

**Appreciating Hindustani Music**  
**Dr.Lakshmi Sreeram**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Lecture 14**  
**Raga-Lakshana or Features of Raga**

[Music]. That was a Lakshana geet in Raag Bihag. It was a composition that was in the Raag Bihag about Raag Bihag, that is it described the Raag Bihag in terms of its Aroha-Avaroha, Vadi-Samvadi and the time that is assigned to the raga. Now, lakshana in general it means features, you know it means characteristics.

So, raga lakshana means the features of the raga and we can we standardly describe raga lakshana in terms of the Aroha-Avaroha, Vadi-Samvadi, Graha-Nyasa all the aspects that we covered in the previous videos whether the swaras are Shuddha or Komal hm and definitely the time of the day or night that the raga is best supposed to be performed in. Ah It also includes typically some the that or the parent scale. You know we have not taken we have not looked at this yet in which we will be doing that very soon. So, this is raga lakshana is is a very standard way of describing any raga. and Lakshana Geet, one of which you heard just now in Bihag ,ah these are a fascinating set of compositions that incorporate the raga lakshanas in the same raga in which the composition is set.

So, we have a tradition of describing the lakshanas of a raag, not just in a composition, but also in textual it in the textual tradition which is typically in verse. So, for example, we have this lakshana of the same Raag Bihag inverse it is in Sanskrit.

[--]. So, this is from Ragakalpdrumankura, which is a 20th century text written in Sanskrit by one Appa Tulasi and the the lakshana, the verse means this right vihanga iha giyate. Bihag is Vihanga is an older name for the Raag Bihag in vihanga iha giyate ma mruduh anyativraswaro. So, Ma is mruduh that is it is Komal.Or it is in a in our terminology we will say it is Shuddha, that is it is not the higher Ma it is the mruduh Ma. Anyativro- the others are the rest of the swaras are teevra that is there they are the the sharper note. Ridhou tyajati- Ri and Dha are Tyajati rohane they are discarded in the Arohana. Sprshati ca avarohane puhah- and in the Avaroha it is only just touched- Sprshati. Tatha niadhitaugani ruchira vadisamvadinau. And Ga Ni are Vadi and Samvadi and Nishitasamayeh sadha. So, it is sung at night. This is how there is a tradition of describing the raga lakshana in verse. Such descriptions of raga; of ragas in terms of raga lakshana- this kind of description has its limits.

Now, even if we included every aspect of the raga that we have discussed so far right in terms of ornament and what kind of ornaments have to be used, what are the important phrases Graha, Nyasa etcetera. Basically we create an extensive list of the features of the raga. Now, is that enough, is that enough of a blueprint for say a musician to perform it, even a seasoned

musician? The answer is no. There are simply too many subtle aspects of ragas that they simply defy exhaustive description, even seasoned musicians would hesitate to perform to try to perform a raga which they have not learnt from their teacher.

Even though the raga might be performed by others, you might have heard it many times, but still if you have not received the raga from your teacher you would be unwilling to perform it. And this is not just a matter of decorum or propriety, it is just that ragas have many areas of slippery territory. not only what what is a raga, but what it is not that is also very important which is where a master, a guru is very important, you know. He or she will guide you that, offer you insights there.

You see we only have 12 swaras right and we have at least a 100 or 150 very popularly widely performed ragas and many more ragas that are less visible. So, necessarily ragas will share tonal material. What are the differences? Where are the differences? The differences lie in these subtleties, which a master a guru can guide us through.

The senior musicians and gurus of Hindustani music are addressed as Pandit or Ustad, which which really means repository of knowledge. So, gurus are a repository of knowledge of the ragas, the subtleties of ragas. And even after receiving this knowledge from such a guru about ragas, it is still a long journey S. K. Saxena, a philosopher and a well-known writer on the aesthetics of Hindustani music says this. I quote.

“Raga is neither a mere arrangement of Aroha and Avaroha or of vadi and samvadi, nor a skeletal fixture to which the music must merely conform but a rich and integrated wholeness of implicit depth, roominess, repose, and vitality. That is why our master musicians speak of a raga's personality.” So, how does one absorb this personality?

It is a lifelong task discovering the identity of a raga, its secrets you know its many beautiful nooks and crannies it is a lifelong journey. For example, there is this lovely astonishing insight into the Raag Shree that Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan refers to, he shares in an interview. The link to the interview is given below.

But I will play a very short clip from this interview where he refers to the the microtonal nuancing of the Ga, of the Gandhar in Raag Shree. Now, if you remember I did mention that Raag Shree has slightly raised Komal Rishabh, the Ri has a microtonal nuancing in which the it is slightly raised, raised over the standard Komal Ri.

But here he is that is well-known it is a well-known feature about Raag Shree, I mean here the Ustad is referring to the microtonal nuancing of the Ga. He says- he speaking in hindi and though some of you may not understand the language, but the music needs no translation- he says that the Ra the Ga of Shree it is Shuddha Gandhar that is what it is. We say that Raag Shree has Shuddha Gandhar, but it is not the standard Shuddha Gandhar. [--] So, we perform the world of performance incorporates all these microtonal nuancing and sometimes we are not even aware of them.

And we discover them as we journey in this world. So, how is raga taught? How is any raga taught? It is a complex process like like any other art or craft in this country, the traditional way of teaching this music was through a residence at the teachers house. This is the well-known

Gurukulavasa right, yeah which generates the Gurukulavasa- which means you live with the gurus family- and this generates the the guru shishya parampara and very another extremely well-known expression, well known phenomenon. So, guru shishya parampara is the lineage of student and teacher which is generated because of this relationship between student and teacher, the student living as part of the guru's household.

Now, what is the advantage of such an arrangement you see, under the system the student left with the teacher and he observed every aspect of a musicians life, most importantly of course how the guru practiced. So, by simply listening to the practice of the practice sessions of the guru or how he taught other students whether more senior or less- everything went into the student's education its part of the students education.

So, much is absorbed at the non discursive level, even when actual teaching happened between the guru and shishya the the guru taught, whenever the guru taught the shishya, traditionally it was not through grammar telling teaching the student this is the grammar of the raga. that is not the traditional way at all.

The guru would sing and the student had to listen and faithfully reproduce; listening listening that is the main thing. So, as much as we say that this tradition is oral right, it is act it is also important that we realize that it is aural . The guru of course, gives oral instructions, the student listens to the music itself.

So, that is the way traditionally that this music is taught not by talking about ragas. In fine tuning the understanding of a raga definitely lakshanas, features of the raga might be discussed, but at the preliminary level. You do not talk about the raga you sing it, you listen to it and then you reproduce it.

Now, learning a raga is in many ways like learning a language. Now how do you learn a new language? If you seek to approach through its grammar, the progress is going to be tedious and its very likely that it will be a very long time before you understand the nuances of the language, the way the language works enough to get all its aspect especially you know jokes and poetry, which rely so much upon non-literal expression.

Ah Sometimes even defying grammar, you cannot get all those if you are going to approach a language through its grammar. The best way to learn a language is to live amidst native speakers of the language. So, also the best way to learn the raga is simply to listen to it performed by those who have a mastery over it.

So, also raga lakshanas are useful of course they are important and gurus do talk about them ah, but that is not the primary way of teaching music, teaching a raag. That is simply not the primary way. Because you see the truth is ultimately there is a certain deceptiveness about these rules, just as in language.

Effective communication is not assured by a strict adherence to grammar you know in language and sometimes flouting a grammar rule can really convey a subtle idea or a joke more effectively. So, also the world of ragas is a world of lakshanas, definitely, there is grammar there is rule, there are rules. It is a shastra.

But in the final analysis it is the artistry that rules. One learns the shastra to ultimately transcend them and feel free even while working within the shastras. It is the centrality of the artistic aspect that makes the world of ragas a dynamic one. It is a world that is in flux it is not unchanging ragas evolve they change old ragas assume slightly subtly newer ways, they even disappear; newer ragas appear and then get established and so on.

So, if the world of ragas was was a kind of a tyranny of rules, then ragas would have atrophied, it would not be a live vibrant system that it is today. Now, how about notation in teaching raga? Notation traditionally it was simply not used these days it is used ah, but at a very rudimentary level. For most ornaments we do not have notation symbols and the notation only captures the skeleton of the melody or the composition.

So, you know, if you were to be presented with the notation of a composition for example, you would need to know the raga in order to be able to perform that composition based on the notation. You need to know the raga, you need to know its chalan, how it moves. So, notation is really used as a tool to remember it as a reference.

Ah It is never something on the basis of which one can actually make music that is simply not possible and it is not used that way. Currently the most popular notation system that is used is one devised by Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, we will discuss his work later in the course. But this notational system is simple and effective as a tool of reference. Melody time and text of a composition are captured in a very skeletal level in the system. Now, what is it like to perform a raga when there are so many rules? Where is the art? Where is the artistry? For a beginner no doubt performing a raga is a daunting task. There are so many considerations, you have to take care of so many things- tunefulness, grammar, what swaras are allowed what are not allowed not allowing shades of other ragas to come in and so on- it is quite difficult ah. In fact, one western musicologist has even commented that performing a raga is really a task of keeping out other ragas. Now so, let us say when you are singing may be Raag Marwa what you are doing is keeping out the other ragas.

Especially you know ragas like Puriya and Sohini with which it shares tonal material. Again you see for a beginner this may be true right, when you are setting out you are very concerned that other ragas, the shades of other ragas , “chaya” we say, it should not come in. It should not come in so as to destroy the raga that you are trying to perform, that is at the beginning at a beginners level.

But as you get seasoned, as you get maturity then you are when you are performing a raga you are performing the raga, you are not obsessed with the idea that you have to keep out other ragas and that happens that will happen. There is you know such a thing as being with the raga, being absorbed in it. So, that other ragas are thereby simply kept out.

Ah. So, when a master performs Marwa, he is performing Marwa, not Puriya. So, otherwise you see performing a raga would be a petrifying task and you would be petrified that you know I will make a mistake or some other raga will come or I will hit a wrong note or something like that.

Or

maybe the ornament is wrong or the phrase is wrong that is not it is performing a raga is a

joyous experience once you have gained a certain level of maturity.

Master, when a master performs a raga she enters it and moves within it confidently and cajoles it to show its beauties, and there is no petrification. Then see here we talk about lakshanas, raga lakshana is important, but there is also the other thing called lakshya right. So, we have lakshana which of course, you know refers to the features of the raga the rules, we also have lakshya which is the goal or outcome.

So, there comes a stage always when you stop obsessing over the lakshanas and you are able to focus on the lakshya that is the outcome, that is the raga that you are performing to bring out that raga. So, a master in a way transcends lakshanas and is guided by the lakshya, which is the goal here in this case is ultimately Ranjakatva or a certain kind of pleasure. You know in fact, the very word raga is derives from the word from the root, ranj which means to colour to please, you know, to to evoke passion. So, that is the meaning of the word raga. So, ultimately the performance of raga is about this Ranjakatva, but you know other other music also offers pleasure right ah.

But here in raga sangeet you also have it is not just a sensual pleasure which any music will offer. So, it is very pleasing to the senses right, music is all music is pleasing to the senses, but in the case of raga sangeet, raga music there is the additional thing of additional level of contemplation it is- and also cognition of saying that the raga is is brought out effectively. So, because it is so challenging you know it is improvised. First of all there are lot of improvisation in Hindustani music. So, that itself is a big challenge and it involves so many elements right (Refer Time: 32:05), so many things that need to be taken care of. So, it is a feat when it all comes together and everything falls in place.

There is a metaphor in one of in a in one of the works of Abhinavagupta the 10th century Kashmiri aesthetician. he says that in when the elements of a theatre of a theatrical presentation or theatrical presentation has so many more elements than just a musical performance, well music itself is a part of uh theatre.

Um So, when everything you know, you see there is this the flaming torch right and if you were to swirl it there are various positions that it occupies, but then when you when it gets into a certain rhythm you are not able to see the individual positions, but it all comes together in a circle of fire.

That is that is how the elements of a performance should come together so that they do not, they are not visible they are not experienced separately as various elements, it all falls in place. This is the the word for this is alatachakra that is what he, that is a metaphor he uses. And this is really what we speak of as rang. Rang is really just color.

But it is a color that that suffuses this the mind right, its color that is sheer joy and this is all this is the goal of raga performance, but like in any other art you know even the most technically perfect or brilliantly virtuosic performance might sometimes simply not have it- the creation of rang is not in any one's hands.

Ah Even after rigorous training under a master which may give you a lot of knowledge, you may be a very knowledgeable musician, but you may not be able to evoke the rang that is a

different deal altogether. But that is really what we all seek in this word. So, as I said it has to do with the feeling of everything falling in place and coming together with the right amount, with the right

proportion you know its appropriateness above all.

And I mean it is hard to put in words, but we know it when we experience it. And certainly it cannot be taught by any means, even the greatest teacher to the most ardent student this is not something that can be transmitted. Pandit Nikhil Banerjee was one of the greatest musicians of the 20th century, he was a sitar player and he has a devout following even today. He says this- I am quoting him, this is from an interview.

“It is a belief, you know. It is a very controversial thing. In this 20th century you may not accept it, but you cannot create this music-something comes from maybe within or from outside. That creates it, if you say, "Now I am creating," then do it now, each time can you do it? No. You cannot do it each time.”

So, here you know Pandit Banerjee is really talking about the elusiveness of this raga, it does not happen to everyone all the time. Now, this is why in the tradition we talk of raga devata: that there are the gods of every raga has a deity and that deity must grace the performance. We also talk of the Ranga Devata, the gods of the stage. So, it is all this just indicates that its ultimately beyond the power of mortals.

It is not something that we can contrive and just will to happen. We also, tradition also speaks of raga bhava at a less divine level. Dr. Mukund Lath who is a leading musicologist philosopher, he says this.

“Raga bhava is the term in use for the felt identity of a raga. A raga without raga bhava is believed to be only the shadow of the raga. This raga bhava is something that transcends the music in its physical aspect and also its grammatical and presentational aspect.” But ultimately that is the base- the mastering the grammar, that is absolutely indispensable that is the base the shastra. Once you master the shastra then the artist might be able to take wings and fly. So, this composition is a very very well known khayal composition, it was originally a dhrupad composition, but it was then repurposed and we sing it in the khayal tradition. This describes the raga vidya the the knowledge system that raga ragas are.

And he says the composer says “sura sangata raga vidya sangeeta pramana ko jo kantha kara dikhaave vaako jaaniye guni gnani . A person who has internalized ,who has learnt the raga vidya, and who has it in his kantha in his throat, that person you call guni or gyani. Guni is an expression that is found very often in many compositions and its one of those untranslatable words. guna means quality virtue. So, a person who has talent who is who has the capacity to persevere and pursue this this Vidya, this art, that person is a guni.