

SOME RARE TALAS IN KERALA MUSIC

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Broadly speaking, the music of Kerala is fundamentally identical with the music of the rest of South India, popularly referred to as 'Karnatak music'. The name *sopanasangita* by which the music of Kathakali and the pre-Svati Tirunal classical music in Kerala has been known, does not indicate a separate system of music, as some people believe, but a style of singing in a somewhat slow tempo without prominence to melodic or rhythmic graces. The singing by the *marar*, the professional musician hereditarily attached to the Kerala temple, at the flight of steps called *sopana* leading to the sanctum sanctorum, typified this music and hence the name. Still, when we carefully examine in detail the original indigenous music of Kerala we find in it certain distinctive characteristics. For example the *ragas* like *Indisa*, *Navarasam*, *Kedarappantu*, *Srikanthi*, *Kantharam* etc., we do not meet with elsewhere. *Ragas* like *Indalam*, *Puranir*, *Kanak-kurunji* etc., have their counterparts only in ancient Tamil music and not in modern Karnatak music. Similarly with regard to the *talas* also we find certain peculiarities and meet with some rare specimens.

Some peculiarities

Of the six common *angas* — part of a *tala* — namely *Anudruta*, *Druta*, *Laghu*, *Guru*, *Pluta* and *Kakapada*, the last is very rarely met with and is not an *anga* in the *talas* commonly used. The *Anudruta* is called by its synonym 'Virama'. The symbols for *Laghu*, *Druta*, and *Kakapada* are the same as in Karnatak music namely, a vertical line, a circle and a plus sign respectively. But *Anudruta* is shown by a small horizontal line followed by a vertical line, something like the English letter 'L' reversed, the *Pluta* by a small circle followed by a symbol resembling the Arabic numeral 3, and *Guru* by a symbol resembling the English letter 'S'. For our purpose

we can indicate them by their initial letters, L = *Laghu*, V = *Virama*, G = *Guru*, P = *Pluta* and K = *Kakapada*.

The duration of each of these angas is the same as in Karnatak music. Thus L has one *matra*, D half *matra*, V quarter *matra*, G two *matras*, P three *matras* and K four *matras*. But the concept of *Jati* for L, by which we get its different varieties like *Chaturasra*, *Tisra*, *Misra*, *Khanda* and *Sankirna*, each with a different time-value, is not seen. Only its normal variety (*chaturasra*) is recognised. The *Virama* is always associated with either L or D and comes after them, and never before. It does not occur independently or with other *angas*.

Differences in *gati*, however, figure in this music. *Gati* is denoted by the term *Kooru*. But the names of the *gatis* are different. *Tisragati* is *Pancharikooru*, *Misragati* *Adantakooru* and *Khandagati* *Champakooru*. The change of *gati* is perspicuous in the ramifications of *talas* in playing *Tayambaka*, a kind of systematic elaboration on the percussion instrument *Chenda*, and in the orchestra called *Panchavadya*.

The three *layas*, *Druta*, *Madhya* and *Vilambita* representing the fast, medium, and slow tempos are accepted. The theoretical position that *Madhya* is double the *Druta* and *Vilambita* is double the *Madhya* is granted, but in actual rendering the speed is changed in an arbitrary manner particularly when the percussion instruments are played alone. The practical direction is that a little reduction of the speed of *Druta* results in *Madhya* and a further reduction results in *Vilambita*. The change can be likened to the shift in tempo between the *Purvanga* and *Uttaranga* of a *Varna* composition resorted to by some musicians. In playing the instrument *Timila*, however, in temple rituals, each succeeding tempo should have either double or half the number of *matras* of the preceding tempo, according as the progress is from fast to slow or vice versa.

Every *anga*, except V and K, is to be played by a main beat followed in the case of *Timila*, *Maddala* etc., by appropriate other sounds for its duration. These latter are called 'showing the *matras*' (*matrakattuka* in Malayalam). V and K are *nissabdas* and have no beat; so too L if it is considered as *nissabda*. It may be noted that *Anudruta* (*Virama*) which is a simple beat in Karnatak music is, generally silent in Kerala music, except in *Champatala* in which V is sometimes a beat.

Some rare *talas* figure in the dance music as well as the temple music of Kerala. In ordinary secular music we find the common *talas* of Karnatak music but with names different from theirs.

Rare talas for dance

Among the rare *talas* met with in treatises but not much in vogue today may be mentioned a few. These are particularly indicated

to be for intricate dances by the famous Malayalam poet Kunchan Nampyar in one of his *Tullal* works named *Harinisvayamvaram*.

Kundanacchi. This is a *tala* of 12 *matras*. Its scheme as can be seen from the description

sadruta laghudvayi sadruta laghutrayi.....
sadruta laghudvayi sadrutam plutam

is LLD, LLLD, LLD, PD. But Ramapanivada in his *Talaprastara* gives a slightly different arrangement of these *angas*. He says,

druto laghudvayam dasca latrayam ca tato drutah
laghudvayam da plutasca tale kharanaravabhidhe

and adds '*ghantaravam kundanacchi*'. The arrangement according to this definition will be, D, LLD, LLLD, LLD, P. In a manuscript of the work the symbols are also found given in this order. When the *tala* is actually played the difference between the two arrangements will not be perceptible. It is likely that *Kuntanacchi* is the local name and its original name was '*ghantarava*'. Though Kunchan Nampyar deals with this *tala* in connection with dance, Ramapanivada has composed a *Panchapadi* song in this *tala* in his *Sivagiti*¹.

Kumbha. This has 20 *matras* with the scheme LLLLLDD, LLLDD, LGG, LL, LLL as given by Nampyar. The last three *laghus* are *nissabdas*. But it appears that there is another view which considers this *tala* as having fifteen *matras* or a quarter *matra* more.

Lakshmi. This *tala* too has 20 *matras*. The scheme is LLGDD, LG, LLDD, LD, LDDD, LL, LLL, the last three *laghus* being *nissabda*. But in the manuscripts dealing with *talas* we find two noteworthy statements about this *tala* namely that it is identical with *Kundanacchi* and that it has $28\frac{1}{4}$ *matras*² with the scheme LLLLLV, LLLLLV, LLV, LLV, LLLLLV, GG, L, P. This shows either a confusion between different *talas* or the fact of different *talas* having been known by the same name at different periods in the development of Kerala music.

Karika. This has 5 *matras* and the scheme LLLG.

¹ Vide L. S. Rajagopalan, 'Sivagiti of Ramapanivada' in *Journal of the Music Academy*, Madras Vol. XXXVI, p. 82. Sri Rajagopalan points out that the word *Kundranchi* occurs in *Yajurveda* as denoting the name of an animal belonging to the lizard family and observes that the name might have been adopted for this *tala* on account of a possible similarity between the cadence of this *tala* and the gait of that creature. But the fact remains unexplained why this name is not found in any of the numerous classical works on music, ancient or modern.

² Vide the writer's article 'Keralavum Sangitasastravum' in the Malayalam periodical *Matrubhumi Weekly*, 5th October, 1952.

Talas in Temple Ritual

In the different rituals of the Kerala temple certain *talas* are prescribed. These are to be played in the percussion instrument called *Timila*, a long drum with the mouths covered with goatskin of medium thickness, to be played by both palms to the accompaniment of other percussion instruments like the drum *Vikkuchenta*, the gong *Chengila* and the cymbals *Kaimani*. This is commonly known as *Panikottu*. Particular *talas* are laid down for particular deities and particular occasions. The same *tala* is also found prescribed sometimes for more than one deity and more than one occasion. The more important *talas* of this category are the following.

Munam talam. *Matras* — 7, *Angas* — PGG, Deities — Brahma, Vishnu, Sarasvati, Garuda, Ananta; the *dikpalas* Indra, Soma and Isana. Occasions — the first inner *pradakshina* and *digbali* at Northwest corner.

Mutakku talam. *Matras* — 5. *Angas* — GLG. Deities — Brahma, Vishnu, Mats; the *dikpalas* Agni, Nirrti and Vayu. Occasions — the second inner *pradakshina* and *digbali* at Southwest corner.

Takatutalam. *Matras* — 6. *Angas* — GGG. Deities — Vishnu, Siva, Virabhadra; the *dikpalas* Varuna and Kubera. Occasions — the third inner *pradakshina* and *digbali* at Southeast corner.

Ancham talam. *Matras* — 9. *Angas* — PLLGG, the first *laghu* being *nissabda*. Deity — Ganapati. Occasion — the fourth inner *pradakshina*.

Ekatalam. *Matra* — 1. *Anga* — L. Deities — Vishnu, Sasta, Shanmukha, Dvarapalas and *dikpala* Yama. Occasions — the fifth inner *pradakshina* and the second and fifth outer *pradakshinas*.

These five are the main *talas*, but we get the following also,

Sambhutalam. *Matras* — 3. *Angas* — DDG. Occasion — third outer *pradakshina*.

Mangalatalam. *Matras* — 4. *Angas* — GLL. Occasions — *digbali* at the Northeast corner (*druta* in 4 *matras*), *bali* on the big *balipitha* (*madhya* in 8 *matras*), *bali* for *kshetrapala* (*vilambita* in 16 *matras*).

Rantamtalam. *Matras* — 3. *Angas* — LG. Occasion — first outer *pradakshina*.

Nalam talam. *Matras* — 8. *Angas* — PLGG. Occasion — before the big *balipitha* at the close of the fifth *pradakshina*.

Sakatu talam. *Matras* — 4; *Angas* — LLG. Occasion — fourth outer *pradakshina*.

Karika tala. This *tala* mentioned earlier is prescribed for *digbali* at the four main quarters.

For the special ritual called *Utsavabali*, which is a particularly important function to be discharged with meticulous care, an expert is necessary for playing the *Timila*. The sounds in this drum are to be so produced as to synchronise with the *mantra* uttered by the priest and the mystic gestures shown by him. For this some *talas* are prescribed. But curiously, each of these has two varieties and which variety is to be used for which particular item in the ritual is decided on the basis of traditional practice. The following are the *talas*,

<i>Chempata</i>	—	LLL ¹ V or LLG.
<i>Adanta</i>	—	LVDDL ¹ V or LVLLL ¹ V.
<i>Rupaka</i>	—	LLV or LG.
<i>Eka</i>	—	L or G
<i>Karika</i>	—	LLLL ¹ V or LLLG.

It may be noted that for *Eka* and *Karika* one of the varieties is the same as what we have noticed earlier.

Talas in secular Music

In secular music we find the *talas* to be identical in form with those in Karnatak music but different in name. The name, number of *aksharakala* and the equivalent in Karnatak music with regard to each of these are given below:

<i>Chempata</i>	—	8 <i>aksharakalas</i>	—	<i>Chaturasrajati Tripata</i> (L ₄ DD) ¹
<i>Adanta</i>	—	14	„	<i>Khandajati Ata</i> (L ₅ L ₅ DD)
<i>Muriadanta</i>	—	7	„	<i>Tisrajati Tripata</i> (L ₃ DD)
<i>Champa</i>	—	10	„	<i>Misrajati Jhampa</i> (L ₇ VD)
<i>Panchari</i>	—	6	„	<i>Caturasrajati Rupaka</i> (L ₄ D)
<i>Ekam</i>	—	4	„	<i>Caturasrajati Ekam</i> (L ₄)

The *matras* for these according to the values given earlier for *Laghu*, *Druta* etc., will be respectively 2, 3, 2, 1 $\frac{3}{4}$, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ and 1. But this is totally incorrect because the *aksharakala* varies according to the *jati* of the *Laghu* and, as pointed out before, the concept of this *jati* is not perceptible in practical Kerala music. The duration of a particular *tala* is, therefore, indicated by additional *angas* like *Druta* or *Virama* or *Nissabdalaghu*. For instance, in *Adanta* which has LVDDL¹V, we get 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ *matras* and taking L as equivalent to 4 *aksharakalas* (the normal *chaturasrajati*) and correspondingly D to be of 2 *aksharakalas* and V of 1 *aksharakala*, we get 14 *aksharakalas* for one *avarta* of the *tala*. And if we take the *tala* cycle as commencing

¹The numeral beneath L indicates its *jati* and thereby its *aksharakala* or time duration in Karnatak music.

from the second *Laghu*, we get LVLVDD which is exactly the same as our *Khandajati Atatala*. Similarly in *Chempata* having LLG the relative time-interval between the beats is the same as in *Chaturajati Tripata*, popularly known as *Aditala*; only the *Nissabdakriya* of counting the fingers should be replaced by another *Nissabdakriya* of a wave of the palm of equal duration and the *tala* cycle should commence with *Guru*. So also in *Panchari* the relative time-interval between the beats is the same as in *Rupaka* and it will be identical with it if we consider it as *Rupakachapu* in which the *angas* are only the beats.

It may be noted that the name '*Chempata*' is a modified form of the name '*Jhompata*' for a *tala* of this description seen in classical treatises on music in Sanskrit. The name '*Muriadanta*' which means a segmented *Adanta* is significant in that its time-value is just half that of *Adanta*. '*Champa*' and '*Jhampa*' are only two forms of the same name. The origin of the name *Panchari* (also known as '*Panchakarika*') is not traceable.

Of the seven common *talas*, known as *Suladi talas* namely, *Dhruva*, *Mathya*, *Rupaka*, *Jhampa*, *Ata*, *Tripata* and *Ekam* in their most popular and conventional *jatis*, all except the first two, have their equivalents in Kerala music as can be seen from the above. *Mathya* also is there because on a careful examination it can be seen to be the same as *Mutakku*. The number of *angas* and the relative time interval between them are the same for these two *talas*, for GLG is simply LDL doubled. Similarly *Munamtala* can be seen to be identical with *Tisrajati Tripata*. As for *Dhruva* we find a serious difference. Instead of the conventional LDLL, in Kerala music this *tala*, in its simplest form is given as having a single *laghu* but as having fifteen other varieties with *angas* steadily added on resulting in the last variety having 28 *matras*, but none of these answer to the *anga* pattern of this *tala* in Karnatak music. It may incidentally be pointed out that *Rantam*, *Munam*, *Nalam* and *Ancham talas* which literally mean the second, third, fourth and fifth, are really the respective varieties of *Dhruva tala* as conceived in Kerala.

The name '*Suladi*' is familiar in Kerala music, although in its modified form '*Chuzhadi*'. According to one view the constituents are *Mutakku*, *Takatu*, *Dhruva*, *Eka*, *Rupaka*, *Adanta* and *Champa*. According to another, they are *Dhruva*, *Matta*, *Pratimatta*, *Nissara*, *Atta*, *Rasaka*, and *Eka* and these have 16, 6, 4, 6, 6, 3 and 3 varieties respectively. Another source gives these as *Dhruva*, *Matta*, *Pratimatta*, *Ata*, *Rasaka*, *Lambhaka* and *Eka*. It is not possible to equate all these with the *Suladitalas* now current in Karnatak music. But the varieties of some of these can be seen to be identical with certain *talas* current in the ritualistic music noticed earlier. For instance, *Mangala tala* is the variety of *Matta* (*Mathya*) called *Sagana*; *Mutakkutala* is its *Ragana* variety.

The five *Mahatalas* like *Chacchatputa*, *Chachaputa* etc., are found mentioned in musical treaties in Malayalam; so also the 108 *talas* described by Sarngadeva and others. But these do not seem to have been in actual vogue at any time.

The above examination of the *talas* in Kerala music shows that some of them are identical with certain *talas* in Karnatak music but some are rare and peculiar to Kerala. Even the *talas* which have their parallels in Karnatak music have names different from them. The absence of the concept of *jati* for *laghu* has necessitated in many cases a pattern of arrangement of the *angas* different from that current in other parts but having the same total duration and same positions of the beats. It is also noteworthy that Kerala music has a set of *talas* exclusively for ritual purposes.

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