



**Sangita Kalanidhi R. Vedavalli** is not only one of the most accomplished of our vocalists, she is also among the foremost thinkers of Carnatic music today with a mind as insightful and uncluttered as her music. *Sruti* is delighted to share her thoughts on a variety of topics with its readers.

## Rakti in raga and laya

‘Rakti in raga and laya’ is a complex theme which covers a variety of aspects. Attempts have been made to interpret rakti in different ways. The origin of the word ‘rakti’ is hard to trace, but the term is used commonly to denote a manner of singing that is of a highly appreciated quality. It carries with it a sense of intense involvement or engagement. Rakti is derived from the root word ‘ranj’ – *ranjayati iti ragaha, ranjayati iti raktihi*. That which is pleasing, which engages the mind joyfully may be called rakti. The term rakti is not found in pre-17<sup>th</sup> century texts like *Niruktam, Vyjayanti* and *Amarakosam*.

### Rakti in raga

The raga scheme was subjected to several transformations and divisions before it attained some sort of stability during Venkatamakhi’s period. There are several categories of raga-s, but only a few among the plethora of raga-s have been accorded the status of ‘rakti raga-s’. We have the ‘ghana raga-s’ – a name given to the ‘ghana raga panchakam’ or the cluster of five – Nata, Gaula, Arabhi, Varali and Sree, which are represented by Tyagaraja’s five compositions, popular today as the Pancharatna kriti-s. Why are they called ghana raga-s? Are they heavier in any sense than other raga-s? Do these ‘ghana’ raga-s lend themselves as substantially to elaboration as Todi,



Sankarabharanam or Bhairavi? Tyagaraja did not compose these kriti-s as a cluster under the category of ghana raga-s. Older texts record these five songs merely as Tyagaraja’s compositions and not as the Pancharatna kriti-s. Not only are these raga-s unsuitable for elaborate raga alapana, they afford limited scope for tanam exposition as well. However, these raga-s sound extremely attractive when they occur as short and fast changing ragamalika pieces at the end of the main tanam.

At a certain period in Carnatic music, when raga swaropaa was considered all important, raga-s such as Saveri, Sahana, Natakurinji, Reetigaula, Dhanyasi, Anandabhairavi, Kedaragaula, Surati, Devagandhari, Yadukulakambhoji, Nayaki, Neelambari, Huseni, Begada and Mukhari were known as rakti raga-s. These are but a few examples. Many senior musicians today may not accept a Dharmavati or a Charukesi as a rakti raga because they consider them to be

swara-oriented as against gamaka-oriented raga-s. There is a section of exponents which fears that the tradition of gamaka-oriented singing is giving way to swara-oriented renditions.

*Yo asau Dhwanivisheshastu  
swaravamavibhooshitaha  
ranjako janachittaanaam  
rasa raga udaabritaha*

There is a reference to ‘dhwani-visesha’ in this sloka from *Brihadcsi*. Scholars have suggested that dhwani-visesha may be taken to connote sruti and that its integration with music ensures a highly enjoyable melody. Rakti could therefore be taken to connote this very melodious quality, and raga-s thus oriented can be called rakti raga-s. However, with the passage of time, there has been a change in the definition of fundamental ideas like melody. Raga-s like Saveri, Sahana, and Natakurinji, for instance, are not entirely dependent on the arohana and avarohana, but gain their form and beauty from the nuances of the phrases unique to them. The creation of these phrases in the artists’ exposition of these raga-s is guided by the dhwani-visesha or special sound. Such techniques in handling rakti raga-s can only be learnt from a guru or derived from their usage in compositions of great composers.

### Rakti in laya

This very significant aspect is almost unique to the nagaswara tradition. Numerous nagaswara stalwarts performed rakti in laya, but this has become a practice of the past. It is unfortunate that nagaswara vidwans who played rakti did not pass on their legacy to future generations.

If rakti in raga expresses the lifeline of the raga, rakti in laya relates to the core of laya. In the past, nagaswara vidwans were bound by rules of what to perform during temple festivals. As part of this convention, the duration of each piece that the nagaswara vidwans played was ascertained by the various stages in the procession of the deity around the temple. For instance, a little before the procession began till it reached the termuttu or the chariot house, it was normally the time to play the mallari, followed by a raga alapana, a laya-oriented piece called rakti, a few compositions, concluding with a Tiruppugazh or such pieces. This performance would last for the entire duration of the deity's procession around the four streets of the temple till it reached the main entrance.

Rakti is set to a tala like a pallavi. This formation is made up of jati-s. Just as pallavi has words, rakti has jati-s, and both have an aridi. The jati-s were set to a specific raga and the nagaswara vidwans explored the various rhythmic permutations and combinations possible. Rakti was generally set in misram. A rakti performance, by definition, included very complicated variations in the gati followed by kalpanaswara – the complexity of which would at times reach such heights that the audience would be unable to keep track of



Vedavalli interviewing vidwan K. Venugopala Pillai as nagaswara artist SRGK Kalyanasundaram looks on

the tala. The nagaswara vidwans, accompanied by tavil vidwans, would play the rakti in three speeds and with gati bhedom. Jati-s for rakti were often composed by tavil vidwans, which were converted into musical compositions set to raga by the nagaswara vidwans – together they created spectacular musical and rhythmic fireworks. K. Venugopala Pillai, son and disciple of the legendary laya vidwan Ammachatram Kannuswami Pillai was one of those who inherited this legacy. The rakti tradition, nurtured and developed through healthy competition between talented nagaswara and tavil vidwans, possibly laid the foundation for pallavi singing.

The late Chidambaram Radhakrishna Pillai was one of the doyens of the rakti tradition. We have the good fortune of gaining access to his interviews on rakti, mallari and such topics. In his view, the primary difference between pallavi and rakti is the fact that rakti is always played in misram whereas pallavi has no such restrictions.

Aridi is a common feature of rakti and pallavi. As rakti is normally played in rakti raga-s (like Huseni), it perhaps derives its name from this feature. However, the tradition in Tiruvarur does not conform to this norm; there rakti was played after the mallari. The procession of the deity through the 'keezh teru' was accompanied by a raga alapana and as the procession reached the end of the street, the vidwans would begin the rakti which was invariably set to Chapu tala. (It is interesting to note that earlier Chapu meant Misra Chapu unlike in contemporary times where one differentiates between Misra Chapu and Khanda Chapu.) Rakti was played in three speeds as well as in tisram, followed by kalpanaswara. A significant feature of the festival lasting 22 days was that the rishabha vahana procession was accompanied exclusively by rakti played in Kambhoji raga. On other days of the festival, rakti was played in raga-s like Todi, Sankarabharanam, Kalyani, Bhairavi, Yadukulakambhoji, Poorvikalyani, Navaraj and Arabhi. ■