

An Enquiry into the *Raga*-Time Association*

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Every Indian, at least every north Indian, whether he is a lover of classical music or not, believes that the hoary forms he is heir to, namely the *raga*-s, have important esoteric aspects besides the musical. I would like to discuss one such aspect, viewing it in the perspective of history. I refer to what may be called the time-aspect of a *raga*. Each *raga*, it is commonly held, in order to be truly efficacious has to be sung or played only at a particular hour of the day or night. A more informed listener will even assert that belonging to a specific part of the day or night is as essential a property of a *raga*, as its tonal structure. He might then proceed to enumerate morning *raga*-s, noon *raga*-s, evening *raga*-s, dusk *raga*-s, late-at-night *raga*-s and just-before-morning *raga*-s.

All of us, I am sure, have come across persons, obviously not very musical, not quite capable of distinguishing one *raga* from another, who yet are deeply convinced that a *raga* sung outside of its assigned hour creates a grating effect. Clearly, the notion that a *raga* has inherent affinity with a certain part of the day is very deeply ingrained in our culture.

If you ask, 'How does one know which *raga* belongs to what hour?', the answer will be unanimous: the scheme has been fixed by a tradition reaching back to time immemorial. And, it would be added, it is not a meaningless conventional scheme but a living tradition which finds renewed sanction in the musical experience of every fresh generation.

But, if the matter is one of direct musical experience, then the tonal or other more palpable features that are felt to be associated with the 'morning' or 'evening' quality of a *raga* can surely be identified and distinguished. This seems an obvious question to ask and one would expect to find an answer to it in the older musical texts, but, curiously enough, the first person to have asked it was Pandit Bhatkhande, whose works belong to the early years of our own century. He was also the first person who attempted to provide empirical tonal cognates for the 'morning', 'noon', 'evening' and similar time-related properties of *raga*-s. The generalisations, which he arrived at, found common acceptance and still remain without any serious rival. His might almost be termed the 'official' theory in the matter, despite doubts and reservations felt in many circles—reservations which, however, do not go beyond matters of detail.

Whatever the merits of Bhatkhande's analysis, the very fact that he considered it an important enterprise in understanding and delineating Hindustani music is of great significance. He strongly felt that the notion of assigning a specific hour to every *raga* was an essential element of Hindustani music: a major distinguishing mark. And this feeling, plainly, was the guiding motive behind his search for those patterns in *raga*-s which marked them as 'morning' or 'evening' and the like. In a, now historic, speech made at the first All-India Music Conference in Baroda in 1916, he enumerated twenty significant features which, in his view, distinguished the Hindustani system, making it, in his words, 'a system perfectly

independent of the Southern or Karnatic'.¹ He set these features out in twenty separate and numbered clauses of which as many as six, that is, numbers 5-10 are concerned with the time-aspect of *raga*-s.

In clause number five he remarks: "Stated times of the night and day are assigned to particular *raga*-s, according to a design which might suggest a psycho-physiological basis."

The next five clauses set out certain specific features which 'enable a singer or listener to determine approximately the time of the *raga*.' He draws our attention to the crucial importance in this matter of the *tivra ma*, the combinations *komala re-dha, ga-ni* and so forth—features which now form part of general musical knowledge and theory.

Pandit Bhatkhande spoke of the notion of *raga*-s and their assigned hours with a specific purpose in mind: namely, to distinguish the Hindustani system from the Karnatic system of music. Thus, in his days, it was only the north Indian singers and listeners who felt that particular *raga*-s belonged to particular hours of the night or day. South Indian singers, in contrast, did not share a similar feeling about their *raga*-s. Yet, though the southerner's music might be recognisably different from that of the northerner, there is an equally recognisable affinity and kinship between the two approaches, especially in their delineation of *raga*-s. *Raga*-patterns, both in the south and the north, are based on formal principles that stem from an identical source and follow parallel streams of inspiration and development, interacting with each other to a no mean degree. Many *raga*-s of north India have such close counterparts in the south that even non-specialist listeners can recognise them as almost identical forms. This obvious feeling of consanguinity is, indeed, the inspiration behind a popular *Vividha Bharati* programme where north Indian *raga*-s are presented along with their south Indian siblings to reveal close kinship. But, if many *raga* patterns in the south and north are so conspicuously similar, then they are bound to have formal features which are also essentially alike: features such as the dominant or exclusive presence of the *tivra ma*, or the combination *komala re-dha, ga-ni* and the like, for these are tonal features as characteristic of Karnatic *raga*-s as of their Hindustani analogues. Yet Karnatic music knows of no 'morning', 'evening' or 'noon' *raga*-s.

The fact that there is, in north India, a definite design or scheme within which different *raga*-s have been assigned to different hours of the day suggests, according to Pandit Bhatkhande, a psycho-physiological basis. He never, so far as I know, spelt out what he wished to indicate by speaking of such a basis. But, if this basis is in any sense psychological or physiological then it must certainly be also a universal phenomenon common to both north Indians and south Indians and, in fact, to all mankind. Any sensitive listener, in other words, should be able to feel the 'morning' or 'evening' quality of a *raga*. But no one except a person duly initiated into the esoteric lore and conventions of Hindustani music really responds to this quality in *raga*-s.

It is thus evidently a response which has to be learned. It is the product of a specific culture. If it seems natural and spontaneous to the Hindustani

musician and listener, it is because it has been so deeply ingrained through centuries of persuasive suggestion and habitual observance as to have become almost a reflex. That it is a trained and not a natural response is often evident in the untutored reaction of listeners from alien musical cultures, who though moved by a *raga*, fail to detect its affinity with a particular time of the day or night. The perception of this affinity has to be taught to them and, of course, many of them prove very dutiful students. But, being a learned response, it can also be unlearned. In truth, as a purely musical experience gains roots and one begins to know and love a *raga* for itself, one is quite able to detach it from such external associations as its relation with a particular hour of the day. This is especially true of practising musicians, who, of all people, are closest to the *raga*-s. Fox Strangways, writing almost contemporaneously with Bhatkhande—*The Music of Hindustan* by him was published in 1914—speaks of ‘advanced’ musicians who found no meaning in ascribing hours or seasons to *raga*-s.² *Raga*-s, traditionally, belong not only to certain times of the day but also to particular seasons. The traditions behind the two ascriptions, seasonal and hourly, are equally old. The seasonal ascription, indeed, as we shall see, is perhaps the more ancient one. The seasonal aspect of *raga*-s is no longer taken seriously even in the north except in the case of the various Malhara-s, Basanta and Bahara, and these, too, are no longer kept tied down to their ascribed seasons. Yet, we still believe in confining them to boundaries of the hours within which they have been restricted by convention. There is plainly an inconsistency here: if a *raga* is just as sweet out of its assigned season, why should it not be equally sweet out of its ascribed hour? The psycho-physiological basis, if any, is certainly the same in both cases. Bhairavi was allowed to break its bounds restricting it to the early morning, without adversely affecting its ethos. Who knows, other *raga*-s may follow suit.

Musicians, in any case, cannot strictly observe the time rule, at least on the A.I.R., where ‘morning’, ‘noon’, and ‘evening’ *raga*-s are often sung in a single sitting. There are even signs of unrest concerning this limitation among concertgoers. People have begun to miss morning *raga*-s in concerts, for most concerts are evening affairs. The south Indians, too, once connected the *raga*-s to specific hours, as we know from the testimony of Ramamatya, who wrote his *Svaramelakalanidhi* in the 16th century and is one of the oldest and most honoured authorities in the south.³ They have given up the notion without any sense of loss.

It would be instructive to examine the history of the *raga*-time tradition in the north, the weight of whose authority guides us in associating different *raga*-s with different hours of the day.

Most of us have quite a dim and shadowy notion of the antiquity and history of this tradition. If pressed, we might say it is as old as the *raga*-s themselves which are very, very old. Bhatkhande who was otherwise a very historically alert scholar, calls it a centuries old notion, without being interested in tracing its history in detail. He was of the opinion that though there have been changes in the time of the day assigned to different *raga*-s, yet the concept that a particular *raga* belongs to particular hours has remained unchanged over the centuries. It was, therefore, to be honoured.⁴

Surprisingly, this does not seem to have led him to ask certain disturbing questions which such a realisation ought naturally to pose: Did the different *raga*-s, assigned to the same hours of the day at different points in history, share certain tonal patterns in common? This seems unlikely, and I believe Bhatkhande would have agreed. Even if he were not to, another question arises: Were the tonal patterns which affiliated these *raga*-s to certain hours of the day, the same as those discovered by Bhatkhande? Again a difficult question to answer but again the answer probably would be, 'Presumably not'. What then are we to make of Bhatkhande's tonal affinities and their supposedly psycho-physical basis? This basis has certainly not changed over the last few hundred years, but tonal patterns corresponding to a particular time of the day appear to have done so. How is one to explain this change?

Looking up the old texts we find that the *raga*-time theory is certainly not as old as the *raga*-s themselves. The oldest *raga*-s that we know of are older than Bharata (2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D.) who has left behind instructions concerning the use of the *grama-raga*-s in dramas. He makes no connection between them and the hours of the day. The first major available text written mainly about *raga*-s is the *Brihaddeshi* of Matanga, belonging to the Gupta period or later and usually placed in the 7th or 8th century A.D. The *raga*-s, in Matanga's days, comprised a rich body of forms including *bhasha*, *vibhasha*, *antarabhasha*, besides *grama-raga*-s and *raga*-s proper. This was already an old, well-entrenched corpus of music. Matanga speaks of various *giti*-s or styles of *raga* singing and of regional *raga*-s—*raga*-s born in or popular in specific regions⁵—but of a time theory, as we know it today, there is no trace.

Abhinavagupta, writing towards the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh century, quotes an earlier authority called Kashyapa, an ancient theorist (date unknown) who speaks of the seasonal aspect of *raga*-s: "(Raga) Prekholita should be sung in spring, so should Malavapanchama. Takkaraga, Gaudakakubha, Bhinnashadaja, Kaishika and Bhinnapanchama are favoured in summer and the subsequent seasons."⁶

Later *sangita* texts bracket Kashyapa along with Matanga, Yashtika and others as hoary teachers. Kashyapa, perhaps, may be placed in the same period as Matanga, that is the 7th or the 8th century A.D. or perhaps, still earlier.

Nanyabhupala, a king of Mithila, writing a century after Abhinavagupta, is the first person, I find, who speaks of a connection between musical forms and an assigned hour of rendering them. In the chapter on *raga*-s (Chapter Seven) in his *Bharatabhashya*, he connects different *giti*-s to different hours (*yama*-s) of the day. The two *giti*-s, *shuddha* and *bhinna*, are assigned to the first *yama* or *prahara* (a three-hour period) of the day. The *giti*, *gaudi*, is placed at mid-day; *vesara* is in the first part of the day and *sadharana* is said to be *sadharana* or 'common' to all hours of the day.

These *giti*-s, as we have said earlier, were not *raga*-s or similar forms, but various styles of rendering *raga*-s, akin to the *bani*-s of *dhrupada* and the different *gayaki*-s of present-day music. Immediately after speaking of *giti*-s and their

appropriate hours of singing, Nanya proclaims: "The *bhasha*-s of different *raga*-s fall within the same time bracket (*kala*) as the *raga*-s to which they are attached."

He does not give details regarding the time of the day in which specific *raga*-s were to be rendered. He speaks only of the *giti*-s and their time. However, different groups of *raga*-s were assigned to different *giti*-s. The time of a *raga* was presumably to be known through its *giti*. What is more remarkable in this context is that Nanya assigns *giti*-s or *raga*-s to specific hours not because of aesthetic, but religious reasons. Unlike the listeners of today, he does not seem to have felt an affinity of 'mood' or 'ethos' between a specific hour and a specific *raga*; he said that it was more 'auspicious' to sing a particular *raga*—or a *raga*-like form such as the *bhasha* at a particular hour. With this, too, he adds a rider: "All these (*bhasha*-s) are equally meritorious and result in eternal merit whenever they are sung; the rule concerning special hours of singing them is meant only for added religious merit" (*shreyovisheshaya*).⁷

For two or three centuries after Nanyadeva we have texts which, for our purposes, may be divided into two categories: those that speak of a connection between *raga*-s and their hour of singing and those that do not. Someshvara III, another King and a contemporary of Nanyadeva, who ruled in the Deccan in the beginning of the 12th century, has a big section on music in his *Manasollasa*. He speaks of no connection between *raga*-s and hours of the day, perhaps because he was chiefly interested in music as a *vinoda*—a source of aesthetic pleasure: he is silent concerning the extra-musical 'auspicious' qualities of *raga*-s.⁸ This is not to imply that Someshvara was an irreligious man. Indeed, his section on song contains many hymns and ends with the exhortation that the *prabandha*-s (musical compositions), which he has spoken of, should be sung before the gods with due devotion.⁹ But he evidently saw no merit, religious or other, in associating *raga*-s with particular hours. His son Jagadekamalla, too, wrote on music. Jagadekamalla's *Sangita Chudamani* is also silent concerning *raga*-s and their specific hour of singing; though it does, at least on one occasion, speak of a seasonal connection, calling Deshihindola a spring-*raga*.¹⁰

The two important texts after Nanya and Someshvara are the *Sangita-samayasara*, of Parshvadeva (date not certain) and the *Sangitaratnakara* of Sharngadeva (early 13th century). Parshvadeva does not speak of any connection between *raga*-s and a prescribed time of singing, though he speaks of *raga*-s in detail. Sharngadeva, however, diligently notes the hour of the day against every *raga* that he describes, using phrases like *geyo'hnah prathame yame* (to be sung during the first *yama* or *prahara* of the day), *madhyame'hno geyo* (to be sung during mid-day) and the like.¹¹ Sharngadeva connects *raga*-s to seasons also.

Sharngadeva had avowedly based his description of *raga*-s on earlier authorities, which he copiously names. We do not know, however, his source for the ascription of hours to *raga*-s. Earlier works available to us, as we have seen, do not make such ascriptions. Nanyadeva makes a connection between *giti*-s and hours of the day, but very half-heartedly. The time factor in his view did no more than add a little more auspiciousness (*shreyovishesha*) to the rendering of a *raga*. Perhaps the ascriptions noted by Sharngadeva were also made in the same spirit. Sharngadeva speaks of no aesthetic affinity, a kinship of ethos, between

raga-s and hours of the day. And it would not be unreasonable to conjecture that he too, like Nanyadeva, thought that to sing a *raga* at a particular time made it more auspicious. He may have been guided in this by Nanya whose work he perhaps knew, since he was an erudite scholar in *sangita* texts. In any case, neither he nor the preceding tradition provides any basis for supposing that an intimate connection of 'ethos' or 'character' was felt by musicians or listeners between a *raga* and its hour. That was to come later.

A rule believed to lead to greater auspiciousness, hence religious merit, tends to become a ritual and turns easily into established convention or customary practice. It thus becomes an ingrained habit; to be followed even after religious connections are forgotten. This is what seems to have happened in the case of the *raga*-s and their connection with specific hours of the day.

Sharngadeva was greatly revered by later authors and his work was accorded an almost canonic authority. The connection he made between individual *raga*-s and specific hours of the day became a convention with later authors, even though the *raga*-s themselves and the specific hours to which they were connected, did not remain the same.

In the beginning, the *raga*-time rule seems to have been loosely observed and allowed flexibility. Pandit Bhatkhande quotes an old dictum to the effect that after ten *danda*-s of the night have passed, any *raga* can be sung.¹² Another dictum quoted in the *Sangita Darpana* is that if a king so orders, any *raga* can be sung at any time.¹³

Gradually, as the habit of singing particular *raga*-s at particular hours sunk in, it began to be thought that *raga*-s please only at their allotted hours-'*yathakale samarabdhām gitam bhavati ranjakam*', as Damodara puts it. An aesthetic connection was thus made between a *raga* and the time to which it had been allotted. Listeners and musicians began to feel that a *raga* was deeply associated with an hour and so began to perceive an affinity of 'ethos' between the two. The category of the aesthetic was confused with that of the auspicious.

But it was only in modern times, with Bhatkhande, that an attempt was made to discover certain structural denominators common to *raga*-s placed in the same time-bracket. Bhatkhande succeeded in making a few generalizations which found great acceptance. Modern Hindustani musical theory as well as practice have been greatly influenced by his views and teachings in other ways too.

Yet people have found fault with his generalizations and pointed out notable exceptions. And in any case, as I said earlier, no one has ever tried to display and work out in proper empirical detail the psycho-physiological basis which he believed was the ground for the *raga*-time connection. It is one thing to find common features in *raga*-s that have been placed in a single time-bracket but quite another to show that this points at a deeper psycho-physiological basis for the occurrence. As is clear from my argument, I think that the association made between a *raga* and its allotted time is an arbitrary one: it is not embedded in any universal human response, but is culturally-conditioned as I have tried to show through the brief survey of its history. This notion remains localised in the

north—the reasons for which I will take up in another paper—and has been given up without any adverse consequences in the sister system of the south. Even a culturally-conditioned response may be valuable, but, as I have pointed out earlier, a deeper musical response tends to undermine rather than support the *raga*-time association.

References:

1. The speech has been reproduced as *A Short Historical Survey of the Music of Upper India*, Bombay, 1934. See pages 41-42.
2. A. H. Fox Strangways, *The Music of Hindustan*, p. 153. Interestingly, Fox Strangways had his own peculiar theory, regarding structural properties that mark a *raga* as 'morning' or 'evening'. He believed that morning *raga*-s had *amsha*-s ranging about G and the evening about E. *Ibid.*
3. *Svaramelakalanidhi*. See *Raga Prakarna*.
4. See *Bhatkhande Smriti Grantha*, Khairagarh, 1966, p. 439.
5. *Brihaddeshi*, p. 127 (Trivandrum edition).
6. Verses 74-75 of *Natyashastra* with the *Abhinava Bharati*, G.O.S. edition, Vol. IV, p. 78.
7. Nanya's *Bhāratābhashya*, Ch. VII, verse 7.
8. His section on music, Ch. 16, *Vimshati* 4, of *Manasollasa*, is titled *Gita-Vinoda*.
9. *Ibid.*, verses 559-560, p. 81, Vol. III of the G.O.S. edition of the *Manasollasa*.
10. See Footnote on p. 75 of the G.O.S. edition of the *Sangita-Chudamani*.
11. See *Sangitaratnakara*, Chapter II, where such instructions are appended with every *raga*.
12. *Bhatkhande Smriti Grantha*, p. 439.
13. *Sangita Darpana*, 2, 26.

*Courtesy: *Jijnasa*, Journal of the History of Ideas and Culture, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.