

Topic: The Nōṭṭusvaram-s of Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar

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Abstract:

The Nōṭṭusvara Sāhitya-s (literally “note-svara-s”) constitute a unique corpus of 39 compositions attributed to Muttusvāmi Dīkṣitar (1775–1835), composed predominantly in Sanskrit with a small number in Telugu, and explicitly notated in European staff notation during the early 19th century.

These works, set to well-known British, Irish, and Scottish melodies—including marches, anthems, folk airs, and dance tunes—represent one of the earliest documented instances of deliberate harmonic engagement within the Carnatic tradition. This study examines the musicological implications of Dīkṣitar’s adaptations, with particular attention to his systematic treatment of harmonic cadence (especially the perfect authentic cadence and its resolution to the tonic), the strategic placement of melodic accents in relation to strong metrical beats, and the structural reorganisation of European binary and ternary forms to accommodate rāga-based elaboration and gamaka ornamentation.

Despite operating in a milieu with minimal formal exposure to Western harmonic theory, Dīkṣitar demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of functional harmony, evident in his consistent alignment of melodic resolutions with underlying tonic–dominant relationships and his selective modification of original tunes to reinforce modal integrity. The investigation integrates textual analysis of the surviving notations preserved at the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, Chennai (D. 2735), comparative study of source melodies identified in British collections of the period (Luduvik 2009; Peterson 2012), and performance-based exploration of interpretive possibilities that preserve both Carnatic aesthetic principles and the harmonic implications inherent in the borrowed material.

Far from mere curiosities or colonial-era novelties, the Nōṭṭusvara compositions emerge as deliberate experimental works that prefigure later cross-cultural syntheses in Indian art music and illuminate Dīkṣitar’s broader compositional philosophy of integrating diverse musical systems without compromising rāga-centric idiom.

