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The history of the system of music that prevailed in India from ancient times, goes back to the Vedas. The Indian musical system shows to what heights the genius of man could soar in quest of new forms of musical expression. Apart from its entertainment value, music was cherished and practised for its quality of lifting mankind to a nobler plane, enabling the soul to attain eternal bliss. The perfect tone system and the extensive raga and tala systems of Indian music, make it comparable with any other sophisticated musical system of the world.

The earliest treatise we have on music is the Natya Sastra of Bharata. Other treatises on music after Bharata, such as the Brihaddesi of Matanga, Sangeeta Ratnakara of Sharangadeva, Sangeet Sudhakara of Haripala, Swaramelakalanidhi of Ramamatya, etc., provide us a fund of information about the different aspects of music and its development during the different periods.

The ancient Tamils of South India had also developed an highly evolved system of music with its solfa methods, concordant and discordant notes, scales and modes, etc. A number of instruments were also used to accompany song and dance. The Tamil classic of the 2nd century A.D. titled the Silappadhikaram contains a vivid description of the music of that period. The Tolkappiyam, Kalladam and the contributions of the Saivite and Vaishnavite saints of the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. also serve as resource material for studying musical history.

The course of the evolution of Indian music saw the emergence of two different sub systems as Hindustani and Carnatic music. In Haripala's "Sangeeta Sudhakara", written in the 14th century A.D., the terms Carnatic and Hindustani are found for the first time. The two distinct styles, Hindustani and Carnatic came into vogue after the advent of the Muslims, particularly during the reign of the Mughal Emperors of Delhi. Both the systems of music received their nourishment from the same original source. Whereas the Indian music of the Northern part of India assimilated some features of the music of the Persian and Arabic musicians who adorned the courts of the Mughal rulers of Delhi, the music of the South continued to develop along its own original lines. But the fundamental aspects of both the systems of the North and South have been the same.

It is said, that South Indian Music, as known today, flourished in Deogiri the capital city of the Yadavas in the middle ages, and that after the invasion and plunder of the city by the Muslims, the entire cultural life of the city took shelter in the Carnatic Empire of Vijayanagar under the reign of Krishnadevaraya. Thereafter, the music of South India came to be known as Carnatic Music.

The advent of Purandaradasa, in the year 1484, marked a very important landmark in the development of Carnatic music. He effected such a thorough systematisation and refinement in the art, that, up to the present day, it has remained the same. He has been justly termed as "Carnatic Sangeeta Pitamaha". He was not merely a composer but a Lakshanakara of the highest calibre. The system of South Indian Music, as we have it now, is entirely his gift to posterity. He introduced the Malavagowla scale as the basic scale for music instruction. He also framed graded exercises, forming part of the series of lessons to beginners of music. This system prevails even today in the teaching of music. The Svaravalis, Janta varisas, the Suladi Sapta tala alankaras and gitams, composed by Purandaradasa, form the basis for mastery in the art. Among the compositional types, he has to his credit numerous lakshya gitams and lakshna gitams, tana varnams, tillanas, suladis, ugabhogas, vritta namas and kirtanas. His kirtanas are popularly referred to as Dasara Padas or Devarnamas.

Moving into the 17th century, the history of Carnatic music saw the epoch-making scheme of the 72 Melakartas, introduced by Venkatmakhi and laid down in his monumental work Chaturdandi Prakasika in the year 1620 A.D. The Melakarta scheme is a highly comprehensive and systematic formula which includes within its fold all the modes used in ancient as well as modern systems of music of the different parts of the world. The scheme opened out new vistas of raga creation and later composers like Tyagaraja invented many a beautiful raga by following it.

In the field of practical music, South India had a succession of brilliant and prolific composers who enriched the art with thousands of compositions. After Purandaradasa, Tallapakam Annamacharya Narayana Tirtha, Bhadra-chalam Ramdas and Kshetranja made contributions to the wealth of compositions.

The birth of the Musical Trinity - Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri - at Tiruvurur between the years 1750 to 1850 A.D. ushered in an era of dynamic development in Carnatic music. The Trinity were not only contemporaries among themselves but, also contemporaries of great composers of Western Music, as Beethoven, Mozart, Wagner and Haydn. It was the 'Golden Age' of music throughout the world. Carnatic music reached its pinnacle of artistic excellence during this period.

A galaxy of composers in the post-Trinity period kept the banner of Carnatic music flying high. Vina Kuppayyar, Patnam Subrahmanya Iyer, Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar, Mysore Sadasiva Rao, Mysore Vasudevathar and Papanasam Sivan are only a few names to be mentioned here.

The Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini, written by Subbarama Dikshitar in the year 1904, serves as an authority for information regarding the music, musicians and composers of the previous centuries.

Many of the musicians and composers of the South were closely acquainted with the Hindustani system of music also and wherever permissible, adopted Hindustani ragas for their compositions. The ragas Yaman Kalyan, Hamir Kalyan, Malkauns, Brindavani Sarang, Jaijivanti, etc. were adopted in their compositions by the Musical Trinity. Raga Kaphi, Kanada, Khamaj, Paraj, Purvi, Bhairav, etc. bear a very close resemblance to their counterparts in the Hindustani system of music.

There are musical forms belonging to Nibadha and Anibadha Sangeeta, that is, Kalpita sangeeta and Manodharma sangeeta or improvised music. All these forms are generally classified under different heads, as Sacred music, Art music, etc. The several forms under these heads possess distinctive characteristics of their own. The ancient musical forms like Prabandhas, etc. gradually gave away to the different musical forms that are in use in present day music, though the basic elements of the ancient Prabandhas are still retained in the modern forms. The following musical forms offer interesting study:

GITAM

Gitam is the simplest type of composition. Taught to beginners of music, the gitam is very simple in construction, with an easy and melodious flow of music. The music of this form is a simple melodic extension of the raga in which it is composed. The tempo is uniform. It has no sections dividing one part of the song from the other. It is sung without repetition from the beginning to the end. There are no intricate variations in the music. The theme of the song is usually devotional, though there are a few gitams in praise of musical luminaries and Acharyas. A notable feature of the gitam is the existence of gitalankara phrases like a iya, a iyam, va iya, etc., called matrika padas, reminiscent of similar syllables occurring in Sama gana. Gitas have been composed in Sanskrit, Kannada and Bhandira bhasha. Purandaradasa's introductory gitas in praise of Ganesha, Maheswara and Vishnu, collectively referred to as Pillari gitas, form the very first set of gitas taught to the students of music. As distinguished from the type of gitas described above, known as Lakshya gitas or Samanya gitas, which, as the name itself suggests, describe the Lakshanas of the raga in which they are composed. Paidala Gurumurti Sastry was a prolific composer of gitas after Purandaradasa. Venkatamakhi too has composed many Lakshana gitas.

SULADI

Very much like the gitam in musical structure and arrangement, the Suladis are of a higher standard than the gitam. The Suladi is a talamalika, the sections being in different talas. The sahitya syllables are fewer than in the gitas and there is a profusion of vowel extensions. The theme is devotional. Suladis are composed in different tempos vilambita, madhya and druta. Purandaradasa has composed many Suladis.

SVARAJATI

This is learnt after a course in gitams. More complicated than the gitas, the Svarajati paves the way for the learning of the Varnams. It consists of three sections, called Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanam. The theme is either devotional, heroic or amorous. It originated as a dance form with jatis (tala, solfa syllables like taka tari kita naka tatin gina tam) tagged on. But later, Syama Sastri, one among the Musical Trinity, composed svarajatis without jatis, which are brilliant concert pieces, noted for their musical value.

JATISVARAM

Very similar to the svarajati in musical structure, this form- Jatisvaram-has no sahitya or words. The piece is sung with solfa syllables only. It is noted for its rhythmic excellence and the jati pattern used in it. This is a musical form belonging to the realm of dance music. In some Jatisvarams, the Pallavi and Anupallavi are sung to jatis and the Charanas are sung to a mixture of svaras and jatis. There are also Ragamalika Jatisvarams.

VARNAM

The Varnam is a musical form in Carnatic Music. Whereas musical forms like the Kirtana, Kriti, Javali, Tillana, etc. have their similar counterparts in Hindustani Music, the Varnam does not find a counterpart. The Varnam is a beautiful creation of musical craftsmanship of a high order, combining in itself all the characteristic features of the raga in which it is composed. This form is aptly called a Varnam, since many of the svara group patterns called 'Varnas' in ancient music, are dexterously interwoven in its texture. Practice in Varnam singing helps a musician to attain mastery in presentation and command over raga, tala and bhava. The vocalist gets a good training for the voice and the instrumentalist a good mastery over technique. Very few words and profusion of vowels mark the sahitya of this form. The theme of the piece is either bhakti (devotion) or sringara (love).

There are two types of varnams, one called the Tana Varnam and the other called the Pada Varnam. While the former is a musical/concert form, the latter is purely a dance form. There are two angas or sections in a varnam, known as the Purvanga constituting the pallavi, anupallavi and the muktayi svaras, and the Uttaranga or the Ettukadai, comprising the charanam and the charana svaras. The pada varnam has sahityam or words for all the angas unlike the tana varnam which has sahityam only for the pallavi, anupallavi and charanam.

Varnams have been composed in all the major ragas and most of the minor ragas, in all the principal talas. Pachchimiriyam Adiyappayya, Sonti Venkatsubbayya, Syama Sastri, Swati Tirunal, Patnam Subrahmanya Iyer, Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar and Mysore Vasudevachar were prominent composers of Varnams.

KIRTANAM

The Kirtanam had its birth about the latter half of the 14th century. It is valued for the devotional content of the sahitya. Clothed in simple music, the kirtanam abounds in Bhakti bhava. It is suited for congregational singing as well as individual presentation. The Talapakam composers of the 15th century were the first to compose kirtanas with the sections, pallavi, anupallavi and charanas. Usually there are more than two charanas the music of all of them being the same. Composed in all the important traditional ragas and set to simple talas, the kirtanas offer soul-stirring music of the highest form of devotion. Bhadrachalam Ramadasa and Tyagaraja were prolific composers of Kirtanams.

KRITI

The Kriti is a development from the Kirtana. It is an highly evolved musical form. The highest limit of aesthetic excellence is reached in the Kriti composition. The raga bhava is brought out in all the rich and varied colours in this form. It was only after the emergence of the kriti as a musical form, that a definite style in musical compositions became a possibility. The pallavi, anupallavi and charanam are the minimum and essential angas of a kriti. The pallavi is sung first, followed by the anupallavi and ends with the pallavi. The charanam is sung next and linked with the pallavi before ending. The Carnatic music world owes its debt of gratitude to the Musical trinity for having made such a monumental contribution in the field of nibaddha sangeeta, in the form of kritis. There are kritis in all the existing ragas and in all the principal talas. The kriti as a musical form has many features in common with the Dhrupad of Hindustani music. Muthuswamy Dikshitar has composed many kritis in the Dhrupad style.

Besides the essential angas, many decorative angas are also appended to kritis for embellishment. They are (a) Chittasvaras or a set of solfa passages, sung at the end of the anupallavi and charanam, (b) Svara-sahitya - an appropriate sahitya is supplied for the chittasvara, (c) Madhyamakala sahitya - an integral part of the kriti, (d) Solkattu svara - resembling the chittasvara, this has jatis along with svaras, (e) Sangati - variations on a musical theme, developed step by step, (f) Gamaka - the dhatu is flooded with gamakas, (g) Svarakshara dhatu matu alankara, where the svara and the sahitya are identical, (h) Manu-pravala beauty - words of two or three languages figure in the sahitya of a kriti, (i) Prosodical beauties like Prasa, Anuprasa, Yati and Yamaka also figure mainly in many of the Kritis.

PADA

Padas are scholarly compositions in Telugu and Tamil. Though they are composed mainly as dance forms, they are also sung in concerts, on account of their musical excellence and aesthetic appeal. A padam also has the sections, pallavi, anupallavi and charana. The music is slow-moving and dignified. There is a natural flow of music and, sustained balance between the words and the music is maintained throughout. The theme is madhura bhakti, portrayed as bahir sringara and antar bhakti. The characters nayaka, nayika and sakhi represent respectively the Lord (Paramatma), the Devotees (jeevatma) and the Guru, who leads the devotee on to the path of mukti (liberation) by his sage counsel. Various rasas are depicted in all their delicate shades, through suitable ragas which reflect such rasas. All the nava rasas are portrayed in padas, though sringara is the main theme.

The pada, when sung, presents an epitome of the raga in which it is composed. Ragas specially noted for evoking typical rasa bhavas, such as Anandabhairavi, Sahana, Nilambari, Ahiri, Ghanta, Mukhari, Huseni, Surati, Sourashttram and Punnagavarali, to mention only a few are specially chosen for padas. Kshetrajana is the most prolific composer of padas.

JAVALI

A javali is a composition belonging to the sphere of light classical music. Sung both in concert programmes and dance concerts, the javalis are popular because of the attractive melodies in which they are composed. In contrast to the padas which portray divine love, javalis are songs which are sensuous in concept and spirit. They are generally set in madhyama kala. In these forms also, the nayaka, nayika and sakhi figure is the theme, but, there is no dual interpretation of the sahitya. The catchy and lilting tunes of the javalis enhance their appeal. Desya ragas like Paraj, Kaphi, Behag, Jhinjhoti, Tilang, etc. have also been used in these compositions. Javalis are composed in Telugu, Kannada and Tamil. This form resembles the Thumris of Hindustani Music.

TILLANA

The Tillana, corresponding to the Tarana of Hindustani music, is a short and crisp form. It is mainly a dance form, but on account of its brisk and attractive music, it sometimes finds a place in music concerts as a conclusion piece. It usually begins with jatis.

The name Tillana is constituted of the rhythmic syllables, ti la na. It is the liveliest of musical forms. This form is said to have had its birth in the 18th century. The sahitya of a tillana may be in Sanskrit, Telugu or Tamil. The presence of rhythmical solfa syllables alongwith a sprinkling of sahitya enhance the beauty of the form of the Tillana. The music is of comparatively slow tempo in Tillanas meant for dance purposes. The pallavi and anupallavi consists of jatis and the charana has sahitya, jatis and svaras. Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar, Pallavi Seshayyar and Swati Tirunal are some of the prominent composers of Tillanas.

PALLAVI

This is the most important branch of creative music. It is in this branch of manodharma sangeeta, that the musician has ample opportunities of displaying his or her creative talents, imaginative skill, and musical intelligence. The term Pallavi is coined from the initial syllables of the three words: Padam, meaning words; Layam, meaning time and Vinyasam, meaning variations. The words chosen for a Pallavi may be either in Sanskrit, Telugu or Tamil and may be on any theme, though the devotional is always preferred. Neither the sahitya nor the music is precomposed. The singer has the choice to choose the sahitya, the raga and the tala. The two parts Prathamangam and Dvityangam are divided by the period of a short pause, called Padagarbham. The sahityam is repeated again and again, as the musical variations develop and proceed in stages of increasing complexity. The Khyal of Hindustani music has very much in common with the Pallavi of Carnatic music. Kalpana svaras are sung to the Pallavi after the different stages of development, including the Sangatis, Anuloma and Pratiloma (singing the theme in double and quadruple speeds and vice-versa) are sung. Sometimes the kalpana svaras are sung in different ragas to present a Ragamalika Pallavi.

'Niraval ' literally means filling up by adjustments. In musical parlance, it refers to the art of singing the sahitya within the rhythmical setting, with improvisations in the musical theme. A suitable line of the sahitya from a kriti is chosen and musical improvisation is done within each cycle of the tala. Niraval is a must in Pallavis and an option in Kritis.

TANAM

This is a branch of raga alapana. It is raga alapana in Madhyamakala or medium speed. There is perceptible rhythm in this. The rhythmical flow of music, flowing in fascinating patterns, makes tanam singing the most captivating part of raga exposition. The word 'Anantam ' is dexterously used to merge with the musical patterns.

To sum up; the outstanding feature of Carnatic music is its raga system, in the concept of which, the ideal or 'absolute music' is reached, and the highly developed and intricate tala system, which has made it extremely scientific and systematic and unique in all respects. Though clear cut demarcations in the style of musical presentation, similar to the gharanas of Hindustani music are not seen in Carnatic music, yet, we do come across different styles in rendering compositions.

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