

Saṅgīta in Saṅgītaratnākara and Kaṇṇāṭaka-Saṅgīta

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Saṅgītaratnākara is a text on 'saṅgīta' by Śārṅgadēva written around 1250-AD. It is well known that the study of a text by itself, cannot give us a knowledge of the performance of the music or of any performing art of a period, one can only visualise how the art might have been. Study of a text certainly gives one an understanding of the thinking on the art that must have taken place. The art that Saṅgītaratnākara has described has almost not survived in practice. However, many terms relating to art used in that text have survived, although their denotations and connotations have changed. This paper will dwell mainly on the term 'saṅgīta' and point out how its significance, as evident from its usage in Saṅgītaratnākara, underwent changes in the subsequent centuries and is now used in the sense of 'music'. The paper will also point out how there is a lack of clear understanding of the meaning of the term 'music' itself.

Saṅgīta is defined in Saṅgītaratnākara as a combination of 'gītam', 'vādyam' and 'nṛttam' (Śārṅgadēva 1992: 1,1,21cd). This definition of 'saṅgītam' certainly does not denote 'music' as normally understood. What is Saṅgītam then?

It is a theatrical presentation of an art form consisting of 'gīta', meaning the tonal form or music; 'vādyā', meaning the syllabic form created by drums; and nṛtta, meaning, the visual form created by the movement of the limbs of the body, namely, dance. Although the term 'vādyā' signifies 'musical instruments' in general, as a constituent of 'saṅgīta' it denotes the 'syllabic form' created by the drum instruments (avanaddha-vādyā).

Śārṅgadēva speaks of two traditions of theatrical presentations, 'mārga-saṅgīta' and 'dēśī-saṅgīta' (Śārṅgadēva 1992:1,1,22-24). Mārga-saṅgīta was the art created by God Brahma and performed by Bharata and his troupe, in the presence of God Śiva. Dēśī referred to that theatrical art made up of gīta, vādyā and nṛtta, which entertained the people of various regions in the country. The mārga theatre, that Śārṅgadēva speaks of, refers to the Nāṭya or the drama of Bharata described in the Nāṭyaśāstra. In the commencement of the fourth chapter of his work, Bharata narrates the account of presenting the nāṭya in front of Śiva.

The nāṭya of Bharata consisted mainly of a drama that was based on one of the ten forms of dramatic presentation called 'Daśa-rūpaka'. Dēśī refers to the theatre that came in a different tradition, not based on daśa-rūpaka. There are many kinds of theatrical formats that were prevalent in the non-mārga tradition and dēśī is one of them. In the dēśī theatre although the three limbs, gīta, vādyā and nṛtta were present, the dominant limb was gīta (music) followed by vādyā and nṛtta. The term dēśī is first heard of in the

work, Bṛhaddēśī of Maṭaṅga. In the later works it is the term 'saṅgīta' that is mainly used although the two terms are synonymous.

While in the mārṅa tradition we have scholars like Viśākhila, Dattila and Bharata describing the art, in the dēśī tradition the scholars met with are Kaśyapa, Maṭaṅga, Yāṭika, Kōhala and others.

Now we take up the significance of the three terms, gīta, vādyā and nṛtta.

Gīta

Gīta, or music, is defined as an assembly of svara-s that is pleasing. (Śārṅgadēva 1959: 4,1ab). There is a difference in the manner of description of 'gīta' found in the earlier works. Nāṭyaśāstra defines gāndharva (gīta or music) as being of the nature of svara (melody), tāla (time framework) and pada (verbal aspect). Bharata was speaking about the music of his times in which tāla was an indispensable limb in all compositional types and hence he chose to include 'tāla' as one of the elements, in his definition.

Vādyā

Among the vādyā-s in general, the stringed (tata) and the wind (suśira) produce tonal forms or melody or gīta (music). The avanaddha vādyā or the class of skin covered instruments does the embellishing (uparañjana) of the gīta. Śārṅgadēva speaks of vādyā-s like paṭaha which create certain syllabic combinations and based on which 'vādyā-prabandha' was composed. The term 'vādyā-prabandha' denotes compositions for drum instruments and not for melodic ones. Thus by 'vādyā' we understand

- the class of drum instruments (avanaddha)
- the syllabic phrases produced through specific techniques of playing the drums
- the compositions created by drums – e.g. vādyā-prabandha

Nṛtta

Śārṅgadēva places 'nṛttam', 'nṛtyam' and 'nāṭyam' in a hypothetical class created by him called 'nartanam'. Nāṭyam, nṛtyam and nṛttam are mentioned as the three art forms based on the limb movements of the human body. 'Nāṭyam' uses four kinds of 'abhinaya' for manifesting 'rasa' (Śārṅgadēva 1953:7,16cd-18a). Nṛtya uses only āṅgikābhinaya and expresses only bhāva. Nṛtta involves only the movement of limbs as prescribed for āṅgika (abhinaya), devoid of any kind of 'abhinaya' (Śārṅgadēva 1953:7,26 cd-28). Definition in Saṅgītaratnākara follows that of Daśarūpaka, a departure from the theory of Abhinavagupta which Śārṅgadēva normally follows.

Gīta – Vādyā – Nṛtta

All the three are primarily non-referential or non-representational arts. Gīta manifests sound or tonal structures which do not denote anything other than themselves, an autonomous art. Gīta however as an art form, namely, as seen in Karnataka music too, has chosen to incorporate, language, an external element to reach out to a larger audience. Both singing and melodic instrumental rendering use language. Further in its stage presentation, Karnataka music has also incorporated, 'vādyā' (drumming) as a limb.

Hindustani Music, in its sphere of singing, of course, uses language. Instrumental playing, in that style, however, has two divisions -

- gāyaki – takes the assistance of language
- bāja – keeps the language out

'Vādyā' or drumming, is used in Hindustani too, but only for manifesting tāla or time-measure and not for rhythmic accompaniment (at least not primarily).

Western music, in its instrumental forms, namely in symphony and concerto, has no language element. Opera, in the West, uses language heavily but in its presentation it is the music that is primary. Music of the Ballet too, is orchestra based and uses no language. Western art music does not use drums in its presentation format, at least as a rhythmic accompaniment.

Vādyā

In the sphere of performing arts in South India, vādyā or the art of drumming has generally not incorporated any other element and has remained independent. But the performance of an independent art of drumming, either of Taval or of Mṛdaṅgam is rarely seen. Taval performance is seen only in a Nāgasvaram concert. Mṛdaṅgam performance too is seen only in a music concert, although Mṛdaṅgam playing is an important limb of Bharatanāṭyam concert too. If at all a Mṛdaṅgam or Taval concert is performed, then it usually tends to take music and sometimes dance as its limb. In Kerala, we come across an independent art of drumming in the Ceṇḍai mēlam.

In Hindustani system, independent performance of vādyā, namely, of Tabalā and of Pakhāvaja are held usually with sāraṅgi or harmonium tune, called 'Laharā' providing the tāla framework.

In the West, art level drumming does not appear to exist traditionally.

Taurya-traya

In the context of saṅgīta we should also note the occurrence of the term

'taurya-traya', in the Saṅgitaratnākara, as a synonym. For instance, when describing the characteristics of -

- a) the composer of the music for saṅgīta performance - vāggēyakāra (Śārṅgadēva 1959:3,5)
- b) the composer of the vādyā prabandha - mukharī (Śārṅgadēva 1986: 6,1058d-1059a)
- c) the teacher for dance - upādhyāya (Śārṅgadēva 1953:7,1250)
- d) the audience for witnessing saṅgīta performance - sabhāsada (Śārṅgadēva 1953:7,1332)
- c) the chief guest at a saṅgīta performance - sabhāpati (Śārṅgadēva 1953:7,1337)
 - the knowledge of 'taurya-trika' / saṅgīta, in other words, proficiency in all the three arts, gīta, vādyā and nṛtta, is mentioned as being essential.

Performance of Saṅgīta

The performances representative of the saṅgīta theatre form are described in Saṅgitaratnākara. The description commences with the listing of the musicians and drummers who constitute the ensemble, called 'sampradāya'. The 'sampradāya' consists of drum players, players on wind instruments and singers (Śārṅgadēva 1953:7,1252-1256ab). The absence of any mention of performers on stringed instruments is notable.

Saṅgitaratnākara also describes the hall meant for the performance and describes the characteristics of the persons who would be qualified to be in the audience and that of the chief guest (Śārṅgadēva 1953:7,1331-1350cd).

The gīta - vādyā - nṛtta forms that are described under the saṅgīta performance are -

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| a) Śuddha-paddhati | b) Gauṇḍalī-vidhi or Dēśī-paddhati |
| c) Pēraṇī-paddhati | d) Kōlhāṭika |

In these presentations, especially in the first three, we observe

- a) the playing of the vādyā-prabandha,
- b) the performance of nṛtta to vādyā prabandha and to gīta-prabandha and,
- c) the singing of the prabandha songs by the dancer.

In the śuddha-paddhati, only the prabandha-s from 'śuddha' class are sung while in the Gauṇḍalī performance the sālaga-sūḍa-s are sung. In the gauṇḍalī-vidhi the performance of Rāga-ālapṭi and Rūpaka-ālapṭi belonging to anibaddha forms, by the dancer, is also seen. Thus the saṅgīta-performance seems to have been a theatrical

presentation of music with support from drumming and dancing. Music seems to have been the dominant limb.

Rasa

Śārṅgadēva declares that the aesthetic aim of saṅgīta performance is Rasa and proceeds to describe the nine rasa-s. This again is strange since Abhinavagupta does not accept 'rasa' as the aim of any art other than nāṭya (drama). And thus the inclusion of rasa section in the Saṅgitaratnākara does not seem to be well founded.

In the post 15th century period we gradually see the discontinuance of these saṅgīta performances and the emergence of presentation formats, such as Caturdaṇḍī, involving only the singing of prabandha-s. Some texts even alter the definition of 'saṅgītam' to include only 'gīta' and 'vādyā' (Ramanathan 1999:40). In other words nṛtta came to be dissociated from it. All the same, most of the texts which had a prefix 'saṅgīta' to them, 'Saṅgītadarpaṇa', Saṅgītapārijāta' and 'Saṅgītasārāmṛta', to name a few, continued to have a chapter on dance and described the prabandha compositions.

Conclusion

Today, the term 'saṅgīta' is used in a loose sense of a heterogenous group of three arts - gīta, vādyā and nṛtta -, a deviation from the sense of a single unified art, that we get from the Saṅgitaratnākara. For instance, the word occurring in the name of the organisation 'Sangeet Natak Akademi' seems to include these three arts and 'Natak', another art, namely, 'drama'. The 'Music Academy' of Chennai is rendered in Tamizh as 'Saṅgīta-vidvat-sabhai'. Apart from Music, dance and Harikatha are brought under this category, perhaps, justified by the broad sense, that the word 'saṅgīta' had conveyed earlier.

However the term 'music', itself, as defined in the west seems to be rather loose, since it includes not only tonal (melodic and harmonic) forms but also drumming. 'Music' is derived from the Greek word 'Muse' standing for Gods that inspired music and poetry (Willie Apel 1977:548) and not from a root word relating to sound, similar to the word 'gāndharva' that was derived from 'gandharva', standing for semi-divine beings that entertained gods with music and dance. A very strict distinction between the art of 'music' and the art of 'drumming' is not made in the West and hence drumming is taken as a part of music, unlike as in the Indian tradition, where 'vādyā', the art of syllabic structures, created by 'avanaddha-vādyā', is regarded as an art distinct from 'gīta', the latter standing for the art of tonal and melodic structures, or technically music. The word 'percussion instrument' exists in the West, which denotes instruments in which sound is generated through striking and includes not only instruments of indefinite pitch but also the ones with definite pitch and even those that have different tones, as for instance,

the Celesta, capable of producing tonal structures too.

The objective of this paper has been to establish that the term 'saṅgīta' as described in Saṅgitaratnākara stood for a composite art that had gīta (music), vādyā (drumming) and nṛtta (dance) as its limbs. As the art form gradually ceased to exist or acquired another name, the term 'saṅgītam' continued to be used and has today become a synonym for 'gīta' (melodic form). However the definition as found in Saṅgitaratnākara, is still being quoted, erroneously, in the modern context. The term is also being used in the western sense of 'music' and erroneously incorporates the art of drumming (vādyā) too. Perhaps it is time to understand and recognise the art of music (gīta) and percussive art (vādyā) as two independent and distinct art forms.

Note: For a more detailed treatment of the ancient concept of 'saṅgīta', please see Chapter-1 of the book 'Musical Forms in Saṅgitaratnākara', by this author, referred to above.

References

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