

An Aesthetical Note:

Alapa in Dhruvapada Gayaki

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OF THE MANY interesting features of Hindustani classical music, the following seem to be quite distinctive to me.

First, it offers the rasika two ready-made concepts—of *rāga* and *tāla*—by which to adjudge the quality of what the musician presents. I wonder if any other art directly provides such definite criteria of aesthetic assessment. It is true that in the region of, say, literary criticism, the foreknowledge that a poem is a lyric or a sonnet is of some clear help in determining the value of the piece. But I doubt if such a merely formal clue is of as great assistance to us in reacting duly to the technical details *and* the feeling of a work of art as our prior awareness of the *rāga-tāla* twosome in respect of a musical performance.

Further, rhythm here works not as a unicolour element but as an intricate balancing of poise with creative freedom, or a matrix against the patterns it permits or suggests. I have here in mind the *Thekā* (or rhythm-cycle) and the shapely *Torhā-tukrās* (patterns) that may be knitted across it, but are all ultimately within it, because of the overriding demand that they attain to the *Sama*, the cycle's focal beat, though the requirement is sometimes met only in idea, as in the case of *Ateet-anagat* patterns.

Finally, singing *sans* words—as also quite without the help of prefixed and concurrent rhythm—is here not only possible, but often the major, more effective part of a whole recital. This is *Ālāpa* in which the traditional Dhruvapada singers excel; and it is this I here seek to dwell upon, mainly in the light of my experience of the *Dagars*.

What is *Ālāpa*? Why does one do it? I suggest that *Ālāpa* is no mere warm-up. Nor is it important merely because it is different from worded music. The forms of instrumental music are also so distinct but they can never claim to replace *Ālāpa*. The true aesthetic warrant of *Ālāpa* is its unmatched power to produce some specific effects—in particular, those of serenity, seamlessness,

infinity—and to evoke an intense, enveloping and identifiable Rāga-rūpa. The effects I speak of are, so to say, the direct 'look' of the typical formal elements or graces that bedeck vocal Ālāpa more effectively than any other form of our music. Here is a random list of some such grace-effect twosomes: Gamak-depth and inwardness; Dyut- and Vedāng-twinkling accents; Dagar—sonant upgoing meander; Āndol-oscillation; and Anuranātmaka—nasal resonance.

I do not wish to underrate the numerous devices that are used as embellishments in our instrumental music. But I insist that the formal excellences which Ālāpa uses in projecting single Svaras or in linking tufts of notes, because they here go with subtle changes of Ākāra, conduce to more varied and deeper effects than what one may find in instrumental music.

The point may be brought out by showing at some length what the content of *ālāpa* really is. I would list its elements thus: the Svaras of the Rāga, aesthetic pace, graces like the ones we have noted, and the Mātrās that distinguish or are implicit in our first ten Hindi alphabets. The Mātrās that give us tāla are equidistant marks in a temporal sequence. But the ones that form the material of ālāpa are regulated variations of ākāra. The former measure and figure Laya; the latter provide distinctive threads in the warp and woof of ālāpa. The Mātrās are included in Ālāpa, be it noted, not merely as they appear in their parent alphabets such as इ, ई but as conjoined with other letters, so as to give rise to the singer's basic syllables like ते, रे, री, नोम. Therefore, in so far as meaningful words are here also—and more clearly—left out, the disjunction of Ālāpa from language is almost complete. The syllables of our rhythm, I may add, are much more various than those of ālāpa. But this, by itself, is no ground for attaching any special value to ālāpa. We may not say that ālāpa is so creative because it builds upon very meagre material. For, if rhythm has more syllables than vocal ālāpa, the latter has infinitely more sounds (or Svaras) to work with than the former.

It is important to see how aesthetic pace, or duration as handled with an eye on effect, conduces to the variform look of ālāpa. If the singer *tarries* on a Svara with the requisite tunefulness, one may 'see' a line or a fount of incandescence, according as the ākāra is slender or ample. A *leisurely* passage across three or even two adjacent Svaras often engenders the look of a concave curve. In the higher register a return to the tonic after a *steadfast* but fine and tuneful articulation of Komal Rishab may project yearning tenderness, as in a 'sohni' ālāpa.

But the crowning glory of ālāpa, I believe, is its ability to bring

out the aesthetic potential of the *rāga*. Here we not only follow and acknowledge the singer's observance of its grammar but are enabled to contemplate a rich and varied content of effect, feeling and imagery within the *rāga*'s own confines. What is more, we may get the feeling that the melody-type (or *rāga*) is not only presented to us, but in a way surrounds and possesses us, pervading both the hall and our inner being.

Where this effect is achieved and kept up for a while, our experience of *ālāpa* is quite intense. It now seems similar to *Rasa* as explained in our ancient texts. The experience is compact, not diffuse (*Nirvicchinna*), and it seems self-complete (*Svātmaparāmarsa-svātmavīśrānti*) not in the sense of appearing rounded like a circle—for we surely do not see its outlines—but in that of being wholly satisfying. It is this blessed singleness of experience that is harmed where the singer indulges in protracted exhibitions of his hold over a particular formal device such as *gamak*. The cheering that often greets such displays may well be a due compliment to the artist's own virtuosity. But it is also, I insist, a curtailment of the full effect of *Ālāpa*.

Yet, though our response to an ideal, full-blown *ālāpa* is not on the whole discursive or diffuse, it is by no means undiscerning. The regional quality of the technical details and the various effects are alike duly noticed; and as for the *rāga*-atmosphere, though it may be felt as seamless, its distinct character, both aesthetic and grammatical, is never lost sight of. Should the second detail appear to involve a contradiction and so unacceptable to some, we may rejoin by pointing to an experience that is in principle accessible to all, say, that of walking through a flower-laden avenue and of feeling wooed by a breeze that seems everywhere and is also the bearer of a *distinct* scent.

The parallel, however, is clearly imperfect. For, the experience visualized is quite without that variety of sonant effect and appeal which distinguishes *ālāpa*. Yet it serves a purpose. Besides indicating the possibility of an experience which may seem both single and specific, it serves to project the idea that if 'form' be taken to imply an outline or limitation, *ālāpa* as contemplated cannot be said to have a form.

On the other hand, if the word is taken to signify skilful inner linkages *ālāpa* is quite as possessed of form as any other kind of our music. Very great care has here to be lavished not only on the articulation of individual *Svaras* but also on the manner, both euphonic and temporal, of traversing or interlinking them. What strikes almost every *Rasika* as the singer commences *ālāpa* is the reverential

way of gaining access to a Svāra, maybe from its very immediate neighbour; but we do not all realize that this simple detail of singing can not only easily work up the effect of depth but requires the vocalist to take pains to ensure that the leisurely passage nowhere wanes in respect of Sur.

To sum up, Ālāpa is singular in value because it projects the superiority of the merely euphonic to the verbal, of Laya to tāla and of rāga as against the individual Svāras that it builds upon. It is, I believe, the only art form that can make us feel ensconced in an intense, blissful atmosphere instead of leaving the contemplation dotted with mere figures and images.

But, if Ālāpa can be so spellbinding, why should a Dhruvapada follow it? My answer here is that a passage from the merely mnemonic to the verbally meaningful, and from contemplation of limitlessness to that of a manifest form (or Bandish) is not only likeable because of the contrast it provides, but is, to borrow a suggestion from Kant, a relief to our apprehending powers. Ālāpa, at its best, is sublime. As we register its depths and elevation our being feels stretched to its utmost; the delight overwhelms us; and, as in soulful prayer, we feel both lifted *and subdued*. A Dhruvapada on the other hand, is set to a tāla. The way its Sthāyi-antarā are disposed in relation to each other is visible; their lineaments are firm; and because of this clear background—as also because of the continual manifestness of the rāga—the unusual movement of Ābhog and the effusion of Sanchāri do not seem to be mere wantonness. □