

Akshara and matra

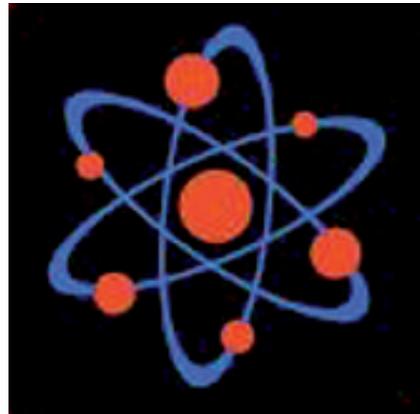
My friend and long-time co-contributor to *Sruti*, B.M. Sundaram, has raised the confusion prevailing in the minds of musicians as well as the public on the use of the terms 'akshara' and 'matra' (see *Sruti Box*, *Sruti* 283). The few books available on tala schemes add to the confusion and there does not appear to be a convincing old treatise on the subject.

It is customary to talk of a tala containing a specific number of akshara-s which are further subdivided into matra-s. My guru, Palani Subramania Pillai used to mention, while talking of 'eduppu' or 'graham' of a line in a kriti, as one or 1-1/2 akshara before or after the 'sama', depending on whether it was 'ateeta' or 'anaagata'. Sometimes he would also use the words four or six matra-s (or even simply 4 or 6) before or after 'sama' to mean the same thing. Much, much later, the late M.N. Kandaswamy Pillai also gave the same interpretation to a pointed question.

In the 'sooladi' scheme of talas, the shortest one has three akshara-s (Tisra Eka — wrongly called Roopakam) while the longest one has 29 (Sankeerna Dhruva). The akshara is the smallest constituent of a tala which maintains the integrity of the tala cycle or 'avarta' (calling it 'avartana' is wrong!). While the akshara can be divided or multiplied by factors of 2, 4, 8 and so on and still keep the integrity of the tala but denote different tempo-s (or kala), heavens would come down if the akshara-s are divided (or multiplied) in any

other manner. This requires explanation. As we have already seen, the akshara-s are made up of matra-s. In chatusra nadai (or 'gati', which means the same thing!), an akshara will have 4 matra-s, in tisra nadai 3, in khandam 5, and so on. Adi tala in chatusra nadai and tisra nadai are two entirely different animals. To cite an example, both *Vatapi Ganapatim* and *Birana varalichi* are set to Adi tala but one line of the former has 32 matra-s and one line of the latter has 48 because of the nadai variation. This also explains my statement why an akshara is called the least finite quantity to maintain the integrity of the tala.

Coming to the 'kalai' of a tala, one comes across the commonly used terms such as 1-kalai, 2-kalai, 4-kalai, etc. Adi tala in the medium tempo has 8 akshara-s (or beats — or time measures, choose what you will!). In the next 'chauka' (or vilamba) kala, the same Adi tala will have 16 akshara-s. Thus it is that in the slowest tempo of a 'shat-kala'



pallavi, each akshara will be repeated a mind-boggling 32 times to make the tala cycle contain a total of $8 \times 32 = 256$ akshara-s.

One fact I had forgotten to mention while writing about B. Krishnamurthy's presentation of shatkala pallavi (in *Sruti* 281) was the extreme brevity of sahitya (or words) which is the hallmark of a good pallavi. He needs to be congratulated on that aspect also apart from his Herculean laya feat. A good pallavi should have adequate karvai-s or silent periods.

The terminology in the laya field has more mines than the erstwhile battlefields of Vietnam! Some lethal groupings are given below :

- (1) korvai, tadinginatom, makutam
- (2) tattakaram, korvai
- (3) teermanam, muktayi, muttaippu, chinna mohra
- (4) chinna mohra, peria mohra
- (5) nadai, gati (incidentally but for the language — Tamil and Sanskrit — they are the same)
- (6) nadai, sollu, sollukkattu, jati (not jaati)
- (7) avarta, avartanam
- (8) tisra eka, Roopakam

The list is by no means over!

To come back to our starting point, matra is to akshara what atom is to molecule.

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