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The Role of Ṛṣabha in Rāga Classification within the 72-Mēla System

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Abstract: The evolution of rāga-s in the South Indian music tradition can be traced through lakṣaṇagrantha-s that preserve successive stages of musical thought. Among these, Caturdaṇḍīprakāśika (CDP), Rāgalakṣaṇa of Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi (RL-MV), and Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini (SSP) represent an important and continuous textual lineage spanning more than three centuries. This study investigates the historical role of the svara ṛṣabha in the formulation, evolution, and classification of traditional rāga-s, with particular reference to these three works. It first examines the treatment of ṛṣabha in the older mēlas and janya rāga-s described in CDP, with particular attention to rāga-s in which the svara is omitted. It then explores the formulation of the 72 rāgāṅga rāga-s in RL-MV and the treatment of vivādi rāga-s as preserved in SSP, with emphasis on the principles governing the omission of specific svara-s. Finally, it considers the historical classifications of two rāga-s, namely Hamsadhvani and Amṛtavarṣiṇi, as case studies to examine the relationship between scalar structure, rāgāṅga affiliation, and the role of ṛṣabha in rāga identity. Through a comparative study of these treatises, the article seeks to provide a historical perspective on the significance of ṛṣabha in the theoretical development of the South Indian rāga system. The study suggests that ṛṣabha may have functioned as an important factor in rāga classification within the 72-mēla framework, with its omission and retention reflecting broader classificatory tendencies across the tradition.

Index Terms - Ṛṣabha, Rāgāṅga, Mēla, Hamsadhvani, Amṛtavarṣiṇi, 72-mēla scheme

I. INTRODUCTION

In the South Indian music system, rāga evolution has been an important topic of discussion, largely due to the availability of various lakṣaṇagrantha-s across centuries that provide detailed explanations of different rāga-s. Among the extant musical treatises, Caturdaṇḍīprakāśika (CDP) of Vēṅkaṭamakhi (belonging to the 17th century) is widely regarded as one of the earliest works to systematically address the musical terminologies inherent to the South Indian system.

It is well known that Vēṅkaṭamakhi proposed the 72-mēla scheme that continues to be followed in the Karnāṭak music tradition today. However, it is important to note that he merely suggested the possibility of 72 mēla-s and named only 19 in the CDP that were prevalent during his time. It was his grandson, Muddu Vēṅkaṭamakhi, who fully formulated the system of 72 mēla-s, also referred to as rāgāṅga rāga-s, in his 18th century work Rāgalakṣaṇa (RL-MV).

In the 20th century, Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśini (SSP) of Subbarāma Dīkṣita was published, and this work is understood to follow the tradition of RL-MV in its treatment of rāga lakṣaṇa. These three works, CDP, RL-MV, and SSP, form the basis of the present study, as they represent a continuous and traceable lineage of musical tradition spanning more than three centuries.

Although the historical development of rāga-s has been discussed extensively by various scholars across different time periods, little attention has been paid to the theoretical significance of the omission or retention of ṛṣabha across lakṣaṇagrantha-s. The present study argues that the historical treatment of ṛṣabha reflects an implicit classificatory principle that influenced the affiliation of certain rāga-s within the rāgāṅga system. This argument is based on a comparative reading of the rāga-lakṣaṇa descriptions and classificatory practices preserved in CDP, RL-MV, and SSP.

II. ṚṢABHA IN THE OLDER MĒĻA-S AND JANYA RĀGA-S MENTIONED IN CDP

The present study focuses exclusively on ṛṣabha because its historical treatment reveals an important aspect of rāga evolution. In order to understand this aspect, it is important to look at the 19 mēḷa-s seen in CDP first. As established earlier, CDP is one of the earliest available works that deals with the rāga-s of the South Indian music system in detail. It is believed that Veṅkaṭamakhi's father was Gōvinda Dīkṣita who authored Saṅgīta Sudha (SS) in the early 17th century. While Saṅgīta Sudha is technically the earliest work to explicitly deal with the South Indian system of music, even specifically the mēḷa-s and the rāga-s pertaining to the South Indian tradition, CDP has gained more attention from scholars worldwide due to the subsequent significance of the 72-mēḷa scheme. It is also important to note that CDP also largely follows SS in terms of its description of various mēḷa-s and rāga-s. While SS mentions only 15 mēḷa-s, CDP, as discussed earlier, deals with 19 mēḷa-s that were prevalent during the time of Veṅkaṭamakhi.

The 19 mēḷa-s in CDP are: Mukhāri (1), Sāmavarāli (3), Bhūpāla (8), Hējjuji (13), Vasantabhairavi (14), Gaula (15), Bhairavi (20), Āhari (21), Śrīrāga (22), Kāmbhōji (28), Śaṅkarābharaṇa (29), Sāmanta (30), Dēśākṣi (35), Nāṭa (36), Śuddhavarāli (39), Pantuvarāli (45), Śuddharāmakriya (51), Simharava (58) and Kalyāṇi (65). Their respective mēḷa numbers in accordance with the 72 mēḷa scheme are given within brackets. Other than the detailed descriptions of these 19 mēḷa-s, there are various janya rāga-s that are described in CDP in accordance with their respective mēḷa-s. The significance of ṛṣabha comes into focus here because not many of the older rāga-s mentioned in CDP or even in SS omit ṛṣabha altogether in their melodic scale. If we take the 19 mēḷa-s mentioned in CDP and the svarūpa of their rāga-s as mentioned in this work, virtually none of these omit ṛṣabha in both ārōha and avarōha. The only exception is the rāga Dhanyāśi, which omits ṛṣabha altogether and is a janya of the 22nd mēḷa Śrī. This version of Dhanyāśi is presently referred to as Śuddhadhanyāśi and is different from the contemporary Karnāṭak version of Dhanyāśi which omits ṛṣabha and dhaivata only in the ārōha and has all the svara-s in the avarōha, and contains śuddha ṛṣabha. Even otherwise, the omission of ṛṣabha in the context of rāga-s with sādharāṇa gāndhāra seems to have been permissible while the omission of ṛṣabha in rāga-s with antara gāndhāra appears to have been almost inconceivable in the earlier rāga-s, as among the rāga-s examined in CDP, none omit ṛṣabha when antara gāndhāra is present. This observation provides the historical basis for understanding the formulation of certain rāga-s.

III. ṚṢABHA AND THE TREATMENT OF VIVĀDI RĀGA-S IN RL-MV AND SSP

As discussed earlier, while Veṅkaṭamakhi in CDP proposes the possibility of 72 mēḷa-s through 3 varieties of ṛṣabha, gāndhāra, dhaivata and niṣāda each and 2 varieties of madhyama, it was Muddu Veṅkaṭamakhi who formulated the actual 72 mēḷa or rāgāṅga rāga scheme in his work Rāgalakṣaṇa (RL-MV) written during the first quarter of the 18th century. In his formulation of the 72 rāgāṅga rāga-s, many newer vivādi rāga-s emerged. While older vivādi rāga-s Mukhāri, Sāmavarāli, Hējjuji, Dēśākṣi, Nāṭa and Varāli were present in CDP, later rāga-s seem to have been systematically formulated in RL-MV. While the scalar formulation of the later rāga-s is not explicitly mentioned or described in RL-MV, Subbarāma Dīkṣita explains some logic and lists a few underlying principles behind the traditional handling of the vivādi rāga-s based on their svara combinations. He states that in those rāga-s with śuddha gāndhāra and śuddha niṣāda combinations, these svara-s may be omitted altogether in the ārōha, that is, the ascent of the rāga-s and may be incorporated only in the descending prayōga-s. For instance, if we take the 1st rāgāṅga rāga

Kanakāmbari, the scale of the rāga as reflected in SSP is: SRMPDS-SNDPMGRS, which appears to have been formulated on the basis of the older Mukhāri scale as seen in CDP, where śuddha gāndhāra and śuddha niṣāda are omitted in the ārōha but are present in the avarōha. Interestingly, even though this logic is not explicitly stated in either CDP or RL-MV, it is inherently followed in all three works, namely CDP, RL-MV and SSP. Subbarāma Dīkṣita explains that the omission of these svara-s is done deliberately in order to mitigate the dissonance associated with these specific vivādi svara combinations.

Alternatively, in the case of rāga-s with ṣaṭśruti ṛṣabha and ṣaṭśruti dhaivata, he states that these two svara-s may be omitted altogether in the descent. Although this is the rule explicitly stated by him in SSP, when it comes to the rāga Nāṭa, it is seen that ṣaṭśruti ṛṣabha is not omitted in the descent and instead it is antara gāndhāra which is traditionally omitted in the descending phrases in this rāga. The reason behind this is not clear. It is noteworthy that the omission of gāndhāra is subsequently extended to all the rāga-s belonging to the 6th Cakra, where, other than Dēśākṣi which is an older rāga, all the rāga-s seem to have been formulated on the basis of the svarūpa of Nāṭa. This concept of omission of gāndhāra also seems to have been extended to all the rāga-s belonging to the 12th Cakra except Jōti, the 68th rāgāṅga rāga, where (mgs) is the characteristic descending phrase. In all the other rāga-s, either gāndhāra is completely omitted as in the descending phrase (mrs), or occurs in a vakra prayōga as (mrgs).

IV. HAMSADHVANI AND AMṚTAVARṢIṆI: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ṚṢABHA IN LATER RĀGA CLASSIFICATION

The implications of this historical pattern become particularly evident in the classification of two later rāga-s, namely Hamsadhvani and Amṛtavarṣiṇi. According to Subbarāma Dīkṣita in SSP, Hamsadhvani was a creation of Rāmasvāmi Dīkṣita, the father of Muddusvāmi Dīkṣita. Historically, Hamsadhvani is first recorded only in RL-MV and is mentioned as a janya of the 29th rāgāṅga rāga Dhīraśaṅkarābharaṇam. Similarly, Amṛtavarṣiṇi is also first found only in RL-MV. In RL-MV, Amṛtavarṣiṇi is classified as a janya of the 66th rāgāṅga rāga Caturāṅgiṇi. Notably, both these rāga-s omit dhaivata altogether. Additionally, while Hamsadhvani omits madhyama, Amṛtavarṣiṇi omits ṛṣabha. While the rāga which contains ṛṣabha in its scale is classified as a janya of a well-established rāgāṅga rāga like Śaṅkarābharaṇam, the rāga that omits ṛṣabha is classified under a vivādi rāgāṅga rāga like Caturāṅgiṇi, which was created much later. This suggests an underlying classificatory rationale whereby the omission of ṛṣabha in a rāga is viewed as a characteristic of a vivādi rāga, particularly one with ṣaṭśruti ṛṣabha - antara gāndhāra combination of svara-s. If we take Hamsadhvani, the omission of dhaivata would technically result in the rāga simultaneously being suitable to be classified under the 30th rāgāṅga rāga Nāgābharaṇam, which is a vivādi rāga, consisting of the same ṛṣabha - gāndhāra combination as Śaṅkarābharaṇam. However, Hamsadhvani, which consists of ṛṣabha, has been systematically classified under Śaṅkarābharaṇam whereas Amṛtavarṣiṇi, owing to the omission of ṛṣabha, is classified under a vivādi rāga, even though it would also fit under the 65th rāgāṅga rāga Śāntakalyāṇi, which is a similarly well-established rāga like Śaṅkarābharaṇam.

Further, the rāga Manōhari also presents an interesting study in this aspect. This rāga is not found in RL-MV, however SSP mentions this rāga as a janya of the 33rd rāgāṅga rāga Gaṅgātaraṅgiṇi, which again is a vivādi rāga with the ṣaṭśruti ṛṣabha - antara gāndhāra combination of svara-s. This is likely attributable to the omission of ṛṣabha in Manōhari. The scale of Manōhari as seen in SSP is (sgmpns-sndpmgs), with antara gāndhāra, śuddha madhyama, śuddha dhaivata and kākali niṣāda. Manōhari, in the absence of ṛṣabha, would also fit under a well-established rāgāṅga rāga such as Mālavagauḷa. However, as seen in the case of Amṛtavarṣiṇi, the absence of ṛṣabha results in the rāga deliberately being classified under a vivādi rāgāṅga rāga like Gaṅgātaraṅgiṇi. Thus, this rationale appears to be based on an intriguing, unwritten but implied rule and explains the importance of ṛṣabha in determining the status of a rāga, particularly within the 72-mēla classificatory framework.

V. CONCLUSION

The examination of CDP, RL-MV, and SSP suggests that the treatment of ṛṣabha reflects a historically consistent aesthetic rather than an incidental scalar choice. The near absence of rāga-s omitting ṛṣabha in the older repertoire described in CDP indicates that the svara occupied a structurally significant position in the melodic conception of traditional rāga-s. As the rāgāṅga system expanded through the formulation of the 72 mēla-s, particularly with the introduction of newer vivādi rāga-s, the omission of ṛṣabha appears to have acquired a distinct theoretical function. The contrasting classifications of Hamsadhvani and Amṛtavarṣiṇi illustrate that scalar identity alone was not the determining criterion for rāga classification. Instead, the presence or absence of ṛṣabha appears to have influenced the association of a rāga with either an established non-vivādi rāgāṅga or a later formulated vivādi rāgāṅga. This observation suggests that the classificatory logic preserved in SSP reflects deeper historical and aesthetic considerations inherited from the earlier tradition.

The evidence examined in this study suggests that ṛṣabha functioned as more than a scalar degree, serving as an important determinant of rāga identity and historical classification within the tradition represented by CDP, RL-MV, and SSP. The historical treatment of ṛṣabha across CDP, RL-MV, and SSP points to an underlying classificatory principle that merits closer examination within the broader context of rāga evolution. Further investigation of other rāga-s preserved in the older lakṣaṇagrantha tradition may reveal whether this principle extends beyond the examples discussed in this study, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the historical development of rāga classification in the South Indian music system.

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