

BOOK REVIEWS

Musical Forms in Saṅgītaratnākara

N. Ramanathan

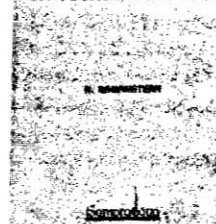
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The *Saṅgītaratnākara* was composed by Śārngadeva in the court of the Sevūṇa King Siṅghana (A.D. 1200–1247) in seven chapters, or *adhyāyas*, called '*Svaragatādhyāya*', '*Rāgavivekādhyāya*', '*Prakīrṇakādhyāya*', '*Prabandhādhyāya*', '*Tālādhyāya*', '*Vādyādhyāya*', and '*Nartanādhyāya*'; it is therefore often called the *Saptādhyāyī* (cf. the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini). These seven chapters have 580.5, 241, 233, 380, 408, 1219, and 1678 *ślokas* (totalling 4729.5) respectively, composed mostly in the *anuṣṭubh* metre. Among these, the first chapter is further subdivided into eight *prakaraṇas* (chapterettes), which deal with *padārthasaṅgraha* (table of contents); *piṇḍotpatti* (origin and constitution of the human body, which is the medium of expression for *nāda* and *laya*); *nāda-śruti-svara* and its attributes *jāti*, *kula*, *daivata*, *ṛṣi*, *chandas*, and *rasa*; *grāma-mūrchana-tāna*; *sādhāraṇa*; *varṇālāṅkāra*; *jāti* (melodic frames or matrices); and *gīti*. The second *adhyāya* is divided into two *prakaraṇas*, of which the first deals with the *mārga* (i.e., *grāma*-, *bhāṣā*-, *vibhāṣā*-, *antarabhāṣā*-, etc.) *rāgas* while the second describes what came to be called *deśī rāgas*, viz. *rāgāṅga*, *bhāṣāṅga*, *upāṅga*, and *kriyāṅga*, besides some well-known *deśī rāgas* of the time.

The *Saṅgītaratnākara* is the most important treatise on Indian music and dance, next in quantity only to the fifteenth-century *Saṅgītarāja* of Kumbhakar. It expands the scope of music discussed in some 1000 verses in four chapters of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* to some 4800 verses in seven chapters. It is systematic, detailed, comprehensive, and compact. It is the only music and dance treatise that carries as many as seven commentaries and is cited or extracted in every major treatise

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composed after it. It is a model of holistic scholarship, projecting into cognate areas including *alaṅkāra*, *āyurveda*, *vyākaraṇa*, *yoga*, *tantra*, *mantra*, philosophy, and psychoacoustics. Brevity is the keynote of its style, which achieves semantic adequacy, unambiguity, and lucidity by harnessing grammatical, logical, and technical means. It offers a uniform theoretical frame for *gīta*, *vādyā*, and *nartana*, and illustrates its descriptions with profuse examples in the first, second, fifth and sixth chapters. It is a critical digest of precedent information and opinion, drawing upon more than forty different authorities, and citing some twenty-six authorities on specific occasions. The work maintains continuity and unity throughout.

The *Saṅgītaratnākara* defines *saṅgīta* following earlier authorities such as *Saṅgītacūḍāmaṇi* and *Saṅgītaratnāvalī* as consisting of *gīta*, *vādyā* and *nartana*. It devotes its first four chapters to *gīta*, the sixth to *vādyā*, the seventh to *nartana*, and the fifth for the common denominator or substrate of all three, viz. *tāla*. The melodic infrastructure offered in the first four chapters and the temporal infrastructure implicit in the fifth chapter are basic to the chapter on instruments also. The sum of all this underlies the chapter on dance. The *Saṅgītaratnākara* holds that of the threesome, *gīta* ranks first in importance, a tenet which is followed in the post-*Saṅgītaratnākara* textual tradition. Another important factor which has greatly influenced the methodology of *Saṅgītaratnākara* is the dichotomy of each component of *saṅgīta* into *mārga* and *deśī*. *Mārga* music is ancient and archaic, decreed to be preserved and performed in the original form without the least change, and aimed at deriving invisible spiritual or religious fruits. *Deśī* music is contemporary, serving the ever-changing popular and provincial aesthetic norms, and

caters to the secular public. The treatment of *mārga-gīta* in *Saṅgītaratnākara* follows this method rigorously in the first, second, and fifth chapters, and emphasizes its sacramental value and divine goal; concomitants of *deśī-gīta* are treated in the final section of the second chapter, in the third and fourth chapters, the final section of the fifth chapter, and in the sixth chapter. (In the latter, only *paṭaha* is classified into *mārga* and *deśī*.)

The book under review is a revised and enlarged version of the thesis for which the author was awarded a Ph.D. by the Benaras Hindu University in 1980. He is the foremost disciple of the late Dr Prem Lata Sharma and is renowned for his profound, critical and creative scholarship. He is an outstanding personality of our times — a rare combination of musician, musicologist, and teacher. Currently, he is Professor and Head of the Department of Music in the Madras University, and Chairperson of its School of Fine and Performing Arts.

The book deals with *gīta*, the generic musical form in the *Saṅgītaratnākara*, and with its varieties manifested in vocal and instrumental music as delineated in the work. These include the archaic song-forms *prakaraṇa-gīti* (Ch. II), *nirgīta* (Ch. III); *jāti*, *kapāla*, *kambala* (Ch. IV); *ākṣiptikā*, songs set to words in a *grāma-rāga* and *mārga-tāla* and used in *nāṭya* (Ch. V); and the *gāna* forms of songs — *rāgālapti*, *rūpakālapti* and *prabandhas* (Ch. VI). The first chapter lays the foundation for the central concept of the thesis by defining *gīta* as a melodic situation with an aesthetic potential (*svarasandarbhā*), and relates *gīta* to *saṅgīta*, *gāna*, *vādyā*, *nāṭya*, *deśī*. This emphasis on *svara* is probably the reason for excluding *vādyā-prabandha* from being similarly treated.

The second chapter is the longest in the book and discusses the fourteen *prakaraṇa-gītis* in minute detail, dividing them into two sets of seven each (*gītas*): *madraka*, *aparāntaka*, *ullopyaka*, *prakarī*, *oveṇaka*, *rovindaka*, and *uttara* (*gītakas*); and *chandaka*, *āsārīta*, *vardhamāna* (and its three subvarieties *kaṇḍikā*,

āsārītābhāsa, and *vardhamānābhāsa*), *pāṇika*, *ṛk*, *gāthā*, and *sāma*. The criterion for differentiating the two sets is suggested to be the suffix 'ka' added to 'gīta' in the latter. This is only thinly ratiocinated in the work. If this could be validated, there are four grammatical situations for its use as a *taddhita* affix — *svārtha*, *alpārtha*, *cāturardhika*, and as *uṇādi* affix. If the sense of diminution is intended, it may be verified by examining the quantitative relationship between the two sets. The *prakaraṇa-gītis* are elaborately structured and segmented in terms of *tāla*, quite different from the application of *tāla* to *gāna* forms such as the *prabandhas*. The *Saṅgītaratnākara* has collated the descriptions of these from earlier authorities. Dr Ramanathan has carried out a comparative and critical examination of this part of the *Saṅgītaratnākara* along with Bharata, Dattila, Viśākhila, Yājñavalkya, Nānyadeva and Abhinavagupta, and modern authorities such as Dr Mukund Lath. In fact, this second chapter (255 pages out of 547), together with the third chapter on *nirgīta* (80 pages) and the fourth chapter on *jāti-gīta*, *kambala-gāna* and *kapāla-gāna* (81 pages), are the most important in both quality and quantity. This part of the book is of inestimable help for the study of *jāti-prakaraṇa* of the 'Svaragatādhyāya' and of the first half of the 'Tālādhyāya' of *Saṅgītaratnākara*. The third chapter deals with *nirgīta*, an ancient musical form which was played on the *Vīṇā* and sung to nonsensic syllables. It commences with a general treatment of chordophones and their performance parameters. Then it takes up a critical study of the form and structure of the *nirgīta*, prescriptions regarding instrumental techniques, performance of *tāla*, and texture and disposition of the nonsensic syllabic content. Finally the *nirgīta* varieties *ārambha*, *āsṛāvaṇā*, *vaktrapāṇi*, *saṅkhoṭanā*, *mārgāsārīta*, *līlākṛta*, as well as the large, middle, and small forms of *āsārīta* are dealt with. The fifth chapter covers an archaic musical form called *ākṣiptikā*, which was composed in descriptive or laudatory words, in Sanskrit or Prakrit, and set to *grāma-rāgas* and

mārga-tālas. The sixth and final chapter deals with melodic organization in terms of rāgālapti and rūpakālapti as well as the gāna forms of song, namely *prabandha*. The last two chapters are treated perfunctorily and give the appearance of being added on for the sake of completeness.

Every page of the book bears testimony to the impeccable scholarship, meticulous documentation, and analytical skill of the author.

The book also contains a detailed bibliography and an index. Dr Ramanathan and his publishers, Sampradaya, deserve warm congratulations on the production of the book, which is printed without the need of an errata or corrigendum. The price of the book, seems somewhat beyond the reach of the individual scholar and the student.

R. SATHYANARAYANA

Sri Ram Memorial Lectures XIII: Theatre and Community

K.V. Subbanna

Sri Ram Centre for Performing Arts,
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43 pages; price not mentioned

Sri K. V. Subbanna has a unique presence in Indian theatre. Neenasam, the institution he set up in Heggodu, Karnataka, has few parallels elsewhere in the country. Besides theatre training and production, its varied activities include workshops to promote awareness of arts and culture, seminars, poets' meets, and film-appreciation courses. Neenasam has made a difference to theatre in Karnataka through its yearly event Tirugata, and is also striving hard to create what E.M. Forster would call an "aristocracy of the sensitive" in a rural part of Karnataka. Subbanna's contribution in the shaping of modern Kannada culture is invaluable.

His Sri Ram Memorial Lecture on 'Theatre and Community' is written in a style that combines urban suavity with village rusticity, a mix that characterizes K.V. Subbanna's personality and mission. Written in three parts, the lecture explores the phenomenon of our theatre in its relationship to community, an angle often neglected by our theatre pundits. Though Subbanna's references are mostly drawn from the theatre and culture of Karnataka, the points made by him have a wider, general significance. Whether or not one agrees with Subbanna, the book bears a close reading.



The most fascinating feature of the book is its style. The explication is unhurried, loaded with allusions, anecdotes and quotations — much like a leisurely country walk through the picturesque environs of Heggodu, which now abounds with 'the best that is thought and written all over the world' thanks to Subbanna's pioneering efforts.

The first section begins with a very ingenious invocation of Ganesha, the popular god who in many ways becomes a metaphor for what Subbanna implies by community. We shall later return to the myth to which he refers. Let us first sum up the main arguments advanced.

Explaining what he means by 'community' — "since that concept looks . . . much too flexible" — Subbanna admits that it "refers to an imaginary reality and hence is not available for physical verification". However, he tries to capture his specific sense of 'community' by contrasting it with his concept of 'society'. He identifies the latter with "a small percentage of our people influenced by 'modern education'", and community with "the majority living in rural and semi-rural areas and traditional environs". To illustrate the distinction between the two terms, he uses two anecdotes. The first is from the life-story of Keremane Shambhu Hegde, the celebrated Yakshagana artist. The latter was once humiliated by a person who had invited him to

perform in a village. Disgusted, Hegde wanted to clear out of the place, but it was very difficult to pack his properties quickly. In this situation, someone came to his rescue and carried all his luggage to the neighbouring village. Later, Shambhu Hegde realized this was his *ishtadevata*, Lord Ganesha of Idagunji. The second story is about one Jattiga, a tenant farmer of Kagodu. After the virtual defeat of the satyagraha of tenant farmers against landlords, Jattiga performed a symbolic act of individual protest against the landlords during a Yakshagana performance. While the landlords were watching the performance seated in chairs, and the farmers on the ground, Jattiga came in and seated himself in a chair taller than the landlords' and sat through the entire performance. Both these experiences, according to Subbanna, speak of the protagonists' intimate connections with their community. In the first incident, the community's deep faith in the Idagunji Ganesha authenticates an intensely personal experience. In the second, the intense belonging to a community felt by a member of the community leads to an act of protest.

Another metaphor for what Subbanna means by community is the Marikamba festival of Sirsi. Originally a tribal goddess, Marikamba has over the centuries evolved into the town's supreme deity, worshipped by all the castes. The festival is held every three years. Underlining the universal participation of all the castes in the festival, Subbanna writes :

The right of the first worship during the *rathotsava* is reserved for the Brahmins, followed by the cobblers whose rightful job it is to set the wheels of the *ratha* rolling. It is only then that the others can lend their hand in taking the car around the town. In other words, the *rathotsav[a]* cannot take place without the cobbler.

He later tells us how this festival-centred community went through a series of changes in response to historical developments — for instance, animal sacrifice in the festival was stopped because of the influence of Gandhi's

non-violence movement.

Subbanna concedes that "it was not always a harmonious relationship that [he] had with [his] community in general"; and adds, "In the same breath, though, I must admit to my position of ambivalence between what I tried to demarcate as the educated section and the communitarian section in it." He calls his relationship with his community as one of "adversarial co-existence". He also argues: "As spears have points, milk has cream, communities have imaginative, initiatory individual minds . . . Wisdom is not something that these individual talents produce on their own, and distribute among the community. On the contrary, it exists subconsciously, deeprootedly, as much in the collective psyche as in the individual psyche." It is the "pioneer minds" within the community who awaken it to a "renaissant life, and help disclose the deep hidden wisdom".

Later, Subbanna goes on to argue how, in spite of Mahatma Gandhi's repeated caution, the newly educated class in India cut itself off from the communities from which it had emerged; and because this class presided over both our theatre and our politics, how this severing of ties has had the same deleterious effect in both spheres. He reiterates the oft-ignored connection between Nehruvian politics and the politics of 'national' theatre. To pioneers of the new 'national' theatre, the models came from the West, and local forms were appropriated only for individual theatrical uses.

Having struck this rather pessimistic note initially, Subbanna cites two examples in the third part of the lecture to show how, in exceptional cases, there can be a happy marriage between the values of community and society. The first example is B.V. Karanth's well-known stage production of G.B. Joshi's Kannada play *Sattavana Neralali*. This play, set in a Madhwa Brahmin *matha*, focuses on deterioration of values; it actually expresses middle-class dismay at changing times. This material was transformed into a stage hit by Karanth by a deft use of popular songs of the Vaishnava saint Purandaradasa. The mood of dismay in the play

was offset by portions of festive song. The songs themselves were sung not in the classical style but in the popular company-drama style. The stage production was a huge success, because it reflected the *angst* of the educated and offered entertainment to the populace at the same time.

The next example culled by Subbanna is Habib Tanvir's celebrated *Charandas Chor*. Though the play is performed in Chhattisgarhi style, Habib Saheb has transformed the original story in such a way as to make it a stunning parable of our unequal society. He has been able to infuse into the play this aspect of modern experience without any overt recourse to eurocentric, modernist styles. In this context, Subbanna also cites Kanhaiyalal's Manipuri play *Pebet*, which uses a devotional ritual to show how a whole people were forced into slavery. As an example of a similar reconciliation in playwriting, Subbanna discusses the Kannada play *Hosa Samsara* by Bendre.

The strange beauty of Subbanna's rambling style in these lectures cannot be captured in this review. However, I hope the foregoing encapsulates the main themes and arguments in the book.

The opposition at work throughout the book seems to be one between the modernist tradition in aesthetics, and modernity. In formalist aesthetics, the same theme appears in the guise of conformity versus deformation. The post-structuralist approaches have already problematized any representation of tradition. But post-structuralism or no post-structuralism, what is curious about all such evocations of tradition or community is that they are all rooted in a certain nostalgia. Even Gandhiji's evocation of the ideal village, so fondly quoted by Subbanna, cannot escape this characterization. An assumption made in these contexts is that the community is uncentric or monolithic. At the same time, the arbitrarily hierarchic nature of community is pulled under the carpet.

To illustrate, let us go back to Subbanna's account of the Marikamba festival of Sirsi:

The right of the first worship during *rathotsava* is reserved for the Brahmins, followed by the cobblers whose rightful job it is to set the wheels of the *ratha* rolling. It is only then that others can lend their hand in taking the car around the town.

What is this but a restatement of the classic Hindu caste hierarchy — Brahmins on top, cobblers at bottom, and others in-between. It seems to me that our nostalgia for childhood experiences often lends a luminosity to symbols and practices inscribed with a whole history of exploitation. Here, I am not saying that Subbanna is an upholder of caste hierarchy — far from it; only that some of our fond childhood images are fraught with dangerous political meanings. Further, I also have to say that none of us has a single-community identity in a changing society like ours. We all have different and often complex identities. Put another way, we live between various communities, regions, castes and classes. But Subbanna's account of our relatedness to community, however sophisticated, reduces to one community the multiplicity of communities that constitute us, and views the relationship in terms of a yes/no logic. The best moments in our theatre are in fact an interplay of various complex identities and loyalties. Therefore, to my mind, the more important part of Subbanna's thesis is not his exposition of community, but his recognition of the place of theatre as being within the socio-political arena (and outside the artificial context of the 'national' theatre).

This is where Subbanna has hit the bullseye. Nevertheless, he does not go the whole hog, perhaps because he is still trying to escape the pre-1970s dilemmas without completely abjuring the outdated categories of those times. For instance, nowhere does he recognize the link between the theatre practice of the uprooted educated middle class and the playwriting of the same class. But the connection is there for all to see. For example, how is it that virtuoso directors in our theatre, working in different styles — e.g., Alkazi, Karanth, or Prasanna — time and again make a splash by staging 'modern' classics like,

say, the plays of Girish Karnad? No one can argue that Karnad's plays have any kind of organic link to any community. My point here is that, while we are sometimes mindful of aberrant practices in our 'national' theatre, we do not apply our minds critically to the question of playwriting. Let us also not forget that Habib Saheb has not produced any one of the so-called classics of modern, 'national' theatre but has created his own plays which are intimately connected with his mode of performance.

In juxtaposing the achievements of B.V. Karanth and Habib Tanvir in this lecture, Subbanna, one feels, is bracketing two very disparate elements. Karanth's approach to traditional theatres, and the uses to which he puts them, are purely formal. His performers are not traditional actors but students of drama schools or members of repertories in urban centres. Habib Saheb does not use traditional theatrical forms in this manner. He works with tribal artists and evolves a performance through his interactions with them, bringing alive their own memories. The individual expression of a Karanth or an Alkazi and the social expression of Habib Tanvir are two irreconcilable opposites in the history of modernism in Indian theatre. Pundits of our theatre have found it convenient not to face this fact. It is our disenchantment with the modernist legacy which led to new explorations in theatre and literature after the 1970s. The Emergency and its aftermath signalled the failure of the Nehruvian formula. An analysis of what followed this breakdown could have provided Subbanna with many more insights. But all the examples he calls forth to build his case are of the pre-1970s variety.

An idea at the back of Subbanna's arguments in favour of community-based endeavour is that the riches of tradition lie undiscovered till an individual genius chances upon them and puts them to use. This idea does not take into account situations which are the result of a collective endeavour to grapple with problems and which provide the context for the individual genius to function. Further, in Subbanna's analysis, not enough significance is attached to individual or

collective *ichchhashakti*, power of volition, for self-transformation.

I would like to illustrate this point by referring to a recent production by the Dalit director Basavalingiah of Kuvempu's *Shoodra Tapasvi*, one of the ignored classics of Kannada drama. Basavalingiah employed the Jogiti style of narration for this play written in a rigorously classical style and diction. This was not just a formal choice; the use of the traditional narration associated with the underprivileged castes of Karnataka underlined the essentially anti-brahminical thrust of Kuvempu's text. The play, written in the 1940s, was very bold for its time. Kuvempu stands the original Ramayana story on its head by making the *brahmastra* which Rama shoots at the *shudra* ascetic Shambooka turn back on the instigating Brahmin himself. Only when the Brahmin bows down to Shambooka does the weapon return to Rama. Kuvempu does all this without showing the slightest disrespect to Rama. But when the play was first published, several noted Brahmin writers had raised a hue and cry. Kuvempu's play and Basavalingiah's production both demonstrate that our relationships with traditions and communities are rejuvenated through Promethean breaks resulting from a passionate political will to transform all in the blazing light of one's conscience. No such example can be found in Subbanna's book.

Subbanna begins his book by invoking Ganesha, the lord of the community. I love this divine playmate of my childhood spent in Karnataka. Because of my partial Tamil identity, I feel like concluding with an invocation of Shanmukha or Murugan, the oldest Dravidian god, who was cheated of his well-deserved fruit by the Parents of the Universe. Disgusted, he abandoned Kailasa in spite of their protests. He went to a rocky hill to practise severe austerities for years. He never returned to Kailasa, for he realized that he was himself the fruit of his prayers. Hence the hill's present name, Palani,

meaning 'you are the fruit'. It is Murugan who slew Tarakasura to save the *devas*. He left the community of the gods only to realize that he was himself the fruit, the essence of the community. This example fascinates me more

than Ganesha's meek perambulations, and is perhaps more germane to our world of continuous ruptures and departures.

H. S. SHIVA PRAKASH