

Ragas of Jayadeva's Ashtapadis

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Ashtapadis are not sung today in any part of country in modes (Varnamettu) in which they were sung by Jayadeva himself. Their original forms or modes have been totally lost to us.

'Gitagovindam' is one of the most widely distributed books; there are several editions of it and of repeated reprints too. While the Devanagari editions give the names of obsolete ragas of the medieval period, their counterparts in southern languages and scripts give only the names of ragas and talas now in vogue of the Carnatic system.

The names of ragas and talas given at the opening of each ashtapadi in Samskrit editions of the lyric do not at all vary from one another. But it appears to me that the ragas and talas indicated in the note preceding the text of ashtapadis in the Devanagari editions might not actually belong to the period of Jayadeva and proposed by himself but would appear to have been current only a few centuries later.

Comprised of twentyfour songs, each with stanzas besides the dhruvapada or burden, the kavya is divided into twelve chapters. Gitagovindam follows the Rasalila depicted in the 10th chapter of Bhagavatapurana. The number of ashtapadis 24 represent the 24 letters of Gayatri of 24000 verses of the greatest epic Ramayana. The twelve sagas of the kavya also denote the Dwadasakrishari Mantra in the Lord Vasudeva.

That each ashtapadi has eight stanzas is also reminiscent of the great Ashtakshara mantra in the Upasana of Sriman Narayana.

Besides the twentyfour ashtapadis, there are ninetyone slokas in different meters and as such they are representative of the vrittas of the sanskrit prosody.

In the south, the Gitagovindam is chanted from the beginning to end in musical chores,

(Bhajana Sampradaya) known as 'Radha Kalayana Mahotsavam'. In houses the practice is to sing an ashtapadi each evening and to celebrate the divine communion of the Lord with Mahalakshmi in the form of Radha on the 24th day.

It is also practice to conduct Radha Kalyanam in the course of two or three days.

Essentially the Gitagovindam is an opera depicting the rasa dance. Sri Krishan captivates the Gopis with his flute and his own attractive form. He moves freely among the gopis indulging with his flute and his own attractive form. He moves freely among the gopis indulging in all kinds of amorous sports. As Jayadeva himself has indicated in different places in the Kavya his devoted wife Padmavati danced to the singing of Jayadeva. Thus it is plain that the work was initially - whether by design or otherwise - devoted to the realm of dance. While a whole work Sangitaraja (vide reference elsewhere in this study) has been devoted to the method of singing the ashtapadis the dance tradition would also appear to have been preserved on scrolls by savants of that lore. The Saraswathi Mahal of Tanjore has brought out a book (Madras Government Oriental Series No. LXI) on the abhinaya of Gitagovindam. The Saraswathi Mahal had been able to retrieve two manuscripts of this work both breaking off at the 17th ashtapadi.

Gitagovindam has rightly been held as the oldest and most complete of the classics and natya laskhya. In the thirties, C. R. Srinivasa Iyengar hailed it - "it is the highest authority on the subject - the last word upon it. It would be a happy day when the science and the art of nartana would be brought up from the profound depths of the Ocean of Ignorance and ill informed criticism and condemnation that now clouds their fair face. It must take its legitimate place by the side of the sister art of song and instrument as an integral factor in the public

and private education of our boys and girls. In fact, like music in its vocal and instrumental aspect, it must be brought back to our homes from its present miserable abode in social gutters and brethers and from among the outcaste of Hindu social life, into the company of clean and respectable men and women. And then, the value, the importance, the greatness and the absolute necessity of Gitagovinda would be realised by art devoted public".

Compositions of the Carnatic Trinity, Sri Thyagaraja, Sri Muthuswami Dikshithar and Sri Syama Sasthri, as well as of the few of their elder contemporaries have been preserved to us. These compositions are sung exactly in the same form or mode as they sang them subject only to limitations on account of equipment or capacity of the today's musicians and of variegated supplements to each line in the name of sangathis. Preservation of the form or mode has been possible because of two reasons: (i) The composers took care to teach them personally to their disciples; and (ii) The raga - thala system has taken a definite shape since the middle of the seventeenth century and the gurukula system has strengthened the respect for traditions.

We are unable to get at the original modes of tunes for the ashtapadis for another reason also. The books which would appear to have contained notes on the method of singing had been lost while commentaries on the text or sahitya have been preserved, because of their literary value.

Sri William Jones wrote, "when I first read the songs of Jayadeva who has prefixed to each the name of the mode in which it was to be sung, I had hopes of procuring the original music, but the pandits of the South referred me to those of the West, and the Brahmans of the West would have sent me to those of the North, while they of Nepal and Kashmir declared that they had no ancient music, but imagined that the notes of the 'Gita Govinda' must exist, if anywhere where the poet was born". But the scholar has proceeded, as many others has done, to assume that the ragas and talas appearing in many editions in the introduction

note preceding each ashtapadi were actually indicated by the poet Jayadeva himself. These indications would not have been given by the poet himself for three reasons: (1) The word 'Giyate' means 'it is being sung' in such and such ragas. Had the composer Jayadeva himself indicated the ragas the word should be 'Gaya'. (2) The raga name given in such prefatory notes agree more with the later commentaries and varies with those indicated by Kumbha Rana himself in Rasikapriya in the sixteenth century. See below (3) The royal commentator even professes to suggest the proper ragas and talas after deep study as the original modes had been consigned to the oblivion by 'time' an inevitable factor and this can be verified from the fact that the system of ragas indicated in 'Sangita Ratnakaram' (Thirteenth century) have become totally unintelligible unlike those indicated in books which followed the period of Gopalanayaka (around turn of the twelfth century).

Poet Jayadeva lived before Indian music bifurcated into two systems - (i) South Indian or Carnatic and (ii) North Indian or Hindustani - during the thirteenth century. Maharana Kumbhaji of Mewar had authored a work 'Sangitaraja'. Devoted wholly to the modes of singing the ashtapadis and slokas of Geethagovinda. Profuse references are made to Sangitataraja in his other work Rasikapriya.

The poet Jayadeva lived at the turn of the eleventh century and the earlier part of the twelfth century. The earliest composition in the nature of a commentary on Gitagovinda is the one known as Rasikapriya of Kumbhaji Rana of Mewar referred to above. Kumbha Rana was the grandfather of the husband of Meeerabai. This work is substantially a commentary on Gitagovinda bringing out its literary excellence. Of course references are made to "Sangitaraja" at the end of the notes to each Ashtapadi and to certain slokas to denote the ragas, talas, places of rest and elongation and other musical aspects. This work, Rasikapriya, is available to us as also an edition of Gitagovinda together with another commentary Rasamanjari of Sankara Misra, apparently of the still later period. A third commentary (traditional literary

vyakya) is ascribed to Cherukuri Lakshmidhara who was encouraged and patronised by Immididevaraya, Prince of Vijayanagar (1565 to 1570), and also the father of Chatura Damondhara (author of Sangita Darpana). The commentary is known by the name 'Sruthiranjani'; there are profuse quotations by the commentator from many books on music - Ragadipika, Sangita Choodamani, Vamadeviyam and Rangalakshmvilasam. The Rasamanjari gives the names of the ragas and talas of each ashtapadi but no further notes. Thus it has become impossible to recover the original tunes from any source.

As already noticed, the bifurcation of Indian music into the northern and southern system arose only after Jayadeva's time. Books on Indian Music preceding his days were Natyasasthra of Bharata, Sangita Makaranda of Narada and Brihaddesi of Matanga. The system of music explained in these books are wholly outside our familiarity and the ragas propounded in them are not comprehensible at all to be related to the modern ragas either of the north or of the south. The 'magnum opus' on Indian musicology was the Sangita Ratnakara of Sarangadeva of the thirteenth century; the raga pattern expounded in this work is equally incomprehensible to the musicians or musicologists of this century. 'Swaramela Kalanidhi' of Ramamatya (1575 AD) and 'Rasa Vibodha' of Somanatha (1609) are the earliest books on musicology comprehensible to scholars of today. Still later appeared 'Sangita Parijata' of Ahobala (both on the northern system).

Thus while compositions of the musical trinity and their elder contemporaries can be sung without losing the mood of the composer, it is impossible to present the moods of earlier composers. of course many of the lakshnagitas of Venkatamakhi (author of Chaturdandi-prakasika - which is the bedrock of our present Raga-Mela system) are still available to us with

notation and can be sung with certainty; it is a pity that no one has learnt them personally from a line of succession of music teachers or musicians; nor does any elder musician care to follow the course effectively and propagate them.

One thing hardly needs an explanation. Presentation of any musical piece would be best only where the mood of the raga and the mood of the composition synchronise.

A faithful understanding of the text is necessary on the part of the musician setting them to music. On this aspect there can be nothing but regret particularly because musicians of the present days ignore the sahitya totally or make a pretence to understand it, if it is in his language. Fortunately great bhagavathas like Sridhara Ayyaval, Bodendra Swamigal have been following a set of ragas and talas for singing ashtapadis which can be said to be the most appropriate once as these saints has knowledge of both music and poetry and had also cultivated enduring devotion. In fact one who understands the import of the ashtapadis would definitely prefer his conventional raga set up to the scintillating and momentary but vascillating and unimpressive modern tunes.

Reserving a discussion on the merits of the ragas proposed nowadays for each ashtapadi to a separate dissertation of the ragas ascribed to the ashtapadis by (1) manuscripts left by the unknown compiler which have been consulted for publication of the book 'Gitagovindam' by Nirnayasagar Press. (2) Kumbajirana as given in Rasikapriya commentary (later part of fifteenth century) (3) Sankaramisra in Rasamanjari commentary (apparently in the seventeenth century) and (4) of the bhagavatars of the Cauvery Delta of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. □