Rāgas of the Kathmandu Valley: The Change in Meaning and Purpose.
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Abstract

The rāga tradition has been a gem of a musical genre in the Indian subcontinent. Many sources infer that this tradition was also popular in the royal courts of the Mallas. As the Mallas were pious kings, they adroitly designed a musical genre that could gratify both the need of an artist and a worshiper through the application of rāgas. They also established music communities among commoners to sing the rāgas in numerous temples and shrines of the valley. The tradition has been continuing incessantly but the context is not entirely the same. The singers of today sing the songs and the rāgas latent within, but do it out of faith and obligation; as to how a priest practices his rituals, not necessarily how an aesthete sings his song. The rāga culture, voyaging from the kings to the commoners, has gone through a major transformation that has altered the meaning and purpose it availed. As a comparative study on the significance of rāgas in the Malla court and Newar locality has not been done previously, this paper fulfills the gap by sketching the metamorphosis and outlining the function and significance of the same tradition in two distinctly different backdrops.

Keywords: Dapha, Nepal, Newar, Raga

The valley of Kathmandu is noted for its myriad of temples and shrines. This reflects the presence of strong religious faith in the culture and people, especially the monarchs of the past who are credited as the constructors of these divine abodes. It is interesting to note that the entire settlement of Kathmandu was deliberately designed to resemble the shape of a khadga¹, the contour being the temples of the most feared and venerated deities (Wright, 1972, p.154). Such endeavors were continued by rulers, be it of different dynasties, to establish the place as a religious and devotional center. In the times of the Mallas, further undertakings were introduced to complement the piety that the numbers of temples had to offer. One such attempt was the introduction of devotional singing called dāphā to be performed as an obligatory duty, still in continuation in the old neighborhoods. At first glance, the singing seems to be similar to the many bhajan styles of Hindu pantheon but there is more to it than an observer might see. When studied assiduously, this singing style proves to be an intricate rāga singing genre originally devised as the court music of the Mallas.

Rāgas in the great tradition of the Indian subcontinent have always been a subject of multiple facets. Though it primarily functioned as the musical model for composition, it also inspired many other related but independent schools of thought ranging from peculiar styles of poetry and visual arts to a means of aesthetic and devotional pursuit. This diversity in application and meaning of the rāgas was piously adhered to by the Mallas with the addition of local devotional and ritualistic values that still survives as dāphā. But the rāgas practiced in dāphā of today is not the same as it used to be. The already multi-layered meaning of rāgas has now further evolved into an absolute devotional cult which does not necessarily reflect all the

¹ Khadga means a sword in Sanskrit.
presents it served in the past. Rather, it has become more of a liturgical practice governed by a strict set of rules that often belittles the music.

**What is a rāga?**

Although our topic explicitly deals with the change in purpose and functions of Newar\(^2\) rāgas, understanding the conception and evolution of the idea is imperative which takes the study to the Indian rāgas. A point to be noted, however, is that the Newar rāgas has not yet been recognized as an authentic ramification of the Great Tradition\(^3\) to this day. But it is worth mentioning that the case is being studied and researchers like Widdess and Grandin have already identified a few missing links that inarguably point to the same tradition as its progenitor (Grandin, 1997; Widdess, 2016).

Musicologists believe that the practice of rāgas goes back to as early as the 5th century but the concept that conceived rāgas goes even back as far as the 3rd century BC to 5th century AD to the time of Nātyaśāstra (Jairazbhoy, 2018, p.16). Although the primary topic of the work was dramaturgy, music has also been covered amply as it was a fundamental element of drama in those days. The concept of rāga had not already developed at the time of Bharata; or even if it was, it was not considered as a higher art and therefore, altogether skipped (Gautam, 2008, p.2). The venerated musical style at the time was called jāti, believed to be the predecessor of rāgas by most musicologists.

Around the 7th to 9th century, the treatise Brihaddeshi by Matanga introduced the word grāma-rāga for the first time in the history of music (Gautam, 2008, p.61). This period also marks the point where the former jāti was gradually being obsolete as the concept of rāgas gained prominence (Gautam, 2008, p.106). But it was not an entirely new musical concept as Matanga deemed grāma-rāgas to be derived from the jātis (Bandyopadhyaya, 2007, p.10). However, there seems to be confusion among scholars as some regard gītis to be the predecessor of the grāma-rāgas, not jātis (Gangoly, 2004, p.17).

By the 12th century, the tradition flourished even further as hundreds of rāgas developed (Gautam, 2008, p.106). A notable work of the time known as Sangītratnākara by Sarangadeva describes a total of 264 rāgas classified into many categories (Bandyopadhyaya, 2007, p.264). Around this time, the whole system of the grāma-rāgas was replaced by that of desi-rāgas as and it is these desi-rāgas that eventually became the rāgas of today (Widdess, 1993, p.44). The current tradition of Indian classical going through the entire evolutionary process is believed to have taken its current shape after the 15th and 16th centuries (Deva, 1995, p. 10).

In the Indian tradition, the rāgas have always been a subject of multiple meanings and purposes. According to Miner (2015) “rāgas functioned in three distinct but interlocking spheres: as objects of general aesthetic appreciation; as objects of music-technical specialization; and as tools of devotional or magical practice” (p. 387). Rāgas, apart from being a musical mode, have kindled other streams of related but independent thoughts. The rāga-rāgini concept, rāgadhyāna visualizations, and rāgamālā paintings are a few strains that were successfully introduced as novel ideas with the predominant theme of devotion.

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\(^2\) The terms Newar rāga, Newari rāga or Nepali rāga used in context mean the same and should not be confused.

\(^3\) The Indian classical music tradition is also called the Great tradition.
This ideology became an accepted standard of rāga tradition and was duly practiced by enthusiasts, connoisseurs, and literati of the Indian subcontinent.

**Rāgas in the Nepali culture.**

Historical records have provided two distinct genres of rāga music in Nepal by the name of caryā and dāphā. Caryā is thought to be the oldest of the two but as it has always remained an esoteric practice having essentially different purpose and meaning, its study is out of bounds to this paper. Rather, the concentration will be on the rāga practice that developed in the Malla court and has now become the part of the dāphā repertoire.

Most of the sources referring to the local rāga music tradition points to the period after the division of the valley into three sovereign kingdoms. The only mentioning from a period prior to the division directs to the reign of Jaya Sthiti Malla. In his time, it was mandatory to play the rāga dipak while a royal member was being cremated (Wright, 1972, p.182). This is the earliest record of rāga in the context of the royal courts, however, no song or texts dating to that period have been known to exist today. It cannot be said whether the rāgas from the time of Jaya Sthiti was sung in the style of dāphā, however, most manuscripts obtained from later Malla period has been identified as dāphā songbooks.

The primary source of information on Newari rāgas are the numerous dāphā groups that have preserved the tradition. Almost all of these groups possess a handwritten songbook containing the songs titled with the rāga it is ascribed to (Widdess, 2015, p.241). In many of these songs, names of the contemporaneous kings are found written as a signature by the poet or by the king himself, thus enabling researchers to approximate the date of its origin. The oldest text so far obtained is from the time of Mahindra Malla of Kathmandu dating to the 16th century (Baidya, 2002, p.17). The song is dedicated to Krishna and is ascribed to rāga bibhās and tāla pra. Similarly, Jaggajyoti Malla of Bhaktapur and Siddhi Narsing of Patan have been identified as the oldest authors of their respective kingdoms (Baidya, 2002, p.37-62). Widdess states that Jaggajyoti was the one who initiated the dāphā tradition in Bhaktapur (Widdess, 2016, p.41); but seeing that it had already flourished in Kathmandu, this statement might not hold true. In any case, texts referring to both the Kings, Jaggajyoti and Siddhi Narsingh, are mostly devotional and ascribed to rāgas. Since this point in history, until the time of Tribhuwan of the latter Shah dynasty, the tradition seems to have continued incessantly as many texts of such rāga songs have been retrieved.

Despite the facts, there are still many questions left that cannot be clarified by the texts alone. For instance, the texts do not precisely delineate how the process of transmission and transformation underwent. Hence, in order to understand the changes and evolution, it is essential to grasp the true purpose and meaning of rāgas within the royal realm.

**Meaning and Purpose of rāgas in the Malla court**

Rāgas of the Malla times, although being predominantly composed as devotional art was not circumscribed to religion or temples alone. Many sources infer that the genre also served as the art music frequently performed to the likes of Kings and civilians. This premise is testified by an event held every year on the full moon day of the Hindu month Jyestha. A group of singers gather in the outer square of Patan durbar and dedicate the whole day to the signing of the rāgas. The repertoire consists of a set of thirty-seven rāga based songs believed to be written and composed by Siddhi Narsingh. The king is also remembered as the initiator of the event and is symbolically represented by an antiquated golden throne.
belonging to him. A rāgamālā painting portraying the stories of the rāgas being performed is also displayed concurrently. Despite singing devotional songs, this performance does not show signs of a devotional milieu. On the contrary, it represents a musical concert as the front square often used to entertain with the slightly raised pavilion giving an impression of a medieval stage.

Another function the rāgas served was as a collaborative art for other performances. The Malla kings were quite fond of writing and staging plays as proved by the many texts of dramas retrieved so far. The plays popular at that time were mostly musicals as the texts also bear the names of rāgas (Prajapati, 2006, p. 17). Again, the theme of religion seems to be the central idea as most of the plays revolved around the tales of Hindu mythology and thaumaturgy (Regmi, 1965, p.847). The backing musical performance might well have been a dāphā group as seen in the famous Kārtik Nāc of Patan still in practice. Another noteworthy example is the Jhyālcā, an erotic shadow play, performed at the time of Indra Jātrā. Jhyālcā also uses the same concept of musical backing done by a dāphā group singing devotional songs. It is strange, however, as Jhyālcā, being an erotic play is accompanied by devotional songs that do not reflect themes of eroticism in any way. Perhaps the Mallas regarded eroticism as divine and godly as opposed to the prevalent tradition of the mainstream religions. This is further asserted by a large number of erotic arts that can be readily seen in the temples of the Kathmandu valley.

The rāgas did not just attract attention from music lovers but a wide range of aesthetes. Among them, visual artists of that time found rāgas especially enchanting and inspiring as illustrated by the existence of a few rāgamālā paintings. Originally developed in the Indian states, rāgamala portrays the sentimental and philosophical values of rāgas in forms of paintings (Greig, 2000, p.312). Two rāgamālā paintings believed to be painted for Jaggajyoti Malla has been identified by Wegner and Widdess (2004). These two sets of paintings, one in the National archives of Kathmandu and the other in the Norton Simon collection, are similar to the Indian rāgamālā paintings in addition to significant local influence. The Sanskrit verses describing the rāgas are from the treatises Sangīta-darpana, Sangīta-dāmodara and Sangīta-nārāyana (Wegner & Widdess, 2004, p.84). Another set of 140 small rāgamālā murals have also been identified at the fifty-five windowed palace of Bhakapur made for Bhupatindra Malla (Shrestha, 2004). This set of rāgamālā along with the aforementioned one of Siddhi Narsing is yet to be studied.

Like the visual artists, poets also found their share of inspiration in rāga music. It is surprising that nearly all the works of poetry recovered from the Malla period are written in the style of rāga-songs. Not that poets were the ones who composed their works into rāgas, but the style of writing is dexterously adapted to the style of singing current at the time. It has already been mentioned that the predominant theme of the rāga-songs was devotional; nonetheless, the poems were not entirely limited to the genre alone. Baidya (2002) has explained that apart from devotional poems, other styles of poetry depicting patriotism, romanticism and moralism were also common in the Malla times. This can be further understood that rāgas were also employed to non-devotional songs.

A feature of these poems is a term called dhuā marked by the initial ‘dhu’ generally to the first stanza. The word dhuā indicates the refrain and must be a vernacular for the word dhruva found in many poems of the prabandhas⁴. The prabandha style had a characteristic

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⁴ A vocal style of classical music popular in the time of Sarangadeva around the 12th century.
feature of inserting the name of the singer or composer\(^5\) at the end of the song (Rowell, 1992, p.274). This element is also readily seen in the Newar rāga songs. The Newars seem to be greatly influenced by Indian devotional poets like Jaydeva and Vidyapati as demonstrated by the effective adaptation of their styles in Newari writing. Their poems were also included in the dāphā repertoire and are still popular among many dāphā groups.

The concept of rāgas was the predominant and accepted theory of music in the Indian subcontinent. Various treatises on music were written, analyzed, reviewed and rewritten throughout the course of history. Thus, rāgas were not just musical ideas, but a profound intellectual subject. The availability of treatises or translated works on music from the time of the Mallas can be understood that rāgas were treated equally erudite in the valley as well. Gītāpancāśīka is one of such literary works on music believed to be written by Jagajjyoti Malla describing different notes, melody and emotion. (Regmi, 2007, p.854). The same work also comprises a collection of poems written by Jagajjyoti himself (Widdess, 2016, p.47). Jagajjyoti alone is credited as the writer or commissioner of at least five treatises on music (Widdess, 2015, p. 235.). Regmi (2007) also refers to inscriptions and written work prescribing special rules of classical music and the mentioning of the principal six rāgas and 36 rāginis (p. 854). Manuscripts of Indian musicological treatises like Nātyaśāstra, Sangīta-ratnākara, Sangīta-dāmodara, Sangīta-darpana, Rāga-vibodha, Rāga-tattva-vibodha, Sangīta-parijāta and Sangīta-sarvasva from the Malla period are still present at the National archives of Kathmandu (Widdess, 2016, p.44). Later Malla kings like Pratap Malla and Jitamitra Malla have been known to follow the footsteps of Jagajjyoti in attempting to write original musical treatise by themselves.

The reign of Mallas ended in 1769 AD as the Gorkhali king Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed the three kingdoms of the valley into his realm. The shift in the power had some adverse effect but as Prithvi Narayan was well acquainted with the Newar culture, most of the tradition survived and continued undisturbed (Widdess, 2016, p.41). The tradition of rāga singing was not all-lost as the Mallas had already devised the art as the hallmark of the valley. The knowledge of the dāphā and the rāgas was inculcated to the locals although it is quite uncertain how the entire transmission went (Grandin, 1997). It can be hypothesized that as Mallas were pious kings and the predominant theme of the rāgas was devotional, the same art was used to appease the many gods and demi-gods residing in the innumerable temples and shrines of the valley. As this was not a task that a handful of rulers and their musicians could undertake, civilians were instead mentored to carry out the duty. Musical communities were established based on caste and society and were obliged to perform their musical duties; performing dāphā was one of them.

**Rāga-singing as a devotional ritualistic cult**

As the discussion on Newar rāgas back and again brings dāphā into the narrative, it needs to be further defined in order to comprehend the meanings it carries. Dāphā is a group rāga singing style of music accompanied by small hand cymbals and a barrel-shaped percussion called khĩ. The characteristic feature of this genre is the peculiarity of the antiphonal singing by two groups. The origin of dāphā has always been a topic of debate as there is no palpable piece of information pointing towards a veritable source. Manandhar argued that it was imported from the Mithila region (as cited in Grandin, 2011, p.108); but it is merely a

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\(^5\) It might well have been the poet as seen in many songs from Indian and Newari tradition instead of singers or composers.
hypothesis based on the fact that one of the languages used in dāphā songs is the Maithili. The word dāphā itself does not give the slightest hint of its origin. The classical Newari dictionary based on manuscript sources defines it as a singing group, not a musical genre (Malla, 2000, p.219). It seems that not only the music but the meaning of the word itself has changed with time.

Dāphā is still continuing among the Newars but its meaning and significance has changed considerably. It has merely become a devotional genre and the term bhajan is often used to connote it. Very few of the local singers know the exact history and significance of the dāphā. To them, the divinity and rituals associated with the act is of greater importance than any other thing, including the music. They are musically untrained as the music pedagogy of the dāphā groups is not cultured enough to be called a proper music tutoring like that of the Indian tradition. They do not have explicit knowledge of musical notes or rhythm but an empirical understanding resulting through repetitive practice and memorization. The basic and most important notion of raga being a musical mode is no longer valid for them. As a result, the layered meaning ragas as a conceptual and inspirational idea have also disappeared in practice.

A notable characteristic seen in the dāphā participant is the incontrovertible devotion shown to the melodies; perhaps because of the rāga ascription? For the dāphā singers, the rāga is the most important element in the singing process as they identify rāga to be connected with the divine aspects. They put a great deal of importance in singing the rāgas perfectly as mistakes are thought to be ominous. But singing the rāgas has a somewhat different understanding among the locals. Widdess (2016, p.77) explains that rāgas, to the current dāphā singers, actually mean the unmetered non-lexical introduction called rāga kāyegu similar to the ālāp of the Indian tradition. This introduction is perceived as an invitation to the gods to come and dance to the music.

Dāphā currently is not just a devotional genre, but largely a ritualistic cult. The performance of dāphā itself is a complex ritual often having strict and unchangeable rules. First, a solo piece on the percussion called dya lhāyegu is performed as an invocation to the gods. Then the rāga kayegu is sung followed by a song ascribed to the same rāga. Generally there are two types of rāga compositions called gvārā and cāli of which the former comes first followed by the latter. Each group has their own set of rules for singing session. Some may choose to sing a single set of gvārā and cāli while others may sing more. The singing usually ends with an ārati song marked by the lighting of the oil lamp. The dya lhāyegu is again repeated to conclude the dāphā session followed by distributing prasāda⁶ and consumption of alcohol in some cases.

Each dāphā group is composed of people belonging to the same caste and community. Training is given to new members every ten to twelve years or depending on the need of new members (Widdess, 2016, p.208). The initiates are selected from the affiliated community and have to go through a training period often done within a separate concealed room dedicated to Nāsaḥ dyaḥ, the local god of music and performance. The training involves learning the songs and percussion going through a process of complex rituals often involving animal sacrifice. An open performance is given by the newly initiated at the completion of the training period. Like other Newar celebrations, it is also followed by a communal feast.

⁶ Food that is first offered to the god and then consumed by people.
Originally, women were not allowed to gain membership into a dāphā group. This idea is still largely followed by most of the them but a few have started to take a more democratic approach lately. Women were actually not allowed to play any kind of instrument in Newar culture but these norms have changed as a female participant in a drumming parade has become a frequent sight nowadays. Dāphā, however, seems to be the most unyielding to its traditional norms, perhaps the reason being the singing of the rāgas as the other musical styles that have changed its values do not comprise singing the rāgas.

Conclusion
As has been seen, the meaning and purpose of rāga performance has gone through tremendous change and evolution. This transformation is partly due to the change in the performance milieu and partly because of the demise of the institution that bore it in the first place.

In the Malla court, the rāgas primarily served as a means of aesthetic pursuit in the form of musical modes. As the nature of artistic works in all its variations was devotional and religious, the same theme dominated the musical arts as well. In spite of that, the tradition of rāgas was not circumscribed to devotional setting but was rather proliferated as art music. It became an inspiration for visual artists and intellectual subject for music scholars. The Indian contemporary idea of rāgas as a means of aesthetic, musical and devotional fulfillment was devoutly followed by the Mallas.

The rāga culture of the present, however, shares least of the features described above. It has lost its value as a musical mode because the locals do not know the theory and concepts behind it. With the loss of musical concept, the extension of the genre as a conceptual and intellectual subject has also disappeared. Rāgamala paintings have become an extinct art style and so is the peculiar style of poetry. On the other side, it has become a very interesting devotional cult with complex rules and rituals; the very custom that the Mallas had contrived. It has become a means of delivering the musical ideas and performance that otherwise would have been limited to words and sentences in some old manuscripts. But above all, the meaning of rāgas has now become religion and continuity of tradition. The antiquity and self-identity connected with this music is what the local value the most.

Works Cited


