

# Concept of Raga in Hindustani Classical Music

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# Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Structural features of Raga
- 3 Characteristics of Raga
- 4 Classification of Ragas
- 5 Ragas in performance

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- Raga is a noun derived from the Sanskrit root *ranj*, meaning to colour red, to delight.
- Red is the colour of passion, hence raga implies the emotional content of a song which delights the listener.
- King Nanyadeva of Mithila (1097-1147) wrote that the variety of ragas is infinite, and their individual features are hard to put into words.
- He wrote : *"Just as the sweetness of sugar, treacle and candy cannot be separately described, but must be experienced for oneself."*

- His predecessor Matanga played a crucial role in the history of ragas.
- He is quoted by virtually all later scholars as the foremost authority on raga.
- Matanga's treatise on music *Brhaddeshi* has the first definition of raga:  
*"In the opinion of the wise, that particularity of notes and melodic movements, or that distinction of melodic sound by which one is delighted, is raga."*
- In other words, ragas have a particular scale and specific melodic movements; their 'sound' should bring delight and be pleasing to the ear.

- A raga can be regarded as **a tonal framework for composition and improvisation.**
- It is far more precise and much richer than a scale or mode, and much less fixed than a particular tune.
- A raga usually includes a large number of traditional songs, composed by great musicians of the past.
- But ragas also allow today's musician to compose new songs, and to generate a variety of melodic sequences.
- Many old hindi songs are based on ragas.

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- Indian Classical Music has two related, but distinct, traditions: Hindustani and Carnatic.
- The basic scale of Hindustani music, like western scale, has 12 notes:  
Sa Re' Re Ga' Ga Ma Ma' Pa Dha' Dha Ni' Ni
- **Raga is a subset of these notes together with a set of rules to combine these notes effectively and create a particular mood.** It must have atleast 5 of these 12 notes.
- They must contain the tonic (Sa) and at least either the fourth (Ma) or fifth (Pa).
- Both varieties of a note which can be altered (Re, Ga, Ma, Dha or Ni) should not be used consecutively (exceptions).

- A raga is described by its ascent-descent pattern (*Aroha-Avaroha*) from middle *Sa* to high *Sa*.
- In compound (*mishra*) ragas, number of notes in ascent and descent are not identical.
- *A note that is frequently used, or that is held for a long duration is usually referred to as the vadi.*
- Strong note at a perfect fourth or fifth from the vadi which is called the *samvadi* ('consonant').
- There may be disagreement about which note-pair should be sonant-consonant in a given raga.
- So we use terms such as 'important', 'strong' and 'weak' to denote musical functions of tones.

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- *A raga must evoke a particular emotion or create a certain 'mood'.*
- Each Raga has a name. It also has a character, which can be devotional, erotic, bold and valorous, or tragic.
- Time of day when it is best performed, usually specified as a 3 hour interval. However the beauty of the raga is not affected by the time of the day it is sung.
- Some Ragas are related to seasons. For example, Raga *Malhar*.
- Ragas are not static. Some can be traced back to ancient or medieval times, others originated only a few centuries or even a few decades ago.
- However, all ragas have undergone transformations over the centuries. Many of them have fallen into disuse.

- Given a Raga, there exist several compositions which obey the rules of that Raga and effectively convey its mood.
- It is common for the words to assist in conveying the mood.
- For example, monsoon-related ragas have compositions that describe the clouds, rains, thunder, etc.
- There are about 50 common ragas, another 100 that are quite common, and around 200 that are relatively rare.
- These include mixture ragas, obtained by combining 2 or more pure ragas.
- At any given instant, a mixture Raga will convey the mood of one of its component Ragas, but it flows smoothly from one component to the other, and creates a beautiful effect.

- The light ragas, used in folk melodies and popular songs, allow some freedom to add extra notes.
- The serious ragas have more definite rules and they can be elaborated in performances.
- Ragas are often illustrated , especially in Rajasthani paintings.
- The paintings have inscriptions, for example:  
*"Out of the lake, in a shrine of crystal, she worships Shiva with songs punctuated by the beat. This fair one, this bright one is...Bhairavi."*

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## Classification of Ragas

- Ragas can be classified using different criterias. For example, on basis of the number of notes used.
- Ragas that contain all 7 notes in ascent and descent are *Sampurna*, those with 6 notes are *Shadav*, those with 5 are *Audav*.
- All ragas are divided into two groups as *Poorva* Ragas and *Uttar* Ragas.
- *Poorva* Ragas are sung between 12 noon and 12 midnight, *Uttar Ragas* between midnight and 12 noon.
- Another division of ragas is the classification of ragas under five principal ragas : *Hindol*, *Deepak*, *Megh*, *Shree* and *Maulkauns*. From these five ragas, other ragas are derived.

- The first derivatives of the ragas are called *raginis*, and each of the five ragas have five raginis under them.
- These raga and raginis also have derivatives. this results in each principal raga having 16 secondary derivatives known as *upa-raga* and *upa-raganis*.
- An important way of Raga classification is the *thaat* system.
- A certain arrangement of the seven notes with the change of *shuddha*, *komal* and *teevra* is called a *thaat*.
- Every raga has a fixed number of *komal* or *teevra* notes, from which the *thaat* can be recognised.

- There are several opinions in this matter. According to Pandit V.N. Bhatkhande, the 10 *thaat's* used to classify ragas are:
  - 1 Bilaval : All *shuddh* or natural notes.
  - 2 Khamaj : With *ni* note as komal.
  - 3 Kafi : With *ga, ni* as komal.
  - 4 Asavari : With *ga, dha, ni* as komal.
  - 5 Bhairavi : With *re, ga, dha, ni* as komal.
  - 6 Bhairav : With *re, dha* as komal.
  - 7 Poorvi : With *re, dha* as *komal* and *ma* as *teevra*.
  - 8 Todi : With *re, ga, dha* as komal and *ma* as *teevra*.
  - 9 Marwa : With *re* as *komal* and *ma* as *teevra*.
  - 10 Yaman : With *ma* as *teevra* only.
- A *thaat* is named after the popular raga of that *thaat*. For example, *bhairavi* is a popular raga and the *thaat* of the raga *bhairavi* is named after the raga.

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- Full elaboration of a Raga on an instrument consists of:
  - ① A slow movement (*alap*) exploring the notes and relationships, without tabla accompaniment.
  - ② A steady rhythmic movement (*jod*) which builds up more patterns, still without accompaniment, evolving to a fast section with lots of rhythmic combinations.
  - ③ A slow composition (a tune) with tabla, followed by variations on the tune.
  - ④ A faster composition with variations, evolving to an ultrafast segment in which rhythm predominates. This builds up to a climax and concludes the piece.
- These movements blend smoothly into each other, though the transition from (ii) to (iii) is always noticeable (the tabla player wakes up).
- In a vocal performance, there is no elaboration without *taal* (rhythm).

- Some of these movements may be omitted. A light Raga, which has less richness of structure, may have only (ii) in medium tempo and will then sound like a song with variations.
- Apart from the compositions, everything else in the performance is improvised spontaneously.
- The performance can last for an hour or two. It is never monotonous because variations are introduced at different stages.
- 'Light' Ragas are performed for shorter durations like 10-15 minutes.
- The success of the performance depends on how effectively the musician builds up the desired mood.

Thank You!