

# The maha melaragamalika

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The *Melaragamalika* is a masterpiece and one of the longest compositions in the repertoire of Carnatic music. Though the *Ragatalamalika* of Ramaswami Dikshitar is popularly known as the '108 Ragatalamalika', only 62 raga sections of that composition are available to us today. This makes the *Melaragamalika* one of the longest compositions of our music.

It comprises the 72 melakarta ragas. The author of this work, Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan, also known as Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer, was a well-known musician and composer of the post-Trinity period. This series of three articles will deal with his *Melaragamalika* in detail. In the first article we attempt to introduce this ragamalika, and explain its origin and structural features.

Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan

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## The author

Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan was born on 26 May 1844 in a family that recognised and encouraged his musical aptitude. He lived till 1893 and within the short span of 49 years he made remarkable achievements which have been spoken and written about by many. Detailed information about Sivan's life can be obtained from the works of U.Ve. Swaminatha Iyer and Vasudevanallur Subbiah Bhagavata. A composite cover story on Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan was published in *Sruti* 227 (August 2003).

## Basis for the melaragamalika

The 72 mela classification is the basis of the *Melaragamalika*. This system of classifying ragas as janaka or parent ragas and janyas or derivative ragas, had its roots in the 16<sup>th</sup> CE work *Chaturdandi Prakasika*. The text outlines the computation of 72 melodic scales, and this theoretical framework gradually, in many stages, led to the development of the 72 melakarta ragas.

The melakarta ragas included melodies that were already in practice and those that were artificially created to fulfill the requirements of the 72 mela scheme. Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries these melakarta ragas were adopted into the performance tradition which included exploring their melodic possibilities through new compositions as well as creative elaboration.

## Origin and purpose

The *Melaragamalika* was a later creation based on the *Bahattara Melakarta* in Marathi by Lavani Venkata Rao. The actual date of its authorship is not known, but the *Bahattara Melakarta* (which preceded this work) is dated 1883 CE.

The *Bahattara Melakarta* has two sections: One consists of sahitya in praise of the author's patron Sakharam Saheb and incorporates the name of each melakarta raga in 72 verses. For example, *Sri sama **kanakangi** sivanrpa | putripati vilase sadari ||* (the raga name is in bold font).

The other section contains 36 verses where the swara varieties of ragas of the six suddha madhyama chakras are embedded in a cryptic form. For example, *suddhariticha **gramapati** ha **dhanika** kuberabama **nrvari*** – in this verse the letters in bold indicate the swara varieties of the first melakarta, namely *su* (suddha) *ri* (rishabha), (suddha) *ga* (gandhara), the 'su' being taken for the rest of the swaras unless specified otherwise. For the second melakarta, where all other swaras would be the same with only 'ni' (nishada) being different, the verse reads as: ***kairavamsi nisi** nipajuni sasisa sukhavitase jani bhuvivari*. Here we find that only 'kai' 'ni' denoting the kaisiki nishada is encrypted, while

