

THE SCHEME OF 72 MELAS IN CARNATIC MUSIC

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The formulation of the scheme of 72 Melas by Venkatamakhin is a great landmark in the history of Carnatic Music. Before him the classification of the Melas and the janya ragas as appears in the works of the previous writers is nebulous and confused. There is no apparent principle deducible in the classifications. Sometimes there are several melas with the same swaras. Often there is no identity discoverable between the melas and the janyas. The number of melas also varied from 15 to 23 and several groups were altogether left out. The object of these early writers was merely to classify ragas then current and that is also the scope of Venkatamakhin's work. But in evolving a scientific system based on the value of the swaras, he revealed the possibility of new ragas and indeed one may say that it was Venkatamakhin's system that rendered possible the wonderful pieces of Sri Tyagaraja in several new modes.

Latterly the scheme of Venkatamakhin has come in for some criticisms here and there. It has been stated that the scheme has resulted in the mechanisation of music and has reduced it to simple arithmetic; that it has tended to throw melody which is of the essence of the Carnatic Music into background and to weaken the true conception of raga. I shall now consider how far this criticism is well-founded.

That there is a whole world of difference between ragas and mere swaras is undoubtedly true. The ragas transcend the swaras and have features which give them a distinctness such as could be visualised in imagination.

Now a raga is totally different from a mere combination of swaras, which may make impressive combinations but cannot possess those fine shades of melody which make for the life of a raga. Indeed the idea of a mere combination of swaras or a scale as distinguished from raga is unknown to our music and goes against its genius.

The question then is : Did Venkatamakhin in inventing a possibility of 72 swara combinations and calling them Mela Ragas or Ragangas go against the true conception of raga and did he introduce a conception of scales as distinguished from ragas? It is my desire in this paper to show that Venkatamakhin when evolving the scheme of 72 meals has scrupulously adhered to the true conception of raga and that in his system there was no such thing as scale as distinguished from raga. If it was not a raga it had no existence at all.

Now I must explain what the notion of mela according to Venkatamakhin is. From the earliest days of Carnatic Music down to recent times a mela was understood to be a raga wherein the 7 notes occurred whether in the ascent or in the descent. It was then called Sampurna and was then taken as a Mela raga. It was not necessary that a Mela Raga should be a sampurna both in ascent and descent. Thus Sriraga is a Mela according to all the writers and that is the 22nd mela of Venkatamakhin. Likewise Kedaragoula is the 28th mela of Venkatamakhin. Following the same principle, a shadava omits one swara in both the ascent and descent like Sriranjini and in oudava 2 swaras will be absent as in Mohana and Madhyamavati.

Now when Venkatamakhin propounded the possibility of 72 melas according to the value of the swaras, he found that while some of them were represented by ragas actually in existence others were not. Now 40 of these melas represented what is known as vivadi swara combinations. Venkatamakhin adopted with reference to them the conception that a mela need not be sampurna in arohana and avarohana but that it should be melodious. Basing himself on these fundamentals he followed certain principles with reference to the vivadi combinations. In the case of Sudda-gandhara he realised that sa ri ga ma cannot be melodious, but ma ga ri sa could be melodious by the adoption of the gamaka called jaru. Likewise with reference to Suddhanishada he realised that pa dha ni sa would not be melodious, but sa ni dha pa could be melodious if the gamaka called jaru is utilised. Thus it happens that in the very first mela he adopts sa ri ma pa

dha sa and sa ni dha pa ma ga ri sa as its lakshana. This is called Kanakambari and it will be readily seen that it has the distinctive feature of a raga in it.

In dealing with Shatsruthi Rishabha he realised that ma ga ri sa would not be melodious and so he adopted only ma ri sa. But sa ri ga ma could be rendered melodious by the adoption of the gamaka called Thripam. Likewise in the case of Shatsruthi Dhaivata he adopted the prayoga pa dha ni sa with the Thripam, and avoided sa ni dha pa in the descent. This principle runs through the 40 vivadi melas.

Thus in his scheme of 72 melas, Venkatamakhin avoided vivadi combinations such as do not conduce to melody, and evolved the melas, avoiding the sampurna scale if it was a mere scale, and did not possess melodic properties such as would be necessary if it was to be a raga. Therefore his system represents an evolution on lines which are in consonance with the genius of Carnatic Music. In his system there are no scales miscalled "Ragas" while his scientific classification provided a background for all Carnatic ragas, those which were then in existence and those which might come into existence thereafter.

Lovers of Carnatic Music must regret that this scheme which combined both melody and science should have been departed from. A change has, in recent years, come over the system. A new idea of mela has sprung up. It is stated that a mela must be sampurna both in ascent and descent; and following that definition we have such classification as Shadava Sampurna, Sampurna-Shadava, Oudava-Sampurna and Sampurna-Oudava. This classification is again recent; and unknown to writers of recognised authority-such as Ramamatya, Govinda Deekshita, and Venkatamakhin. This innovation cannot be earlier than the end of the 18th century because it is unknown to Tulaja Maharaja, who records the contemporary music of Tanjore in the middle of the 18th century; and but for the fact of its having been published in the first printed books on music by Singaracharyulu Brothers they would not have acquired such widespread currency.

Under this system, even in vivadi melas, the arohanam and avarohanam must be sampurna. That this conception stresses the Swaras and ignores the requirements of melody must be conceded. For example take the very first mela under the new dispensation; the arohana is sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa; that is to satisfy the new concept of mela; and it is called Kanakangi. Now Venkatamakhin, acting under the old conception of mela and emphasising melody adopted only sa ri ma pa dha sa as the arohana; and under the revised scheme it ceased to be a mela and became a janya. But Kanakangi is a scale and Kanakambari is a Raga. In the same manner we find that under the new scheme many of the melas of Venkatamakhin are classed as janyas, an new melas which are merely scales take their place. Thus the criticism that the scheme of 72 melas is destructive of raga bhava and tends to mechanise music is true to a large extent of the modified system which is now in vogue but is not true of the system as originally featured by Venkatamakhin.

From this it should follow that the revised scheme of 72 melas which has latterly come to be adopted should be condemned as an innovation for the worse, as tending to destroy the best elements in the Carnatic Music. It is therefore surprising to find that the new scheme should find support from not a few of the present day theorists. One reason for this is that Sri Tyagaraja is supposed to have lent his support to it. It would be strange indeed if the great Tyagaraja set his approval on the theory of scales in Kanakangi and the like melas. But what is the warrant for associating the name of that great composer with a lame theory? It is said that he has composed kirtanas in ragas like Kharaharapriya, Kiravani and so forth; and they are to be found only in the new scheme, and not in the scheme of Venkatamakhin. True, but it is forgotten that ragas like Kharaharapriya and Kiravani are only in the non-vivadi melas. Venkatamakhin himself had stated that under his scheme new ragas were possible and himself invented the mela Simharavam now called Hemavati. Therefore the use of ragas like Kharaharapriya, Kiravani etc., is in accordance with the scheme of Venkatamakhin and does not violate any principle of melody and does not lend any support to the idea of a scale apart from ragas. On the other hand

in the vivadi melas the authentic kirtanas of Tyagaraja show that he adopted the system of Venkatamakhin. For example, Manoranjini, Chayanata, Nabhomani and the like, are all melas of Venkatamakhin and in them we have great pieces of Tyagaraja. And there are no authentic compositions in which Tyagaraja adopts vivadi combinations such as sa ni dha pa with shatsruti dbaivata, ma ga ri sa with shatsruti rishabha, sa ri ga ma with suddhagandhara and pa dha ni sa with suddhanishada. The only exception is in the case of ragas like Varali where according to tradition suddha gandhara is slightly higher than the chatussrutirishabha and thus the vivadi dosha is avoided. This is in accordance with the practice of Venkatamakhin.

Now in the printed editions of Tyagaraja's kirtanas, a few of them are stated to be in Ragas which are among the vivadi melas of the new school. This is put forward as proof that Tyagaraja adopted the new system even in respect of the vivadi melas. But the mistake lies with the editors who have identified them and not with the composer himself. For example, take the piece "Evvare Ramayya". It is said to be in Gangeyabhushani. But there is no ma ga ri sa in it, and without ma ga ri sa it loses its character as a scale under the new scheme. It has only ma ri sa and it is therefore clearly a piece in Gangatarangini of Venkatamakhin. A critical analysis of the pieces of Tyagaraja in these melas will reveal that he was quite against the scales- invention of Kanakangi and its sister melas; and that he, belonging as he does, to the sishyaparambara of Venkatamakhin, followed only his system of melody; and that he does not lend any countenance the scales theory. There is no authentic composition of his in Kanakangi and similar melas. On the other hand his genuine kirtanas are on the lines of Venkatamakhin - such as "Atugarathani" in Manoranjini, "Idi Samayamura" in Chayanata, "Jagadanandakaraka" in Nata, "Nayeda" in Nabhomani, "Banturiti" and "Vachamagocharame"

It should not be forgotten that these 40 vivadi melas are all of them covered by great pieces of that illustrious contemporary of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, whose breath was melody and they reveal how following on the lines of Venkatamakhin, melody could be evolved. In my

opinion, there are no sufficient materials for holding that the two great contemporary musicians followed different schools of music whatever differences in style there might be.

Then there are a few who are moved by the fact that the late Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar has composed a mela ragamalika under the new theory. Apart from the fact that this composition was made to order, and does not represent any musical practice of that gifted musician, it cannot be denied that the piece was practically still-born; and never came into vogue; and this is not a little significant when it is remembered that Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar held an unrivalled position among the contemporary musicians and had numerous sishyas and large admiring audiences. The fact is that the piece was primarily a business proposition with Maha Vaidyanatha Aiyar and it is only his sishyas and admirers that have chosen to put it forward as a composition of outstanding artistic merit.

And finally there are those who prefer this system because of its simplicity and perfection on paper. But art does not thrive on mere arithmetical formulae or mechanised rules. And however satisfactory the "Kanakangi" system may be for purpose of mass teaching in schools and institutions, it has no place where there is an artistic ideal to be put forward and sustained.

It is therefore the plain duty of all lovers of the higher ideals of Carnatic Music, to protest against the new system, and protest emphatically. We are seeing before us the disastrous consequences of adopting the scale theory of "Kanakangi" system. Ancient and natural ragas which cannot be defined in term of swaras, and which can be pictured only by the imagination, are falling into desuetude. Some of them like Dvijavanti and Ghanta are half-dead. Others like Saveri, Punnagavarali, Yadukulakambhoji and Ahiri are losing ground. Instead we have new combinations of swaras miscalled ragas, and they are usurping the place of the old ragas. It requires imagination to develop ragas; it requires only practice to manipulate swaras. The former is a gift; the latter is an acquisition. The system of swaras and scale is a gift to plodding men without imagination;

and thus its adoption has tended to destroy the Raga-chaya, and discount imagination.

This is a matter for grave concern for the future of the Carnatic Music. I am in fear that those finer shades called "Gamakas", which breath life and melody in ragas will gradually disappear; and we shall have instead regular modes with clear cut swaras, with no grace, with no beauty, and with no life. We shall have killed natural living persons, and shall have got instead brilliant dolls. I do not contemplate the prospects with equanimity. I think, lovers of music should take a serious view of the situation, and rescue Carnatic Music and Sri Tyagaraja from the baneful effects of the scales-theory embodied in the Kanakangi system; and restore the concept of raga for which Carnatic Music has always stood and restore in full the system of Venkatamakhin which is based upon it.

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