svara*, *sruti*, and vocal texture collectively form emotional expression. In *Kalpita Sangita*, the progression of *sangati-s* reveals subtle variations in *bhava*, while *Sahithya* provides semantic clarity. (TRB, 2017)

For instance, compositions like “niti chala sukama” in Kalyani, “enna solli azaithai” in Kannada, and “varuvaro varam taruvaro” in Sama illustrate how *sahithya* and melody combine to evoke specific emotional states. The listener’s experience of *rasa* may vary individually in concerts, whereas in group performances such as *bajan-s* or *naamavali-s*, *rasa* becomes collective.

Factors influencing *rasa* include pitch variation, voice modulation, facial expression, interaction with accompanists, and the development of *sangati-s*. Sustained notes and controlled phrasing further deepen emotional impact.

Rasa and Raga

The formation of *rasa* is closely linked to the structure and expression of *raga*. Each *raga* possesses characteristic features that contribute to its emotional identity. For example, *sama*, *saaranga*, *kamaas*, *kambhoji*, *ataana*, *sahana*, *mohanam*, *maand*, *dharbaari kaanada*, and *sivaranjani* are known for their distinct aesthetic qualities.

Some *ragas* derive *rasa* from scale, while others depend on specific *prayogas*. For instance, in *Sivaranjani*, the interplay between *antara gandharam* and *sadarana gandaram*, as well as *suddha daivatam* and *chatusruti daivatam*, contributes to its emotional effect. Similarly, the phrase “pmsgmr” in *sahana* evokes *karuna rasa*.

Certain *ragas* like *Ritigowla* and *Ananda Bhairavi* employ *pseudo-svara-s*, creating a sense of relief and subtle emotional shifts. Additionally, *raga-s* such as *desh* evoke patriotic sentiments, while *kedaara* conveys calmness¹.

The aspect of the cure from ailments of Rasa in Raga

Carnatic music is also associated with curing properties. Specific *raga-s* are believed to influence physical and mental states. For example, *Sankarabaranam* is said to relieve headaches, while *mohanam* aids digestion. Singing *akara* exercises strengthens vocal muscles and reduces nervous tension. (Balachandar, 1980)

Certain *prayoga-s* are believed to produce specific effects, such as inducing rain in *Amrita Varshini* or sleep in *Nilambari*. Although these claims are experiential, they reflect the perceived therapeutic potential of *raga* and *rasa*.

Rasa in Instrumental Music

Instrumental music plays a significant role in conveying *rasa*, though it requires advanced technical skill. Instruments are classified into string, wind, percussion, bow, and metallic types. Mythological associations, such as Krishna with the flute and Saraswathi with the vina, demonstrate their cultural significance.

Vina

The *vina* is a principal instrument, often called the "Queen of instruments." Its strings- *saarani*, *pakka saarani*, *mantram*, and *anu mantram*- represent melodic components, while additional strings support rhythm. Techniques such as *tanam* are central to vina performance. Variants include *rutra vina*, *citra vina*, and electronic vina.

Violin

The violin, adapted into Carnatic music, serves both as a solo and accompanying instrument. Its ability to reproduce *gamakas* and rapid *bruga-s* makes it essential in concerts. The interaction between vocalist and violinist enhances *rasa*, particularly through supportive improvisation.

Flute

The flute (*venu*) produces a continuous and expressive tone, capable of conveying *navarasa*. Its sound is often compared to natural elements such as birdsong. Techniques like *thuthakara* enable the articulation of complex phrases. The flute is widely used across musical traditions.

Nagasvaram

The *nagasvaram* is a *mangala vadyam*, producing powerful and auspicious sound. It is typically performed with *tavil* and *talam*, especially in temple and ceremonial contexts. Its expansive tonal range allows it to express all nine *rasa-s*.

Drone and Sruti

The *tambura* and *sruti-box* provide the tonal foundation of Carnatic music. The continuous *sruti* stabilises pitch and enhances *raga* perception. The *tambura* produces a sound pattern such as "psss," creating a meditative atmosphere and sometimes evoking *shantha rasa*. Modern adaptations include electronic and digital *tambura* systems. (Sambamoorthy, 1998)

Rasa in Percussion

Percussion instruments establish *tala* and *laya*, forming the structural backbone of music.

Mridangam

The *mridangam* is central to Carnatic concerts, accompanying both vocal and instrumental performances. It contributes to *rasa* through rhythmic patterns, *sol kattu*, and dynamic contrast. The *tani avartanam* showcases improvisational skill, including *mohra*, *korvai*, and *kuraippu*.

Konnakkol

Konnakkol involves vocalisation of rhythmic syllables such as "daki ta tom nam." It develops rhythmic understanding and conveys *bhava* through articulation. It is used across various musical forms, including classical and fusion.

Upa Pakka Vadyam and Metallic Instruments

Supporting instruments such as *ghatam*, *kanjira*, and *morsing* enhance rhythmic texture. Each instrument contributes uniquely to the overall *rasa* of a performance. Metallic instruments like *jaalra* and *tala* are used in devotional and folk contexts, often creating energetic or *bhayanaka rasa*. (Pakkiriswamybharathy, 2012)

Findings

The analysis demonstrates that *rasa* in Carnatic music is not a fixed attribute but an emergent phenomenon that is formed by multiple factors. It arises through the interaction of *raga*, *svara*, *sruti*, improvisation, instrumentation, and performance context. Both vocal and instrumental traditions contribute to this process, supported by the rhythmic and tonal systems.

Ultimately, *rasa* and *bhava* are realised through experience, requiring active engagement from both the performer and the listener. Carnatic music, therefore, functions as a comprehensive system where structure and creativity converge to produce emotional expressions.

Conclusion

This article has explored how music functions as a medium for enhancing *rasa*, *bhava*, and *anu-bhava* within the Carnatic music tradition and showed how various musical elements, including *raga*, *svara*, *sahitya*, and performance practices, contribute to the emotional experience of music.

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The study provides a foundational understanding of the concept of *rasa* and presents it in a synthesised manner, making it useful for emerging research scholars.

While the article covers major aspects from observation and is based on available references and Music sources, it acknowledges that further exploration is needed. Other musical forms, such as Hindustani, folk, light, and *bhajan* traditions, offer additional perspectives on *rasa*. Thus, this work serves as an introductory understanding to encouraging deeper study and appreciation of *rasa* in music.

Note

Some of the raga-s like saama, saaranga, kamaas, kambōji, ataana, sahāna, mohanam, maand, dharbaari kaanada, kaanada, dwijavandi and sivarani create Gambhira Rasa. Some raga-s create a rasa by scale and a few through prayoga-s. That's why we sing swaras as a ragamalika in beginning and RTP in concerts. For instance, in raga Sivaranjani, the svarams like antara gandharam, sadarana gandaram combination is used, and on the other side, suddha daivatam chatur sruti daivatam combination is also used. In the raga sahāna prayoka 'pmgmr' exhibits the karuna rasa wherever it is rendered. Some raga-s create a sense of relief, especially in the raga ritigowla and ananda Bhairavi for example. The svara chatur-sruti daivata is touched while singing the kaisiki nisada or chatsruti daivata position for example 'ndmns' for riti gowla and 'mpdps' in ananda bhairavi. Some raga-s like desh, bihag create a patriotic mood, whereas kedaara exhibits a sense of relief.

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Declaration by Author

The conceptualisation, design, and overall development of this study, including the formulation of ideas, analysis, interpretation of findings, and conclusions, have been carried out solely by the Author. The work presented in this article is original and reflects the independent effort and academic contribution of the researcher.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have been used in a limited capacity to enhance language clarity and improve the presentation of certain sections of the manuscript. The use of AI has not influenced the core ideas, analytical framework, or outcomes of the study.

The researcher takes full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of this work.