

SING RĀGA, EMBODY BHĀVA: THE WAY OF BEING RASA

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The rasa theory of Indian aesthetics is concerned with the nature of the genesis of emotions and their corresponding experiences, as well as the condition of being in and experiencing the aesthetic world. According to the Indian aesthetic theory, rasa (“juice” or “essence,” something that is savored, that is tasted) is an embodied aesthetic experienced through an artistic performance. In this thesis, I have investigated how the aesthetics of rasa philosophy account for creative presence and its experiences in Karnatik vocal performances. Beyond the facets of grammar, Karnatik rāga performance signifies a deeper ontological meaning as a way to experience rasa, idiomatically termed as rāga-rasa by South Indian rāga practitioners. A vocal performance of a rāga ideally depends on a singer’s embodied experience of rāga and rāga-bhāva (emotive expression of rāga), as much as it does on his/her theoretical knowledge and skillset of a rāga’s svaras (scale degrees), gamakas (ornamentation), lakṣhaṇās (emblematic phrases), and so on. Reflecting on my own experience of being a Karnatik student and performer for the last two decades, participant observation, interviews, and analysis of Indian aesthetic theory of rasa, I propose a way of understanding that to sing rāga is to embody bhāva opening the space that brings rasa into being. Reflecting on the epistemology of rāga theory, particularly its smaller entities of svaras and gamakas, and through a phenomenological description of the process through which a vocalist embodies rāga (including how a guru transmits this musical embodiment to his shishya [disciple]), I argue that the notion of rāga-rasa itself has agency in determining the nature of svaras and its gamakas in a rāga performance. Additionally, focusing on the relationship between performers and rasikas (drinkers of the juice), this thesis examines

how the embodiment of rāga-bhāva and the experience of rasa open the possibility for musicians and audiences to live rāga-rasa in a performance.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO RASA AND RĀGA-RASA

#### 1.1 Karnatik Music and Rasa

My tryst with music began at the age of four, when I started learning to sing rāgas using *sargam*, the system of solfeges in Karnatik music. Over many years, as I grew into the practice of singing various rāgas through sargams, I unwittingly assumed that rāgas were merely a construction of *svaras* (solfeges of defined scale degrees) and *gamakas* (stylized musical pitches) within a template defined by the Melakarta system.<sup>1</sup> In conventional Karnatik pedagogy, a student/novice begins to sing rāgas using sargams, especially in the initial stages of learning and, incrementally, ornamentations and unique musical features are introduced through compositions and improvisation. Progressively, this school of thought and scheme of learning intrinsically affirmed the notion that singing rāgas was a technique defined only by the use of a theoretical approach to performance. Yet, while I listened to the concerts of my *guru*, T. M. Krishna, not only did each rāga performance exemplify the musical mastering of *svaras* and *gamakas*, they were experiences which resonated deep inner emotions leaving me with a desire to hear more. Under the tutelage of my *guru*, I gradually discovered that learning to sing rāgas (both pre-composed and improvisational pieces) was not just a progression of understanding and perfecting technical precision, and mastering the rāga virtuosity, which is of course necessary, but it was also a process of embodying and internalizing a more profound experiential component deeply connected to a notion of *rasa*.

Rasa is an idea difficult to transmit through language without diminishing the richness of

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<sup>1</sup> Melakarta is a system of organizing rāgas by the pitch content, theorizing them into a framework of 72 “parent” scales. The initial work of mela system can be found in Ramamatya’s (c.1550) text *Svara-Mela-Kalanidhi* which was later revised and standardized by scholars during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

its experiential meaning. In Sanskrit and other various vernacular languages of India, the word *rasa* literally means “juice” or “essence,” a “quality, cognizable through the sense of taste” (Pandey 1959: 20). Etymologically, the word is understood as *rasyate iti rasa*, “that which is tasted or relished is *rasa*” (Pandey 1959; Dehejia 1996). According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. second century BCE to second century CE), an ancient Hindu Sanskrit encyclopedic treatise on the performing arts theorized by Bharata Muni, *rasa* is an aesthetic affect experienced within an artistic performance. Often, it is “a measure of the quality of a piece of art: a play succeeds to the degree that it manifests *rasa*, a painting is good or bad to the extent that *rasa* appears in it (or from it), a film is worthwhile only insofar as it finds and sustains *rasa*” (Mason 2013:1). As the great Kannada and Sanskrit literature scholar D.V. Gundappa (1887-1975) says, *rasa* is an experience that hides behind the clichés of “aha,” “oho,” “ahaahaa,” and “ohoho”<sup>2</sup> (“*rasa yendare - aha yennisabeku, oho yennisabeku, ahaahaa yennisabeku, ohoho yennisabeku*” (Sathyavathi 2010)).<sup>3</sup> This definition further suggests that the experience of *rasa* is something that transcends the boundaries of literal illustrations and can be understood only through experience.

In Indian aesthetic philosophy, the very essence of art is to bring *rasa* into *being*, activating a field of unity underlying the harmony of the human spirit. Creating art means to seek “the inner meaning of life” (Chethimattam 1998:44) in all its diverse vivacity of emotions and sensibilities. *Rasa* is “the soul of art” whose infinite external expressions culminate in *rasa-svāda* (in experiencing *rasa*). Nevertheless, to experience *rasa* is not limited to an immediate pleasure of

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<sup>2</sup> “Aha” and “oho” are commonly used interjections to express goodness or pleasure. For example, “Aha! This cake smells so delicious.” Or “Ahaahaa, this place is a paradise on earth!”

<sup>3</sup> Sanskrit scholar and Musicologist T. S. Sathyavathi quotes in her lecture demonstration of *rasa* theory.

finite forms of art, rather it epitomizes an inner vision of emotions and experiences shared in an artistic performance.

As the “soul of art” in South Indian Karnatik music, *rasa* is realized through a performance of *rāga*, the musical schema or body through which flavor or essence—or *bhāva* (which is translated as an underlying emotion)—is cognized and experienced. Any musical tune or melody classified under the South Indian Karnatik system belongs to a specific *rāga*, a term that defines a comprehensible boundary to the musical possibilities of a certain character (Krishna 2013:53-56). The concept of *rāga* defines a musical boundary for a Karnatik performance of both improvised and pre-composed pieces. From a historical and theoretical music perspective, *rāga* is a melodic template, represented through *ārohana* and *avarohana* (ascending and descending order of solfeges), stylized musical relationships between notes, and distinctive phrases. However, beyond the theoretical comprehensions, *rāga* signifies a deeper ontological meaning as a vehicle for both the musicians and *rasikas* (the drinkers of juice or aficionados of *rāga* performance) to experience *rasa*.

Today, within the Karnatik realm, a performance of *rāga* is often linked and valued for its aesthetic significance, *bhāva*, besides its defining set of musical rules such as ascending and descending order of solfeges, *svaras*, and *gamakas*. Especially, in the popular notion of critics and connoisseurs of South India, a *rāga* rendition is appreciated as a “*bhāva* laden performance.” For example, V. P. Dhananjayan pays tribute to a great musician and composer M. D. Ramanathan (1923-1984) in the 2013 article titled, “*Bhāva Sangeetham*,” which was published in the monthly fine-arts magazine, *Sruti*. The author writes, ““*Bhāva sangeetam*,” or expressive music, is synonymous with M. D. Ramanathan. In this century, I have not heard such *bhāva*-laden Carnatic music as that sung by MDR” (Dhananjayan 2013). *Bhāva*—a special kind of

essence, a flavor, an emotion, a color, an identity of a rāga is comprehended as a significant character of not only a rāga, but also the artist's rāga presentation. For instance, rāga Nīlāmbarī and rāga Śankarābharāṇa comprise a similar set of svaras with a variation in the order of notes for the former which makes them comparable to each other in their sonic structure. But, the bhāva, the emotion inferred by these two rāgas create unique and different musical colors. Therefore, the rāga-bhāvas of these two rāgas are not only different but, they are inherent to the musical identity and manifestation of these rāgas. When a singer successfully embodies this essence in performance, it is referred to as rāga-bhāva.

In everyday usage, bhāva is understood as an emotion (happy, sad, etc.), but within a rāga, it does not point to the expression of a specific socially defined emotion; rather, it is an aesthetic sense of emotional “expression,” which gives each rāga performance the potential to elicit rasa. By learning, practicing, and listening over and over again, singers not only learn to identify but eventually have the ability to embody the unique rāga-bhāva specific to each of these rāgas in their singing. Therefore, ideally, singing rāga with bhāva brings rasa into being, eliciting an affective experience mutually shared by both the performer and rasikas.

## 1.2 Rasa and Nava-Rasa from Indian Aesthetic Theory

In the Nāṭyaśāstra, Bharata classifies rasa into eight primary categories—love, joy, wonder, anger, courage, sadness, fear, and disgust—and discussed the constituent elements for accomplishing them on the stage (particularly for *nāṭya* or theater). According to Bharata's theory, in an artistic performance, rasa is mediated by one of the eight permanent or dominant

psychological states or emotions (*sthāyi bhāvas*) which subsequently leads to the experience of one of the rasas listed in Table 1.1.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1.1: The eight sthāyi bhāvas and corresponding rasas.**

Sthāyi bhāva	Rasa
Rati (desire or love)	Śṛṅgāra (erotic)
Hasa (humor or laughter)	Hāsyā (comic)
Śoka (pity or grief)	Karuṇa (pathos)
Krodha (anger)	Raudra (furious)
Utsāha (energy or vigor)	Vīra (heroic)
Bhaya (fear or shame)	Bhayānaka (fearsome)
Jugupsa (disgust)	Bhībatsa (disgusting)
Vismaya (surprise or wonder)	Adbhūta (wondrous)

The ninth rasa, *śānta* (peace), was added to this classification by the philosopher Abhinavagupta in the tenth century CE, hence the popular name “nava-rasa,” with nava meaning the number nine in Sanskrit. Abhinavagupta’s philosophy of aesthetics is based on his conception of a ninth rasa, *śānta*. He argued that *śānta* rasa is the final or pivotal transcendental rasa in a performance, in which all the other rasas blend and sublimate (see Pandey 1959; Rodríguez 2017). Additionally, succeeding aestheticians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have included distinctive rasas to the list, such as “*bhakti* rasa,” (devotional love), and “*kutuhala* rasa,” (curiosity, a rasa that is added to the list by acclaimed aesthetician and Sanskrit Scholar Dr. Shatavadhani Ganesh from Bengaluru) to name a few. Figure 1.2 represents the nine-rasas enacted in the Indian dance form Bharatanāṭyam.

<sup>4</sup> Adya Rangacharya’s English translation of the text *Nāṭyaśāstra* (1996) and its commentary, “Introduction to Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*” (1996) discuss rasa theory and its significance.



**Figure 1.1: Nava rasas depicted in Bharatanāṭyam, one of the classical dance forms of India. (Each row, left to right): ṣṛṅgāra (erotic), hāsya (comic), bhayānaka (fearsome), vīra (heroic), karuṇa (pathos), adbhūta (wondrous), raudra (furious), bhībatsa (disgusting), śānta (peace). Artist: Hamsa Natraj, Source: Photo by Manoj, Hassan, India.**

However, beyond the taxonomies, the comprehensive notion of rasa itself has an ontological depth to its understanding in Indian classical literature as well as in the practice of Indian art forms. In his book, *The Advaita of Art*, Indian scholar Harsha V. Dehejia explains this notion:

However, there is agreement that, even though the rasa experience may begin with specific emotion, it culminates in a sense of wonder, which transcends all classifications and divisions of emotion. The sense of wonder indicates a unique and unified rasa experience which goes beyond the pleasure and pain of specific emotions. Raghavan in

concluding his discussion on the number of rasas accepts that “all the rasas are but forms of some one of them... rasa is rasa. It is one. It is like the brahman or the sphota. Rasa is fundamentally one and hence it is that Baratha refers to it in the singular number” (Dehejia 1996: 55).

Rasa signifies “tasting” as a mode of being in an artistic world. Corresponding to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied body-subjectivity, rasa represents an embodied musical way of being in the world which transcends both musical and physical realities opening the space of rasa experiences. For that reason, the audience members of a performance are addressed as rasikas, those who taste the performance, who relish the art form. At the flux of performative moments, beyond the virtues of mere listening, watching, understanding, and/or judging a performance, the artistic experience of a rasika ideally epitomizes deeper insights of emotions and intuitions which moves one’s “perceptual consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 30) in an inexplicable way. Therefore, while rāga-bhāva can be understood as an implicit essence to a rāga’s identity, rāga-rasa is the consequential effect of savoring or tasting, which however, only occurs when the musical and emotional aesthetic elements of rāga come together or emerge from the musical flux of a performance.

### 1.3 Issues and Thesis Statement

While the attitudes of aesthetics are predominantly addressed as “bhāva” or “rāga-bhāva,” within the Karnatik music discourse (at least in everyday vernacular practice), the term “rasa” is frequently conflated with the conception of the academically codified system of nine specifically defined emotions (*nava-rasa*) from Indian aesthetic theory.<sup>5</sup> Yet, analogous to what Nuttall writes about rasa in Hindustani tabla playing, “often overlooked by [musicological]

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<sup>5</sup> Nava-rasa is a popular concept especially within the practice of Indian traditional dance formats.



scholars and confused with the process of *bhāva* (emotion) by performers, the concept and application of *rasa* continues to be the dominant aesthetic principle” (2013: 69) in a Karnatik vocal performance today.

In this thesis, I confine my discussion to the vocal-centric understanding of *rāga-bhāva* and *rāga-rasa* within Karnatik performance. Subsequently, to separate the meaning of *bhāva* from its usage within the historical understandings of Bharata and Abhinavagupta’s works (Eleventh century commentator of Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*), where the connotations embody various types of emotions associated with *nāṭya* (theater) or poetry or play, and to specifically refer to *bhāva* within a *rāga* performance, I use the term *rāga-bhāva*. Hence, in this discussion, the term “*rāga-bhāva*” denotes the emotive character of a *rāga* performance, which defines the musical nature of the vocalist and maintains the potential to bring into being an experiential world of *rāga-rasa*. While, the term *rāga-rasa* is not new in the vernacular language of the Karnatik realm, often, no single specific meaning is codified. The term, as I use in this thesis, precisely denotes the aesthetic notion of “*rasa*” within a *rāga* performance.

*Rāga-rasa* itself is not sung, rather it “comes into being” (Cooper 2013: 336) through the interactive musical and emotional elements of a performance asserting a “mutual tuning in” (Schutz 1976: 161) between the vocalist and *rasikas*. Ideally, singing *rāga* through an embodiment of *rāga-bhāva* becomes an opening to what is considered an infinite number of possibilities for experiencing *rāga-rasa* in a performance. For *rāga* practitioners, striving to experience each one of these possibilities becomes the ultimate goal of singing *rāga*, which, philosophically speaking, is never totally achieved; however, its musical pursuit gives each performance an experiential power to *be* *rāga-rasa*.

On the other hand, when certain music practitioners focus chiefly on the theoretical and

technical aspects of a rāga, the performance can eventually diminish or weaken its rāga-bhāva, which is generally discernable in a rasika's experience and also is frequently used as metric to describe the musical character of an artist's rāga presentation. Especially, within the realm of rasikas and critics, rāga-bhāva of a performance becomes an important criterion or metric to endorse an artist's performance. For example, Sangeetha, an ardent rasika of Dallas, Texas, once told me after a resident musician's concert that the artist somehow never was engrossed on bringing bhāva in her performance, thereby making the concert a colorless or inert listening experience (Sangeetha 2017).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, we often find newspaper reviews of concerts emphasizing the bhāva component of performances. For example, G. Swaminathan, a renowned music critic from Chennai recently titled his concert review of an acclaimed young musician, Ramakrishnan Murthy, as "Rich in rāga Bhāva: how Ramakrishnan Murthy combined melody and technique in his recital" (Swaminathan 2017).

While the comprehension and approach of rāga only as a sonic structure of musical technicalities neither diminishes an artist's virtuosity or musicality in general – nor reject the intrinsic possibility of the experience of rasa – it potentially creates a disruption of deeper ontological understandings of rāga and its performance, thus questioning its cohesive and subjective modes of existence. Therefore, in this thesis, I seek to explore rāga-rasa phenomenologically as a musical way of being in the world experienced by both singers and rasikas within the vocal performance of Karnatik rāga. By exploring the connotations of rāga and rasa in Indian aesthetic philosophy and through a phenomenological description of the experience of music training and music making, I propose a way of understanding that to sing rāga is to embody bhāva opening the space that brings rasa into being. Further, the pursuit of

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<sup>6</sup> Collected from a personal interview.

rāga-rasa, something which an artist has been imbued with through methodical pedagogy and practice under a guru's guidance, is in itself the agency for the musical form and essence of rāga to organically grow as a single entity, giving each performance an experiential ability to be transformed to "rāga-rasa."

#### 1.4 Literature Review

The diverse social structure of South Indian society and the complexity of Karnatik music theory (both written and embedded in cultural practices) have engaged the ethnographic and historical scholarship of modern Karnatik music, including debates on colonial modernity and social dynamics of inequality (Weidman 2012; Subramanian 2006), and theoretical or hypothetical analyses of musical elements (Kaufmann 1976; Powers 1956; Viswanathan 1974, 1977; Shankar 1983; Pearson 2017; Tallotte 2017). In these works, scholars have explained the artistic and social dynamics of rāga's structure, improvisation, repertoire, pedagogy, and performance practices. Although these studies significantly contribute to the scholarship of Karnatik music—essentially broadening our epistemological understanding of rāga theory intertwined within a social and cultural network—there is an ontological meaning of rāga, musically experienced, but largely ignored in the literature. By limiting rāga analysis to a social and musicological framework, we not only lose the experiential impact and sensorial responses associated within the rāga performance, but also its symbolic meaning mediated through a particular bhāva (emotion) and the reflexivity of inner organizing principles, an "experience" that, according to tradition, surpasses the consciousness of human behavior. While many scholars (Kauffman 1976; Powers 1956; Viswanathan 1977; Shankar 1983; Pearson 2017; Tallotte 2017), and most performers acknowledge that a rāga performance should not be reduced

only to its theoretical features (musical notes and gamakas forming a rāga's melodic structure), the potential impact of its experiential component of rasa in rāga performance has not been sufficiently explored in both aesthetic and musicological studies of Karnatik rāga.

However, within the performance practice of Karnatik music, it is a tenuous job to study, understand, interpret, elucidate, and assert this deeply ingrained, experiential notion. As researchers, we can learn the musical structures of rāga and its smaller entities of gamakas and *lakshanas* (characteristic phrases); we can analyze rāga-rasa as a product of musical construction of rāga features, by establishing relationships between pitch positions and rāga phrases to one of the nava-rasas (Popley 1966; Tembe 1957). This literature has developed a way to understand rāgas as an apparatus for experiencing specifically one of the nava-rasas. On the other hand, we can also record and examine various musicians' performances of rāga from acoustic perspectives to evaluate the "patterns" deducing its subsequent rasa (one of the nava-rasa) and create rāga schemas (Rao 2000). Scholars have used modern psychology, physiology, and related scientific methods to explain the theoretical nature of the relationship between rāga and rasa, and its discernable impact on human psychology (Ranade 1951; Kelkar 1980; Ranade 1980; Mangrulkar 1980). These analytical methods throw light chiefly on the perspective of psychological "functionality" of rāga-rasa based on notions of "cause and effect." Though these studies significantly contribute to the analysis and evaluation of the notion of rasa in rāga, they do not adequately address the lived experiences of rasa from the perspective of a singer and a rasika. The above methodologies present the "essence" of rāga performance while placing the musical and physical tangible realities at the center of study, subjugating the "quintessence" (of this study) of its lived experiences that perhaps uncover the moments that transcend rāga, making it a musical way a being. What really matters in a rāga performance for a true rasika and an artist is

the effect of rāga personification which surges forth as a consequence of the given sequence of rāga events; it is the rāga-rasa itself, which not only is beyond the theoretical entities of music, but it is essentially embedded in the social and the philosophical underpinnings of the tradition.

## 1.5 Research Design and Methodology

As a student of Karnatik music under various gurus for the last twenty-four years, my experience of rāga-rasa is far from trivial and has been augmented and intensified as my relationship with both my gurus and rāgas have strengthened over time. Hence, this thesis is not purely an investigation of a theory in Karnatik rāgas, but a “phenomenological description” of rāga as a musical way of being. Despite discernable theoretical discrepancies between rasa philosophy (primarily established through dramaturgy in Indian aesthetics) and Karnatik theoretical and musicological understandings, enough connections remain for the persistent student to discover the basis of this original nexus. Hence, through a phenomenological description, “which asserts the phenomenon as irreducible,” (Mason 2013: 49) I will plot the ontological enquiries. Taking inspiration from Murphy Halliburton’s concept of “multi-phenomenology,” this thesis will unpack a phenomenology hidden within the classical traditions of India (Halliburton 2002, 1125). Indian religious and philosophical traditions are “saturated with discussions of self and its many layers: the self and mind, the self and consciousness, the material and the transcendent” (Halliburton 2002: 1126). According to Halliburton, “multi-phenomenology” means identifying such local theoretical explanations of experience and popular everyday ways of experiencing, which are often informed by these traditional theories. Particularly, using the rasa theory of Bharata and Abhinavagupta as a theoretical and

philosophical basis, this study aims to contribute to an ontological understanding of a vocal rāga performance as a way-of-being rasa.

It is difficult to focus only on the experiential and philosophical qualities of a musical genre like Karnatik music, which is highly virtuosic and technical in its nature. Therefore, I will use the structural entities of rāga as a point of departure, engaging in a few case studies of rāga improvisations. Using a dialogic review of the smaller entities of a rāga performance combined with phenomenological description, this thesis will explore how the musical structures and essence of a rāga organically grow as a single entity giving every performance a unique, experiential facet. Accounting for the dynamic variations in gamakas, and the progression of svaras in a rāga performance, I will incorporate transcriptions using both staff notation and the conventional Indian notation system of sargam.

My research methodology includes four important modes of participant observation; however, several of the ethnographic accounts in this thesis incorporates stories from my recollection of being a student of Karnatik music over the last twenty-four years:

1. Personal observations of my physical and musical ways of singing during music lessons with my guru, personal practice sessions, teaching students, as well as in my own performances. This mode of participation is significant, as the expression of embodying rāga-bhāva is seldom, if ever, directly quantified or stated as part of teaching or learning. Thus, through participant observation one can comprehend the approaches of imparting rāga and bhāva through osmosis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I use the word “osmosis” to refer to the *guru- śiṣya* tradition of learning, where learning is a process of transformation of embodied knowledge from *guru* (teacher) to *śiṣya* (student) as a consequence of a unique *guru-śiṣya* relationship through formal lessons, listening, observing, inheriting, and so on.

2. Observing various concert performance practices in order to carefully attend to various subjectivities, such as interactions between performers and rasikas. This mainly includes -firstly, as a *śiṣya* (student), accompanying my guru on tambura for his performances, and secondly, as a rasika, attending various concerts by popular and legendary artists in both India and the United States including performances by Ranjani-Gayatri, Malladi Brothers, Vijaya Siva, Abhishek Raghuram, Jayanthi Kumaresh, and the Mysore Brothers to name a few.

3. Direct interviews with performers, scholars and rasikas. These specific interviews were mainly conducted in 2017 and 2018. Sanskrit and Karnatik music scholars like Dr. Sathavadhani Ganesh, and Dr. T.S. Sathyavathi were the two significant informants who guided me in understanding rasa aesthetics of Karnatik music. Many informal discussions with acclaimed musicians like Dr. Manjunath, R. K. Shriram Kumar and my guru, T. M. Krishna were a great source of information and inspiration for developing this thesis.

4. Informal interviews with up-and-coming and young performers, and rasikas, including two of my *guru-bandhus* (which literally means relatives through guru, that is, other students of my guru), five of my colleagues or co-performers, and ten rasikas both from Dallas, Texas and Bangalore, India. Most of these interviews were informal, yet an extremely important part of my research, which not only revealed the conflation of the terms “bhāva” and “rasa,” but also the numerous connotations associated with a rāga performance.

5. A structural analysis of a rāga rendition.

## 1.6 Organization of the Thesis

In this thesis, I analyze rasa and rāga-rasa along two complementary thematic lanes: (1) a discourse formation and (2) a subject formation. The first will necessitate a discussion of the

classical Sanskrit theory of aesthetics and rasa based on Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and later elaborated by various scholars between the seventh and eleventh centuries CE. Chapter 2 introduces rasa theory of Indian aesthetics and its significance in the discussion of Karnatik rāgas.

Informed by this literature, the second thematic axis discusses the lived experience of rāga-rasa within rāga performance which is tied to a socio-cultural understanding of South Indian Karnatik music. Chapter 3 chiefly discusses the transmission of rāga-bhāva from a guru to a śiṣya, phenomenologically analyzes rāga pedagogy, practice, and performance techniques through its musical structures. Chapter 4 discusses how the embodiment of rāga-bhāva and the experience of rāga-rasa open the possibility for musicians and audience to live rāga-rasa at the performance space.



## CHAPTER 2

### RASA: THE RECIPE AND TASTE OF TRANSCENDENCE IN ART

In this chapter, I unravel the complicated nature and vast scope of the term “rasa” in the historical context of Indian aesthetics and philosophy. My goal is neither to simply summarize rasa theory as propounded by Indian scholars/aestheticians, nor to merely assert its relationship with the modern Karnatik music system. Rather, I engage in reflexive self-awareness, and an epistemologically grounded discussion for understanding the nature of rasa aesthetics in Karnatik music.

#### 2.1 Origin of Rasa

Historically, Indian aesthetics is a part and product of the philosophical discourse of Sanātana Dharma, which has been popularly called Hinduism for the past two hundred years. In the article “Rasa, the Soul of Indian Art,” Indian philosopher and theologian Chethimattam writes, “While Indian philosophy and aesthetics tried to discover unity through abstraction and transcendence, art and ritual tried to attain the same goal through involvement and sublimation” (1972:46). Elucidating the relationship between Indian religion and aesthetics, Susan Schwartz defines rasa as “performing the divine,” and writes:

Indian aesthetics are extremely complex. It is crucial to remember that in this tradition, the distinction between religion and philosophy that has permeated western culture as well as the western academy is not useful. Both religion and philosophy in India take their inspiration and their application from a worldview that combines them. It is more fruitful to state that the goal of the aestheticians, from Bharata muni onwards, has been to facilitate a transformation – of the artists, the audience, and ultimately the world – that may only be understandable from the perspective of religion (2004:3).

Although the oldest literature to theoretically discuss rasa is Bharata Muni’s (c. second century BCE to second century CE) Nāṭyaśāstra, which describes it as the “soul of arts,” rasa is as old as

the Vedas.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, the earliest account of rasa in the history of Indian thought is in the Vedas. The word is used frequently in various segments of the four Vedas.<sup>9</sup> In the discourse of the Vedas, as well as the six philosophical schools of ancient India, several meanings like “sap,” “juice,” “taste,” “delight,” “charm,” “sentiment,” “essence,” and “quintessence” have been attached to the term rasa, defining it through the philosophical traits of savoring and experiencing.<sup>10</sup>

In her book, *Acoustical Perspective on Rāga-Rasa Theory*, Suvarnalata Rao notes that, broadly, the connotation of the word rasa in the Vedic scriptures and Śāstras (treatises) can be viewed at three significant levels: “the physical,” “the psychological,” and “the metaphysical” (2000: 2). In the physical sense, the word denotes “juice” or “essence”; occasionally, it also stands for the physical nature (“liquid”) of a matter/thing. For example, a fruit full of rasa indicates that the fruit is full of juice or essence. In the psychological sense, it implies an emotion, “where the active participation of psyche plays a definite role” (Rao 2000: 2). Informed by both physical and psychological connotations, at the metaphysical level rasa signifies a transcendental reality of an “absolute consciousness” (which is called as the “Brahmānanda” or the Ānanda of the Brahman in Hindu terms).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Vedas are understood as an authoritative enterprise of Indian cosmological and metaphysical thought. Vedic scholars believe that Vedas are deeply embedded in the lives of Indians in forms of socio-cultural practices and applications such as Ayurveda (Indian medical science), philosophy, astrology, nāṭya, music, religious rituals and etc., which are derived from them.

<sup>9</sup> Namely, four Vedas are Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharvaveda, Sāma Veda. Each Veda is constituted of four parts: the Samhita, the Brahmana, the Aranyaka and the Upaniṣad, in which the first two are concerned with the “ceremonial rights and rituals” whereas Aranyakas and Upaniṣads explicitly focus on “philosophy and spirituality.”

<sup>10</sup> The six philosophical schools of ancient India are – Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta (formalized circa 1000 B.C.E.). They comprise an extensive discussion and revelation on the ontology of Brahman-Ātman, Śunyata-Anyatta, reliable substantiation of epistemology and other topics (Perrett 2001).

<sup>11</sup> “Ānanda is one of the most common terms in the religious vocabulary of the Hindu traditions both in Sanskrit and in the vernaculars... The term points to the intense feeling of joy that devotees experience in their loving devotion and service of god, and mystics, in their meditative trance or samadhi. Within Advaita and related traditions, it represents a central and essential “attribute” of Brahman. In many of the Indian religious traditions, moksha, the final goal of human existence, has been defined as Ānanda” (Olivelle 1997: 153). In vernacular terms of arts and

However, such classifications can only act as a tool for understanding the comprehensive meaning of the word *rasa*, because in reality, a single verse from the Veda could be perceived in different ways by different schools of philosophers/gurus. Essentially, the meaning of the word reflects a conflation of physical, psychological, and spiritual/metaphysical notions. For example, in the Rigveda,<sup>12</sup> *rasa* is “soma, sacrificial libation and essence” which has three aspects: “concrete power, form and formlessness” (Fiske 1971: 215). In Chāndogya Upaniṣad of the Sāmaveda, *rasa* is the “essence” that characterizes the *guna* (quality). This also refers to an absolute essence, a transcending form (Fiske 1971: 216). In the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, *rasa* signifies the “essence” of a human’s bodily existence, symbolizing the *jīva*, the life force energy in the verse “*saha esa puruso annarasamaya*” (see Shastri 1903: 154). Though the literal translation of the verse is “a man is said to be made of the essence of food,” Vedic scholars interpret it as a human body “consists in its being (or that it comes from) the *rasa*, a transcendent spiritual essence” (Shastri 1903: 154). On the other hand, in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, *rasa* simply means “taste” or “flavor,” referring to the implied meaning of taste and form of food (Fiske 1971: 215).<sup>13</sup> The most influential mantra in the *rasa* tradition, “*raso vai sah*,” “He is *rasa*,” of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad situates *rasa* as the concept of “eternal Brahman,” which is the highest state of consciousness and/or bliss (*ānanda*) enjoyed by the self.<sup>14</sup> In this mantra, “*raso vai*

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rituals, it simply means an elevated joy or pleasure deeply connected to the meaning of *rasa*.

<sup>12</sup> Namely, four Vedas are Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharvaveda, Sāma Veda.

<sup>13</sup> See Sri Ram, Pandit eds. 2014. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad: Dialogue with Death*. India: Srimatham. [http://www.srimatham.com/uploads/5/5/4/9/5549439/katha\\_Upaniṣad.pdf](http://www.srimatham.com/uploads/5/5/4/9/5549439/katha_Upaniṣad.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> *Raso vai saha* is a prominent Vedic (Taittirīya Upaniṣad) statement which is often quoted by both aestheticians, and religious/spiritual gurus alike. In the mantra, the word ‘*saha*’ is referred to the eternal Brahman, identical with supreme joy (*Ānanda*).

*saha*,” means rasa itself is the Brahman, where the Brahman is not an external phenomenon, but is in the Self (Nagaswamy 2017).<sup>15</sup>

The above instances are not an exhaustive list but a few significant illustrations to recognize that the reference to the word *rasa* in any artistic or aesthetic context reflects multiple layers of its meaning which are “deeply embedded in the history of how that word evolved over time” (Malhotra 2011:220) within the metaphysical discourses of Vedic context.<sup>16</sup> In each of these cases the word suggests and reflects an inherent spiritual and transcendental (*paramārthika*, an otherworldly) meaning intertwined in its sensory and metaphysical nuances that accompany its usage. For this reason, the concept of “taste of *rasa*” in Indian aesthetics, which finds its roots in the spiritual tradition of the Vedas, is not limited to a simple mundane experience of an artistic performance. It represents a deeper ontological meaning, which often blurs the boundary between aesthetic and spiritual paths, frequently overlapping the roles and aims of the philosophers, artists, aestheticians, and mystics (Rodríguez 2017: 53). I am not suggesting that Indic aesthetics are restricted to a certain religious practice or belief. Rather, the tangible identities of Indian arts, their performance practices, and experience represents a form of conjuncture, which embodies and reflects Indic spiritual expressions especially through the notion of *rasa*.

## 2.2 Rasa in Indian Aesthetics

Bharata Muni is one of the oldest documented scholars to discuss *rasa* as an aesthetic

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<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, in religious discourses the mantra is purposed with the intense Bhakti for Krishna, who is entitled as *rasa*.

<sup>16</sup> Malhotra explains how certain Sanskrit words are non-translatable and translation can only lead to outcomes of misrepresentations of traditional understanding. (Malhotra 2011: 220)

model of performing arts in his treatise Nāṭyaśāstra (popularly known as ‘treatise of drama’). Nāṭya and śāstra are two Sanskrit words that are not easily translatable. Roughly, nāṭya’s meaning can be reduced to “dance-theater-music” (Schechner 2004:334), while śāstra signifies a theoretical authentication of a discipline authorized by the religious realm (Katz 1996: 411). Śāstric texts refer to the well-established and debated classical texts of ancient India. The word śāstra is used as a suffix with names of traditional disciplines of music, medicine, astronomy and so on, to signify its authority (mostly in Sanskrit and other languages derived from it). For example, Vedas are addressed as Vaidika śāstra, Ayurveda (Indian Medicine) as Ayurveda śāstra and Music as Sangīta śāstra. In that regard, Nāṭyaśāstra means the śāstra of nāṭya (theory of nāṭya), dance-theater-music. Though Nāṭyaśāstra mainly deals with rasa as a consequence of nāṭya, the treatise is significant in the history of Indian classical traditions as most of the modern art forms hinge on rasa theory for philosophical and metaphysical reasons. Following Bharata, several other philosophers (Ānandavardhana [c. 850], Abhinavagupta [c. 1000], Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka [c.1025] Mammata [c. 1050], Pandita Jagannātha [c. 1700]) have reinterpreted, debated, challenged and commented on the rasa theory of Nāṭyaśāstra (see. Pollock 2016). Therefore, as Rodríguez notes, the term rasa theory is not restricted to Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra. It is, essentially, the classical Sanskrit theory of aesthetic experience initially discussed by Bharata and later expounded as a philosophy of aesthetics by various philosophers and aestheticians of India (Rodríguez 2017: 49).

In his treatise, Bharata delineates that the fundamental goal of the arts is to achieve rasa. However, as Mason says, Bharata’s words are scanty and filled with “ambiguities and paradoxes, providing only a tantalizing suggestion” of what he meant by rasa (Mason 2013: 47). This has eventually led to questions and discussions on the “relevance of rasa in modern times,” (Patankar

1980) the significance and usefulness of rasa understanding for contemporary Indian artists (Rodríguez 2017; Cooper 2013; Schwartz 2004; Nuttall 2013), and also arguments speculating that the notion of rasa has turned into an obsolete or an archaic phenomenon in relation to the modern performance practice. Yet, a comprehensive understanding of the theory reveals that the foundation that Bharata laid to comprehend the work of art is not just as a representation of the “beautiful,” but it is also an existential artistic pursuit for sublimation with its spirit, forming the core of what is called Indian aesthetics today (Pollock 2016: 2).

### 2.3 Aesthetic Object of Rasa

According to Bharata, “Rasa is the cumulative result of *vibhāva* (stimulus), *anubhāva* (involuntary reaction) and *vyabhicārībhāva* (voluntary reaction)” (Rangacharya 1996: 55).

Bharata describes rasa defining its constituting elements within the notion of bhāvas. *Vibhāva*, applied to a theater performance, is the physical environment allowing words, gestures and facial expressions to express a certain emotion. *Anu-bhāva* and *vyabhicārī-bhāva* are the actual physical expressions conveying meaning through words, gestures and facial movements. *Anubhāva* is involuntary action and *vyabhicārībhāva* is voluntary action. For Bharata, in a performance, rasa is ‘triggered’ or ‘initiated’ in the spectator by appropriate combination of a stimulus, and voluntary and involuntary actions and reactions (*vibhāva*, *anubhāva*, and *vyabhicārībhāva*). In Bharata’s definition, the vernacular understanding of bhāvas as temporal “emotions” or “feelings” is intertwined with a category of actions and performances that are fundamentally initiated from those emotions.

Bharata describes,

As it is enjoyably tasted, it is called rasa... Persons who eat prepared food mixed with different taste and then feel pleasure (or satisfaction); likewise, sensitive spectators after

enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through words, gestures and feelings feel pleasure, etc (Rangacharya 1996: 55).

Bharata explains how “sensitive spectators” (*sumanasah prekshakah*) taste the bhāva or emotions which are revealed in a performance of nāṭya and compares this to a gourmet’s tasting of flavors. Similar to a process of cooking using various ingredients, several aesthetic objects come together to transform the performative space into something which presents emotive and affecting flavors or taste of artistry. As Katz notes, here, “the resulting phenomenon is, importantly, more than the mere sum of the ingredients; it is, in the culinary simile, the tasting of the composite totality or full relish, and in the context of the drama it is the aesthetic experience of heightening” (Katz 1996: 415). Similar to a gourmet dish, whose flavors are a result of a precise combination of the right ingredients, rasa experience is “contingent on the right combination of various components” of what Bharata calls bhāvas (Rodríguez 2017: 49). In other words, if bhāva is enacted, it can be understood metaphorically as the flavor of food; rasa is the “heightening” joy that one experiences when the food unites with one’s saliva (Cooper 2013:339). Perhaps, “sensitive spectators” supply their own rasa (juice, saliva) to necessitate the action of tasting the bhāvas. Therefore, the existential meaning of bhāvas within a performance lies in the realization of rasa experience in the sensitive spectator.

#### 2.4 Receiver-Oriented Theory

Post Nāṭyaśāstra, rasa theory was extended to non-dramatic literature such as Sanskrit poetry; subsequently, “from poetry to other arts like music and painting” (Katz 1996, 415). There are two significant notions of rasa that were emphasized by commentators of Nāṭyaśāstra during this period. The first was the theory of “universalization” (*sādhāraṇikaraṇa*) according to which, rasa in a performance is a universalized or de-personalized experience for spectators. In the

aesthetic experience of *rasa*, a spectator's personal psychological mode transcends the mundane consciousness (Rodríguez 2017, 49). This is a process through which a spectator surpassing himself, "loses his sense of ego" (Slawek 1996, 34) to become one with the fellow audience and performers, in surrendering to the aesthetic object of the performance.

The second topic of discussion was the significance of "sensitive spectators," (*sumanasa*, which is not an equivalent of audience, listeners, or spectators) "one who is sensitive enough to get into the condition similar to that of the performance" (Pandey 1965). Subsequently reflecting on Bharata's word "sumanasa," Ānandavardhana (820-890 AD), a prominent philosopher of Indian philosophy and aesthetics, coined the term "*sahrdaya*," which translates to "a kind-hearted person."<sup>17</sup> As Sundararajan and Raina writes, the term *sahrdaya* literally means "similar/identical heart," in which the "outpouring of the poet's [artist's] heart finds its goal and fulfillment"(2016: 791). The prefix 'sa' in *sahrdaya* suggests *samāna* or equal, while "*hrdaya* is an epithet which stands for a vibrating and responsive heart" (Sundararajan and Raina 2016: 791). The usage of the terms "sumanasa" and "sahrdaya" is important, as it assigns a kind of responsibility to the spectator. The expression of "sensitivity" defines a prerequisite character for spectators to immerse themselves in aesthetic experience through universalization. In an interview, Sanskrit scholar and musicologist Dr. T. S. Sathyavathy mentions that, "all of us have the ability to taste, but only epicureans can acknowledge and relish it."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in arts, relishing is a value attributed to the character of a sensitive spectator, which assigns a collective significance and meaning to the object of relish. Therefore, a sensitive spectator becomes a

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<sup>17</sup> I quote both the terms, "sumanasa" and "sahrdaya" as these two words are often used as synonyms, and they embody a notion of sensitivity of an aficionado, within the modern usage amongst Indian scholars and researchers.

<sup>18</sup> Translation of Dr. T. S. Sathyavathi's (Literary scholar and Musicologist, Bengaluru) words in Kannada, from a discussion with the author, November 2017.



significant part of the proceedings of the artistic performance; his/her dispositions of artistic involvement, relish(ment) and bodily reactions are significant in the process of the creation of art.

Expanding on these two themes, Abhinavagupta's commentary text on *Nāṭyaśāstra*, "Abhinava Bhārathi," shifts the attention of rasa theory from the constituents of bhāvas to the process of "aesthetic response," and "characterizes it as a receiver-oriented theory" (Rodríguez 2017: 52). According to Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience is possible because of the sensitivity of the spectator. He emphasizes the "subject" that perceives and experiences rasa in the performed emotions through a sensory mode of attention (Rodríguez 2017: 52). Discussing Abhinavagupta's theory, Katz notes that the rasa model signifies that "the material received by a spectator [from a work of art] is perceived to relate to one or more parts of that person's already existing psychic make-up, conditioned as this is by the conventions of his particular cultural training" (1996:409). He suggests that the experience of rasa is a result of a "particular cultural way of "hearing," whom Abhinavagupta calls a sahr̥daya; it is not just 'to hear', but to 'hear as'," and the assumption is that "whatever may be the personal individuality of response, 'hearing as' depends on a tempering of the innate capacity by assumed common experience within a contemporary listening culture" (1996:409). Though this model appears to ignore the culturally non-trained spectators, it augments the point that rasa experience has both a discrete personal facet as well as a shared value in a performance. Consequently, rasa experience has roots in a "subjective" individually acquired capacity to respond to aesthetic stimuli, yet, it is a collective "objective" experience, where "aesthetic experience is bound up in a process of universalizing meaning, freeing it from the space and time of the vehicle that carries it" (Slawek 1996: 34).

## 2.5 Rasa: A Unity of Subject-Object

As Schechner writes, “rasic” performance has its goal in extending pleasure through an always deferred pursuit “‘almost’ like sexual orgasm” that stems into an aesthetic experience which is direct and immediate, bypassing the cognizant understanding and contemplation of the necessary processes to achieve it (2003:339).<sup>19</sup> There is an essential front of rasic performance, which communicates and caters to the audience in a particular way. Slawek describes this as “the power of the aesthetic expression to evoke associations with past experiences” of an observer (1996:34). In other words, the significance of art creation is not limited to its pre-defined and finite aesthetic structures in a performance. Rather, it aims to bring rasa into being through creating a uniquely interactive shared space between the artists and the connoisseurs. A pivotal point to note here is that the conventions of interactive elements are not merely a part of a performance/presentation, but also make up the fundamental nature of rasic art itself. For example, in these art forms the final plateau is not delimited; rather, the training and performance relies a great deal on developing an understanding of intrinsic elements, processes and external identities of expressions of the art form as a perpetual way of living (Cooper 2013 :344).<sup>20</sup> As a result, performance doesn’t reflect a fixture of artistic symbols; it is a pursuit through communicative and shared artistic symbols, which “tune in” the audience and the performers into the rasic space.

To explain the nature of rasic performance, Katz uses Kendall L. Walton’s analogy of experiencing humor and music. Katz writes that,

Whatever our investigations of a musical piece may tell us about its structural nature, the crucial moment in understanding why it ‘works’ is an introspective act of recognition or

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<sup>19</sup>“Rasic” is a term coined by Schechner to signify a rasa-oriented performance.

<sup>20</sup> Cooper notes that the training of such art forms include initiative, self-reflection, and individual search through the art.

acknowledgement of what is that sparks our reaction to it; achieving this is like ‘getting’ a joke, and takes us a crucial step beyond acquiring information about what features are part of the content of one’s experience (Katz 1996: 409).

Walton’s model not only proposes an attractive framework to understand the interaction between the artwork and “an already present innate capacity in a listener” (as proposed by Katz 1996), but it also directs us towards a more profound understanding of the nature of the art work itself as well as of *rasa* experience. This analogy makes a clear differentiation between joke as an object of understanding or comprehension and its characteristic stimuli which sparks the impulsive reaction. Here, a reaction, which makes a joke worthwhile, is a consequence of consolidation of several factors including the nature of the joke, the nature of its delivery, and its listeners’ comprehension as well as their desire to appreciate/relish the joke, which is “beyond the mere structural content of the joke.” Similarly, in *rasik* performance, there is a thin line between understanding and appreciating the structural nuances of the plot/music/nāṭya and transcending into the performance in its aesthetic experience, which Cooper calls as being “pulled into” the performance space. Though the former is a significant quality of a spectator, the latter phenomenon depicts *rasa* experience in a performance. Consequently, *rasa* represents a potential aesthetic “threshold” of a performance space, where both the performers and spectators transform themselves (see Hiriyanna 1997); this transformation is accomplished by the “pleasure experienced in the generating and apprehension of *rasa* and is said to begin with the transcendence of the ego” (Cooper 2013: 341).

This experience of *rasa* is explained as *alaukika* (otherworldly) by Abhinavagupta; it is a “transformative *sui generis* experience of aesthetic object,” that falls beyond the boundaries of mundane experiences (Subramani 2006: 70). Abhinava’s *rasa* philosophy also compares the *alaukika* experience to the “detached,” “non-worldly,” “extra-worldly,” and “transcendental” joy

of a spiritual yogi. For Abhinavagupta, both the ecstasy of rasa in art (*rasānanda*) and the enlightened spiritual experiences (*brahmānanda*) “share similar aims and reach out to transcendence, but they differ in terms of purpose and the notion of time” (Rodríguez 2017: 52).

As Rodríguez writes,

The yogic individual searches for an ultimate union with the Absolute Truth. Similar to mystical experience, the aesthetic experience is not an ordinary mundane worldly (*laukika*) experience, but it originates from the realities of the *laukika* world and searches for a sublimation in the artistic ecstasy (2017: 52).

Rasa is a “quasi-mystical experience,” (Subramani 2006: 71) which is neither purely an otherworldly notion, nor a worldly feeling. Rather, as Sanskrit scholar Shatavadhani Dr. Ganesh says, “the non-worldly (yoga) gets unified within the worldly (bhoga)” in *rasānanda*;<sup>21</sup> rasa defines a realm where both “yoga” and “bhoga” merges (Ganesh 2018). Therefore, rasa is *rasānanda*, a trans-mundane experience in art, and it is *brahmānanda*, an otherworldly plateau in the Vedic or Yogic context.<sup>22</sup> Indic Scholars have also described *rasānanda* in art as “*brahmānanda sahodara*,” where *sahodara* in Sanskrit stands for “brother,” or something that shares the same origin or womb (*udara*).

From the discussion of rasa in the Vedas and from Bharata and Abhinavagupta’s models, we understand that, unlike various worldly experiences that have definite reasoning of cause and effect, rasa experience “cannot be said to have a definite means of cognition” (Subramani 2006: 76). Scholars also reiterate the fact that the rasa experience is “un-produced,” (Subramani 2006: 76) and it “comes into being” within events of the performance (Mason 2013; Cooper 2013). Yet, rasa is an existential reality when seized within the time and space of its experience/relish in

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<sup>21</sup> He says, *rasānanda* is neither defined through “yoga” (unification with the Absolute) nor a worldly event of “bhoga,” (a worldly experience) but it defines a realm where both “yoga” and “bhoga” merges.

<sup>22</sup> Translation of interview in Kannada language with Dr. Ganesh (Sanskrit scholar and aesthetician, Bengaluru), February 2018.

a performance (Kulkarni 1986; Mason 2013). Cooper (2013:340) quotes T.S. Nandi's words, "Where is the relish in the mere inference of worldly feeling? The relish of *rasa* is in its essence a state of unique and wonderful enjoyment (*camatkara*). It is radically different from memory, inference, and worldly (sensation of) pleasure" (Nandi 1986). The notion of *rasa* which is free from cause and effect as well as various modes of cognition, embraces the whole of aesthetic process, from the inception in the performer's mind to its culmination in the final experience by the aesthete. The word refers both to what is "artistic"—the soul of the aesthetic object—and to the experience of the artistic object expressed by the term "aesthetic" (Subramani 2006: 34). It is neither solely artistic nor just aesthetic but represents a phenomenon which encompasses both and so becomes an untranslatable expression (Thampi 1966). Reflecting on Thampi and Subramani's discussions, *rasa* is not limited to the "subject" or the "object" in a performance but surpasses the subject-object dichotomy. *Rasa* represents the entirety of an aesthetic object and individual subjective sensitivity within the shared "aesthetic" space of experiences and, hence, identifies as a representation of a "unity of both subject/object," (Subramani 2006: 35) in a performance.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Beyond the popular theory of understanding *rasa* as evolving within the confluence of various *bhāvas* (also known as *rasa* formula) in a performance, two significant points to note from the *rasa* philosophy of Indian aesthetics are: Firstly, as Subramani writes, Indian aestheticians

deal with aesthetic experience not only from the point of view of artist's creative subjectivity and art object, but also from the connoisseur's relishing subjectivity. They recognize the inter-connected processes of creativity and "relish-ability" and reflect on

their intrinsic and inextricable relationship. They argue that not only the creative artist but also the connoisseur creates the art object in the mind while perceiving it (2006:36).

Secondly, rasa is an “in-between,” “trans-mundane” experience. The dichotomies between subject-object, performers-spectators, and worldly-otherworldly significantly exists in mundane, every-day experiences; but rasa annihilates this separation and opens a world of “union” in art. Thus, as the Abhinavagupta suggests, rasa needs to be understood as alaukika, “that which grants a unique mode of perception” (Subramani 2006).

Likewise, rasa in Karnatik music is not limited to a particular meaning of the physical state of a thing, neither to a personal psychological feeling (like happy or sad etc.), or a transcendental reality, rather, it resonates “alaukika,” the very nature of existence of rāga from which all others flow. Rasa, which undeniably echoes an inseparable essence, an aesthetic musical sense of bhāva, embodies the entirety of this multifaceted nature which within a shared space of rāga moment creates a soundscape that gives every performance the power to bring rāga-rasa into being. The next two chapters will explore the notion of rāga-rasa in a Karnatik performance.

## CHAPTER 3

### RĀGA-RASA: THE QUEST OF TASTING RĀGA

*Indian music is essentially impersonal; it reflects an emotion and an experience which are deeper and wider and older than the emotion or wisdom of any single individual. Its sorrow is without tears, its joy without exultation, and it is passionate without any loss of serenity. It is in the deepest sense of the words all-human.*

-- Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (2011)

*The profoundly learned in rāga, even Matanga and his followers, have not crossed the ocean of rāga; how then may one of little understanding swim across?*

-- Nanyadeva (Rowell 1992)

During one late-night practice session, I was struggling to sing an *ālāpana* (unmetered improvisation) in Bhairavi rāga, even after a persistent effort for more than two hours. I was frustrated for the fact that Bhairavi is a rāga that I had practiced countless times, performed on numerous occasions, and was a personal favorite that was often on loop in my playlist. Yet, that night, I was disappointed with my improvisation, as I was searching for something more profound than what I already knew in Bhairavi. I was striving to look deeper into the rāga. After a couple hours of singing, I decided to get some inspiration by listening to one of my favorite artists, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer's (1908–2003, here after SSI) Bhairavi rendition.

This was a recording of a *rāgam-tānam-pallavi*<sup>23</sup> (in Bhairavi) from a concert in 1988 in Chennai.<sup>24</sup> Despite his age, which noticeably affected his voice, the grandeur, firm, and what Karnatik musicians call “heavy” phrases struck me with a sense of fullness from the first moment

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<sup>23</sup> This is a type of composition, which is mainly comprised of various forms of improvisation and generally sung as a main piece in a concert. RāgamTānamPallavi, as the name suggests, includes improvisation formats of rāga-ālāpana, tānam and svaras (see Wade 1999: 201-204).

<sup>24</sup> The recording can be found in the following link - YouTube. 2018.

“Semmangudi Srinivas Iyer (7) – Rāgam, Thanam, Pallavi – Bhairavi.” Last Modified Feb 5, 2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZHVSP4ky2>.

of his rendition.<sup>25</sup> A few minutes into the *ālāpana*, as he started traversing through the three octaves of the *rāga* with a combination of “*brugās*” (emblematic fast phrases) and slow phrases, a sensation of *Bhairavi* that exceeded theoretical concepts filled the air reflecting a majestic nature that bought out an emotional response in me: a kind of inexplicable feeling.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 3.1: Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer performing in the late 1980s. Source: Sruti Magazine, May 30, 2012.**

Though my intention was merely to listen for new possibilities of phrasing or musical ideas to adapt in my own singing, SSI’s voice and his prevailing rendition echoed an underlying personification of *Bhairavi*, beyond the mere traditional introduction of discrete phrases/structures. What really made this performance so impactful, even while he was struggling with his age-related voice issues, was his embodied sensibility accomplished through years of musical engagement and experience. As one of my music colleagues Pramod once

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<sup>25</sup> In a figurative sense, words like “*gambhira*,” (which means deep or thoughtful or majestic), “*śudha*” (which means pure) are used to describe a traditionally bound Karnatik performance and colloquially, “heavy” is used as a translation of these figurative words in English.

<sup>26</sup> Historically, *Bhairavi* has been known as a majestic or a royal *rāga* because of its characteristic *gamakas*.



mentioned, a single svara of Bhairavi in SSI's voice is enough to bring the splendor and totality of rāga into the world. To be precise, not every rendition of Bhairavi, perhaps by a novice student or even by an experienced artist could bring out the same affect. In this performance, there was something special, the phenomenon of Bhairavi rāga itself, that which reflected the musicality saturated with experience, emotion and stimulating bhāva for which the legendary artist has toiled for years. Therefore, these are some of the most cherished moments that both performers and rasikas long for, in every rāga performance.

Karnatik musicians believe that each rāga is like an endless ocean in itself. As musicians often reiterate, throughout one's musical journey, every artist is a *vidhyārthi* (one who is in the pursuit of knowledge), with an endless quest to experience the cosmic vibrations within. Each one can only succeed to explore a rāga to the limits of his/her ability.<sup>27</sup> For example, during a conversation with my guru T. M. Krishna about SSI's music, he shared an anecdote on how SSI started his music career at a very young age singing rāgas like Kalyāṇi and Bhairavi, yet, when he was in his late eighties, and early nineties, his passion to dwell for a more deeper and profound imprint of these rāgas was evident in every musical endeavor (concerts or other musical sessions) and also in his daily life.

Karnatik musicians do not confine the symbolic significance of rāgas to one of the nava-rasas, at least in the modern concert realm. Therefore, unlike in nāṭya (as defined by Bharata), rasa in rāga is not a prescribed recipe that can transform an artistic episode into a specific rasa experience.<sup>28</sup> Largely grounded on an artist's years of practice and musical endeavors, bodily

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<sup>27</sup> Lalgudi Jayaraman, a legendary violinist mentioned this while teaching a rāga, when I was learning from him in 2007.

<sup>28</sup> I say this because in Bharanatyam, nava-rasas and their respective bhāvas are instructed with prescriptions of body movements and facial expressions.

sedimented musical knowledge, and embodied rāga-rasa experiences, rasa manifests as a “pregnant possibility” (Mason 2013) of rāga effect, symbolically giving meaning to a rāga performance. Hence, rasa in Karnatik music is “more powerful as an embodied set of ideas and practices” than as a transcribed formula or theory (Schechner 2013: 335).<sup>29</sup> Rāga-rasa is experienced, practiced, and lived through the musical ways of being in formal learning settings with one’s guru, as well as in one’s own personal musical expedition (which mainly includes self-reflection through rāgas), rather than being theorized as a codified set of rāga expressions for every rasa, as practiced in classical dance forms of India (especially in the preliminary stages).

In this chapter, I explore pedagogical approaches, practice techniques, and artistic experiences, to suggest that singing rāga through an embodiment of rāga-bhāva opens a way to bring rāga-rasa into being. Reflecting on the epistemology of rāga theory, particularly its smaller entities of svaras and gamakas, I will discuss how the underlying notions of rāga-bhāva and experiences of rāga-rasa, reverberated within the traditional methods of pedagogy and practice, are in themselves a mediation in symbolically giving rāga performance a power to bring rasa into being. Engaging with gamaka analysis and scholarship on musical embodiment in Indian classical music (Weidman 2012; Nuttall 2013; Rahaim 2012), I argue that rāga-rasa itself has agency in determining the nature of smaller entities in a rāga performance. Phenomenologically speaking, just as describing a fruit’s chemical formula never reveals its real taste, an exclusive discussion of the theoretical concepts of rāga will not disclose its complete nature (particularly their lived experiences). However, this does not minimize the pragmatic importance of Karnatik music theory as an undeniable part of a musician’s everyday artistic practice. Through a

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Schechner (2013) notes that the theory of Nāṭyaśāstra is much more powerful as an embodied set of ideas and practices than as a written text.

“dialogic process” (Tallotte 2017) between phenomenological description and a case study of an ālāpāna performance, this chapter will explore how the musical form and essence of rāga organically grow as a single entity giving each performance an experiential power to be “rāga-rasa.”

### 3.1 Introduction to Rāga and Its Smaller Entities

Svaras are the smaller entities of expression within a rāga that come together to form its musical structure. They are not equivalent to the Western concept of a “note” chiefly because of the significance of gamakas, commonly referred to as ornamentations. Gamaka is a comprehensive term used to identify different types of subtle tonal oscillations of svāra; generally defined as an ornamentation or an embellishment of a svāra. The term “ornament” implies extravagant and non-essential embellishments, minimizing the role of gamaka in a svāra to simply a matter of technical style (see Krishna 2013; Powers 1960). Rather than the decoration, gamaka performs a fundamental structural function in rāgas. As T. Viswanathan, a well-known Karnatik musician and musicologist says, “a svāra is properly defined only after taking consideration of the gamakas associated with it” (1974: 1). More than an embellishment, gamaka gives a rāga its character; it is an acoustic emblem imprinted on each svāra and through this relational process, the Karnatik feature of a rāga is personified. In other words, as Rangaramanuja Ayyangar (1901-1980), a revered musicologist and a music historian of South India writes, “when a gamaka clothes the *svārasthāna* [pitch position of svāra– this would then be the equivalent of the scale degree], it crafts a standalone artifact of a unique character, which contributes to the personality of the larger experiential entity, which is the rāga” (1972:148). Hence, a svāra is an integrated entity combining *svārasthāna* (scale degree) and gamaka (melodic

movement). For example, in Bhairavi rāga the svarasthāna scale degrees are shown in Example 3.1.

**Example 3.1: Bhairavi Rāga notation.**

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the Bhairavi Rāga. The first staff is an ascending scale with notes Sa, Ga, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Da, Ni, and Śa. The second staff is a descending scale with notes Śa, Ni, Da, Pa, Ma, Ga, Ri, and Sa. Each note is represented by a quarter note on a five-line staff with a treble clef. The Svara names are written below each note.

When these svarasthānas (scale degrees/pitches) are sung, a set of ascending and descending ordered notes are formed. But, the rāga is brought into being only when each tone is articulated with its precise pitch dispositions, subtle melodic movements, and the relationships with its neighboring notes as shown in Example 3.2.

**Example 3.2: Bhairavi Rāga.**

Furthermore, rāgas define a specific order of svara progression. As in the above example, in every phrase involving an ascending flow from sa, “ga” must come after “sa” (tonic) before singing “ri,” though ri is the second svara in the order of sargam (sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni). Here, I am reminded of ethnomusicologist Harold Power’s words, “a rāga is more specific than a scale, for any number of rāgas can share a single collection of pitches. Yet a rāga is less specific than a

tune, for any number of tunes can share the same rāgas” (1984: 328). Though musicians comprehend a musical phrase as a formation of svaras (the skillset to identify svaras of a tune is called *svara-jñāna*), in reality, it essentially depends on the structure of gamakas, which has an essential role in creating a musical character of svara and rāga. That is because, a single note in a rāga can have different gamaka structures depending on its previous and subsequent notes; I will discuss this in detail at the end of this chapter.

In Example 3.2, besides the svaras which define specific gamakas (ga, ma, ni), the svaras sa, ri, pa, da and sa (of the next octave) are represented without any gamaka. In Karnatik theory, sa and pa are called as *prakṛiti* svaras, (natural svaras), which are collectively acknowledged as not being entitled to any gamaka. Yet, in an accomplished artist’s rendition of a composition or rāga improvisation, these svaras are subjected to subtle sonic movements within the flow of rāga. For example, a long note of *tārasthāyi* (upper octave) sa in Bhairavi is often dropped or released at the finishing front (which can be visually compared to the right half of a negative parabola slope). Similarly, svara pa takes subtle sonic shapes depending upon its previous and next svara and their specific gamakas. In pedagogical discussions, they are not often referred to as gamakas and these subtle sonic movements are verbalized far rarely than practiced. However, they are essential, discernable, and recurring patterns in a proficient singer’s rāga. Therefore, any definition of rāga excluding knowledge gained through practice and experience can only represent a limited segment within rāga (Viswanathan and Cormack 1998: 219).

Consequently, various scholars (and practicing musicians) have explored rāga using an analogy of language and its practice. Accordingly, a simple musical formation of a set of svaras and gamakas acts as a musical language of expression (Slawek 1998; Bhagyalekshmy 1990) for accomplished artists. Like a storyteller or a fiction writer, who uses words to artistically express

or articulate his/her imaginative world, a Karnatik musician learns and masters the language of rāga to craft an imaginary (in the form of *ālāpana*, *swaraprastara*, *neraval*, *rāgam-tanam-pallavi*) world of rāgas. Just as language opens a way of thinking, each rāga unlocks a musical world of rationale and creativity. Consequently, similar to learning a language, rāga is assimilated through bodily interactions, listening, observing, learning, practicing, and, most importantly, feeling and expressing within an extended osmotic process between guru and śiṣya. Here, I use the word “osmosis” to refer to the guru-śiṣya tradition of learning, where learning is a process of transformation of embodied knowledge from guru (teacher) to śiṣya (student) as a consequence of a unique relationship through formal lessons, listening, observing, inheriting and so on.

### 3.2 Rāga in Theory and Practice

Since the time of Venkatamkhin (seventeenth century), Karnatik musicological work has tended to concentrate on the rules of sequencing svaras (see Kauffman 1976; Powers 1960). His treatise *Chaturdanḍi Prakāshika* (CE 1650) is the foundational work for today’s Melakartha system (here after MS) and hence occupies an important ground in the history of Karnatik music theory.<sup>30</sup> However, rāgas, epistemologically and ontologically, reflect connotations beyond the rules of sequencing pitch content or svaras. They represent not only an innate musical “essence,” but, also an epistemology of aesthetics practiced within the traditional *guru-parampara*.<sup>31</sup>

In the MS, the twelve svarasthānas (what Western musicians would generally understand

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<sup>30</sup> See Kauffman for Melakartha system and rāga discussions.

<sup>31</sup> Parampara means “tradition” in Sanskrit.

as twelve semi-tones)<sup>32</sup> of the octave are combined to form seventy-two “possible known and unknown full scales,” parent rāgas, known as *mela-rāgas* or *janaka-rāgas*.<sup>33</sup> The parent scales have seven svaras ascending and descending without deviation (i.e., crooked movement). The remaining rāgas which have been passed down traditionally and do not comprise all the seven svaras were classified as their derivatives, also known as *janya-rāgas* (see. V. Raghavan 1951, 1-4; Subramanian 1999, 135; Krishna 2013; Bhagyalekshmi 1990; Kauffman 1991).<sup>34</sup> Therefore, MS theorized Karnatik music by assembling both traditional and newly formed rāgas into a framework of seventy-two full scales and derivative rāgas based on their pitch content (see Bhagyalekshmi 1990).<sup>35</sup> Consequently, many of the newly added mela rāgas are synthetically formulated in the processes of assembling different combinations of twelve svarasthānas.

As T. M. Krishna says,

Many of the so-called janaka rāgas were only artificial combinations of the seven svarasthānas, yet they were considered to have given birth to rāgas that had existed for over 300 years. Therefore, natural, older rāgas now considered to have been derived from a rāga, which was a product of the manipulation of a set of seven svarasthānas. This was a complete inversion of rāga evolution. Unfortunately, this thought did not remain confined to theory but also had a profound influence on musicians, thereby seriously disconnecting rāga from music, choosing instead to stay wedded to theory (2013:345).

As Melakarta rāgas were mainly defined through the pitch content excluding both the gamaka movements and its comprehensive aesthetics of rāga-bhāva, the Melakarta system perhaps devalued the notion of bhāva which was understood as significant character of a rāga within the system of guru-parampara.

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<sup>32</sup> However, these twelve notes have variants like ri1, ri2, ga1, ga2, and so on, which makes it different from the concept of 12 semi-tones in Western music.

<sup>33</sup> The word “Janaka” means “father” in Sanskrit.

<sup>34</sup> “Janya” means “to be born from;” janya rāgas are understood as to have been born from one of the janaka rāgas.

<sup>35</sup> The term rāga appears for the first time in Matanga’s Brihaddeshi (fifth to ninth century C. E.) (Jairazbhoy 1995: 16). The melodic system was discussed as *jātis* before the term rāga was introduced (see Krishna 2013).

The ambiguities of MS have been a crucial topic of discussion for traditional musicians (especially through the late 20th century), as it is also significant in recognizing the possible influences of musicological approaches to rāga singing. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, a popular Karnatik musician said that his guru was insistent on practicing “rakti” rāgas, as “the rakti rāgas were supposed to be more classical and aesthetic, provided a better listening experience to the connoisseur” (Subrahmanyam 2009).<sup>36</sup> He also opines that rakti rāgas were based on melodies, while rāgas in MS are based on scales and so, “there was always the dismissal of the scale [based] rāgas as being a mere collection of notes that lacked any innate aesthetics and that rāga elaborations invariably descended to an intellectual exercise of playing on the notes” (Subrahmanyam 2009). For example, singing a rāga such as Toḍi, which is traditionally a rakti rāga (the seventh rāga in MS), has its own aesthetic specificity attached, while singing a rāga like Vishwambari (the 54<sup>th</sup> rāga in MS) is fundamentally mediated through pitch content or its svarasthāna, as the rāga does not have any reference for its *sanchāras* or musical phrases.

On the other hand, MS also creates perplexity in the understanding of janaka and janya relationship between rāgas. The following example explains a janaka-janya relationship between a mela-rāga Toḍi (eighth rāga in MS) and a janya rāga Bhūpalam. The scale of Toḍi (with its gamakas) and Bhūpalam are shown in Example 3.3 and 3.4 respectively. As seen in the examples, the derivative rāga (Bhūpalam) typically entails svaras from the janaka scale (Toḍi) but omits a few svaras. But for “ma” and “ni,” Bhūpalam shares notes with Toḍi, making it a pentatonic scale. However, the difference between the two rāgas is not limited to the missing notes of Bhūpalam; it primarily lies in the way each svara moves with gamakas (particularly

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<sup>36</sup> Within the Karnatik realm, rāgas which are entitled to a greater number of gamaka regimes and aesthetic specificity are called rakti rāgas. I.e. Toḍi, Bhairavi, Begada and so on.



svaras “ri,” “ga,” and “dha” in both the rāgas) and their overall rāga-bhāva.

**Example 3.3: ārohana and avarohana, ascending and descending svaras of Toḍi.**

Sa      Ri      Ga      Ma Pa      Da      Ni      Śa

Śa      Ni      Da Pa Ma      Ga      Ri Sa

**Example 3.4: ārohana and avarohana of Bhūpalam.**

Sa      Ri      Ga      Pa      Da      Śa

Śa      Da      Pa      Ga      Ri      Sa

Generally, Toḍi is considered a “heavy rāga,” and, in practice, it is elaborately excavated through intricate imprints on each svara. While Bhūpalam is typically understood as an intense penetrating rāga, reflecting an ambience of mantras chanted during rituals (see. Bhagyalekshmy 1999). In practice, the penetrating effect is brought out through emphasizing “ri,” engaging in a comparatively a smaller number of gamakas. Therefore, approaching these two rāgas only through a theoretical understanding of pitch content tailored within the janaka-janya relationship creates a perplexity in their musical manifestations, bhāva comportment, and their holistic experience.

Therefore, for traditional musicians, various rakti rāgas like Śankarābharāṇa (29<sup>th</sup> rāga in MS), Kalyāṇi rāga (65<sup>th</sup> rāga in MS), Dhanyasi (a derivative of 20<sup>th</sup> rāga Natabhairavi) are not limited to the characterized framework as defined in the MS; rather, the MS and theory of janaka-janya are merely supplementary information to the rāga knowledge acquired through an extended training under the guru.

Additionally, in recent practice, some artists create their own rāgas spontaneously during public performances. For example, Dr. Mysore Manjunath, a Karnatik violinist, created a new rāga based on the notes (pitch positions) suggested by the students (as shown in Example 3.5) during his guest lecture at the University of North Texas.<sup>37</sup>

**Example 3.5: Notes (pitch positions) suggested by the students to create a rāga.<sup>38</sup>**



The question here would be as to how one could bring a bhāva to such spontaneous rāga formations. Unlike in traditional rāgas, the bhāva in spontaneous creations is neither specific nor epistemically restricted. But the artist wields the freedom to bring their own bhāva to their rāga. However, one cannot deny that such spontaneous compositions are influenced by the other rakti rāgas and prevalent rāgas that are traditionally practiced. For example, in Dr. Manjunath’s creation, the first half of the rāga is closer to rāga Śudhasarang of the Hindustani system with constantly emphasizing Ri-1, Ma-1 and Ma-2 while the other half is based on Naṭa-bhairavi (without the svara pa). Therefore, in addition to the virtuosity and creativity to adapt to a new set

<sup>37</sup> This was a guest lecture for “Music Cultures of The World” (MUET 3030) class at the University of North Texas, on 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Indian musicians generally use numbering 1, 2, and 3, to represent different positions of svara. For example, two positions of ri and two positions of ma are represented as ri1, ri2, ma1 and ma2.

of svaras or pitch content, the skill to spontaneously create a new rāga exemplifies the embodied bhāva comportment (acquired through a rigorous training of traditional rāgas under a guru) of the creator. Though many traditional musicians describe such performances as an intellectual exercise of joining svaras (describing it as a “light” performance), the musical creation is not only a logical process of weaving a set of notes together through improvisation skills. As the rāga itself intrinsically does not define its bhāva comportment (like in the case of rakti rāgas), it is often an undesirable circumstance for many traditional musicians. However, it is evident that Dr. Manjunath could create a new rāga so powerfully, saturated with his own bhāva because of his extensive bodily training of rakti rāgas and their bhāva comportments.

This theory holds for singers choosing non-rakti rāgas (synthetically formed rāgas) from the MS. For example, while singing rāgas like Hemavati (58<sup>th</sup> rāga in MS) or Dharmavati (59<sup>th</sup> rāga in MS), the only way to show the distinction between the rāgas is through repeatedly singing phrases around the svara ni (as the only difference between the two rāgas is the pitch content of ni, as seen in Example 3.6).<sup>39</sup>

**Example 3.6: Rāga - Hemavathi (left) and Dharmavathi (right).**



In a study of hereditary singers, Neuman discusses similar tensions between musicological approaches and the rāga knowledge of hereditary performers that characterized

<sup>39</sup> As the rāgas do not inherently specify an aesthetic comportment, musicians often incidentally bring phrases from rakti rāgas like Karaharapriya. However, between rāgas like Śankarābharāṇa and Kalyāṇi, though the difference is only a single svara ma, musicians summon the rāga-bhāva even without singing the svara ma. Each svara and phrase in these rāgas bear an aesthetic identity of the respective rāga and a singer’s mission is to learn and relearn this bhāva through persistence.

Hindustani music, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He calls the musicological approach “scientific and art-based” (artistic rules based) and the hereditary performer’s approach “performance and craft based,” adding that, “the one bound to rules adhering to a rational form, and the other bound to rules deriving from practice demands and [serves] an aesthetic effect” (2012:432). He says that a disciple in a “hereditary musical tradition” eventually gains the classificatory knowledge, but the traditional process of pedagogy emphasizes “musical recognition, mastery, creativity, and innovation,” in the absence of a theoretical classificatory information (2012:432).

### 3.3 Rāga as Heard

From the period of Nāṭyaśāstra, the Indian melodic system is significantly valued for its affective musical meaning. Etymologically, the meaning of the word rāga refers to such concepts as “to please,” “to color,” and “to tinge.” It is also associated with a variety of connotations, which signify “pleasure,” “passion,” or “delight” (Mahajan 1989: 2; Widdess 2006).<sup>40</sup> In practice, an impactful rendition of rāga is often verbally described as joy (*ānānda*) within the Karnatik community. Lewis Rowell explains the emotive character of rāga in the development of Indian tradition and art by saying,

... in its underlying and self-fulfilling assumption that a particular melodic structure insures the communication of affect from person to person, the tradition of rāga has become one of the primary means by which Indian culture has become sensitized and perhaps even instructed in emotive life (1992: 179).

Weidman (2012) identifies two different “modes of attention” to rāga. The first refers to the standardized theoretical and taxonomical comprehension which accentuates the identification

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<sup>40</sup> The word rāga comes from the root word *rañj*, which describes things that are red colored (Monier-Williams 1899:861, 872; Widdess 2006).

of svaras as the representation of rāga (*svara-jñāna*), and the second to an understanding of rāga as an emotive identity or the knowledge that is practiced by rasikas. For example, a rasika's knowledge of rāga identification (without a theoretical understanding) significantly depends on the affective quality or feel, or emblematic musical phrase fundamentally acquired through the embodied experience of listening to music (Weidman 2012: 222). Weidman narrates a conversation with a rasika, to explain how rāga heard (as a rasika) is different from rāga that she learned (as a set of svaras).

I would talk about notes and she would sing phrases. Although she could not sing the ascending or descending scale in a particular rāga, she could sing phrases characteristic of that rāga and could always recognize which rāga was being sung or played almost instantly, while I was still painstaking listening for the presence of this or that note. As I became more familiar with rāgas and their characteristic phrases, I realized that these were really two different modes of attention, one focused on recognizing individual notes and their presence or absence, the other on grasping the taste (*rasa*) mood or impression of the phrase (2012: 222).

Here, I am reminded of rāga analysis by one of my non-musician friends, who, while listening to Varāḷi, expressed that the rāga seemed to “evoke thunderstorms,” and rāgas like Toḍi or Mukhāri created a very “serious and sober atmosphere.” Correspondingly, when he listened to a rāga like Naḷinakanti, Behāg or Desh he always experienced a “pleasant” sensation. Though these are certainly subjective reactions and emotional descriptions of the rāga-bhāva, he was advocating the “mode of grasping the taste or the impression” of the rāga. Another rasika from Dallas, Texas recently told me how he always liked the feeling of rāga Ārabhi and named his daughter after that rāga. The word Ārabhi in Sanskrit means “robust, dynamic or athletic,” but, the rasika here chose the name for the “feeling” the rāga created.

The process of appreciating the affective nuances, and mapping that experience to specific rāga names develop over time through embodied experience of listening to it over and over again within the modalities of a performance. In these cases, as the name suggests, a rasika is one

who tastes the *rāga-bhāva* and experiences the *rasa*. Often, in concerts, we also see emotionally engaged *rasikas* with their eyes wet in response to their favorite *rāgas*. Here, the experience of *rāga-rasa* is not limited to an immediate pleasure of musical ideas presented; it also embodies an inner vision of *rāga-bhāva*, giving the *rāga* performance an experiential power that binds its *rasikas* to the performance. In this case, the *rasika* is a sensitive spectator whose personal psychological mode is sublimated in the aesthetic experience of *rāga-rasa*. Therefore, their embodied experience of listening values the immediacy of *rāga-rasa* over the painstaking identification of *svaras* and phrases, and “savoring over judgement,” (Schechner 2013: 340) thus explaining the use of the metaphor “*ānānda*.”

A common feature in the Karnatik world is that many *rasikas* who are not formally trained in music can effortlessly identify various *rāgas* whereas many novice music students struggle to develop this quality. This is mainly because, in Karnatik training, the initial focus is on developing the *sargam* knowledge, while *rāga*'s identity and its affective meaning is indoctrinated through a gradual, symbolic process in the long term. However, within the artistic and performance realm, the manifestation of this underlying aesthetic sensibility specific to each *rāga* is as significant as that of its structural components.

### 3.4 Singing Rāga

As discussed in Indian textual music theory, *rāga*'s musical identity is a product of its *lakṣanas* (rules or technicalities like *svaras* and their unique *gamakas* and phrases), but these rules are not adequate enough to create a *rāga*; there is more to it. Artists give life to a *rāga* by bringing about an underlying emotive character to the musical versatility they create, which is acknowledged as *rāga-bhāva*. In other words, there is a tangible relationship between artist and

their rāga creation. Rowell further describes this relationship,

...the affective content of a given rāga rests on a cultural consensus, is embedded in the many technical specifications, and should be communicated automatically if the performance is competent. It is evident that we are dealing with an important theory of musical meaning, as well as a cluster of theoretical constructs. (p.167)

Drawing on my own experience as a śiṣya and a performer, the performative faculty of rāga is evidently shaped and determined by one's embodied rāga knowledge which amalgamates both rāga as theoretical clusters as well as its rāga-bhāva, rāga as it is heard, viewed, observed (within a guru's and other artist's bodily creation), envisioned, and experienced. Neither one of them can solitarily define or create a successful rāga performance. The specificity of singing rāga doesn't lie in either its scale or in its theoretical paradigms, neither in a set of its tunes nor in the underlying emotional (as heard and described) expressions. It is in a musical phenomenon which combines all the above, where the form (structure) and essence (rāga-bhāva) grows together as a single entity opening the possibility of rāga-rasa.

Even though musicians often reveal a discrepancy in their verbal descriptions, especially addressing the sense of "temporal density," "momentum," and dispositions of rāga singing, indeed, the epistemology of what is understood as theoretical intricacies and structural details, encircle an intrinsic bhāva or essence acquired through an encultured sensibility. This tangible relationship that exists between an artist and his or her rāga was explained by popular violinist Lalgudi Vijaya Lakshmi who said, "an accomplished artist's rāga can be understood as her child. Like a mother, an artist creates a life and nurtures it with all love and care. Similar to a mother child-relationship, the bond between an artist and his rāga is elusive for a verbal description."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Collected from a personal interview (2015).

### 3.5 Phenomenology of Rāga-Rasa

If we are to understand the relationships between Karnatik rāga, rāga-bhāva, and rāga-rasa, it is crucial to discern how these notions influence: 1) a śiṣya's learning process and 2) a seasoned artist's journey of rāga.

#### 3.5.1 A Śiṣya's Pedagogy

“Passed down as an oral tradition through guru-śiṣya-parampara for many centuries,” the guru is at the center of perceptions of learning music in India, even to this day (Schippers 2007:123). Various ethnographic and ethnomusicological studies have situated the significance and essence of rāga learning and performance practice to the unique congenial relationship between a guru and śiṣya (Rahaim 2012; Powers 1956; Weidman 2012; Menon 1998; Neuman 2012). As Schippers writes,

Indian music does not have a canon in the sense of an established body of works that can be accessed independent of the teacher. The guru embodies the tradition, which, ideally is slowly and beautifully assimilated through a long, close relationship (2007:124).

A guru is considered an embodiment of this cultural knowledge representing a lineage of rāga and, therefore, becomes central in passing this to the next generation. Traditionally, a guru is more than a mere guide who directs or assists a student's learning process. A guru is a “medium” through which the tangible and intangible aspects of the embedded cultural knowledge of rāga are assimilated by his or her śiṣya. I follow Schippers (2007) in the use of the terms “tangible” and “intangible aspects of music.” According to Schippers, tangible aspects of music are repertoire, instrumentation and techniques, while intangible aspects include expression, aesthetics, and social and spiritual values underlying the music. He explains how the institutional environments emphasize analysis of tangible aspects, while guru-śiṣya tradition



encompasses numerous intangible elements which are often ignored in academic investigations (2007: 129). Accordingly, the knowledge passed and practiced is not limited to a mere one-way information transmission from guru to śiṣya, rather, śiṣya represents an assimilation of “body sensorial” rāga cognizance where the musical skills and knowledge acquired are manifested as bhāva comportment in one’s performance practice. Similar to what Tommy Hahn identifies in the pedagogy of Japanese Nihon Buyo dance, a variety of sensory modes of engagement like “visual, tactile and oral/aural” (Hahn 2008: 78) within a “long-term” commitment and associations with a guru essentially facilitates the transmission of aesthetics of sound, timing, gesture, essence and beyond in a śiṣya.

For a śiṣya, unique svara dispositions of each rāga have to be mastered, sitting face-to-face with one’s guru, through imitative and repetitive exercises of svaras, phrases of rāga, as primarily understood within the traditional pedagogy. Scholars have observed how the body, as a primary instrument, is initially prepared with “repetitive” musical activity in developing rāga skills and creativity (Neuman 2012; Rahaim 2012; Weidman 2012). Weidman writes that the initial process of acquiring the skillset of rāga includes “bodily experiences that involve much more than ears (Weidman 2012: 218). These include: “tactility” (e.g., feeling the correct sonic placement and oscillations of the svaras), “kinesthesia (e.g., learning the kind of movement needed to produce the correct sound or learning how to move with the beat),” “proprioception (e.g., feeling when one has achieved the balance and posture necessary to produce the correct sound).” Though initially music lessons are broken down into well-defined units of pitch content, sargams, gamakas, well-defined rāga phrases, and small compositions (*gītha*, *jatisvara*, *varṇas* and so on), as a śiṣya advances or progresses in the course of rāga understanding, lessons are more intricate yet comprehensive, and typically are not molded into definite units. Weidman

(2012) writes how her guru’s instructions either dwell on very specific technical issues or extremely vague suggestions that music “is something that comes or doesn’t come” which connects it less to “practice,” willful agency, or “talent,” and more to the Tamil-Sanskrit concept of gnanam [jñānam],” a word musician often use in relation to musicianship”(221).<sup>42</sup>

For example, Śankarābharāṇa and Kalyāṇi are two rāgas sharing a similar set of svarasthānas, except for “ma” as shown in the transcriptions below in Example 3.7. Initially, the difference between the two rāgas are clearly rationalized through singing “ma” differently, followed by the different set of gamakas that each rāga takes especially on svaras ga and ni.

**Example 3.7: Śankarābharāṇa (left) and Kalyāṇi (right).**



However, to successfully sing these two rāgas one must go further than merely reproducing these introductory phrases, which are, of course, necessary but not sufficient. Incrementally in the course, one learns to show the difference between these two rāgas, even without singing the svra “ma.” As a śiṣya progresses in the journey of understanding these rāgas, the pedagogical focus is now to comprehend and experience infinite possibilities and intricacies within rāga to develop one’s own bhāva comportment. Therefore, when an accomplished singer dispositions himself to sing Śankarābharāṇa, even if a phrase is identical in svaras with that of Kalyāṇi, the phrase will still embody and resonates only the aesthetics of Śankarābharāṇa. This conception of learning rāga, through an understanding of its underlying aesthetic significance and unique

<sup>42</sup> Jñānam is a Sanskrit word referring to knowledge. As Weidman writes, “glossed as “wisdom,” or “knowledge,” gnanam sediments is deposited in one’s body over time, acquired less by actively practicing than by making oneself receptive through listening” (2012:221).

emotivity gives an aperture for a śiṣya to enculture oneself and to see, adapt, experience and sing rāgas as comprehensive beings. Daniel Neuman (1980) gives an example of performing rāga *Malkaus*, to explain this cultural definition and musical significance- “when rāg *Malkaus* ceases to be the rag of jinns and becomes a pentatonic scale, the music becomes something different because it means something different” (212).

In the overall training of Karnatik rāga singing, the possible expressions of rāga-bhāva and the notions of rasa are not explicitly taught. Instead, the notion of how to create rāga-bhāva are deeply embedded in the cultural consensus of guru-śiṣya relationship and are transferred through musical and physical stylistic aspects that accompany instructions of musical practice. Reflecting on many years of experience as a student, interactions explicitly focusing on creating, learning, and imparting bhāva and rasa have never been a part of formal training under my guru. Yet, it was always clear that the ultimate goal was not merely to memorize or present the learnt musical lessons as they are; rather, it was to bring out the intrinsic rāga-bhāva both in improvisation and composed pieces and, essentially, to bring life to the sonic creation while adhering to all the technical rules. For example, during pedagogical music sessions, my guru often expressed his discontent saying, “don’t sing like a dead person, sing with *jīva* (life).” Clearly, the instruction here was not pointing to any structure or musical error, rather he was pointing at something deeper than music as just a sonic construction. In a similar study of rasa in Hindustani tabla, Nuttall (2013) discusses how bhāva the “emotive quality,” was never directly instructed by gurus, but was often communicated indirectly through intriguing stories narrated by gurus on various musical topics (74). Therefore, instructions in inculcating an emotive disposition is often more symbolic and embedded in the cultural consensus of the oral tradition beyond the systemized musical ideas.

How does a śiṣya develop a comprehension of rāga beyond the mere understanding of svaras, gamakas and other theoretical classifications? While learning a great number of compositions is an important part of rāga-learning, extensive listening to renditions by various artists is understood as another important part of pedagogy. T. M. Krishna further explains how rāgas are learned in the performance process:

Every composition is a storehouse of the facets that give a rāga its image. A composition interprets the rāga through the melody in a unique way, giving musicians a different perspective, opening a new window to it. Each composition builds a whole range of ideas and approaches to a rāga in a musician's mind. The rāga identity is not something that comes the moment a musician learns a composition or its technical aspects. The rāga is being learnt and relearnt continuously right throughout life, every time a new composition is learnt (2013: 79).

A popular Karnatik singer, Vijay Siva once noted that besides learning a large number of compositions in a rāga, each composition has to be practiced for hundreds of times in a meditative, self-reflective manner to successfully appreciate and embody its nuances. The notion of self-reflection through singing, listening, and experiencing various compositions is an important avenue to discern and embody various facets of a rāga.

Here, another significant pedagogical instruction that every artist, guru, and scholar emphasize is the value of “knowledge from listening,” or “*kelvi jñāna*.” Listening is believed to be an important pedagogical instrument to allow musical knowledge to sediment in one's body and, hence, one doesn't merely become skillful at rāga, but also cultivates and intensifies one's rāga knowledge through a persistent interplay between “aurality and orality” (Weidman 2012: 226). Especially for improvisation, Karnatik musicians believe that who one listens to, how, and how-much one listens has equal prominence as much as how and what one practices. For example, though my guru is very encouraging in facilitating an individual musical identity for his students, he often kept an eye on who we (śiṣyas) listened to.

Furthermore, the succession of “embodiment” ensues through an innate characteristic sensitivity of *sādhana* where the strength/intensity lies in “submission” or *samarpaṇa* of oneself to the guru and the art form.<sup>43</sup> For example, in modern times, although a śiṣya does not stay or reside with the guru unlike *guru-kula-vasa* (*gurukula* tradition, an ancient Indian pedagogical system where śiṣyas resided with their guru for years to be trained and acquire knowledge), accompanying the guru to her concerts, spending long hours after music lessons in various musical discussions, and helping with musical or personal work are a few ways in which an apprentice performs his/her role as śiṣya. As a śiṣya of my guru T. M. Krishna, though long hours of music lessons are a chief part of my musical training, learning has never been limited to musical sessions (face-to-face music session at my guru’s place in Chennai, what practitioners call as “class” in the Karnatik realm). For example, when I accompany him on the *tambura* (drone instrument, as shown in Figure 3.2) at his concerts, the performance space itself becomes a significant learning space, where the art of spontaneity, the dispositions of silent communications of artists and audiences, and the art of creation of a shared musical space, are some of the significant virtues of artistry which cannot be verbally articulated or taught, but are essential for the śiṣya to imbibe. Additionally, these are not mechanical, imitable gestures which are intentionally embarked upon. As Rahaim writes, “The reception of musical knowledge in guru-śiṣya parampara, then, spans the whole volitional spectrum from passive, unconscious absorption of habits to active choices” (2012: 228). They are dispositions which are embodied (both consciously and unconsciously) as a consequence of “devotion” and “submission” to the guru and the art-form. Therefore, along with the tangible aspects of music making (*svara*

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<sup>43</sup> The word *sādhana* is from the root word *sādh*, which means “to go straight to the goal” (Grimes 1996:261). *Sadhana* can be reduced to “spiritual discipline” or “means” or “the way.” Colloquially, everyday practice of music is addressed as daily *sadhana* (practice).

knowledge, repertoire, technique and so on), the unique guru-śiṣya relationship essentially symbolizes inheritance of intangible, ineffable yet imperative ontological meanings of expressions of rāga-bhāva and experience of rāga-rasa in one's singing.



**Figure 3.2: T. M. Krishna in concert with the author on the tambura at San Diego, 19th March 2016. Source: Photo clicked by Shankar Ramachandran, Columbus, Ohio.**

In a study of pedagogy and knowledge transfer within Japanese Nihon Buyo, Tomie Hahn (2007) describes how bonding between the teacher and student “manifests a mutual commitment and a relationship of responsibility to teach/learn,” and that every sensory mode of transmission reinforces and strengthens this bonding (85). Analogously, for a śiṣya, “music is integrated into the rhythms of everyday life,” (Weidman 2012: 220) through a long-term personal relationship that one develops with the guru. Consequently, inherited aesthetic attitudes and techniques of vocalization, gestures, and musical receptivity create a body sensorial knowledge of a somatic mode of attention to rāga as bhāva and rasa. Within the persistent interplay of visual, tactile and oral/aural engagements in rāga music, jñāna, which is “more than

a set of skills or a body of knowledge, is a bodily disposition, and, as such, is crucial to becoming ‘the kind of person,’ who can sing or play Karnatik music” (Weidman 2012: 221). However, learning a greater number of compositions, observing guru’s musical endeavors, listening to various artists and developing bodily sensorium are not mutually exclusive events in the sequence of one’s pedagogy; indeed, they are woven into the socio-cultural endeavors of guru-śiṣya parampara and are complementary to each other in cultivating, developing, and reinforcing embodied rāga knowledge (*jñānam*) in a śiṣya.

### 3.5.2 An Artist’s Rāga Journey

While acquiring significant bodily knowledge through various sensory modes of engagement is one phase of rāga pedagogy, an artist’s own personal rāga journey encompassing significantly self-reflection or *sādhana* through submission to the art-form is another significant part of a musician’s rāga evolution. As aforementioned, musicians believe that each rāga is an ocean in itself and every artist has to be a lifelong student (*vidhyārthi*) with an endless pursuit to experience every possible rāga-rasa within. The quest for experiencing rāga-rasa is what makes an artist’s rāga journey meaningful. Complementing the above notion, the training and performance of rāga emphasizes the importance of developing an understanding of intrinsic elements, processes, and identities of expressions as a perpetual way of living. These create a mode of *being* for an artist, rather than aspiring for a fixed set of rāga phrases and patterns. By developing a solid musical understanding and by honing one’s musical skillset, an artist begins to sing or explore a rāga through composed pieces and improvisation. In this way, a singer continues his journey of becoming intimate with the pulse of the rāga and its inherent essence, i.e., rāga-rasa.

To avoid predetermining an improvisation segment prior to a concert, or a repetitive trap

within rāga improvisation, my guru often emphasized that one has to succumb to a rāga for a relatively long period of time. For example, one has to practice a chosen rāga again and again in various improvisation forms, for weeks or sometimes months at a time, depending on the scope of the rāga. In other words, one must practice the rāga until reaching a saturating point within; my guru's words, "sing until you are exhausted." This instruction is applied to every music session—both personal practice and face-to-face music sessions—with a guru. For example, while singing improvisation in class, he always insisted that I continued until I was physically and mentally exhausted. Hence, an artist's personal journey or practice of every rāga fundamentally includes initiation, self-reflection, individual search, learning and relearning through and with rāga for one to develop the skillset of creativity, and spontaneity as a mode of *being*. In this process, an artist gets closer and closer to the emotional vibrations of a rāga through a constant association. It is this emotive binding of an artist with her rāga, perhaps the essence, that makes one's experience of a rāga felt and memorable for both the performers and the listeners. As my guru says, "this is a boundless and timeless process." One can never reach the "point" or the "destination" of a rāga, because no such destination exists. Instead, it is a journey towards rāga, while exploring and experiencing its rāga-rasa. A true artist's quest for embracing the unexplored vibrations of a rāga-rasa intensifies with time. At this point, the artist does not merely create a technically correct musical entity, but rather, rāga becomes a personification of its characters and dispositions that transcend the musical and physical technicalities opening an empirical world of rāga experiences, thus, becoming an inherently cohesive "flow" of temporality.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> I use the term "flow" as a dynamic state of being where mind and body is completely immersed in the task at hand (Csikszentmihalyi 2008).



### 3.6 Rāga Ālāpana Analysis

In the following example by T. M. Krishna, I analyze an unmetred form of improvisation (ālāpana) in rāga Bhairavi to understand the relationship between the smaller entities of expression within a rāga and how they symbolize the deeper meaning of rāga-bhāva in a singer’s performance. Through an analysis of gamakas within each phrase, we can perceive how they contribute to a rāga experience. One of the significant characteristics of Bhairavi is the sound of the svaras, ga and ni. I have divided the first minute of the ālāpana into three separate phrases. In Example 3.8, the gamaka on ni changes each time with the flow of rāga.

**Example 3.8: First phrase of Bhairavi ālāpana.**

The musical notation for Example 3.8 is as follows:

Line 1: **Ni** | Ri Sa Ni | Ni Da Da Pa Pa Da Ni Da Pa Ma

Line 2: Pa, Da Ri Sa, Ni Da | **Ni**

- In the first phrase (Example 3.8), the svara ni appears six times.
- The first and the sixth ni has the same gamaka, named *kampita*, which is a type of sonic shake between the leading tone, ni, and the tonic, (in the next octave) sa. However, the four more ni(s) in between are sung with different types of gamakas.

**Example 3.9: Second phrase of Bhairavi ālāpana.**

The musical notation for Example 3.9 is as follows:

Line 1: **Ni** Sa Ri Sa Sa Ni Ni Da Da Pa

- In the second phrase (Example 3.9), ni appears three times.
- Though the opening ni has the same gamaka as that of the first ni of the first phrase, the sonic frequency of the gamaka reduces and the highest sonic point of the gamaka

lies at place which is slightly below the svara sa (tonic of the next octave), unlike the former case where it was closer to the svara sa.<sup>45</sup>

Towards the end of the third phrase (Example 3.10), the svara ga is sung six times. Four different types of gamakas are used on the note ga.

**Example 3.10: Third phrase of Bhairavi ālāpana.**

Ri Ga Ma Pa Da Ni Sa Ri Ga Ga Ma Ga Ri Sa Ni Da Pa Ma Ga

Ma Ni Da Pa Ga Ma Pa Pa Ga Ri Sa

Ri Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga Ri Sa Ri Ga Ri

Ri Ni Sa

From these examples, one can infer that svaras transform their structure by adapting to different gamakas contextually in the creation of raga, and these transformations are significant in delineating the rāga’s musical identity. However, accomplished singers consciously do not script every svara, its intricacies (twists and turns), and gamakas in a rāga rendition. While through analysis one can point to several mutations of *svara*, for singers these variations are a consequence of singing rāga as a cohesive entity. Contrarily, for a singer, the goal of a rāga performance is to be bound to the agency of rāga-rasa and that the mutation of smaller entities becomes a creation of spontaneity in personifying rāga-rasa.

<sup>45</sup> The gamaka slightly below the svara sa is represented by a quarter tone symbol.

In the study of hereditary musicians, Neuman observes that the essential notion of aesthetic affect drives the practice demands of pedagogy in Hindustani music (2012). Neuman's analysis also reflects the notion of rāga's cohesive nature. He writes that,

For musicians the bandish [a type of composition in Hindustani system] was not reducible to individual notes of fixed significance but was rather an aesthetic weaving of a rag's main phrases (pakad and chalan) that could be reupholstered in different and unique ways (2012: 444).

He continues,

The bandish is breakable into significant parts but it is not understood as a patched whole. The jagah are therefore not "prefabricated" [phrases and places of rag] parts that stand as irreducible units to be detached and reattached. The breaking up of the bandish rather constitutes the musical work of one's life-long practice. In other words, the bandish is the beginning point for musical exploration and performance, while the rhapsodein is the end point for performance; the former is a launching pad and the latter is the performative object. The bandish is a woven whole that exists to be broken apart and built around (2012: 444).

This is an extremely important analysis, not only in its faculty to describe the process of rāga improvisation through a composition (bandish), but also to show the holistic approach that an artist augments through his rāga journey. While the breakable, theoretical understanding of rāga (especially through the framework of pitch content) is the beginning point for musical comprehension, however, learning, singing and evolving through rāga manifestations is precisely grounded on embodying a "rhapsodein," immersing oneself through the culturally specific set of patterns, comprehended as a life-long sadhana; As Neuman says, "the former is a launching pad and the latter is the performative object" (2012:444).

### 3.7 Conclusion

Three significant interpretations from the above analysis are: 1) Rāga is internally cohesive, 2) Rāga performance is a creation of temporality, and 3) The agency within a rāga

performance is the embodied rāga-rasa. At the time of performance, rāga is a cohesive entity of its structures and essence. An acclaimed music critic from Delhi, Menon writes “like the human body, rāga is not created successively part-by-part. It was born instantaneously and grows organically as a single formation. Rāga animates a living being, having a life of its own, beyond limitation and is experienced by the world around” (1998, 44). In the theory of mind-body dichotomy, Merleau-Ponty writes, “the body itself, as a body, is an existence and therefore of a subjective nature. The subjective character of the body is not derived from a principle distinct from itself when the body itself is a subject” (as quoted in Kwant 1963: 15). Likewise, rāga has a mode of being of its own, by the unified virtue of its “form” and its “essence.” It cannot be defined by the principles of the outer world. The subjective characters of svaras, gamakas and rāga-bhāva are not separate entities in a presentation to grow sequentially. These subjectivities of rāga are delineated only through an artist’s creation and understood through experience and embodiment.

Rāga is cohesive and its performance is positioned by the virtue of temporality. Temporality doesn’t reduce a rāga performance to a present or current action. Though a rāga “lives” at that moment of its realization, it is a product and a part of its past and future horizons. Like a flowing river, in every presentation, with definite starting and ending points, each moment in rāga is a temporal phenomenon which comes to life through an insight of past experiences and future anticipations of rāga-rasa. Here, past not only refers to the previous moment within the presentation, it is also the musical past of the performer and the sum of his embodied rāga-rasa experiences (Tallotte 2017: 49).

Within a rāga performance, the smaller entities of svaras and gamakas are inseparable, and are essential characters signifying the existential meaning of a rāga performance. For

performers they are both a musical expression that gives a way to unfold the embedded rāga-rasa and a way to be rāga-rasa through their unique dispositions. Hence, while the existential characteristics of gamaka are indispensable in delineating the experiences of rāga-rasa, the embodied rāga-rasa of a performance itself becomes instrumental in crafting the sole nature of gamaka that comes into life.

Mikel Dufrenne (1973) writes that, “from the nonexistence to the existence of an art,” an artist’s “works proceed from him, but they point to that within him which is not himself.” The artist becomes an instrument “who feels a desire which answers to a call: something wants to come into being, something on which he has reflected for a long time as a craftsman” (31). Dufrenne’s words reflect the relationship between gamaka, rāga-bhāva and rāga-rasa in an artist’s performance. The performer is an instrument who, through perpetual variations of the smaller entities of gamakas and svaras, explores the very meaning of rāga, thus opening the world of rāga-rasa. Here, the very call—rāga-rasa coming into being—something upon which he/she has reflected on for a long time as a craftsman is itself the agency in delineating the individuality of each gamaka and svara of every possible manifestation within rāga. To paraphrase Dufrenne, for the embodiment of rāga and rāga-bhāva in us, we exist in the rāga-rasa; we submit to the rāga-rasa, an outward movement into a musical way of being.

## CHAPTER 4

### RASA: THE CONFLUENCE OF PERFORMER AND RASIKA

Chapter 3 focused on ways in which rāga-rasa serves as a vehicle for a musician's rāga performance. However, in the context of Indian aesthetics, rasa is a "term that denotes the subjective as well as the objective aspects of aesthetic experience" (Subramani 2006: 1). Rasa, which is understood as an "aesthetic essence" of art, is also contemplated as a mode of transcendence through art experience for both performers and rasikas (Subramani 2006; Vatsyayan 2003; Dehejia 1996). Focusing on the relationship between performers and rasikas, this chapter discusses rāga-rasa as a way of transcending the subjective perceptions and dichotomies (for both musicians and rasikas) in a rāga performance.

By way of example, this is a story of a concert that I heard back in 2004, when the world of ethnomusicology was unbeknownst to me as a teenage Karnatik music aspirant. It was the last day of a summer music camp (workshop) in a small South Indian village called Nidle near Mangalore (a coastal city of Karnataka State, India). Amidst the forests of the Western Ghats, between cashew and areca-nut plantations, stood the Karumbithil house (Karumbithil is the name of the house, which translates to a farm of sugar cane).<sup>46</sup> The Karumbithil family was hosting more than 150 enthusiastic Karnatik students from the surrounding villages and towns, who were eagerly waiting for the grand finale concert by one of the contemporary leading Karnatik musicians, T. M. Krishna. We, the audience, were seated on the porch made of dried areca-nuts leaves as shown in Figures 4.1 and 4.2. Certainly, this was not a common set-up for the musicians who were performing, since most of the audience comprised music students and their parents from in and around the village, unlike an urban *sabha* concert which is usually attended

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<sup>46</sup> Traditionally, houses in south Indian coastal region are named after their plantations.

by a South Indian elite concert crowd (see Subramanian 2006).<sup>47</sup>



**Figure 4.1: Students sitting and waiting eagerly for the concert to begin, Karumbithil, India, May 2005. Source: Karumbithil Family.**



**Figure 4.2: Concert by students before the finale performance. In this picture the parents and**

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<sup>47</sup> Sabhas (translated as “assembly”) were a nineteenth-century reformist musical organization which facilitated professional musicians to sing before large congregations of urban rasikas, “in the new context of the public stage” outside the temples (see. Subramanian 1999). Today, Sabhas are the chief organizations and a support system for both established and upcoming musicians endowing them with various platforms for performance. Scholars (Weidman 2012; Subramanian 2006; Krishna 2013) discuss how the urban Sabha system and rasikas are directly coupled with various modes of performing elite status in South Indian society.

**relatives of students and the performing artists sitting on the stage are the rasikas listening carefully to the students' rendition. Karumbithil, India, May 2005. Source: Karumbithil Family.**

As I had no intentions of research, I never recorded any material or notes during the concert. Yet, I was so impacted by the concert that I still remember the smallest details of the rāgas, compositions, and varieties of improvisations that were performed. While the artists were setting up on the stage, the master of ceremonies introduced the vocalist as the “rock star of Karnatik music,” for which all the musicians on the stage exchanged smiles, as a symbol of complementing the vocalist. With his powerful full-throated voice, Krishna started his concert with a *varṇa* in rāga Kāmbodi.<sup>48</sup> Though the opening of the *varṇa* was in a relatively slow pace, the energy levels of all the artists intensified with the speed in the second half, and concluded with what South Indians metaphorically say, “as though it poured heavily and stopped,” but in this case referred to the downpour of *svaras* and *sanchāras* (phrases) of Kāmbodi rāga, which was then followed by a huge applause of appreciation. This *varṇa* was not just a warmup piece as it is usually described in a concert; it had successfully captivated the audience into the world of Karnatik rāgas. Following the *varṇa*, a composition and improvisation in Harikāmbodi, a gentle and slow-paced composition in rāga Rīthigoula, and a majestic Toḍi transfixed the audience for the next two hours. The concert filled the atmosphere with a kind of rāga resonance in such an emphatic fashion that one of the guests who spoke after the concert called it an experience of “*sangītada paramānanda*,” or “ultimate joy through music” (parama [ultimate] + ānanda).

Though Karnatik music has been a consistent inclination and influence since my childhood through family ties, this particular concert uncovered for me a new meaning of rāga.

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<sup>48</sup> A *varṇa* is a type of “composition explicitly designed to present the rāga in which it is composed in all of its subtleties of ornamentation, special phrases, and overall pitch movement; it teaches the student how to sing, perform, and eventually improvise in its rāga, as well as serving as sort of a rāga dictionary” (Morris 2: 2011). Therefore, *varṇas* are extensively practiced in the initial stages to develop rāga knowledge synesthetically as well as to develop rāga dexterity.



Beyond the acoustic constitution of hypothetical knowledge, reverberating an underlying passion and emotion, music here had moved the audience in a certain way. The rāga vibrations from the artists on the stage had struck a definitive chord of rasa, binding musicians, students, parents, and others gathered alike. Here, performers and rasikas were “tuned-in” (Schutz 1976:175) to the flux of the moments of rāga formation which created a “quasi-simultaneity between the stream of consciousness,” (Schutz 1976:175) that is, between the performers and rasikas, thus living rāga-rasa, a musical way of being in the world. In other words, within this proximity of the musical realm, the aesthetic experience of rāga-rasa had grown into the space and time of rasikas bestowing upon us with the moment of rāga personification. This intersubjective space of artistic performance is what Abhinavagupta called a universalized space of emotions, where the experience is “alaukika,” otherworldly, which is far from the everyday realities, that which is also a transcendental notion. The term rāga-rasa which encompasses the entirety of this musical way of being, is neither merely a creation of a vocalist or his/her co-performers, nor is it rasika centric, but it is a musical way of being together in the world sharing the rāga space and time. Rāga-rasa stands for an experience of unification or what is called as “samyoga” (Saxena 2010: 375) where both the subjective and objective awareness of svāra, gamaka, rāga, *tāḷa*, *shruti* culminates in a soundscape beyond the acoustical, bringing rāga-rasa into being.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4.1 Rasika

As discussed in chapter 1 and chapter 3, aficionados in a Karnatik concert are notably referred to as rasikas– those “who can taste the rasa” (Allen and Viswanathan 2004: 59). As

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<sup>49</sup> Samyoga can be translated as “unification.” According to Saxena, “sublimation” is aesthetically secured in an art experience, through the “principle artistic device of integrating the constituent elements,” or “samyoga” of the constituting elements, that may all help each other in making the whole work significant (2010: 375).

Kalpana Ram writes,

The address of 'rasika' seems merely to describe a group of people, whereas it is helping to constitute spectatorship in a particular way, one that implies distinction... One comes to fill the position of a rasika not simply because one is addressed as such, but because crucial features of performance itself sustain that form of address (2011: 162).

While there are many kinds of listeners/audiences (spectators, disciples, critics, admirers, and so on), the true meaning of rasika denotes one, “who gets absorbed in aesthetic delight” (Martinez 2001: 166) within the creative and emotional elements of a performance.

The etymology of the word “rasika” reflects an embedded historical connotation of the term “sahṛdaya,” referenced by Abhinavagupta, where the word suggests an aesthetic attitude of an embodied listener (as discussed in Chapter 2). According to rasa aesthetics, sahrdaya is a “qualified individual... whose heart is filled with uncontaminated sensibility” (Pollock 2016: 194). Informed by the principle of non-duality, aesthetic experience as defined in rasa theory upholds a virtual reality of “ideal relationship between creators and connoisseurs.” As Sundararajan and Raina (2016) write, the aesthetic experience “is viewed as that state of joy where differentiations cease ... All duality of subject and object is lost, distinctions of physical time and space are eschewed, the finite and infinite merge” (790) (see Vatsyayan 1998:167–168).

#### 4.2 Gestures of Rāga Space

In many ways, being rasika in a Karnatik rāga performance is participatory and inevitably involves the body. Various ethnomusicologists (Neuman 1990; Clayton 2007; Neuman 2009, 2012; Zadeh 2017) have analyzed the activities of rasikas as a crucial part of a live performance in Indian music. Through a “repertoire of conventional gestures” (Zadeh 2017: 207) and vocal interjections (clichés), rasikas engage with the artists throughout the performance. For example,

physical movements of hands, along with facial expressions and nods of acknowledgements are practiced extensively by rasikas during a performance. Additionally, vocal interjections (Karnatik interjections), like “*bhale bhale*,” “*sabhaash*,” “*aaha*,”” *barali barali* (*let it come*),” among others, are spontaneously uttered when a rasika feels that a given musical moment is worthy of praise. Many rasikas keep *tāḷa* (gestures of rhythmic cycles) in their hand, often making audible clapping sounds. Often, rasikas could guess or identify (by gently conversing with the people sitting next to them) *rāga* names during the introductory *ālāpana* segments. These gesticulations of rasikas are symbolically significant virtues in creating a collective meaning (for both performers and rasikas) within the performance space.

Besides, artists deliberately establish a relationship with their rasikas in a performance. For example, artists try to break the barrier between audience and performers through conscious eye contact, exchanging smiles, and palm gestures of greetings (what are called *namaskāra* or *namaste*) when a notable member of the music fraternity is spotted in the audience. These relationships are not only forged between the performers and rasikas but are also seen between the various artists performing. When a vocalist, violinist, *mridangam* artist, and *kanjira* artist start a performance, it is evident that they are musically communicating with each other while exchanging glances and smiles, and through gestures of appreciation and curiosity in exploring known and unknown trajectories of a *rāga* (performance). Therefore, collaborative efforts represented through spontaneous body dispositions between both performers, and performers and rasikas are understood as a fundamental character of a *rāga* performance.

Analyzing gestures and their meanings within Hindustani practice, Clayton writes, “the audience role seems to be one of continual feedback and affirmation, rather than input aimed at directing the course of the performance” (Clayton 2007: 92). Matt Rahaim discusses the

significance of trained listeners in South Asian performances as “circuits of voice.” He argues that the transformative power of vocal performance lies not merely in notes or formal structures, but in disciplined vocal circuits between trained singers and trained listeners. In essence, the call-and-response of voicing and listening is an essential mode, fostering the creation of musical performance (Rahaim 2017). Similarly, in Karnatik performance, within this loop of symbolic gesticulations between performers and rasikas, as Indian-European philosopher Coomaraswamy says, a rasika practices “an art of his own” (1917: 73). Inspired by a performer’s musical stimulus, a rasika’s embodied reflexivity comes into being as a significant part of performance, persuading artists, to paraphrase Slawek (1998), keep the rāga pursuit going.<sup>50</sup>

Gestures in a rāga performance are neither a fixed set of rules, nor performed uniformly in every rāga performance. Rahaim also writes in his study of Hindustani vocalists and their gestures that, “there is no [specific] evidence that the spontaneous flow of gesture in the course of masterful singing [directly] represents vocalization in general” (2012: 116). Nonetheless, in a performance, gestures generally delegate a collective significance and meaning to the musical moments and unequivocally represent a certain aspect/part of the rāga performed (Rahaim 2012). In other words, when artists begin to perform confidently, adopting to their embodied postures and rasikas begin to conscientiously listen through their body comportments, these embodied dispositions become an aperture to seize the rāga space, in which, eventually, both performers and rasikas dissolve.

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<sup>50</sup> According to Slawek, “keeping it going” is one of the fundamental attitudes of an accomplished rāga performer in improvisation. Discussing improvisation and music making process of Hindustani music, Slawek writes that the complexity involved in improvisation includes musical ideas of both fixed (grammatically discernable) and flexible notions of music. An accomplished performance of improvisation chiefly hinges on a musician’s continued exploration of rāga until he is ready to leave. He says “every performance is a new exploration of a particular musical experience that will lead both the performers and audience into uncharted musical territory. And once the musicians enter that territory, they must keep the conglomeration of music-making processes going until they are ready to leave it” (1998: 335-363).

### 4.3 Rasa: The Fluid

As discussed in Chapter 2, the rasic performance intrinsically has “its goal in extending pleasure through an always deferred pursuit” (Schechner 2003:339). Often, experienced vocalists choose their main rāga, as well as compositions in a performance, not before but after sitting on the stage or commencing the concert, which is essentially after sensitively perceiving their rasikas. In one of the concerts of Vittal Ramamurthy (a popular violinist from South India), in which I was accompanying him on the tambura, twenty minutes into the concert, I realized that the list of compositions and rāgas that he had planned to present were different from what he eventually performed. For the same reason, accompanying my guru T. M. Krishna on tambura as well as on vocal support is always a challenge. Being a śiṣya, I am expected to be prepared to sing any rāga or composition that he chooses on the spot. These choices of compositions/rāgas in a performance depend on several factors like the mood of the artist, the mood or the ambience of the performance space, a rasika’s request or an artist’s intuition, and so on.

Having said that, in one of my guru’s concerts, he sang four compositions in rāga Sahana.<sup>51</sup> Though he was trying to change and move on to the next rāga, the mood and dispositions of Sahana was so overpowering that he announced that, he “would give up on trying Begada [the next rāga he had chosen]” and started singing a varṇa in Sahana, which without more ado, multiplied the intensity of the performance and culminated with an overwhelming response from both artists and rasikas. As Cooper says,

Whether a spectator’s experience will result in appreciation, understanding, both, or neither, is difficult to predict. However, it is in that particular space, combining the performer’s embodiment with the spectator’s interpretation, that rasa manifests – as empathy, sympathy, pathos, joy, reflection – although the conditions for rasa come into play long before the performance begins (2013:343).

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<sup>51</sup> Generally, in a contemporary Karnatik concert format, singing two compositions of one rāga is rare. Rāgas with contrasting rāga-bhāva (also various contrasting combination of svara structure) are chosen to bring different musical flavors.

Therefore, within the cumulative musical and emotional confluence of a performance “rasa experience is always an anticipated possibility” (Mason 2013: 50). Understanding this notion is what separates a novice or student’s performance from a legendary musician’s performance. Accomplished musicians will generally function or work with time and mood (performance atmosphere) at the very moment of the performance, accounting for various musical (rāga, tāḷa, and composition), rasic, and emotional elements. I do not intend to say that legendary musicians never plan their musical pieces beforehand for a performance, rather, they are trained, skillful, and sensitive enough to habitually modify or decide on the rāga/composition/spontaneous improvisation instantaneously at the time of performance. Therefore, when an artist is open to embrace the flux of the rāga moments, and submit oneself to it, the empirical possibility of rāga-rasa comes alive, blurring the divisions between past, present and future, and opening a shared musical space of rasa experiences.

Discussing rasa in Hindustani tabla playing, Nuttall writes,

It is important to talk about the idea and practice of the rasa concept in musical performance as something that is reciprocal, as something that could be conceived of as a process in motion. Rather than viewing the process of bhāva/rasa as something like a linear model of aesthetic enjoyment where the performer ‘transmits’ his or her emotion, bhāva, to the receivers who are asked to ‘taste’ the performance, I believe it is important to perceive the process as one of a feedback loop and one that is on-going. (2013: 71)

Reflecting on Nuttall’s words, though rasic moments are described as shared “space and time,” in a rāga performance they are not static within the shared space and time. Rasa, as the name suggests is fluid, dynamic, and “on-going” in its nature. Within the interactive assemblage of artwork, artists, and rasikas, rasa emerges as a “dialogic union” of various elements (Subramani 2006: 47). In other words, rasa is called “samyoga,” (union) through a constant “inter-play,” a “co-mingling” or a “dialogue” (Subramani 2006: 47) of various elements involved in its creation.

Quoting Subramani, rasa “is not a static accomplished state; it is a vibrant hermeneutic interactive process among all the elements involved in art experience” (2006: 47).

Consequently, these moments of musical flux embodied with rasa experience reveal that the relationship between a performer and rasika is neither a static and regulated theoretical framework of “call and response,” nor a service-oriented function merely privileging the rasikas’ choice. In a rasic performance, “the division between performer and spectator is [also] fluid” (Raman 2011: 165) and interactively responsive. However, when both performers and rasikas collectively submit to the rāga, the performance opens a mode of co-existence that “exceeds the possibilities of all such formulae” (Mason 2013: 50), melting the boundaries between the two. This is what Abhinavagupta discussed as “universalization” or “*sādhāraṇikaraṇa*,” in art experience, where the musical way of being is not merely a “collective consciousness” but is also a consciousness driven by a common ‘essence:’ rasa (Dufrenne 1973: 69).

#### 4.4 A Rasika within Performer

So far, I have discussed that rasa is created at the confluence of performers and rasika. What happens, then, when there is no rasika for a performance as in a secluded practice session? How does a lonely singer (who is equally proficient as a performer) practicing a rāga ālāpana create a space of rāga-rasa without co-performers? How does a vocalist create the environment and a point of departure for the genesis of rāga-rasa without a feedback loop from the rasikas?

In a study of rasa in Hindustani tabla playing, Denise Nuttall writes that, emotion is fundamentally generated in part through the skilled execution of the artistic endeavors performed by and with the body and the embodied mind (2013: 78). Similarly, in a Karnatik performance, bhāva is symbolically manifested in the expressive tonal predications and symbolic

gesticulations of artists and their capacity to engross and experience their own musical creations. For example, when questioned about the notions of *rāga-bhāva* in a performance, Karnatik musicians unequivocally advocate that *bhāva* comes into life only when an artist completely gives himself to it as well as experiences or relishes his/her music.

For example, when asked about the best moments in performance, Gayatri, an acclaimed singer of the Ranjani-Gayatri duo (Figure 4.1) said,

After singing so many technically defined *sangatīs* [phrases], you reach some moments in a *rāga*, where you forget everything, and you feel like you are connected with something higher. At that moment you are not really thinking about the *rāgam* or *svarams*- it is a flow. You are not consciously thinking about *rāga*, but you feel and see it happening. Music takes over (Gayatri 2013).

Ranjani complemented her sister Gayatri by saying,

As a musician, you put your neck on the block and completely give yourself to the moment and music (Ranjani 2013).

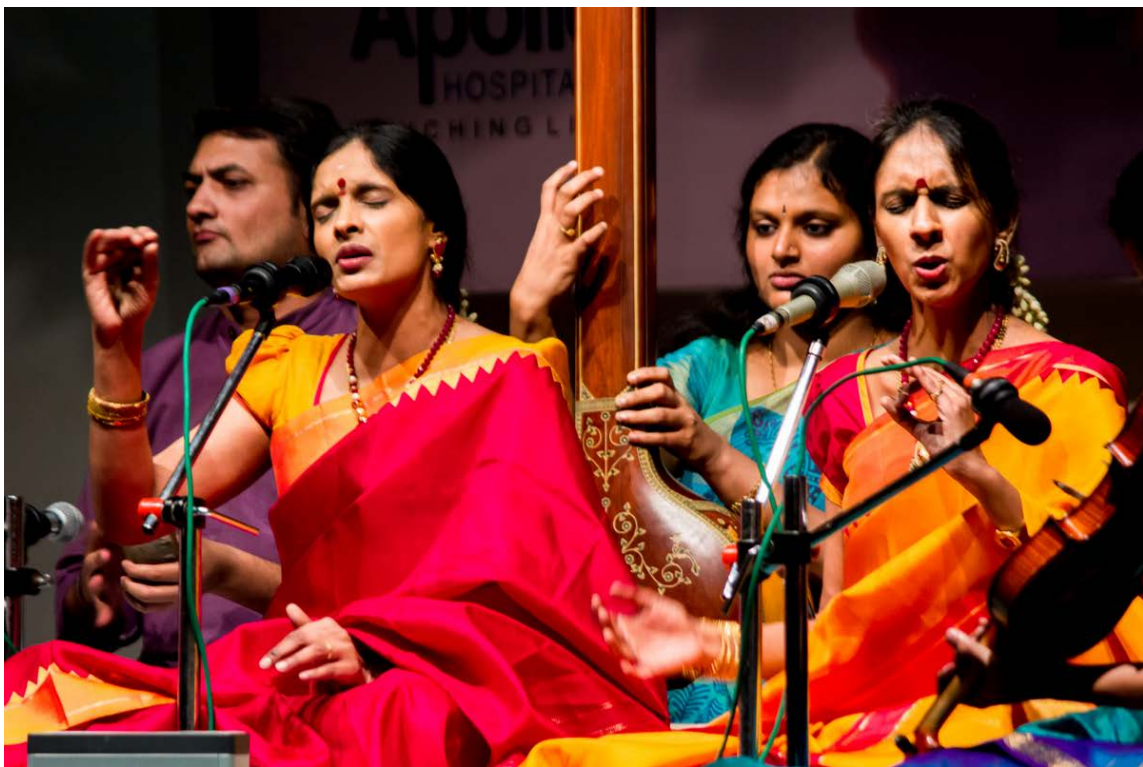


Figure 4.3: Ranjani-Gayatri in concert, Chennai, 2016. Source: [www.chennaidecemberseason.com](http://www.chennaidecemberseason.com)



Here, the language of the singers elucidates that the immersion of oneself in a musical moment is coupled with the agency of the aesthetic object, which transcends the mere understanding of the “representation” or “exhibition” aspect of a performance. Through submission and volatility, Karnatik musicians facilitate the signification of rāga-rasa “coming into being.” Nonetheless, the transcendental rasic musical moments cannot be summoned as soon as a musician learns the right rāga technicalities and dispositions. It manifests as a consequence of abiding and devoting oneself to a rāga in a longstanding quest and pursuit for creating and experiencing rāga-rasa; essentially, in a process of living and growing together with the rāgas.

As Schechner writes,

If the self-who-is-observing is moved by the self-who-is-performing the performance will be a success...The rasic performer opens a liminal space to allow further play – improvisation, variation, and enjoyment (2003: 356).

Karnatik musicians believe that, unless an artist experiences and sublimates through one’s own rāga, s/he would be unsuccessful in imparting and sharing it with co-musicians and rasikas. One significant piece of advice that my guru has consistently emphasized since I started practicing improvisation is to “listen to each svāra, each phrase and each sonic movement” of the rāga synesthetically during my sadhana (daily practice). During a music session (class) at my guru’s place in Chennai, I happened to sing *varāli ālāpāna* (unmetered improvisation) as my guru was listening to it observantly. A few minutes into the ālāpāna, he interrupted by saying, “if you are so conscious about every phrase and svāra, you will never ‘sing’ the rāga.” He said, “to create and sing a rāga, you have to listen to your voice (rāga) and reckon on it yet be consciously vulnerable for it to flow fluently.” Following this conversation, my guru started singing *varāli rāga* to guide me in choosing a path of rāga ālāpāna. As I started singing with him and, subsequently, singing alone, I found myself on the move in a kind of euphoric sense of freedom

within the boundaries of varāli; a type of synesthesia set in, and the flow of svaras and gamakas of the rāga started to take on a rasic dimension. I was somehow in between the call of rāga-rasa and the response of phrases (through svara and gamakas) for the next thirty minutes, until the ālāpana was concluded at the instruction of my guru. Therefore, first and foremost, an artist ought to be a rasika to comprehend and value the aesthetic character and stimulations of a rāga. And, more importantly, artists have to be ardent rasikas to their own rāga rendition/presentation in order to transcend the dichotomy of conceptual knowledge and their abstract, instinctive, and spontaneous ideas during a performance.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4.5 Conclusion

For rasikas, rāga performance presents a possibility of “experience” characterized by intense personal involvement, reflexive immediacy, and a spiritual or meditative immersion popularly known as “tanmayata,” in which all seems to be in a “flow” of ecstasy. Kalpana Ram recently argued that “to be a rasika is to inhabit the time of the present in a very particular way” (2011: 161). She writes that “rasa theory makes it very explicit that this is a world in which time is slowed down to the time it takes for good flavors to be realized” (161). Within this brief moment, the performer’s search of the elusive invalidates the monotony of the personal distance between “I” and “thou” (Schutz 1973: 63), subject and object (Subramani 2006), as well as the temporality of “space” and “time.”

Subsequently, to achieve this, performers have to move beyond the conceptual understandings of rāga into a liminal space where the boundary between the performer and rasika

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<sup>52</sup> “The performer’s task, especially in improvising, is to render and combine phrases in such a way that the abstract ideal is present; and yet, he must render and combine those phrases in a fashion sufficiently individual to be stimulating. He must be conventional but not stereotyped. He must work within an esthetic area bounded on one side by banality and on the other by caprice.” (Powers 1956, 16)

“within” diminishes. Like other rasikas, she can appreciate the flow, “the crisis” and “the feeling” of the performance, and, thus is affected by her rāga (Schechner 2003: 356). This relationship of the self as performer to the self as rasika constitutes the “subject” as a unity of apperception (Dufrenne 1973: 371). Within this fluidity between self-to-self, subject-to-object, rāga performance emerges as an aperture for the samyoga (union). Exceeding the conscious divisions, the embodiment of rāga-bhāva and the experience of rāga-rasa open the possibility for musicians and audiences to mutually “tune-in” to rāga ecstasy - an experience, popularly described as “Sangīta paramānanda” (the absolute joy through music).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The rasa theory of Indian aesthetics is concerned with the nature of the genesis of emotions (transitory emotions according to Bharata) and their corresponding experiences, as well as the condition of being in and experiencing the aesthetic world. Indic scholars have opined that the essence of ancient Indian philosophy and aesthetics are deeply embedded within the cultural context and performance practices of Indian art and rituals. Subsequently, in practice, the ways in which art forms are studied, absorbed, performed, and experienced reveal ways in which Indian philosophies and spiritual practices have predisposed approaches to aesthetics and artforms.

In this thesis, I have attempted to shine light on how the aesthetics of rasa philosophy account for creative presence and its experiences in Karnatik vocal performances. The question is pivotal as it unearths how Karnatik practitioners (both performers and rasikas) construct meaning and value for a rāga performance within sensory and metaphysical perceptions. Though “musical meaning” in itself can express various personal, social and political implications, the rasa theory presents an apparatus not only to understand the basic attitudes and symbols of aesthetics within performance practice, but it also unlocks a phenomenology of “taste” to comprehend deeper perceptions of how Karnatik singers and rasikas, respond, experience and express musically in a rāga performance. I attempted to answer the question in two ways: primarily, through an exploration of a performer’s rāga journey and, subsequently, through the notion of being rasikas.

In Chapter 3, I argue that, for a vocalist, learning and performing a rāga is fundamentally a progression of embodying its rāga-bhāva, which is deeply connected to the notion of being in

and experiencing rāga-rasa. Indian art critic Menon (1998) explains that to understand rāga “you need a teacher who knows the mystery of the crisis and the trauma of transformation in music” (47). Here, the emphasis on the idea of the “mysterious” nature of rāga suggests that, no matter how experienced an artist is (from years of practice), every new rendition can offer something fresh; a rāga always comprises a mysterious facet. This also suggests that something as simple as a single musical phrase itself could offer an infinite variety of experiences for an artist, similar to that of walking inside a dense tropical forest. Even for an experienced forest dweller who is familiar with the paths, valleys, and trees, the exploration of the forest and its beings are endless; there are always new flowers to experience, more birds to hear, more insects, and other inhabitants to meet. Just as Indian artists colloquially say, “the artist is never greater than the art,” likewise, the rāga is always larger than what an artist can comprehend, grasp, and express.

Chapter 4 explores how the embodiment of rāga-bhāva and the experience of rasa open the possibility for musicians and audiences to live rāga-rasa in a performance. While (for both performers and rasikas) the understanding of rāga experience commences from a perception of each rāga having a specific inherent sonic structure and a unique emotive nature, the rasa experience is rooted in a subjective, individually acquired capacity to savor or respond to a rāga’s aesthetic stimulus. Yet, within a performative space, the inception of rāga-rasa experience lies in a process of universalizing its musical meaning and manifestations that transcend the space and time of the vehicle that carries it. Finally, I argue that, in a rāga performance, a performer is also a rasika for his/her rāga presentation.

## 5.1 The Rasa Debate

Some of the significant debates of rasa in the modern musicological and artistic realms

have expressed concerns over the speculations that the *rasa* notion is an obsolete or archaic phenomenon in relation to modern performance practice. On the contrary, this thesis resists the idea of *rasa* as an archaic theoretical concept. As Indian aesthetician Ganesh says, “how can you negate a feeling or perception of something, when you have experienced it” (Ganesh 2016). By discussing philosophical (*rasa* philosophy) and musicological connections, this thesis seeks to uncover the basis of the existential nexus of *rasa* experience within a *rāga* performance.

Within vernacular and non-aesthetic convention, when someone says that “a fruit is full of *rasa*,” it indicates that the fruit is full of juice or essence. Along with representing a meaning of “taste” as a quality cognized through the sense of tasting, here, the word “*rasa*” also illustrates the extent of its worthiness in representing its primary character, *guna*, i.e., the fruit(ness).<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in describing music, *rasikas* might use the terms, “*rasa bharitha sangīta*,” (music filled with *rasa*, or saturated with *rasa*), “*rasa-ānanda*,” (the absolute joy through *rasa*), or “*rasa-anubhāva*” (experience of *rasa*). Here, analogous to Heidegger’s “thingness,” (Heidegger 1971:163-184), – where “the nature of a thing that is more primordial than a sum of determinate and universal characteristics” (Howe 1993 :94), *rasa* represents the primordial *rāga*(ness), which outstrips everything that pretends to be a cause, including space and time. Thus, *rasa* experience becomes the primordial anticipation for a Karnatik concert.

However, in general, the deeper meaning of the word is conflated with the notions of *nava-rasa* and other popular theories of post-colonial and nationalistic revival movements. This thesis reveals how the aesthetic attitudes of pedagogy, performance, and listening essentially augment the significance of the deeper meaning of *rasa* in *rāga* ontology. For example, the word

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<sup>53</sup> The Sanskrit word *guna* can be reduced to “quality,” “characteristic,” or “constituent”. According to Indian philosophy, there are three basic qualities or nature in every being, which determine its inherent characteristics. They are *sattva* – purity, light, harmony; *rajas* – activity, passion; and *tamas* – dullness, inertia, and ignorance (Grimes 1996: 131). Indian arts are categorized under *sattva* *guna*.

rasa is seldom, if ever, directly used during pedagogical sessions. But, in post-concert speeches, reviews, congratulatory expressions directed towards the artists, and also in designations of music festivals or awards, the notion of rasa is treated as a spontaneous, innate idea to delineate the meaning and value of a rāga performance. Therefore, the rasa experience is a part of the everyday, existential reality for devoted Karnatik practitioners. Additionally, words like *jeeva* (life), *bhāva* (emotion), *bhakti* (devotional love), *bhoo-vaikunta*,<sup>54</sup> etc., are used to express the idea of *aloukika* (other worldliness) in a performance. As Ganesh says, “as scholars, we can only debate on how rasa is brought into being, how one expresses rasa perceptions, the designation for the notion of rasa, but one cannot classify the notion as an obsolete theory of Sanskrit classical literature” (Ganesh 2016). Therefore, more than just a derivative of a classical Sanskrit theory, rasa is a fundamental mode of existence of rāga, “connecting to the universal which has no name, no form, no ego and no borders” (Rodríguez 2017: 63), where the cognition and emotion becomes unified.

## 5.2 Artist and Rasa

Within the Karnatik realm, the construction of an individual musical identity through distinctive competency, proficiency, and performing subjectivities of the elite, classical, masculine, and artistic status quo (within the historical and traditional power structure) form significant discourses of creating artistic subjectivity of a singer. However, the existential performative notion of rāga-rasa as agency for a performance pushes back against an overdetermined subjectivity that is possibly tied to neo-liberal constructions of the self. Here,

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<sup>54</sup> Bhoo represents the earth and Vaikunta is the holy abode of lord Vishnu. Therefore, Bhoo-vaikunta is the holy abode on the earth. It is, philosophically speaking, a spiritual world of realities beyond the limited material world of our experiences.

beyond the notions of artists' individual identities of status and artistry as the authority in performance, the artists' attitudes of obedience and compliance to a higher spiritual agency signifies a primordial role. The influence of the spiritual tradition of non-duality embodies notions of reflexive and liminal aesthetic attitudes which consequently opens a space of sublimation, a "samyoga" with rāga-rasa in which both the performers and rasikas are "pulled into." Additionally, for singers, "rāga is always in a state of becoming, like life itself, in a state of eternal mutation" (Menon 1996: 42). Within the social, political dynamics of subjective identities, there exists an intersubjective existential reality of performance which transcends egoistic and material selves. It is within this corporeality that artists become instruments who prepare themselves through extensive practice, *sadhana*, and await the samyoga in rāga-rasa.



**Figure 5.1: T. M. Krishna in concert in Dallas, TX, October 16, 2014.**

### 5.3 Multi-Phenomenology

In the process of writing this thesis, I discovered a nexus between the Western philosophy of phenomenology and Indian popular ways of constructing "experience" through the notion of *rasa*. There is vast scope to embrace theories of *rasa* and philosophy in understanding



art experience in India. Particularly, within the practice of Karnatik music, the effective notion of rasa is essentially a part of rāga ontology. Three potential future research topics that I identify here include: 1) the study of time and tāḷa's role in rasa experience, 2) the function of compositions and lyrical authority, and, finally and most importantly, 3) the role of bhakti in rāga experience. Firstly, even though, a rāga ālāpana rendition is not overtly bound to a tāḷa or rhythmic structure, every rāga is epistemologically conceptualized with an untold resonant pace. As an illustration, Nīlāmbari is a rāga which is always sung in a slower pace compared to the tempo of a rāga with similar svaras such as Śankarābharaṇa. How tāḷa influences rasa in a rāga performance and how each rāga defines its rāga-bhāva within the notion of "time," are a few important questions to address.

Historically, composers of the Karnatik tradition defined specific rāgas in which each of their compositions were structured. Performers and scholars believe that each of these rāgas were chosen depending on their intrinsic emotive quality which was appropriate for the emotional content of the lyrics. This also falls within the understanding of nava-rasas concept. I believe that examining the connection between the lyrical content and choice of rāgas can be valuable in the context of rasa in rāga.

While tāḷa and lyrics are tangible systems within the practice, bhakti, popularly understood as devotion, is intangible, yet a significant notion within the Karnatik realm. Research into how bhakti rasa came about as one of the foundational identities of Karnatik compositions and how it influences today's Karnatik rāga performance within the prevalent socio-political developments, make for a fascinating study in understanding the relationship between bhakti and rasa.

#### 5.4 The Ethnographer and the Informant: The Performer and the Rasika

In the chapter on “Fieldnotes In Ethnographic Research”, R. M. Emerson states that the,

Ethnographer can separate from what he says and does from what he observes others saying and doing, treating the latter as if it were unaffected by the former. But such a séparation distorts processess of inquiry and meaning of field “data” in several significant ways (1995,11).

As I began to gather and analyze the meaning of Karnatik rāga and rasa, within my own practice and experiences, I was trying to understand as to where I stand as an “ethnographer,”

phenomenologically examining something that has been a part of me since my childhood.

Indeed, being both a researcher and practitioner has blurred the boundaries between the two and has predisposed each other in defining my subjectivities and perspectives in this thesis.

I want to suggest that an interesting parallel case can be established between an artist’s role of being one’s own rasika, which is something that I have investigated as a fundamental mode of a rasic performance and using one’s own musical experiences as ethnographic material or doing research on oneself as ethnographic subject. Both involve an interesting kind of binary nature. The former is moving beyond the personal binaries in a way of achieving harmony of the performer and rasika within; and, the latter represents an ethnographic self-reflexive enquiry of conscious structures of experiences. However, both represent a mode of forming the “objective” experiential realm from a “subjectivity” of being in the world. In both cases, subjectivity and objectivity, are not independent of one another but are instead aspects of a unified existential reality. Consequently, for the personal embodiment of taste or rasa within us, we (both performers and rasikas) exist “in” rasa. I end with this analogy put forward by Sri Kanakadāsa

(509-609)<sup>55</sup> where he questions the dichotomy of subject and object within the sensorial process of tasting.

*Saviyu sakkareyoḷago, Sakkareyu saviyoḷago*  
*Saviyu sakkareyeradu jihveyoḷago?*  
*Jihve manasinoḷago, manasu jihveyoḷago*  
*Manasu jihvegaḷeradu ninnoḷago hariye?*  
--Sri. Kanakadāsa

Is the sweetness inside sugar? Or, sugar within sweetness?  
Do both sweetness and sugar reside in the sensory nature of the tongue?  
Is the mind (sensory perception) inside tongue, or the tongue inside one's consciousness?  
Are both tongue and consciousness inside "You?"

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<sup>55</sup> Kanakadāsa is a sixteenth century bhakti poet and philosopher from South India. He is identified as a prominent poet from the dvaita tradition.

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