

Tagore's Rain Songs

A Review in Context of Traditional Indian Monsoon Ragas

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Abstract

Indian ragas possess long evolutionary tradition over centenaries with wide spectrum of varieties and rich heritage. But it has become conservative to the commons due to significant restrictions on it for avoiding dilution. The grammar of tunes is elaborate and tough, that reduces the focus of lyric and rhythm.

Traditionally, rain / monsoon ragas were created through ages with specific tunes, pattern and depicting them through lyrics of preconceived themes. Rabindranath Tagore came out from this orthodox system and applied various non-rain ragas in his rain-compositions. Among 115 rain-songs of his own composition, 79 songs were tuned with such non-traditional ragas in a careful way to make balance among the tune, lyric and rhythm. He modified ragas, reduced or exaggerated the impact of a certain tune, which made a wonderful balance, as said by the researchers.

This article reviews the rain songs composed by Tagore, its evolutionary measures in application of non-rain ragas. It also critically analyses the methods of modification of the tunes in traditional ragas in accordance with the lyric and rhythm. The authors further suggest for pursuing elaborate experiments of Tagore's songs to continue the Indian tradition in a respectful way, instead of mere notional fusions.

Key words: Rain Songs, Monsoon Raga, Rabindranath Tagore, Indian Classical Music

1. Introduction

Ragas of Indian classical music possess one of the longest evolutionary traditions for more than three centenaries exhibiting wonderful gems inside those have been nourished and conserved carefully. The system first appeared in the oldest civilization in Indian

subcontinent during the period of Rig Veda¹. For centuries, the tradition was continued, enriched, snowballed and regionalized by learned teachers, their disciples and scholars. The ancestor-developers, for keeping its purity and to avoid any dilution, had to put significant restrictions on it in accordance with complicated grammar and diversification in expression (gharana). The tunes of ragas, originated based on time (prahar) and seasons (ritu), were the primary focus of the songs, followed by the lyrics (bandish). For example, notes of raga Bhairavi depict time zone of early morning and the lyrics are also set to manifest the situation of pre-dawn. Likewise, Yaman represents the evening, Sarang as noon, Basant as spring and Megh-malhar as monsoon. However, as a consequence, the rich wealth was converted into a walled enclosure for a distinguished class of learned people and in turn, was demarcated as 'conservative' by the commons. A parallel wave of folk, tribal and indigenous songs captured the heart of majority middle class with simplistic philosophies through delivering social and religious stories through colloquial notes.

During late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a new wave of liberalization appeared in the context of classical impacted songs that was patronized by Rabindranath Tagore. He was considered the greatest poet, composer, writer of contemporary Bengal, and even also now. Born (1861-1941) in an aristocrat Bengali family of Kolkata during British regime, Tagore was an eminent Nobel Laureate for his composition 'Geetanjali' and was crowned as 'Bishwa-Kavi' (Poet of Universe). Tagore had a strong background of Indian classical music. He was a disciple of Pandit Jadunath Bhatta, Bishnupur Gharana and later of many others. He believed that sangeet (song) must express its bhaav (emotion), not mere techniques (Dutta, 1981). Thus, he utilized the essence of tunes, bhaav (emotion), made significant variations, shifted scientifically from a rigid grammar but produced beautiful harmony; those gave dignified respect to the ragas, instead of utter dilution and depicting the uniqueness by style, form and class beyond the traditional boundary. Smt. Indira Devi Chowdhurani, one of his grand sisters, constantly persuaded him to describe all the notes for future documentation. Finally, he permitted her to identify the ragas in his compositions as well as to create notations i.e. swaralipi².

Tagore created bunch of seasonal songs, especially on rain, in different stages of his life. The experiments indicate that he dealt with mostly three aspects in application of different ragas –

¹ The Rig Vedic civilization is accounted as the oldest civilization having evidences in arts and music. It dates back to 1500 B.C. - 1000 B.C. Some scholars date the Rig Veda as early as 12000 BC - 4000 B.C. (Khanna, 2007).

² <http://www.slideshare.net/dattapk2003/rabindranath-tagoreamp-indian-classical-music-july2010>

(i) use of rain ragas in rain-songs, (ii) use of rain and non-rain ragas in different stanzas of a song, and, (iii) use of completely non-rain ragas in different ways through modifications. Attempt has been made in this article to provide an overview of rain songs. It also reviews the evolutionary measures in application of non-rain ragas in rain songs. It also touches the methods of modification of the tunes in traditional ragas in accordance with the lyric and rhythm.

2. Rain Songs: Tradition of India

Rain songs were first initiated during the age of Vedas. The Parjanya Sukta (hymn) and the Aap Sukta of the Rig Veda³, and the Varuna Sukta of Yajurveda were dedicated to rain god and were recited / sung with specific musical notes based on different conditions of sky – pre-, during and post-rain.

As per researches of many music scholars, the monsoon ragas were developed in classical music during medieval period of India, 14th – 16th century, under patronage of Rajput Kings and Mughal Emperors. Mia Tansen initiated the raga ‘Megh’ in context of monsoon. He was one of the gems of nine masters (Navaratna) in Emperor Akbar’s court. Another two similar ragas, Megh Malhar and Mian-ki-Malhar⁴ were created from ‘Megh’. The historical evidences prove that the monsoon ragas also became popular for poet-saints, Ramdas and his son Surdas due to their original contribution in ‘Ramdasi Malhar’ and ‘Surdasi Malhar’ respectively.

Afterwards, bunch of monsoon ragas were evolved from different regions of India in the names of Gaud Malhar⁵, Des Malhar, Nat Malhar, Dhulia Malhar and Meera ki Malhar⁶. Shadows of rain tunes are also observed in ragas like ‘Sarang’, ‘Desh’ and ‘Chhayanaat’. All these ragas are mostly emphasized on the tunes ‘ma’ and higher ‘ma’ in accordance with lower ‘ni’ and ‘ni’. During 18th century, Sufi culture, the philosophical blend of Hindu and Muslim religion, also dealt with the romantic ambiance of rain songs through their heart-touching easy tunes.

Through centenaries, monsoon ragas were sung predominantly based on three themes. During the era of Vedas, the songs or the poems were dedicated to the gods (Parjanya or Varuna)

³ <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/Monsoon-Ragas-1.aspx>

⁴ *Lakshyasangeetshastra* defines the boundary condition of Miyan Malhar as “*Harapriyabhide Jayate Bibudhpriya / Miyanmalharnamasou Varshasu Sukhadayaka*”. *Abhinabaraagmanjayam*

⁵ *Gour Malhar-ko Mangsho Varshasu sukhadayaka*

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malhar>

with expectation of timely rain and thus praying for increase in fertility for sustenance of human settlement. These songs were mostly sung due to fear of the invisible gods, the powers of nature. Gradually, people observed that rains are happening naturally and periodically, and they came to know about scientific reasons for such phenomenon. The fear of god, thus, disappeared, and after centuries, such monsoon songs used to depict the joyous moments of lovers after long gaps of separation. Such themes were documented by one of the greatest poets of India, Kalidas, in his composition 'Meghdootam'. He explained the pathos of 'Yakshpriya', the wife of a mythical male figure 'Yaksh' for years of separation due to curse of lord Kubera, and finally, she requested the cloud to bring her husband's news, thus to depict the passion and love to husband. The lovers' expressions were crystallized in manifestation of 'Radha' and 'Krishna', the myth-historical characters of north India, through the rain songs. Even in many parts of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat state, the rain tunes are sung dedicating to the eternal love of 'Radha' and 'Krishna'.

3. Rain Songs of Tagore

Eminent Tagore-researchers have unanimously suggested three distinct phases of his compositions based on his age. First phase spans for around 24 years from 1877-1900. He was only 16 when he started composing rain songs and was 40, when the first phase was over. The second phase took another 20 years, when he became the senior citizen. The final phase of composition was observed during 1921-1941 for another 20 years and the creation continued till his death.

During this long and eventful 60 years of creation, Tagore composed 115 rain songs. The number of rain songs during 1st phase was only five. This time, he was somewhat conservative in choosing ragas for creation of notes. During the 2nd phase the number increased to 22, around 4 times of the previous stage. In the final phase of life, Tagore composed 88 rain songs that was another 4 times of the 2nd phase. The scenario reveals that number of compositions on rain songs increased geometrically for 60 years.

The investigation of ragas used in his rain songs reveals three categories. First, bunch of songs are found where Tagore was disciplined and orthodox. The ragas as stated in rain group were utilized as per original structure. The second type is associated with mishra (blend) ragas, where Tagore used other ragas with rain ragas in a mixture or separated way in different paragraphs, for example, *Desh-Malhar* and *Mishra-Malhar*. Initial one indicates two separate ragas have been blended and the second one is a single raga with few note

variations. Third type accommodates the ragas those are completely different from rain ragas in terms of attitude, style and formation. Table 1 explains Tagore's rain songs in connection with ragas for various phases.

The scenario exhibits a rapid growth in creation of songs based on non-rain ragas in later stage. The lion share of rain songs were composed during final phase, where, more than 81% songs are based on such experiments. The songs got popularity and no imbalance was noticed from any researcher or eminent personnel in this regard.

Table 1: Tagore's Rain Songs in Different Phases of Life

Phase (Years)	Total number of Rain songs	Rain Ragas	Mishra Rain Ragas	Other Ragas
Initial (1877-1900)	5	3	1	1
Middle (1900-1921)	22	7	1	14
Later (1921-1941)	88	21	3	64
Total for 60 years	115	31	5	79

Source: *Geetabitan*

4. Observations and Discussions

(a) Observations during phase 1

Tagore composed only five rain songs during initial phase. In 1882, he wrote the first song 'Gahono Ghano Chhailo' when he was only 16 years old. The song was tuned on raga megh-malhar. After 13 years, he composed the second song 'Jhar jhar borishe' in raga megh. He took shelter of raga gour-malhar in his third composition, during 1897. All the three songs were based on ragas of rain, popular to Indian subcontinent for centuries.

The first experiment of composite ragas was found in his fourth song. The song is distributed over five paragraphs. The paragraphs contain tunes of Malhar, Pilu, Yaman-Kalyan, Khamaj and Hameer separately. Probably, Tagore was alert for not mixing up such ragas to achieve a composite one. Hence, the song 'Oi ase oi oti' may be considered as the first song composed with various non-rain tunes but not rejecting the rain raga.

During 1900, Tagore came out of orthodox system of composition and the fifth song i.e. 'Nilnoboghone' was tuned in raga 'yaman', an evening raga, not associated with any season or any particular mood. The drastic step of composition opened up the bottle and

consequently, a bunch of rain songs had to obey the non-rain ragas followed by a respectful discipline.

(b) Observations during phase 2

Tagore composed twenty-two rain songs during the mid phase (1900-1921). Among them, seven touch rain-ragas. Six of them were composed within 1920. This may be assumed that, Tagore was in a mood of ‘non-experiment’ of other ragas initially. The seventh song ‘Amar din furalo’ was composed in 1920, a decade away from the sixth one. Among all these seven songs, three were composed of raga Malhar, three from Gour Malhar and one from Desh Malhar.

The pattern of experiments using non-rain ragas possesses distinct features during this phase. Use of raga Yaman and Kafi are observed here. Among the rest fifteen rain songs out of twenty two, two were composed of raga Yaman and three from Kafi. Yaman is usually bonded with evening, after the sun-set. The ambience was created in the song ‘Ashar sandhya ghoniye elo’, where the term ‘sandhya’, synonymous to ‘evening’, was composed. Surprisingly, the other yaman-based rain song ‘Aji bari jhare’ is not conforming to the evening; rather it is predominantly focused to the rhythm of the rain drops and therefore, a composite rhythm of ‘teora’ (7 bits) have been used here to dramatize the ambience.

Raga kafi is neither seasonal nor time based. As a Carnatic origin and by prescription of Pandit Vishnunarayan Bhatkhande, the raga is mostly used in tappa, hori, dadra, kirtan and bhajan⁷ which indicate the religious nature of the raga. The rain songs composed by raga Kafi, are mostly of slow beats.

Apart from these songs, two among twenty-two are sheltered by ‘baul’ tune, one of the closest philosophies of contemporary Bengal. The music of baul community had simple tunes, mostly based on bhairavi raga. The melodies are more often melancholic but have deeper meaning of life. Tagore used this philosophical attunements in the songs – ‘ei shraboner buker bhitor’ and ‘mehger kole kole jay re’. In addition to such baul tunes, Tagore captured the tunes of Hameer, Pilu and Sahana in the mid phase.

(c) Observations during phase 3

Tagore composed eighty-eight rain-songs during the terminal phase of his life (1921-1940). The number indicates a four-fold growth from the previous phase. Application of rain ragas

⁷ Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kafi_\(raga\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kafi_(raga))

also increased but in lowest pace. Among total, only twenty one songs are composed of rain ragas, predominantly of malhar and composite malhar. The rest sixty seven songs were composed under wide domain of Indian ragas. Extensive use of raga Bhairavi, Desh, Yaman Kalyan, Kafi and Pilu are observed during this time. Among these ragas, Kafi and Yaman Kalyan got stronghold in previous phase. This indicates a striking philosophy of Tagore. Unlike the Indian traditional thought, he came out from orthodox nature as widely observed in older persons. This nature resulted in an apparent violation in application of rain ragas, though he cautiously applied the non-rain tunes on rain-notes by changing their rhythms, the 'bhaav' and sometimes using multi-rhythmic paragraphs.

Bhairavi is a widely accepted and respectful 'ragini' (female form of a raga, or the consort of a raga) in Indian classical domain. This resembles the morning tunes, before the dawn and is quite 'gambhira' nature. Bhairavi and rain are no way connected anywhere, as per history or mythology of Indian music. Though he composed seven songs based on this raga, most of these songs are based on two-bits (kaharba) or three-bits (dadra) of tala. All of these songs were composed during 1922 - 1939 i.e. spanning the entire phase. 'Aaji barsharaater sheshe' was the first song composed in Bhairavi, based on kaharba. The meaning indicates the incidents during the dawn and he correlated the meaning with 'bhairavi' in appropriate timing.

Raga Desh partially touches the rain tunes. Rabindranath composed eleven songs based on this raga either in pure or mixed format. Alike application of Bhairavi, these songs were also composed during the entire phase.

Ragas Yaman Kalyan and Kafi have been used in rain songs almost in similar numbers. These ragas are not uncommon in rain songs of Rabindranath as per evidences of his second phase. Rather raga Pilu possesses a stronghold of such experiments. Tagore composed ten such rain songs based on raga Pilu, mostly during 1922-1925.

Some other notable ragas, used in rain compositions are Alayia Bilawal, Brindabani Sarang, Hameer, Jhinjhit, Kedara, Ramkeli and Sahana.

4. Conclusions

The research indicates an unorthodox attempt of Tagore in composing rain songs; however, it was not a childish drama or a gimmick. A wholistic approach was observed for every song with varying focuses either on raga, or lyrics or beats.

Unlike the traditional scenario, Tagore explored the rain songs in his own ways. During first stage of his creation, he was confined within the traditional systems of tunes and topics. Gradually, he included various times of day in rains instead of only season – dawn, morning, afternoon, evening, night and even midnight. This helped him a lot to use the appropriate ragas of different times, as available in traditional Indian ragas and that could be blended with rain-ragas. And thus, bhairavi could be successfully used during dawn and morning, pilu in afternoon, yaman in late evening and kedar at night.

Non-rain ragas were carefully chosen in support of other two elements, rhythm and lyrics. In traditional Indian classical tunes, the use of slow rhythms was made particularly prior to rains and this was a tiring appeal to the nature for rains. When rain comes, the rhythm automatically increases to express joyous mood. Tagore made a dramatic attempt in using the rhythms. Sometimes, he used three-beats but both in lower and higher pace and that was also true for two-beats. In many rain songs, he used different talas in different paragraphs, which snatches the concentration of the audience from rain tunes to bits.

Tagore was a philosopher, not a mere song-composer or a poet. His cosmopolitan consciousness composed so many emotions - the nature, activities of people, melodramatic features, the sorrows and joy, description of incidents in tiny levels, the fertility, the plants and flowers and even various formats of rain i.e. thunder, small rain drops, cloudy conditions and so many aspects. Hence, sometimes, the melodramatic description like opera attracted the audience more than the tunes. Tagore perpetually availed the opportunity for experimenting the songs playing above the ragas. He was 'universal' instead of being mere national or regional. Thus, people can relate the lyrics even if they are not Indians or Bengalis.

The present chaos in Bengal songs, in terms of unplanned fusion, use of over-powered beats, the rocky sensation and the losing emotion have entrusted to re-examine the Tagore songs, to post-mortem them with due respect. Such researches are seriously expected from the musicians, not only for researches and paper works, but to acquire the fuel for further development of songs for making them alive and enjoyable in people's mind.

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