

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 16
Classification of Ragas - The Mela or That System

There are about a 100 ragas in circulation, 80 to 100 that are widely performed very well-known ragas, what are called prachalit ragas. And there are many more that are rare, that are performed by select schools and select musicians even and there are many more that are obsolete- lupta ragas, that is they have disappeared from practice.

Now, with so many ragas and given the general propensity towards classification that Sanskrit traditions of intellectual inquiry have, ragas have also been classified. The medieval text onwards even earlier ragas are classified along various lines.

Now, raga is a complex thing right - it is characterized by the presence, over absence of swaras that is one thing about it, that there are many other things about it such as the melodic personality of it, the phrases that are typical in the raga- the way it moves and so on. Even the ornament, so we can classify ragas along these various parameters . As it happens there are three well-known systems of classification in Hindustani music. These are the mela or that paddhati or system. We have the raganga paddhati, the raga-ragini paddhati. Of these, raga-ragini paddhati is of historical interest merely, plus there were some other aspects that that make it important to us even today. But raga-ragini paddhati as a classification system is quite obsolete nobody uses it. but the other two mela paddhati and raganga paddhati; paddhati means system.

So, the mela or that system or the raganga system these are two prevalent systems of classifying ragas. Now, why do we need to classify ragas? Just to get a better sense of the kind of variety of ragas that we have. even to understand raga you need to understand what it shares with other ragas and how it differs from ragas that might otherwise you know maybe share melodic material with it and so on.

So, classification generally is is a way of there is intellectual gain in it because you do get some clarity about what we are talking about and then so also with ragas. but we will see the ragas are particularly difficult to classify.

We will now first talk about the mela paddhati. Mela in Sanskrit and in Hindi means an assembly, a meeting, and as a category, as a musical category it is an assembly of swaras. It is just a set of swaras come together. Tdefinition of mela that that just found in Raga Vibodha it is a text of the 17th century, it is a very important text by written by one Somanatha- it has a very clear definition of mela as a meeting of swaras, a place where swaras are together a set of swaras. [--] that is where ragas meet or are classified that is called a mela. This is swarasamsthana where swaras are together, samsthana in the same place. In fact, samsthana is a synonym for mela in

many of the texts, North Indian text especially and in contemporary usage mela is also called thaat.

So, mela then is a scale, it is a certain combination of the 7 swaras arranged in ascending order. and ragas that use some or all of those swaras are classified under that mela. And what happens is that the raga which is the most popular among those that are classified under a particular mela that raga gives its name to the mela itself.

Ah The the important thing to remember is mela is not raga, it is just a set of 7 swaras it has no ranjakatva. As we have another definition- mela Swarasamuha . It is just swarasamuha, it is just a group of swaras. It does not have ranjakatva.

And it is also, it is only a set of notes in the ascending order, you do not have an avarohana also for a mela because it is just a set of notes. Here we have Venkatamakhin of in Chaturdandiprakashika another landmark treatise.

And he says [--] that is mela- they have form is only of swaras in aroha. So, this is the idea of mela as a classification system that is ragas are classified based on the swaras that comprise them. So, all ragas that have Shuddha swaras would be classified together. Whereas, all ragas that would have Shuddha swaras, but the Ma is Teevra right, Re Ga Dha Ni are Shuddha, but Ma is Teevra then those ragas would be classified together. And as I said each category each class would go by the name of the most popular raga that is classified under that mela. [--]

This is really the idea with which the mela as a category of classification started and the first available treatise to talk about mela as a system of classification is the Swaramelakalanidhi of Ramamatya who lived in the Vijayanagara Empire. he was with the Vijayanagara court. This is the landmark treatise ,really, especially for South Indian musics. So, after uh this, after Ramamatya's Swaramelakalanidhi the idea of mela spread. And then we have lakshana granthakaras from all around the country suggesting, putting forth their own mela system of classification, coming up with different numbers of melas.

Some have suggested that there are 12 others have said that there are 19, maybe 23 it it all depends on the kind of ragas that they were trying to account for. So, based on that and based on the period and the time and the place, the number of melas were different. So, while mela is a medieval idea and is found in many texts, contemporary Hindustani music adopted the mela system as set forth by Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande in the 20th century, in the early 20th century. We will hear this name many times during this course because his work has impacted and has been definitive you know in the evolution, the particularly difficult period of transition of Hindustani music in the 20th century.

Now, Bhatkhande had this project of codifying Hindustani music as really because while the in the performance aspect of it is vibrant there was much wanting by way of standardization and codification. So, that is what he set out to do and he did it, he perused the medieval texts even ancient texts to see how he can use those categories to bring about order in the practice of hindustani music at that time.

He also travelled south. he travelled to the south to see how Carnatic music is systematized, how standardization is achieved. By standardization what I mean is that see this music primarily

exists as a performance tradition or many performance traditions we should say. And especially in North Indian music because this music was practiced by court musicians and court musicians of different courts and their own what should I say, their own performance practices and their own conceptions of idea, their own conceptions of raga and alap and so on.

There was a considerable disparity in these various traditions and if we had to talk of Hindustani music as one system, then some amount of standardization had to be brought in, and that is what Bhatkhande sought to do.

And he came upon the 72 melakarta, the 72 mela system of in Carnatic music that was propounded by Venkatamakhin in his Chaturdandi Prakashika. In fact, Bhatkhande acquired a copy of the Chaturdandi Prakashika, which is a 17th century text- Chaturdandi Prakashika. And so, in Carnatic music even today the system of mela that is used is one that sets forth 72 mela; 72 such combinations of swaras under which ragas can be classified. Now, inspired by this Bhatkhande worked out, then given the swara material that we have in Hindustani music and that the nomenclature, the nomenclature of the swaras. See because there are two things about mela. First is that it should include all the swaras in the aroha and it should be a straight scale it, should not be a zigzag, it cannot be a Sa Ga Re Ma and all that, it has to be Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni, it is a particular combination of Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni in that order, and no two varieties of the same swara can be there in a single mela. Every mela will have one and only one variety of every note, besides Sa and Pa of course. So, given that and given the way ragas, given the way swaras are named and organized in Hindustani music 32 combinations or 32 melas are possible. I will quickly show how.

So, you have Sa Re Komal, this is a notation for Re Komal and you have Re Shuddha, then you have Ga Komal Ga Shuddha, we have Ma Shuddha and Ma Teevra, we have Pa, then we have Dha Komal Dha Shuddha, then Ni Komal Ni Shuddha. So, these are the 12 swarasthanas right; 12 swaras in Hindustani music.

Now, if you need a combination of Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni how many are possible? Of course, you cannot have Sa Ga Re Ma Pa Dha Pa Ni Dha Sa, it has to be in this order Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni. So, the way the 72 melas were derived by Venkatamakhin, Bhatkhande basically followed that in order to show how 32 melas are possible for us.

And incidentally those of you are interested to see how the 72 melas have were generated by Venkatamakhin you may please visit the link that is given below in the description box. So, he followed how Venkatamakhin derived the 72 melas and it is basically, he kept the Re and Ga constant right. With one combination of Re Ga how many combinations of Dha Ni are possible?

So, we let us take Sa Ma and Pa as a constant for the time being. So, Ma we I will taking it as Shuddha Madhyam. Now, how many combinations of Re Ga; let us take any one combination of Re Ga let us say Komal Re, Komal Gandhar.

So, how many combinations with Ni, Dha Ni are possible? So, Re Ga can combine with Dha Komal, Ni Komal, it can combine with Dha Shuddha, Ni Komal then it can combine with Dha Komal, Ni Shuddha and then it can combine with Dha Shuddha, Ni Shuddha. So, four

combinations of are possible for one combination of Re Ga. Similarly, there are four combinations of Re Ga possible. So, in all how many combinations of Re Ga Dha Ni are possible that is 4 into 4 you have 16; 16 possible combinations of Re Ga Dha Ni and that is with just one Ma, that is let us say Shuddha Madhyam.

And you will have a similar 16 for, 16 combinations possible with Teevra Ma. So, in all you have 32 combinations of Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni that are possible and therefore, 32 melas are possible mathematically . So, to those of you who are intrigued how is it that 72 melas were possible for Venkatamakhin and only 32 are were possible for Bhatkhande, it is really just a matter of swara nomenclature and if you visit the link that I have suggested. So, Bhatkhande knew the 72 mela of Carnatic music he also computed 32 possible melas for Hindustani music. But intriguingly, he did not put forth a theory of 32 melas, he only listed 10 combinations from among the 32 as the melas or thaats of Hindustani music and he said that these are enough, these 10 are enough to account for or to classify all the known ragas at that time. All the ragas that were prevalent at that time could be classified under these 10 melas or thaats. And he also said, that if somebody wants to have more thaats that is also fine. Now, this is utterly intriguing that when you set out to offer a classification theory do you know what is possible mathematically, but you just step back and say 10 are enough.

The 10 thaats that he proposed were Bhairav, Todi, Asavari, Bilawal, Marwa, Poorvi, Kalyan, Khamaj, Kafi and Bhairavi . He also factored in the Samaya pranahi, the raga time association and he wanted to make sure that there are enough thaats for every prahar or every part of the day or night.

So, so there are many ragas that cannot be unproblematically classified under one of these 10 thaats. So, the raga may have a note, that is not the note of the mela and yet it is just classified under it as an exception. Ahir Bhairav for instance- Ahir Bhairav is like this [Music]. So, the notes which uses are [Music] these are the notes, but it is classified under Bhairav. And there is a reason for that which we will see in the next video, because it draws from the other classification system the Raganga Paddhati. Bhairav under which Ahir Bhairav is classified goes [Music]. So, both the Dha and Ni are different, Ahir Bhairav has the Shuddha Dha and Komal Ni whereas, Bhairav has the Komal Dha and Shuddha Ni and yet Ahir Bhairav is classified under Bhairav. And the word of Hindustani music is quite ok with this anomaly, you see because there is a fundamental problem with the thaat system of classification when it comes to ragas. So, even if it were complete, even if we acknowledged 32 thaats, 32 possible combinations there will still be ragas that are left out.

Because there are many ragas that use both varieties of the same note right that is the one clear instance and more importantly there are many ragas that are classifiable under more than one mela. Now how do we handle this situation?

So, let us take the raga Bhoopali or Bhoop and it is a very very standard basic raga. Basic raga in the sense everybody knows it, everybody who has an introduction to the world of Hindustani music would know raag Bhoop. even that it will be difficult to classify there are some issues with classifying it under the mela system.

So, Bhoop as you know has these swaras, Sa Re Ga Pa Dha Sa- all Shuddha swaras. So, it has all Shuddha swaras, but it does not have Ma and Ni right. It does not have Madhyam or Nishad, it drops it. It is an audava raga it has only 5 swaras in the aroha and avaroha. So, how do you how can you classify this raga- Raag Bhoop? So, as it turns out there are four possibilities, depending on the Ma and the Ni, because Sa Re Ga Pa Re Ga Pa Dha; Re Ga Dha are there in the raga and they are Shuddha. So, the mela mela also has to have Re Ga Dha Shuddha besides of course, Sa and Pa are any way there.

So, with Re Ga Dha Shuddha there are four possibilities, you have Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni all Shuddha swaras or you have Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha, Shuddha swara in Ni Komal. It does not matter what note Ni, what variety Ni is right, because Ni is not there in Bhoop.

So, Bhoop can still be classified under this mela Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni even though Ni is Komal, because Bhoop does not have Ni- does not matter. Bhoop can also be classified under Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni where, Ma is Teevra because, Re Ga Dha which are there in Bhoop are all Shuddha, so that is fine.

Again, you can have a combinations Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni, where Ma is Teevra and Ni is Komal. So, there are four possibilities. So, where would you classify Bhoop? We would need some fiat. For instance, you may say that the first that the first mela that you have when you derive the 32 thaats that is where it will be classified or some such thing, but it is not satisfactory and performance tradition is clear that Bhoop has to be classified under this one his is the Kalyan thaata, because as I said again this goes to the Raganga Paddhati, because Bhoop and Yaman or Kalyan they have that the phraseology, the the kind of phrases that are that occur and the chalan common. Again even in the South Mohanam which is the equivalent of Bhoop has a lot of commonality with Kalyani, which is again a counterpart of Kalyan or Yaman.

So, performance tradition is very clear that Bhoop has to be classified under Kalyan thaata, but there is no way that the mela Paddhati, if even if we had 32 melas, there is no way that we can work this feature of the raga into its classification.

So, one can say that ragas are simply too chaotic beautifully chaotic maybe, but chaotic still to submit to neat mathematical categories like combinations of swaras. What is achieved by the mela classification? At most what we can say is that if a raga is classified under a particular mela, it has some of the notes of that mela. It might have other notes also because that is the reality.

So, it is it is marginally helpful at best when this is the problem with the mela or the thaata system of classification of ragas. Now, possibly because of these drawbacks of the mela system, which Bhatkhande he does not talk about them, but he probably intuitively perceived it and the world of Hindustani music also quite understands this.

So, possibly because of this we are not bothered- the world of performance is not bothered by the incomplete 10 thaata system. And the mela system leaves the aesthetics of the raga the personality of the raga completely out of the picture. And one might seek raga classification system that heeds this the personality of the raga and this is what the Raganga Paddhati does,

which we will look at in the next video.