

THE MELAKARTĀ—A CRITIQUE

K. V. RAMACHANDRAN

The melakartas have dominated our musical thinking of the past 100 years so thoroughly and influenced our musical beliefs and practices so intimately, that it is perhaps time we examine what these Melakartas are, mainly to clarify some of the implications of the Melakarta theory, whether it has furthered the development of the art or arrested its development.

Mela denoted a group of svaras. At one stage in the history of our music—Vidyāraṇya was probably the originator of the practise—the Rāgas came to be grouped and classified in terms of Melas. Rāgas constituted the substance of our music and they were far too intricate to be defined by any mechanical formula based exclusively on svaras: the svaras were just one of the several units—the vowels let us say—that contributed to the making of the Rāga, which implied besides a graded variety of importance among the various svaras timed and free and comprehended movements of various kinds in addition to certain characteristic figures and exclusive phrases not to mention a variety of pauses, initial, medial and final. The sound picture that resulted from all these factors was the Rāga. The Mela never attempted to define the Rāgas, but just indicated the more prominent svaras requisitioned by them. The Mela was just a label and at no time did it have anything more than a classifying sense. To summarise the more prominent svaras that found employment in the Rāga is not to define the Rāga because the svara was just one of the many units of which the Rāga is composed; it did not imply and taboo that svaras not comprehended under the Melas should under no account be resorted to. It did not matter for instance whether the Mela was Gurjari or Gaula so long as people understood the group of svaras that the names mnemonically summarised. In

other words there was a fluidity about the system of Melas which was never forgotten as long as the early Mela system was in vogue; and it was in vogue as recently as the time of Tulajāji. It was the Mela that was derived from the Rāgas; the Mela was a generalised hypothetical term improvised by the musical authors at a time when the earlier classifications based on the character of the music were found not sufficient and there was a need to emphasise the svaras. The Mela was not a Rāga; it was just a hypothetical term with a classifying sense.

Unfortunately current musical belief among professional musicians as well as theoretical experts is that the Melas is the parent and that the Rāgas are the offspring, that the Mela implies svara taboos and that the Aroha and Avaroha sañcāras are sufficient to define the Rāga. As explained before the Mela does not define the Rāga; and the aroha and avaroha sañcāras are but one among many features of the Rāga. For the present state of our musical beliefs, a certain work named Saṅgraha Cūḍāmaṇi is directly and indirectly responsible.

Venkatamakhin who flourished during the Naik period, among others, made an attempt to codify the Rāgas current in his time under the Melas that earlier writers had already improvised; but he was responsible for the suggestion that by mechanical manipulation of the svaras it was possible to derive 72 Melas; but he did not elaborate the suggestion nor give names to the 72 possible groups. This was probably done by a certain Muddu Venkatamakhin said to be a grandson of the original Venkatamakhin and it was perhaps he who gave the names beginning with Kanakāmbari catalogued in the anubandha of the published edition of the Caturdaṇḍiprakāśikā, in addition to certain Rāgas that were not current in Venkatamakhin's time, but had since invaded

the south and come to stay. Muddu Venkatamakhin belongs to the early Maratha period. At a still later stage perhaps, the new fangled system of Melakartas received some final touches, but the system itself did not gain general acceptance and was presumably confined to certain families, because long afterwards almost in the times of Śrī Tyāgarāja, we find Tulajāji defining the Rāgas current in his time in terms of the pre-Venkatamakhin Melas with additional data calculated to visualise the Rāgas more precisely. We are thus fortunately in a position to assay the exact musical inheritance of the great composers Tyāgarāja, Śyāma Śāstri and Muthusvami Dīkṣita. The period immediately preceding these great men was one of intense musical activity; Purandaradas and Kṣetrajña divide the honours of composition and among master craftsmen are Vīrabhadrayya, Adiyappaya, Vīna Kalahasti Ayya and Sonti Venkatasubbayya from some of whom Tyāgarāja, Śyāma Śāstri and Dīkṣitar learnt their music. An analysis of the music of Śyāma Śāstri and Dīkṣitar reveals that these great composers are interpreting the music of the past almost exclusively—a great past, of which we could have no conception, but for them. Tyāgarāja is an indefatigable interpreter of the past as well; but if with one eye he looks backward, with the other he looks forward as well. Like Prajāpati he creates his own media and adores his Rāma not alone with jewel-words newly fashioned, but also with jewel-music newly created. It is this facet of Tyāgarāja that distinguishes him from his illustrious contemporaries.

To estimate the real achievement of Tyāgarāja, we have to distinguish between the Rāga media that he inherited from the past—an inheritance shared by all the three great composers—and the media that he actually created. However this is not easy because the Rāga nomenclature of the Kīrtanas of Tyāgarāja are in a state of shocking confusion. Tyāgarāja has been singularly unfortunate in his editors; inspired by the Saṅgraha Cūḍamaṇi, each Apūrva Rāga kīrtana has been given some novel name by these editors. One Rāga is disintegrated to yield 10 different names for none of which there

is warrant and all of which are non-existent. Such a state of affairs completely disguises the existence of certain wonderful Rāgas whose real form is distorted out of shape by such disintegration; it has also effectively disguised the fecundity of the master who could compose such diverse patterns out of a single Rāga. We have lost the Rāga, but gained ten names; the exaltation of the Melakartā based upon a misreading of what it denoted and the mistaken corollaries that the svaras are never to be transgressed etc. are responsible for the banishment of our Apūrva Rāgas. We do not even know that there are such Rāgas, much less do we know how to employ them. Ignorance of the Apūrva Rāgas and of Tyāgarāja's musical inheritance is responsible for such absurd identifications; such identifications are responsible for subsequent attenuations and distortions of the Rāgas in question. Guided by the Saṅgraha Cūḍamaṇi, the kīrtanas 'Rāga sudhā rasa' and 'Sārvabhauma sāketa Rāma' have been identified as Āndolikā and Bhañjaram whereas both the kīrtanas are in Devamanoharī. 'Nāda tanum anisām' and 'Mokṣamu galada' have been identified as Cittarañjanī and Sāramati whereas both are compositions in a pre-Tyāgayyan Rāga called Gopikāvasanta. 'Nenendu' labelled Harikāmbhoji (which the late Mr. C. R. S. renamed Kannada Behag on his own authority) is really a pre-Tyāgayyan Rāga called Taraṅgiṇī in which Dīkṣitar has a song 'Māye tvam yāhi'. In this example, our musicians today assume that the face of Vināyaka resembles a monkey and set about fashioning it after that type. 'Vinaya' is not Pratāpavarālī but a pre-Tyāgayyan Rāga called Naṭanārayaṇī. Among other Rāgas that have been so cruelly identified or disintegrated are Kannada gaula, Kannada Vaṅgāla, Īśa Manoharī, Abherī and many others. Instead we have fantastic names like Navarasakannada, Bahudārī, Kalāvati, Nalinikānti etc. Among the kīrtanas grouped under Darbaru, there is plenty of confusion. A self-conscious and deliberate artist like Tyāgarāja has given some unique interpretations of the Apūrva rāgas, but the ignorant and self-complacent identifications of these begun under the auspices of the Saṅgraha Cūḍamaṇi has deprived us of these where

indeed it has not distorted them as in the case of Tārāṅgiṇī. It is an irony that our learned theorists are most anxious to define these non-existent Rāgas and even our university-syllabuses are preoccupied with these.

How did such a state of affairs arise? It arose when printing was introduced to India. The late Mr. Singarachariar who was among the first to print kīrtanas had necessarily to name the Rāgas when he printed the kīrtanas. In his earliest publication 'Sarvārtha Sāra Saṅgraha' he solved the problem by giving fantastic names of his own coining to the Apūrva Rāgas of Tyāgarāja's kīrtanas. There was a gap between the demise of Tyāgarāja and the time when his kīrtanas became popular. When after this hiatus people rediscovered him, there was a real need to know what the Apūrva Rāgas were in which he had composed in such prolific abundance. When Singarachariar published his Sarvārtha Sāra Saṅgraha, he lacked the means to solve the problems and so fell back on his own imagination. But when he published his next book, he had discovered the Saṅgraha Cūḍāmaṇi and all his subsequent identifications are based on that book. As Singarachariar is our first printed musical Manu, the Parāśaras and Yājñavalkyas that came later have just been faithfully copying him without ascertaining the soundness of his identifications.

In 1927 the writer chanced upon a copy of the Saṅgraha Cūḍāmaṇi at the Adyar library and as there was such marked agreement between this work and the identifications of Singarachariar, he thought that Singarachariar must have used this work though without acknowledgment. This work which is a reflex of the Melakartā scheme elaborated by Muddu Venkatamakhin names the Melakartās 'Kanakāṅgi' 'Ratnāṅgi' etc. Saṅgraha Cūḍāmaṇi came into existence at a time when there was a need to know the correct nomenclature of some of Tyāgarāja's kīrtanas. Suffice it to say that the identifications are mostly incorrect and that the work reveals not only an ignorance of Sanskrit, but an ignorance of

earlier musical literature and a colossal ignorance of the Apūrva Rāgas—the Rāgas that Tyāgarāja inherited from the past. If the author had been aware of Rāgas like Gopikāvasanta, Kannadagaula, Devamanoharī Naṭanārayaṇī, etc. which were in existence even before Tyāgarāja was born, he would not have blundered. Part of his undoing was due the fantastic edifice of Melakartās and their imagined corollaries. The work suffers from another serious defect. Though Muddu Venkatamakhin gave names to the 72 Melakartās renaming some of the older names in the process, Rāgas like Sāma Varāli, Bhinna ṣaḍja, Vasanta Bhairavī etc. that existed even previous to his time, the Rāgas are easily recognisable from his list because he has just added a prefix to the names calling them Gānasamavarāli, Dhunibhinnaṣaḍja, Geya Hejeji, Vāṭi Vasanta Bhairavī, etc. There is no break with tradition involved. But the Saṅgraha Cūḍāmaṇi calls these Gānamūrti, Dhenuka, Gāyakapriyā, Vakulābharaṇa etc. The prefix which determines the number of the Melakartā is more important than the Rāga. The substance of music of Jayadeva and Śārngadeva is not very different from that of our present day music, only the nomenclature has undergone considerable changes. With Muddu Venkatamakhin's names we could still rediscover the Rāgas of Aṣṭapadī, whereas we cannot do it with those of Saṅgraha Cūḍāmaṇi. What was the need to distort the names of Rāgas and produce a freak theory? It was clearly a want of equipment. At best the theory was tentative and expedient a temporary one.

Unfortunately this theory has come to color our beliefs and practises. In the light of fuller knowledge now available it would be proper if our music scholars devote some part of their valuable time to a correct identification of the Rāgas of Tyāgarāja kīrtanas. It is only when this is done that an appraisal of the art of a great composer would be possible. In the process we would gain certain wonderful Rāgas which like some of our marvelous Naṭarājas have become rusty and mud-smeared by interminable burial underground. Musical restoration is the need of the hour.