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## Rāgas of the Kathmandu Valley: The Change in Meaning and Purpose.

Bigyesh Nepal

(bigyesh.nepal@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*The rāga tradition has been a gem of a musical genre in the Indian subcontinent. Many sources infer that this tradition was also popular in the royal courts of the Mallas. As the Mallas were pious kings, they adroitly designed a musical genre that could gratify both the need of an artist and a worshiper through the application of rāgas. They also established music communities among commoners to sing the rāgas in numerous temples and shrines of the valley. The tradition has been continuing incessantly but the context is not entirely the same. The singers of today sing the songs and the rāgas latent within, but do it out of faith and obligation; as to how a priest practices his rituals, not necessarily how an aesthete sings his song. The rāga culture, voyaging from the kings to the commoners, has gone through a major transformation that has altered the meaning and purpose it availed. As a comparative study on the significance of rāgas in the Malla court and Newar locality has not been done previously, this paper fulfills the gap by sketching the metamorphosis and outlining the function and significance of the same tradition in two distinctly different backdrops.*

**Keywords:** Dapha, Nepal, Newar, Raga

The valley of Kathmandu is noted for its myriad of temples and shrines. This reflects the presence of strong religious faith in the culture and people, especially the monarchs of the past who are credited as the constructors of these divine abodes. It is interesting to note that the entire settlement of Kathmandu was deliberately designed to resemble the shape of a *khadga*<sup>1</sup>, the contour being the temples of the most feared and venerated deities (Wright, 1972, p.154). Such endeavors were continued by rulers, be it of different dynasties, to establish the place as a religious and devotional center. In the times of the Mallas, further undertakings were introduced to complement the piety that the numbers of temples had to offer. One such attempt was the introduction of devotional singing called *dāphā* to be performed as an obligatory duty, still in continuation in the old neighborhoods. At first glance, the singing seems to be similar to the many *bhajan* styles of Hindu pantheon but there is more to it than an observer might see. When studied assiduously, this singing style proves to be an intricate *rāga* singing genre originally devised as the court music of the Mallas.

*Rāgas* in the great tradition of the Indian subcontinent have always been a subject of multiple facets. Though it primarily functioned as the musical model for composition, it also inspired many other related but independent schools of thought ranging from peculiar styles of poetry and visual arts to a means of aesthetic and devotional pursuit. This diversity in application and meaning of the *rāgas* was piously adhered to by the Mallas with the addition of local devotional and ritualistic values that still survives as *dāphā*. But the *rāgas* practiced in *dāphā* of today is not the same as it used to be. The already multi-layered meaning of *rāgas* has now further evolved into an absolute devotional cult which does not necessarily reflect all the

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<sup>1</sup> *Khadga* means a sword in Sanskrit.

purposes it served in the past. Rather, it has become more of a liturgical practice governed by a strict set of rules that often belittles the music.

### What is a *rāga*?

Although our topic explicitly deals with the change in purpose and functions of Newar<sup>2</sup> *rāgas*, understanding the conception and evolution of the idea is imperative which takes the study to the Indian *rāgas*. A point to be noted, however, is that the Newar *rāgas* has not yet been recognized as an authentic ramification of the Great Tradition<sup>3</sup> to this day. But it is worth mentioning that the case is being studied and researchers like Widdess and Grandin have already identified a few missing links that inarguably point to the same tradition as its progenitor (Grandin, 1997; Widdess, 2016).

Musicologists believe that the practice of *rāgas* goes back to as early as the 5th century but the concept that conceived *rāgas* goes even back as far as the 3rd century BC to 5th century AD to the time of *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Jairazbhoy, 2018, p.16). Although the primary topic of the work was dramaturgy, music has also been covered amply as it was a fundamental element of drama in those days. The concept of *rāga* had not already developed at the time of Bharata; or even if it was, it was not considered as a higher art and therefore, altogether skipped (Gautam, 2008, p.2). The venerated musical style at the time was called *jāti*, believed to be the predecessor of *rāgas* by most musicologists.

Around the 7th to 9th century, the treatise Brihaddeshi by Matanga introduced the word *grāma-rāga* for the first time in the history of music (Gautam, 2008, p.61). This period also marks the point where the former *jāti* was gradually being obsolete as the concept of *rāgas* gained prominence (Gautam, 2008, p.106). But it was not an entirely new musical concept as Matanga deemed *grāma-rāgas* to be derived from the *jātis* (Bandyopadhyaya, 2007, p.10). However, there seems to be confusion among scholars as some regard *gītis* to be the predecessor of the *grāma-rāgas*, not *jātis* (Gangoly, 2004, p.17).

By the 12th century, the tradition flourished even further as hundreds of *rāgas* developed (Gautam, 2008, p.106). A notable work of the time known as *Sangītratnākara* by Sarangadeva describes a total of 264 *rāgas* classified into many categories (Bandyopadhyaya, 2007, p.264). Around this time, the whole system of the *grāma-rāgas* was replaced by that of *desi-rāgas* and it is these *desi-rāgas* that eventually became the *rāgas* of today (Widdess, 1993, p.44). The current tradition of Indian classical going through the entire evolutionary process is believed to have taken its current shape after the 15th and 16th centuries (Deva, 1995, p. 10).

In the Indian tradition, the *rāgas* have always been a subject of multiple meanings and purposes. According to Miner (2015) “*rāgas* functioned in three distinct but interlocking spheres: as objects of general aesthetic appreciation; as objects of music-technical specialization; and as tools of devotional or magical practice” (p. 387). *Rāgas*, apart from being a musical mode, have kindled other streams of related but independent thoughts. The *rāga-rāginī* concept, *rāgadhyaṇa* visualizations, and *rāgamālā* paintings are a few strains that were successfully introduced as novel ideas with the predominant theme of devotion.

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<sup>2</sup> The terms Newar *rāga*, Newari *rāga* or Nepali *rāga* used in context mean the same and should not be confused.

<sup>3</sup> The Indian classical music tradition is also called the Great tradition.

This ideology became an accepted standard of *rāga* tradition and was duly practiced by enthusiasts, connoisseurs, and literati of the Indian subcontinent.

### ***Rāgas* in the Nepali culture.**

Historical records have provided two distinct genres of *rāga* music in Nepal by the name of *caryā* and *dāphā*. *Caryā* is thought to be the oldest of the two but as it has always remained an esoteric practice having essentially different purpose and meaning, its study is out of bounds to this paper. Rather, the concentration will be on the *rāga* practice that developed in the Malla court and has now become the part of the *dāphā repertoire*.

Most of the sources referring to the local *rāga* music tradition points to the period after the division of the valley into three sovereign kingdoms. The only mentioning from a period prior to the division directs to the reign of Jaya Sthiti Malla. In his time, it was mandatory to play the *rāga dipak* while a royal member was being cremated (Wright, 1972, p.182). This is the earliest record of *rāga* in the context of the royal courts, however, no song or texts dating to that period have been known to exist today. It cannot be said whether the *rāgas* from the time of Jaya Sthiti was sung in the style of *dāphā*, however, most manuscripts obtained from later Malla period has been identified as *dāphā* songbooks.

The primary source of information on Newari *rāgas* are the numerous *dāphā* groups that have preserved the tradition. Almost all of these groups possess a handwritten songbook containing the songs titled with the *rāga* it is ascribed to (Widdess, 2015, p.241). In many of these songs, names of the contemporaneous kings are found written as a signature by the poet or by the king himself, thus enabling researchers to approximate the date of its origin. The oldest text so far obtained is from the time of Mahindra Malla of Kathmandu dating to the 16th century (Baidya, 2002, p.17). The song is dedicated to Krishna and is ascribed to *rāga bibhās* and *tāla pra*. Similarly, Jaggajyoti Malla of Bhaktapur and Siddhi Narsing of Patan have been identified as the oldest authors of their respective kingdoms (Baidya, 2002, p.37-62). Widdess states that Jaggajyoti was the one who initiated the *dāphā* tradition in Bhaktapur (Widdess, 2016, p.41); but seeing that it had already flourished in Kathmandu, this statement might not hold true. In any case, texts referring to both the Kings, Jaggajyoti and Siddhi Narsingh, are mostly devotional and ascribed to *rāgas*. Since this point in history, until the time of Tribhuvan of the latter Shah dynasty, the tradition seems to have continued incessantly as many texts of such *rāga* songs have been retrieved.

Despite the facts, there are still many questions left that cannot be clarified by the texts alone. For instance, the texts do not precisely delineate how the process of transmission and transformation underwent. Hence, in order to understand the changes and evolution, it is essential to grasp the true purpose and meaning of *rāgas* within the royal realm.

### **Meaning and Purpose of *rāgas* in the Malla court**

*Rāgas* of the Malla times, although being predominantly composed as devotional art was not circumscribed to religion or temples alone. Many sources infer that the genre also served as the art music frequently performed to the likes of Kings and civilians. This premise is testified by an event held every year on the full moon day of the Hindu month *Jyestha*. A group of singers gather in the outer square of Patan durbar and dedicate the whole day to the signing of the *rāgas*. The repertoire consists of a set of thirty-seven *rāga* based songs believed to be written and composed by Siddhi Narsingh. The king is also remembered as the initiator of the event and is symbolically represented by an antiquated golden throne

belonging to him. A *rāgamālā* painting portraying the stories of the *rāgas* being performed is also displayed concurrently. Despite singing devotional songs, this performance does not show signs of a devotional milieu. On the contrary, it represents a musical concert as the front square often used to entertain with the slightly raised pavilion giving an impression of a medieval stage.

Another function the *rāgas* served was as a collaborative art for other performances. The Malla kings were quite fond of writing and staging plays as proved by the many texts of dramas retrieved so far. The plays popular at that time were mostly musicals as the texts also bear the names of *rāgas* (Prajapati, 2006, p. 17). Again, the theme of religion seems to be the central idea as most of the plays revolved around the tales of Hindu mythology and thaumaturgy (Regmi, 1965, p.847). The backing musical performance might well have been a *dāphā* group as seen in the famous *Kārtik Nāc* of Patan still in practice. Another noteworthy example is the *Jhyālcā*, an erotic shadow play, performed at the time of *Indra Jātrā*. *Jhyālcā* also uses the same concept of musical backing done by a *dāphā* group singing devotional songs. It is strange, however, as *Jhyālcā*, being an erotic play is accompanied by devotional songs that do not reflect themes of eroticism in any way. Perhaps the Mallas regarded eroticism as divine and godly as opposed to the prevalent tradition of the mainstream religions. This is further asserted by a large number of erotic arts that can be readily seen in the temples of the Kathmandu valley.

The *rāgas* did not just attract attention from music lovers but a wide range of aesthetes. Among them, visual artists of that time found *rāgas* especially enchanting and inspiring as illustrated by the existence of a few *rāgamālā* paintings. Originally developed in the Indian states, *rāgamala* portrays the sentimental and philosophical values of *rāgas* in forms of paintings (Greig, 2000, p.312). Two *rāgamālā* paintings believed to be painted for Jaggajyoti Malla has been identified by Wegner and Widdess (2004). These two sets of paintings, one in the National archives of Kathmandu and the other in the Norton Simon collection, are similar to the Indian *rāgamālā* paintings in addition to significant local influence. The Sanskrit verses describing the *rāgas* are from the treatises *Sangīta-darpana*, *Sangīta-dāmodara* and *Sangīta-nārāyana* (Wegner & Widdess, 2004, p.84). Another set of 140 small *rāgamālā* murals have also been identified at the fifty-five windowed palace of Bhaktapur made for Bhupatindra Malla (Shrestha, 2004). This set of *rāgamālā* along with the aforementioned one of Siddhi Narsing is yet to be studied.

Like the visual artists, poets also found their share of inspiration in *rāga* music. It is surprising that nearly all the works of poetry recovered from the Malla period are written in the style of *rāga*-songs. Not that poets were the ones who composed their works into *rāgas*, but the style of writing is dexterously adapted to the style of singing current at the time. It has already been mentioned that the predominant theme of the *rāga*-songs was devotional; nonetheless, the poems were not entirely limited to the genre alone. Baidya (2002) has explained that apart from devotional poems, other styles of poetry depicting patriotism, romanticism and moralism were also common in the Malla times. This can be further understood that *rāgas* were also employed to non-devotional songs.

A feature of these *poems* is a term called *dhuā* marked by the initial ‘*dhu*’ generally to the *first stanza*. The word *dhuā* indicates the refrain and must be a vernacular for the word *dhruva* found in many poems of the *prabandhas*<sup>4</sup>. The *prabandha* style had a characteristic

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<sup>4</sup> A vocal style of classical music popular in the time of Sarangadeva around the 12th century.

feature of inserting the name of the singer or composer<sup>5</sup> at the end of the song (Rowell, 1992, p.274). This element is also readily seen in the Newar *rāga* songs. The Newars seem to be greatly influenced by Indian devotional poets like Jaydeva and Vidyapati as demonstrated by the effective adaptation of their styles in Newari writing. Their poems were also included in the *dāphā* repertoire and are still popular among many *dāphā* groups.

The concept of *rāgas* was the predominant and accepted theory of music in the Indian subcontinent. Various treatises on music were written, analyzed, reviewed and rewritten throughout the course of history. Thus, *rāgas* were not just musical ideas, but a profound intellectual subject. The availability of treatises or translated works on music from the time of the Mallas can be understood that *rāgas* were treated equally erudite in the valley as well. *Gītapancāsika* is one of such literary works on music believed to be written by Jagajyoti Malla describing different notes, melody and emotion. (Regmi, 2007, p.854). The same work also comprises a collection of poems written by Jagajyoti himself (Widdess, 2016, p.47). Jagajyoti alone is credited as the writer or commissioner of at least five treatises on music (Widdess, 2015, p. 235.). Regmi (2007) also refers to inscriptions and written work prescribing special rules of classical music and the mentioning of the principal six *rāgas* and 36 *rāginis* (p. 854). Manuscripts of Indian musicological treatises like *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Sangīta-ratnākara*, *Sangīta-dāmodara*, *Sangīta-darpana*, *Rāga-vibodha*, *Rāga-tattva-vibodha*, *Sangīta-parijāta* and *Sangīta-sarvasva* from the Malla period are still present at the National archives of Kathmandu (Widdess, 2016, p.44). Later Malla kings like Pratap Malla and Jitmitra Malla have been known to follow the footsteps of Jagajyoti in attempting to write original musical treatise by themselves.

The reign of Mallas ended in 1769 AD as the Gorkhali king Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed the three kingdoms of the valley into his realm. The shift in the power had some adverse effect but as Prithvi Narayan was well acquainted with the Newar culture, most of the tradition survived and continued undisturbed (Widdess, 2016, p.41). The tradition of *rāga* singing was not all-lost as the Mallas had already devised the art as the hallmark of the valley. The knowledge of the *dāphā* and the *rāgas* was inculcated to the locals although it is quite uncertain how the entire transmission went (Grandin, 1997). It can be hypothesized that as Mallas were pious kings and the predominant theme of the *rāgas* was devotional, the same art was used to appease the many gods and demi-gods residing in the innumerable temples and shrines of the valley. As this was not a task that a handful of rulers and their musicians could undertake, civilians were instead mentored to carry out the duty. Musical communities were established based on caste and society and were obliged to perform their musical duties; performing *dāphā* was one of them.

### **Rāga-singing as a devotional ritualistic cult**

As the discussion on Newar *rāgas* back and again brings *dāphā* into the narrative, it needs to be further defined in order to comprehend the meanings it carries. *Dāphā* is a group *rāga* singing style of music accompanied by small hand cymbals and a barrel-shaped percussion called *khī*. The characteristic feature of this genre is the peculiarity of the antiphonal singing by two groups. The origin of *dāphā* has always been a topic of debate as there is no palpable piece of information pointing towards a veritable source. Manandhar argued that it was imported from the Mithila region (as cited in Grandin, 2011, p.108); but it is merely a

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<sup>5</sup> It might well have been the poet as seen in many songs from Indian and Newari tradition instead of singers or composers.

hypothesis based on the fact that one of the languages used in *dāphā* songs is the Maithili. The word *dāphā* itself does not give the slightest hint of its origin. The classical Newari dictionary based on manuscript sources defines it as a singing group, not a musical genre (Malla, 2000, p.219). It seems that not only the music but the meaning of the word itself has changed with time.

*Dāphā* is still continuing among the Newars but its meaning and significance has changed considerably. It has merely become a devotional genre and the term *bhajan* is often used to connote it. Very few of the local singers know the exact history and significance of the *dāphā*. To them, the divinity and rituals associated with the act is of greater importance than any other thing, including the music. They are musically untrained as the music pedagogy of the *dāphā* groups is not cultured enough to be called a proper music tutoring like that of the Indian tradition. They do not have explicit knowledge of musical notes or rhythm but an empirical understanding resulting through repetitive practice and memorization. The basic and most important notion of raga being a musical mode is no longer valid for them. As a result, the layered meaning *ragas* as a conceptual and inspirational idea have also disappeared in practice.

A notable characteristic seen in the *dāphā* participant is the incontrovertible devotion shown to the melodies; perhaps because of the *rāga* ascription? For the *dāphā* singers, the *rāga* is the most important element in the singing process as they identify *rāga* to be connected with the divine aspects. They put a great deal of importance in singing the *rāgas* perfectly as mistakes are thought to be ominous. But singing the *rāgas* has a somewhat different understanding among the locals. Widdess (2016, p.77) explains that *rāgas*, to the current *dāphā* singers, actually mean the unmetred non-lexical introduction called *rāga kāyegu* similar to the *ālāp* of the Indian tradition. This introduction is perceived as an invitation to the gods to come and dance to the music.

*Dāphā* currently is not just a devotional genre, but largely a ritualistic cult. The performance of *dāphā* itself is a complex ritual often having strict and unchangeable rules. First, a solo piece on the percussion called *dya lhyāyegu* is performed as an invocation to the gods. Then the *rāga kāyegu* is sung followed by a song ascribed to the same *rāga*. Generally there are two types of *rāga* compositions called *gvārā* and *cāli* of which the former comes first followed by the latter. Each group has their own set of rules for singing session. Some may choose to sing a single set of *gvārā* and *cāli* while others may sing more. The singing usually ends with an *ārati* song marked by the lighting of the oil lamp. The *dya lhyāyegu* is again repeated to conclude the *dāphā* session followed by distributing *prasāda*<sup>6</sup> and consumption of alcohol in some cases.

Each *dāphā* group is composed of people belonging to the same caste and community. Training is given to new members every ten to twelve years or depending on the need of new members (Widdess, 2016, p.208). The initiates are selected from the affiliated community and have to go through a training period often done within a separate concealed room dedicated to *Nāsaḥ dyaḥ*, the local god of music and performance. The training involves learning the songs and percussion going through a process of complex rituals often involving animal sacrifice. An open performance is given by the newly initiated at the completion of the training period. Like other Newar celebrations, it is also followed by a communal feast.

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<sup>6</sup> Food that is first offered to the god and then consumed by people.

Originally, women were not allowed to gain membership into a *dāphā* group. This idea is still largely followed by most of the them but a few have started to take a more democratic approach lately. Women were actually not allowed to play any kind of instrument in Newar culture but these norms have changed as a female participant in a drumming parade has become a frequent sight nowadays. *Dāphā*, however, seems to be the most unyielding to its traditional norms, perhaps the reason being the singing of the *rāgas* as the other musical styles that have changed its values do not comprise singing the *rāgas*.

## Conclusion

As has been seen, the meaning and purpose of *rāga* performance has gone through tremendous change and evolution. This transformation is partly due to the change in the performance milieu and partly because of the demise of the institution that bore it in the first place.

In the Malla court, the *rāgas* primarily served as a means of aesthetic pursuit in the form of musical modes. As the nature of artistic works in all its variations was devotional and religious, the same theme dominated the musical arts as well. In spite of that, the tradition of *rāgas* was not circumscribed to devotional setting but was rather proliferated as art music. It became an inspiration for visual artists and intellectual subject for music scholars. The Indian contemporary idea of *rāgas* as a means of aesthetic, musical and devotional fulfillment was devoutly followed by the Mallas.

The *rāga* culture of the present, however, shares least of the features described above. It has lost its value as a musical mode because the locals do not know the theory and concepts behind it. With the loss of musical concept, the extension of the genre as a conceptual and intellectual subject has also disappeared. *Rāgamala* paintings have become an extinct art style and so is the peculiar style of poetry. On the other side, it has become a very interesting devotional cult with complex rules and rituals; the very custom that the Mallas had contrived. It has become a means of delivering the musical ideas and performance that otherwise would have been limited to words and sentences in some old manuscripts. But above all, the meaning of *rāgas* has now become religion and continuity of tradition. The antiquity and self-identity connected with this music is what the local value the most.

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