

Musical Iconography in *Shri Tatva Nidhi*

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Translation of its abstract aural concepts into a visual idiom has been a unique feature of Indian music. The idea is indeed very old. Possibly it is a consequence of the Indian mind's ready recognition of a divine element in all matter and also the urge for its deification. The belief that *Nada* or sound is of divine origin is very old and its different forms may have been viewed as different manifestations of the Supreme God.

This visual concept, at least in its embryonic form, occurs in ancient works on music like the *Brihaddesi* of Matanga (sixth to eighth century A.D.). In this work the seven *svara*-s (notes) have been treated as different entities. Attributes like dynasty, colour, guardian deity, and sentiment have been mentioned in respect of each note. This has been enlarged in later works like the *Bharata Bhashya* of Nanyadeva (1197-1233 A.D.) and the *Sangita Ratnakara* of Sarngadeva (1150 A.D.). Meanwhile another work—*Sangita Makaranda* of Narada (eleventh century)—classifies the *raga*-s, on the basis of sex, into *Purusha* (male) and *Stree* (female). There is also a family-wise classification with eight male *raga*-s having three consorts each.

In the next stage, the *svara*-s and the *raga*-s seem to have acquired anthropomorphic forms, with stylised anatomical features and other paraphernalia symbolical of their various attributes. It is apparent that these pictorial forms have an Agamic and Tantric background. But the basis on which they were evolved is not clear. The earliest description of such visual forms are found in Jain texts. In the illustrations of the *Kalpasutra*, for instance, *sruti*, *svara*, *grama*, *moorcchana* and *tana* have been portrayed as deities. This iconical portrayal was possibly meant to help contemplation and worship. They are viewed as entities with a dual aspect: *Nadamaya* (of sound) and *Devatamaya* (of divinity). *Sangita Upanishad Sarodhara* (1340 A.D.), a music treatise by the Jain scholar Vachanacharya Sudhakalasa, contains the earliest iconic descriptions of *svara* and *raga*.

Sangita Upanishad Sarodhara, for instance, describes the *svara*, Shadja thus:

He is endowed with six faces and has four arms;
While two of them play the veena, the others hold lotus flowers
He is as lustrous as a lotus flower and belongs to the *Devakula*
(the dynasty of gods).
He was born in *Jambudvipa* and his guardian
deity is Brahma; he rides a peacock
Whose sound he imitates; that is the *svara* Shadja.

(SUS, Ch. III, *Shloka* 42-43)

Similarly the description of the well-known *raga* Vasanta reads thus:

He is endowed with six faces and ten arms,
The *raga* Vasanta who shines like gold.
He holds the *Tala*, *Shankha* (conch), *Khatvanga* (dagger),
Phala (fruit), *Chakra* and Lotus; while his two hands
play the veena, the other two are held in the
gestures of *Varada* and *Abhaya*. He rides on the
Kokila (cuckoo) and he is sung in the months of
Chaitra and *Vaishakha*.

(*SUS*, Ch. III, *Shloka* 84-85)

Starting as the *dhyana* or contemplative form of the *raga*, this pictorial concept was gradually altered to represent its underlying *bhava* or sentiment, and extended to the area of *Kavya* or poetry. The advent of the *Nayaka-Nayika* (hero-heroine) aspect was inevitable. The pictures became lyrical and highly romantic in tone and the environment, too, changed from the celestial to the terrestrial. In brief, the pictures acquired a human touch, which is clear to anyone who has studied the stages in the development of the *Ragamala* pictures of the Rajastani and other schools.

The *Ragamala* pictures are believed to be confined to northern India and regarded as a unique feature of Hindustani music which follows the family-wise classification of the *raga*-s. This, no doubt, provided the stimulus for a lyrical pictorial interpretation. This visualisation of the *raga*-s which started in the medieval period gradually changed in form. Their interpretation, too, seems to have changed from time to time and from text to text. Nevertheless, by and large, all these pictures follow the classification and characterisation of the *Hanumanmata* (school of Hanuman). This is dealt with in the *Sangita Darpana* of Damodara who lived in the sixteenth century.

Karnatic music follows the classification of *raga*-s under the *Mela* scheme, which is built upon a methodical permutation of the *svara*-s and their variants. Possibly this could not provide sufficient stimulus for the visual interpretation of the *raga*, an element absent in almost all the texts on music following the *Mela* scheme. But there are some exceptions like the *Ragavibodha* of Somanatha. Perhaps he could not ignore certain ancient concepts even though they could not fit into his system of classification under *Mela*-s. Fifty-one *raga*-s have been described along with their visual forms in the *Ragavibodha*. They have been generally portrayed in their *devatamaya* (divine) forms, with their *rasabhava* (sentiments) the *nayakibhava* has also been added in some of the *raga*-s. In addition, some of the later works in the south on *Bharata Shastra* contain references to the visual forms of the *raga*-s. But no serious effort seems to have been made to translate these into colourful pictures corresponding to the *Ragamala* paintings of north India. It is against this background that we have to appreciate the Musical Iconography in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi*.

Shri Tatva Nidhi presents the old visual concepts in colourful, pictorial forms which are closer in spirit to the *Agama*-based sculpture of south India. *Shri Tatva Nidhi* is an encyclopedia of *Purana*, *Ithihasa*, *Tantra*, *Agama*,

Shilpa and *Jyotishya*. The material has been condensed from ancient works. The text is in Sanskrit, but written in the Kannada script. It is noteworthy that in Karnataka two such works had been produced before it. The first is the *Manasollasa* or the *Abhilashitartha Chintamani* of Chalukya Someshwara in the twelfth century and the *Shiva Tatva Ratnakara* of Basappa Nayaka of Keladi (seventeenth century). They also contain chapters on music and the later work also mentions the visual characterisation of the *raga*-s. But *Shri Tatva Nidhi* is unique in that all this material is illustrated with beautiful pictures.

Shri Tatva Nidhi contains nine sections, each entitled a *Nidhi* or treasure. The *Nava Nidhi* idea was possibly inspired by Kubera, the Lord of the Nine Treasures. The nine sections of the work are as follows: *Shakti Nidhi*, *Vishnu Nidhi*, *Shiva Tatva Nidhi*, *Brahma Tatva Nidhi*, *Graha Tatva Nidhi*, *Vaishnava Nidhi*, *Shaiva Nidhi*, *Agama Nidhi* and *Koutuka Nidhi*.

The author of this great work is Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar who ruled Mysore between 1799-1868 A.D. His rule was indeed a golden age in respect of the patronage to and development of arts and letters. Himself a prolific writer and composer and well-versed in many of the subjects dealt with in this work, Krishnaraja Wodeyar encouraged literature, music and painting. *Shri Tatva Nidhi* is a beautiful combination of all the three. It contains nearly one thousand two hundred pages (of half-imperial size) and is fully illustrated with paintings and drawings. Considering the variety and range of material incorporated in it, and also the quality of the paintings, more than a decade or two must have been spent in its preparation. The work must have been produced between 1810 and 1830 because the East India Company resumed the administration of the state in 1831, resulting in a drastic cut in the finances of the ruler.

This work may be deemed as a pictorial digest of all our ancient knowledge. The beautiful pictures certainly give a graphic idea of ancient concepts; these are described in the verses preceding each painting. There are only two copies of this work, one which is in the Oriental Research Institute at Mysore and the other in the palace. The text of this work has been published by the Tanjore Saraswati Mahal Library. The images of the Gods and Goddesses in the recently opened temple of Kamakotishvara at the Hanuman Ghat in Kasi have been fashioned after their descriptions in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi*.

The paintings in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* are drawn in clear but delicate lines; the figures are well-proportioned and painted in bright colours. The influence of the *Agama*-s on these paintings is obvious. The style is post-Vijayanagar, and belongs to the Mysore school which is similar in many respects to the Tanjore school of painting. A study of this work is an enlightening and edifying experience, and one article cannot do full justice to the material contained in it.

Since the Gandharvas are the repositories of the divine arts of music and dance; the music section opens with a description of their world. This



Raga-s Shri and Vasanta

is followed by descriptions and pictures of *svara-s*, *raga-s* and their consorts and *tala-s*. Each painting is preceded by a descriptive verse in Sanskrit and also the *moorchhana* or the scalic movement in the case of *raga-s*. The opening *alankara* phrase is also added in respect of the *tala-s*. There are thirty-five pictures of *raga-s* and their consorts and their classification mostly follows the *Hanumanmata*, as detailed in the *Sangita Darpana*.

Unless a romantic or other situation has been suggested, the *raga-s* and their *varangana* or consorts have been portrayed as *devatamurthi* or deities, with appropriate stylised postures and other attributes. A few of them will be examined now in some cases against the background of references in the *Sangita Darpana* and also their forms in the *Ragamala* paintings. We may start with the *raga* Vasanta itself. Its earliest iconical characterisation in the *Sangita Upanishad Sarodhara* has already been mentioned. The portrayal of this *raga* in the *Ragamala* series is quite different from the six-headed and ten-armed deity described in the above work. According to the *Hanumanmata*, Vasanta is a *ragini* and a consort of the *raga*

Shri. But at some later period the *raga* also came to be associated with the Spring. And the *Ragamala* series portrays the splendour and the spirit of that season. For this who could be more ideal than Krishna? The *Ragamala* pictures feature Vasanta *ragini* disguised as Krishna, singing and dancing to a chorus of drum and cymbals, in a setting of flowering bushes, water-ponds with lilies, an atmosphere indicative of the spring. The picture in *Shri Tatva Nidhi* features straightaway Shri Krishna dressed in his *pitambara*, playing on the flute and attracting all the animals; maidens around him are seen playing on instruments. The dress of these maidens is purely South Indian and the painting is arresting because of the rich hues of the apparel and ornaments.

Now let us consider another *raga* which is deemed as the *adi* or first *raga*, namely Bhairava. The very name indicates Shiva with all his terrifying attributes. But there are two variations of the Shiva theme in the *Ragamala-s* which presented milder features. In the first, he is portrayed as riding on the bull with his usual attributes like the Ganga, the crescent moon, and the *trishula*. In the other version, Shiva is characterised as the lord of love (Rati). He is portrayed as dallying with ladies. But the picture in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* is like an icon and painted in accordance with the verse in *Sangita Darpana*.

Carrying Ganga, adorned by the crescent moon, and having three eyes, ornamented with serpents and covered with the skin of the Elephant, his hands holding the *Trishula* and the head (*Munda*) and the body besmeared with ashes, that is Bhairava, the *adi* or the first *raga*.

(*Shloka 198*)

In the picture Shiva is seated on a *bhadrasana* in the usual *mandalasa* posture letting down the right foot and folding the left leg, with one hand holding the *trishula*, the other *munda* or the head and the other two in *Varada* and *Abhaya* gestures. A stately picture, austere in tone, more suitable for contemplation and worship.

Shiva also figures in the picture of the *ragini* Bhairavi. Here instead of the *Shivalinga*, housing in a marble sanctum and worshipped by the young love-lorn damsel Bhairavi, (so characteristic of *Ragamala* pictures), Shiva himself is seated on a throne. Bhairavi is seated at the feet of the lord and is worshipping him with lotus flowers, while the attendants are providing the music.

Megha is another *raga* which provides an interesting contrast with its counterpart in the Rajastani *Ragamala* pictures. Also called Meghamalhara in some cases, almost all the *Ragamala* pictures have Krishna as the central character, in a setting with heavily overcast skies, the dark clouds streaked by lightning and Krishna himself in the form of the *raga* Megha-dancing or disporting himself with the Gopis.

In the *Shri Tatva Nidhi*, this rain god has been portrayed as seated on a mountain. A huge rainbow covering almost the width of the horizon

serves as his halo, while peacocks are disporting at his feet. On one side are the *Chataka* birds eagerly awaiting the rain drops. And the peasants, standing on another side awaiting the good graces of this rain god, are noteworthy. Megha himself is seated in the classic *Padmasana* posture, ornamented with a crown, necklace and holding a long sword, possibly suggestive of the lightning, in his right hand.

The picture of *Shri raga* is of special importance in that it is rare even in the *Ragamala* paintings. Its portrait in *Shri Tatva Nidhi* features a handsome youth, lording over the music world, and served by the seven *svara-s* grouped on either side. He is wearing a scarlet upper cloth (*uttariya*) seated on a *Bhadrasana*, in the *Mandalasa* posture, his right hand holding a lotus while the left is relaxed and stretched on the folded left leg. His right foot is being pressed by a maiden while three others are awaiting on the sides. All the figures are well proportioned and glowing with rich colours. This is one of the most beautiful *raga* pictures in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi*.

While some of the *raga* pictures in this work are portrayed as icons, there are also others which illustrate and evoke the underlying *bhava* or sentiment. Most of these paintings are identical in mood with their *Ragamala* counterparts though the mode of the portrayal is different. A *raga* like *Bhoopali* for instance. She is described in the old texts as a *Virahotkanthita nayika*, a heroine suffering from the extremes pangs of separation.

"She is white and her body is anointed with saffron, the charming maiden is endowed with high elevated breasts and a radiant face like the moon She is pained by the memories and pangs of separation of her lord; that is the *raga* *Bhoopali* who fully exudes the *Shanta rasa*"

This is the description in the *Sangita Darpana*.

(*Shloka* 266-34).

The painting in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* features a standing bejewelled and colourfully dressed maiden, sporting the side-bun coiffure. Anguish and pain are writ large on her face and the ladies-in-waiting are trying to console her. While one of them is fanning her, the others offer her flowers.

Similar is the *raga* *Desakari*. Here the romantic mood and situation have been carried a step farther. The *nayika* portrayed is *Vasakasayya*, the heroine eagerly awaiting the Lord on a bed, and also displaying sexual desire.

"The golden-hued maiden, perfect in all limbs, endowed with eyes reminiscent of lotus flowers, and flowing tresses, and heavy breasts, enjoying the company of her Lord, is the moon-faced *raga* *Desakari*".

This is how *Desakari* is described in the *Sangita Darpana*.

(*Shloka*-265-33).



Raga-s Bhoopali and Desakari

The *Shri Tatva Nidhi* painting of the *raga* features a bedroom in which a couple is making love on the cot, while the two attendants have delicately withdrawn and are slowly drawing the doors of the room.

Dipaka is another *raga* which provides an interesting contrast with the *Ragamala* pictures. This *raga* is always associated with heat and light. The *Ragamala* pictures feature two versions of this concept. In the first Dipaka is portrayed as a youth (sometimes resembling Krishna), seated with a lady in a pavilion and entertained by three musicians. It is a night scene, illuminated by lamps lining the parapet and other enclosing walls of the pavilion and also the roof. Flames are seen issuing from the jewels on the forehead of the youth.

In the other version the *raga* is portrayed as a youth dressed in red, riding an elephant, holding a lamp in his hand. The wildly-running, trumpeting elephant also holds a lamp in the tip of the trunk while an attendant sitting behind is waving a *chauri* and providing a mild breeze. But this differs from the characterisation of the *raga* in the *Sangita Darpana*.

The damsel, hungry, for the love of her lord
 gets the lamps removed on his arrival, so that
 she can enjoy full bliss in the darkness,
 (because she is modest), but the ruby in his
 crown is so dazzling that it illuminates the environs
 and makes the maiden bashful.

(*Shloka 235*).

This is the theme portrayed in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi*. The scene is a bedroom; the ladies-in-waiting are moving out with the lamps, while the Lord seats himself beside the *Nayika* reclining on the cot. The jewels in his crown are shining; they illuminate the surroundings, and the lady has coyly turned aside.

Similarly the *raga* Kedara presents a picture far removed from the romantic version in the *Ragamala*. In the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* Kedara resembles

Dipaka and Kedara raga-s





Rishabha svara

a portrait of Dakshinamoorthy — seated on a mountain and in a *Yogasana* posture, his knees bound by a *Yogapatta*, the stylised *jata* (matted locks) flowing behind, of the four one hand is holding a *veena*, another the *japasara*. Among the other two while the right hand is in the *Arala* gesture the left hand is holding a book. Sages, like Suka Sanandana, standing on either side, pay homage with folded hands.

Of special interest in the musical Iconography of the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* is the section devoted to *svara* and *tala*, elements which are not found in the *Ragamala* pictures. It is natural that the mind which worshipped the *raga* as a divine form should similarly recognise its existence in other elements of music like *svara* and *tala*. As already stated, the idea of investing the *svara*-s with divine attributes is as ancient as the *Brihaddesi* of Matanga. But the concept itself may be even older. The earliest pictures of *svara*-s are to be found in the illustrations of Jain *Kalpasutra*-s. But these do not seem to have caught the fancy of the artists as the *raga*-s and their family did.

In contrast with their counterparts in the *Kalpasutra-s* the portraits of the *svara-s* in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* are more refined and feature greater detail. The *Sangita Upanishad Sarodhara* characterises the *svara* Rishabha thus:

He is endowed with one head and four arms; two of which hold lotus flowers while the other two play the veena. His body is blue in colour and his guardian deity is Agni (fire). He was born at the Sakadvipa and praised by Brahma and exudes the *Hasya rasa* (laughter) and rides on a bull . . . the *svara* Rishabha.

(Ch. III, *Shloka* 44-45)

Against this the portrait of the same *svara* in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* features the following attributes:

He was born on a Friday, the second day of a *Shuklapaksha*. His birth star is Chitta in the *rasi* (zodiac sign) of Tula (Libra). He is a *kshatriya* (warrior) by caste and belongs to the dynasty of the Rishis and

Dhruva tala



the Vedagotra. He shines like gold and his guardian Rishi is Brahma and the *Chhanda* (metre) is Gayatri and he portrays *Adbhuta rasa* (wonder). He was born on the Sakadvipa and is endowed with three heads, six eyes, six ears, six arms and two feet. He is riding a Lion on the crest of the Mahanasa mountain from which is issuing the river Anagha. The mountain itself is floating on the Dadhi Samudra (sea of curd). Dressed in *pitambara* he has applied the *agaru* scent and his favourite flower is the *champaka*. He is holding a *kunta* (dagger) and his favourite dish is *payasa*, offered by a Kinnara maiden to whom he is wedded and his age is seventy.

It should be noted that the original attributes in the *Sangita Upanishad Sarodhara* have multiplied nearly three-fold in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* portrayal, which is a composite picture. The *svara* Rishabha, while holding the centre is surrounded by miniatures of the several attributes like the birth star, the zodiac sign, the metre, the guardian deity, not to mention the vehicle and the several attendants. Each of these is no doubt a complete picture in itself, but collectively they make the entire composition a rich artistic piece.

The portraits of the other *svara-s* are on similar lines. But those relating to the *tala-s* are significant. While the pictures of the *svara-s* are rare, those of *tala* are rarer still. One possible reason may be that while *raga-s* and even *svara-s* could evoke an emotional reaction that could somehow be translated into a picture, the reaction evoked by rhythm was possibly too abstract for a pictorial concept. However the portraits of the *tala-s* in the *Shri Tatva Nidhi* feature similar attributes like the *svara* and *raga*. The Dhruva *tala*, for instance, is described thus:

He is born on a Sunday and of a Goat,
 And his *rasi* (zodiac sign) of birth is Karkataka (Cancer)
 He belongs to the group of *deva-s* (gods) and is white in colour, with large eyes and dressed in clean clothes.
 He wears a necklace of precious stones and is under the power of Hrinkara, the Brahmi *shakti*.
 He is accompanied by Koundinya rishi and also Vishnu and his metre is Anushtup.
 He belongs to the Brahmin caste and is seated on the Plakshadvipa and exudes the *Shringara* sentiment.
 He has three *angas* or sections like *divyalaghu* and a dual *laghu* that is the *tala* Dhruva.

In the picture of the *tala-s* like the *svara-s*, the dramatic element of the *raga-s* is absent. The figure of the *tala* is seated in the centre and on either side are the miniature pictures of its several attributes. In the picture of the Dhruva *tala*, for instance the figure itself is in profile, seated in the centre, with outstretched arms and the palms closing over one another. On his left is the four-headed Brahmi *shakti* riding a swan and on the right Vishnu and Koundinya rishi. In the bottom are: Sun, suggesting the day of birth, riding on

the single-wheeled chariot; the crab suggesting the zodiac sign of birth; a god suggesting the Devagana; the goat out of which he was born; and portraits of Pushya the birth star, and the Anushtup metre respectively. The picture of Dhruva *tala* is a panel, where though each component is a beautiful picture in itself, together they all build up the atmosphere and the character of the theme in its totality.

The six other *tala*-s—Matya, Roopaka, Jhampa, Triputa, Atta and Eka that constitute the Sooladi sapta *tala* combining with the Dhruva, and currently in use in Karnatic music, have been portrayed on similar lines.

Notwithstanding the refined portraiture, the sensitive craftsmanship and the imaginative execution of the ideas, the esoteric significance of these paintings is not known. And such a possibility may have been there. This is attested by the *bija mantra* (mystical syllables) given to these *svara*-s by Jagadekamalla which perhaps formed a part of propitiatory rituals. Though the human imagination has multiplied their attributes in course of time these paintings seem to reflect the basic object of the concept that is to serve as a symbol for contemplation and worship for any one eager to acquire a knowledge of or gain control over the various branches of music through rigorous *sadhana*. And they strictly fall into the concept of *sagunopasana* which is inherent in Indian thought. And this is apt too because the *Shri Tatva Nidhi*, as I have already stated, is a pictorial digest of our ancient religion, knowledge and culture, of which music, we need not add, is an integral part.

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