

1 Introduction

The historical study of Indian dance is an interesting area of dance research. It involves a multi-dimensional study of treatises, sculptures, manuscripts and other sources. An important aspect in the study of dance is the study of the music that accompanies it. In the historical study and reconstruction of Indian dance, re-construction and presentation of the original music is one of the challenges. In this essay, an attempt is made to outline the challenges in the study and re-construction of historical music from musical notations in manuscripts and oral tradition.

Indian Music is primarily melodic in nature. Over the centuries, it has evolved in various ways, incorporating delicate graces and nuances. It has primarily been passed on from one generation to another through oral tradition. However, at different stages, there have been earnest efforts to capture the features and embellishments of the music through notation and also document the musicological concepts in treatises (lakṣaṇa granthas). Though Indian Music dates back to several centuries B.C., it is only over the last hundred years or so that a plethora of audio recordings have been created which reproduce original music in a fairly accurate manner. The primary source for studies in Indian Music of the earlier centuries are manuscript notations and musicological treatises. In order to study songs of these centuries, the notations have to be looked at and interpreted according to musicological descriptions in lakṣaṇa grantha-s.

We now look at the challenges associated in the study of songs from musical notations in manuscripts and in oral tradition:

2 Reconstruction of historical music from manuscript notations

There are many songs notated in palm-leaf, paper and other manuscripts that are several hundred years old. The study of these songs presents several challenges, in different stages in the study of the songs from manuscript notations. These have been discussed below:

2.1 Survey of manuscripts:

There are several manuscript collections in libraries that contain a huge volume of musical notations. However, the catalogues of these manuscripts usually contain only bare details of what the manuscripts contain. Many times, a list of songs present in such manuscripts is not available. The

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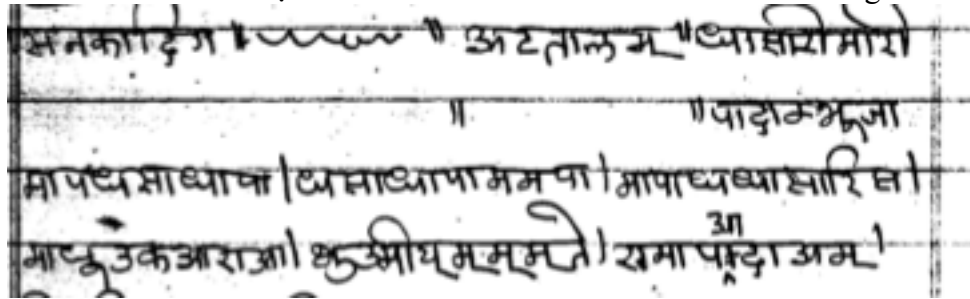
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researcher usually has to examine each manuscript folio by folio to first list out all the songs present in the manuscript. If a particular song is being searched, it is like looking for a needle in a haystack. The process of looking through manuscripts to identify songs is a very time-consuming one.

2.2 Reading, transcribing and editing the song notations

Once a song notation is identified in a manuscript, reading, transcribing and editing it poses several challenges, such as:

- 1) Many times, letters, symbols and instructions in the notations are not clear or decipherable. Apart from these, in some cases there are obvious scribal errors in the manuscript.
- 2) In some instances, the song notations seem incomplete - sections or sub-sections appear to be missing. In some cases, the span of the s̥hitya syllables do not match the span of the corresponding svara-s. The s̥hitya sometimes appears corrupt as sets of syllables do not seem to form meaningful words.
- 3) In many cases, the tāla markings in the notations are not clear – the vertical lines in the notations seemed randomly placed and a clear structure of tāla cannot be deciphered from their placement. Even in cases where the tāla structure seems clear from the placement of vertical lines, the distribution of akṣara-s across tāla āvarta-s in a section of a song is not always uniform.



In the above image of a Thanjavur manuscript notation, we see vertical lines after 11 akṣara-s (after the phrase *da sā dā pā ma ma pā*) and after 12 akṣara-s (after the phrase *mā pā da dā sā ri sa*). The tāla mentioned is 'ātātālam' which has a span of 14 akṣara-s per āvarta. In this case, it is difficult to decipher the tāla structure.

- 4) In some sections, s̥hitya passages are given without svara-s. Some instructions are given in such cases that imply the repetition of melody from earlier passages in the current passage. The exact melody for the s̥hitya these passages is not totally clear from these instructions.

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2.3 Analysis of the re-constructed notations

This phase involves studying the edited notations and deciphering the musical information in them – the features pertaining to the musical form, rāga and tāla. There are many issues pertaining to such analysis.

1) Musical Form:

- a. While studying the musical form, in some cases, the information pertaining to melody repetition between segments in the same section, refrain etc. is not clear.
- b. There may not be a close correspondence between lakṣaṇa definitions and what is actually seen in the manuscript notations with respect to musical forms.

2) Melodic Features:

- a. Much important information pertaining to the rāga features such as the mēla name, svara type (śuddha ri, catuḥśruti ri etc.) , registers (mandra, madhya, tāra) etc. is missing in the notations.
- b. From lakṣaṇa definitions, the exact pitch positions of svara-s, gamaka-s applied to svara phrases and the exact kāla pramāṇa-s of svara-s cannot be determined and compared with the musical notations.

3) Tāla features:

- a. In some cases, the tāla structure is indeterminable from the notations - information about the aṅga-s of the tāla-s (druta, laghu etc.) is missing. Sometimes, even the total count of akṣara-s per āvarta is not known.
- b. The exact way of reckoning a tāla is not known by the notations – the kriyā-s such as beat, wave and finger-counting are not specified.

3 Study of historical music from Oral Tradition:

The word ‘tradition’ implies a custom or practice that is handed over from generation to generation without much alteration. In Indian Music, we have oral traditions of music attributed to musical composers/teachers which apparently retain certain discipline, conventions and style of rendering music. However, in these traditions, it is often seen that several changes have taken place over generations which have altered the course of the music. In the course of several centuries, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how much of the guru’s music the śiṣya imbibes, how much of the original is retained and what elements are added/altered. Some of the changes that are seen in the oral transmission of music are discussed below:

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3.1 Changes in pāṭha:

‘Pāṭha’ is the way of rendering a song, which comprises the melodic features, the tāla aspects, sāhitya and musical form. In the teaching of kalpita saṅgīta (pre-composed songs) in Indian Music, the pāṭha of the guru is taught to the student and the latter is supposed to exactly follow what he has been taught. However, there are instances of many changes taking place in the pāṭha being passed on through oral tradition. A case in point is the tradition of Muttusvami Dīkṣitar. Ambi Dīkṣitar was the son of Subbarāma Dīkṣitar, the grandson of Bālasvāmi Dīkṣitar, Muttusvami Dīkṣitar’s brother. Hence, Ambi Dīkṣitar is an important torch-bearer of the Dīkṣitar tradition. It is seen that the versions of the kṛti ‘bālagōpāla’ learnt by the musicians S. Rajam and D.K. Pattamal from Ambi Dīkṣitar have a slight variation with respect to each other, with the former incorporating a passage of svara which is not there in the latter. Here, we see the surprising instance of pāṭhāntara (a variant version) emerging from a single source – Ambi Dīkṣitar. Similarly, there are other instances of the different branches of the śiṣya paramparā of Muttusvami Dīkṣitar having quite a few variations between their versions of songs with respect to dhātu, mātu, tāla, prosody and melody ¹.

Coming to a more recent composer, Mysore Vasudevacharya of the 20th century, we can see variations in the pāṭha of one of his songs in oral tradition. An example is the ciṭṭe svara of his popular kṛti in Mōhana – rā rā rājīvalōcana. The Kṛti has been printed by the composer’s grandson, S. Krishnamurthi in his book ‘Vāsudēva kīrtana mañjari’. It is well-known that Krishnamurthi learnt music from Vasudevacharya for many years. The ciṭṭe svara given in the book is as follows:

s , , p , d s r g s , r d s p d | g , , p , , r , | , g , p , d , r ||
s r g s , r d r s d , p g r s d | s , , r , g p d | r s d p d , , , ||
p d d s , s r , r g r p g g r s | g r g s , r d , | s p , d g p d s ||
r s , d p g r s g p d s r g s , | , p d s p , , s | r g s , , s r g ||

Another version of this ciṭṭe svara is seen in the tradition of G. N. Balasubramanian, who was a contemporary and friend of Mysore Vasudevacharya. Balasubramanian apparently learnt this version from Vasudevacharya. It was then transmitted through Balasubramanian’s disciple Gowri Kuppaswamy to her śiṣyā Sukanya Prabhakar, from whom the author learnt the song. The ciṭṭe svara in this version is as follows:

¹ For more details, see the paper ‘Problems in the Editing of the Kīrtana-s of Muddusvāmi Dīkṣitar’ by Prof. N. Ramanathan.

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s , , p , d s r g s , r d s p d | g , , p , , r , | , g d p g r s d ||
s , , r g p g r g , , g p d p g | p , , p d s d p | p g d p d , , , ||
p d d s , d s s r r g r p g r s | g r g s , r d , | s p , d g p d s ||
r s d p g r s r g p d s r g s , | , p d s p , , s | r g s , , s r g ||

Thus, we see that even over a period of a hundred years, there are instances of variations in pāṭha. When the music which is several centuries old is being taken up for study, it is quite likely that several changes have taken place in the pāṭha, even if there is an extant unbroken oral tradition.

3.2 Change in the rāga of the composition:

Sometimes, the song is set to a rāga altogether different from what the composer originally composed – an example being the popular Tyāgarāja kṛti jñānamosagarāda being sung in Pūrvīkalyāṇi instead of the original rāga Ṣaḍvidhamārgiṇi. Another instance is the Dīkṣitar song ‘mahīśāsūramardini’. In the text ‘Saṅgītasampradāyapradarśini’ written and published by Dīkṣitar’s grand-nephew Subbarāma Dīkṣitar in 1904, the notation of the song is given in the rāga Nārāyaṇī². However, it has been sung in Bilahari by some popular musicians of the twentieth century including Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar.

3.3 Changes in the svara-s of the rāga:

The features of the rāga also evolve over the years, leading to many changes in the melodic construction. A simple example is the occurrence of the lower ‘śuddha’ dhaivata in the rāga rītigauḷa. In the tradition of Mahādēva Bhāgavatar, a disciple of Ambi Dīkṣitar, in the kṛti nīlōtpalāmbam bhajare, śuddha dhaivata is primarily used. But in the rendering, shades of catuśruti dhaivata are also seen. In the kṛti ‘Śrī nīlōtpala nāyikē’ also

² More details about this song were provided in the paper – ‘Interesting insights into Ugābhōga-s based on Thanjavur manuscript notations’ by the author presented in the Annual Conference of the Music Academy of Madras, Chennai in December 2018.

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in the same rāga, in the notation of ‘Saṅgītasampradāyapradarśini’, we see only śuddha dhaivata. It has been reconstructed in recent times, based on the notation, without any shade of catuśruti dhaivata³.

3.4 Changes in the gamaka-s applied

Another subtle but important change is the rendering of gamaka-s in rāga-s. If we look at the audio recordings of rāga-s in the early part of the century, we see some differences in the gamaka-s. An example is the rendering of Bhairavi by Budulur Krishnamurthy Shastrigal, the Gottuvadyam player where the ‘ga’ seems flat in ascending phrases and not curvy as compared to present-day renderings⁴.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that the study of historical Indian Music from manuscript notations and oral traditions has many complexities due to the absence of complete information, difficulties in interpretation and variations in the music over time. It can be inferred that due to these complexities, a complete accurate reproduction of historical music is not possible. At best, only a ‘representational’ reconstruction maybe attempted which helps to understand the musical thinking and not the exact music of earlier times. Such being the case, researchers of Indian Dance should be cautious in taking into consideration re-constructed historical Indian Music as part of their study. It would be pertinent for historical Indian Dance researchers to decide the scope of their study which may or may not include the study and attempted reconstruction of historical Indian Music.

³ More details on this were provided in the paper – ‘Rītigauḷa of Nīlōtpalāmbā kṛti-s: A comparative study of modern renditions with the Rāga Lakṣaṇa in Saṅgītasampradāya-pradarśini’ by the Author presented in the International Conference of the Indiranagar Sangeetha Sabha, Bengaluru 2017.

⁴ This recording can be heard here - <http://www.gottuvadyam.org/home>. The author is grateful to Prof. N. Ramanathan for pointing out the rendering of ‘ga’ in this recording.

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