

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 7
Swara and Shruti in the Textual Tradition

So, we saw that in Hindustani music we speak of seven shuddha swaras and five vikrita swaras and then we have 22 shrutis. The seven swaras we know are Sa Ri Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni, but these actually are the shortened abbreviations of the actual names of the swaras. These swaras have names, the seven swaras I mean.

So, Sa is Shadja, Ri is Rishabha, Ga is Gandhara, Ma is Madhyama, Pa is Panchama, Dha is Dhaivata, Ni is Nishada. So, these are the names and these names have been- are found in ancient treatises like Naradiya Shiksha, which is an early treatise that is concerned with the phonetics of chanting of the Vedic hymns.

So, Naradiya Shiksha, here even in this treatise we have these names of these swaras and there are some interesting aspects, interesting associations of the swaras. So, Sa is supposed to be associated with the cry of the peacock, Rishabha the Ri is as some of you would know rishabha means the bull.

Gandhara is the goat, that is the cry of the goat, Madhyama is the heron, Panchama is the cuckoo bird, Dhaivata is the horse, Nishada is the elephant. Now, these are well known associations and as intriguing and enchanting as they are not really clear what these associations mean.

One thing you can definitely see is that Sa Ma and Pa which are really the tonal centers so to say of a, for us they are associated with birds and the others are associated with animals. And you know that you might think of this as just something fanciful or something that is poetic. You see, not only animals and birds, the notes swaras are also associated with colors they are associated with rasa.

So, each swara is associated with one color and one rasa or emotion, and also a deity. So, what we can really gather from this kind of engagement with the idea of swara is that, you know, swaras are not aloof, they are not something that have nothing to do with the rest of human experience. They are very much part of man in nature. Now, how is swara defined in the textual tradition? That is also- it can be interesting to take a look at it.

Now, how would you define a swara that is any swara? What is swara, how would you define it? Now, if you look at Wikipedia, it says that a musical tone is a steady periodic sound; now this is obviously cast in terms of physics right? Periodic, sound and all that.

But suppose you were not to draw from the physics of sound, but simply based on your experience of music of swaras, how would you define swara? In the sense swara is sound right, it is dhvani. But so is my speaking and so is this, that is also dhvani. So, how would you ,if you had to, how would you define swara or note? One of the well-known very well-known definitions

definitions we can say of swara is Swameva Rajate.

That is, it is that which this is of course, Sanskrit. Swameva Rajate. It shines on its own that is it is attractive, it is attractive in itself. some other things some other kinds of sound might be attractive you know. But this is classic Sanskrit example Putrasthejathaha , your son is born to you.

Now, that is sound and it is very pleasing right, but it is not because of the sound itself, it is because of what it means where is swara, Swameva rajate, it is pleasing it attracts on its own. Now, see actually the context of this is its more complex because it draws from the, the swara also means vowel, you know swara and vyanjana.

Swara means vowel and there, this is a definition of vowel its Swameva rajate, that is a vowel is independent right? you can say without the help of a consonant. Whereas a consonant you cannot pronounce a consonant without a vowel. So, in that context Swameva rajate it shines on its own, it is expressed on its own that make sense.

But then it is this the same definition is applied to swara as a musical entity and we have to try and figure out what it means, you know in this context. But Swameva Rajate is found in the 8th century text Brihaddeshi and is one of the most well-known definitions if you want to call it that, definitions of swara.

A more elaborate definition by the 10th century brilliant mind, Abhinavagupta he includes other features such as anurananaatma that is resonance. Snigdha: Snigdha is smooth, shiny and Madhura. So this is what Abhinavagupta says. And this is just for those of you who have an interest in Sanskrit; the verse goes like this

Vayam tu srutisthaanibhighaataprabhavasabdaprabhaavito
anurananaatmaasnidghamadhurashabdaiva swara iti vakshyaamaha.

So, it is anurananaatma, it is resonant, it is snigdha, madhura it shiny, smooth and sweet and that is swara according to Abhinavagupta. And how about shruti, what is, how is shruti defined? Shruti is defined very simply again, too simply one would say Shruyate iti shruti it is that, which is heard is shruti.

Now, this again is a lot of things are heard, but you do not call them shruti. But again this is again it goes back to the context of the Vedas, because the Vedas are supposed to have been heard by the rishis, by the sages. So, they are heard therefore, they are shruti. So, another word for Veda is shruti.

And in the context of music, in the context of micro tones when you say again that; Shruyate iti shruti what does that mean? If you go back to the observation made in the last video that in the tradition shruti is sometimes regarded, by some theoreticians, it is regarded as micro tones as pitches themselves, and by others it is regarded as intervals between very close pitches, the least discernible interval.

So, I would say that when you say Shruyate iti shruti, the shruti as the least discernible interval makes sense- that you can hear, you can discern that difference, that pitch interval. So, if shruti is taken in that sense then this definition of Shruyate iti shruti makes sense. So, now, while we you

know as I said we acknowledge we know that there are in physics tells us that there are infinite pitches between any two adjacent swaras, we cannot discern all of them; we can discern a few. So, the discern the hearability, the fact that you are able to hear that micro tone that that pitches, you know, infinitesimally different from the previous one that is itself its defining feature Shruyate iti shruti- that which is heard is shruti. Because what is heard in performance is swara, right.

Whatever is heard in in performance attains the status status of swara. We do not say we are singing this shruti or that shruti. We're singing Gandhara or we singing Ga or Ma or Pa in a particular shruti of it, definitely. But we we speak of swaras in the context of performance. Shruti is the matrix as it were, of possible pitches from which some are lit up as swaras. In fact, there is this thing that the swara, the ra means Rajru Deepta. The expression Deeptais used even today by many musicians when we say when they say swara deeptaman hai, that note is lit up, that particular pitch is lit up.

So, in that sense what is the exact way of shrutis or how exactly can you grasp shruti or even perform them, that is very intricate and it is something that is learnt in practice, through constant exposure and practice and training. So, there is this lovely verse in the Naradiya Shiksha about the elusiveness of shruti. It says again it is a Sanskrit verse.

Yathaapsy carataam maargo meenaanaam nopalabhyate Aakaashe vaa vihangaanaam tadvat swaragataa srutihi. That is, just as you cannot really, you cannot really capture the path of a fish in water or the path of a bird in flight in the sky, you cannot really trace its way, you cannot trace the path. So also you cannot trace the path of shruti. Now, in practice, as I said, there are some ragas where we explicitly speak of shruti nuances.

So, for instance Rageshri or Raag marwa they have a Komal Rishabh, Komal ri, but it is higher than the normal Ri. Now, how do we actually hit that pitch, this is higher than the normal Ri that is where training comes in. That is where your what is called Talim comes in and the kind of exposure to good music that you have had and that is that is the only way you can capture those shrutis.

You see, shrutis confer a fluidity to swara, the idea of swara and the music itself. So that, though we may describe a raga in terms of its swaras as we often do, the actual position of that swara is determined and propagated in practice. So, even within the same raga the same note, same swara so to say might have slightly different pitch positioning depending on the phrase.

So, this is something that for instance cannot be captured on an instrument like the harmonium or the keyboard where you have very fixed keys and there is no continuity. But that is the life of, that is the very life breath of Indian music. The shrutis are a nebulous stratum, a matrix of possibilities parts of which get lit up during raga presentation.

In an evocative metaphor swaras have been compared to ghats in a river, ghats are steps leading down from the banks to the actual waters of the river. Now, the steps, the ghats are the swaras and the music is the stream of the river that is lapping against these steps as it goes. Now, obviously the waters don't, you know, hit the steps at exact precise positions right; they just flow over them and sometimes a particular step, it goes over, sometimes it may go just a little below that step or

sometimes it may go between that step and another step and so on. So, that is, swaras are like those steps and when we perform a raga that is how we negotiate the swaras. I will just end with a bit of Raga Shri [Music].