

Syncretism in the Perspective of Evolution of Raga

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Abstract

Syncretism is a well known phenomenon which bears the meaning of merging, melding and mixing different things to form a new concept. The concept of the term is very old and broadly used in different areas such as religion and culture. The function of syncretism is not only mixing or merging but also adopting different things and establishing link or bridge between similar things. Indian Classical Music is deeply influenced by the raga music as it is considered as the backbone of classical music. Raga has a wide history of its evolution that covers different dimensions. Syncretism plays a significant role in the evolution of raga ,as it has undergone various changes and reached at today's position .In this article it will my endeavor to cover the areas of evolution of raga on the basis of syncretism.

Keywords: Syncretism, Culture, Classical Music, Raga.

Introduction:

Syncretism generally indicates the concept of combining different, often contradictory beliefs. When one or more customs or practices combine in a new practice the existence of syncretism can be observed there. The word Syncretism appeared first in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1618. It derived from the modern Latin word ‘Syncretismus’ drawing on Greek word ‘Syncretismos’. The concept of syncretism i.e., blending or mixing different practices, customs and ideologies into a new theory, has been established by the Greek Philosopher Plutarch (1st Century A.D.). Syncretism is a process where different thoughts not only merge together but new concepts are formed by adopting or assimilating various things .Like other field's syncretism plays an important role in Hindustani Classical music. Raga is the foundational element of Hindustani Classical Music, even a casual listener of Hindustani Music can identify a raga as the raga music describes the melodic facet of a piece of music.¹

Classical music rests on the raga melody which is more delightful than any other melodic structure. Raga music represents the whole aspect of Indian Classical music through its

¹ Raja, Deepak, Hindustani Music: A tradition in transition, p.125

emotional and mind blowing combination of musical notes which produce an outstanding melody that touches not only the minds of music loving people but also the common people. The term raga, which is known as the elementary thing to understand the structure of Hindustani Music, is a technical word that indicates several characteristics, whereas the concept of raga was prevalent as a melodic structure and it was in vogue from Bharat's time, but it can be observed in "Brihaddesi" (6th century) written by Matanga Muni that a clear and specified definition of raga was given.² Basically raga indicates a melody which is formed out of some rules such as every raga should have minimum five notes and maximum seven notes, every raga should contain two important notes named as vadi and samvadi note etc. Raga is a very ancient term as we can see its reference in two earlier epics Ramayana and Mahabharata as jati raga, which has been considered as the forerunner of raga. Raga was prevalent in 2nd century in the form of grama raga as Bharat Muni of 'Natyashastra' has used this term to denote the grama ragas. Bharat used the term raga several times as:-

*"Tatang shesha prayogastu na ragajanako bhabet"*³

Despite these facts, the clear definition of Raga was given for first time in 'Brihaddesi' (6th Century) written by Matanga Muni. He was an ancient scholar of music who has exhibited the concept and evolution of raga more elaborately in his musical text. Matanga Muni defined raga in 'Brihaddesi' as:

*"Tatradou, swarvarnabisheshena dhwanivedena ba puna :
Rajjayate yena sachittang sa raga sammata satam:"*⁴

In above mentioned shloka Matanga described raga as a combination of different musical notes, which form a sweet melody ornamented by different tunes that colors the minds of the listeners. So raga stands as the permutation and combination of notes having the influence of rasa and bhava for which raga can create an emotional and sentimental approach over the minds of the listeners.

Raga has a wide history of its evolution and there is a big controversy regarding this. Indian classical music is ancient and its origin that is the origin of raga dates back to the period of Ramayan and Mahabharat. Jati ragas were in vogue in Ramayan and Mahabharata, which later changed into ragas. Jatis are the ancestor of raga, this is well accepted phenomenon and in course of time various dimensions of raga has been discovered which are related to the process of syncretism such as, Ragas from the folk melody, ragas from south Indian origin .

² Mutatkar, Sumati, (Ed.), Aspects of Indian Music, p.13

³ Ghosh, Pradip Kumar, (Ed.), Raga Rahasya, p.16

⁴ Kshirsagar, D.B., Shri Matangamuni krita Brihaddesi, p.144

Jatis are the forerunner of raga:

When notes are in a specific arrangement or pattern, producing aesthetic enjoyment, giving rise both to material prosperity and unseen spiritual benefit then it is called jati.⁵ The gandharva type of music was performed using seven pure jatis. These jatis were the ragas by themselves, as they were able to create pleasing and soothing sensations in the hearts of living beings. The melodic structure of jatis were known as jati ragas and the musical compositions were known as jati gana. The jati ragas were the base of all kinds of ragas. Bharat Muni, the author of 'Natyashastra' has said that

*“Jati sambhutatvat gramaganamiti, yati kinchidelat giyate loke tat sarva jatishu sthitamiti”.*⁶

The above mentioned shloka implies that jati ragas were the first melodic combination which later on gave birth to gram ragas, and all the gitis that were prevalent in ancient time, evolved from the jatis. Syncretism occurs in the evolution of raga through the formation of jatis because except the seven pure jatis there are eleven jatis which are known as vikrit jati. The vikrit jatis are the result of syncretism as they are the combinations of two or more pure jatis. Among the vikrit jatis, there are few jatis that suggest reference to certain regions. For example, vikrit jati kaisiki, sadjodichayva, Andhri indicate specific regions. Kaisiki represents the place vidarbha, sadjodichayva indicates a place in the North and Andhri jati directly denotes the region of Andhra⁷.

Jati or jatiragas were sung by following some basic rules which were adopted by the ragas during its evolution. The major thing was jati ragas were bounded by ten lakshanas and these lakshanas were strictly followed, minimum five and maximum seven notes were used to sing jati ragas and there were no jatis with less than five notes. Therefore, it is evident from the facts that from jati ragas and by absorbing all the characteristics of jati ragas, raga has formed.

Raga from folk melodies:

Syncretism covers another area of evolution of raga i.e., origin of raga from folk melodies. The origin of raga from folk melody is a well accepted fact which was occurred right from the very inception of raga, as Matanga Muni described about Swarakhya and Deshakhya ragas in his text 'Brihaddesi'⁸. The Deshakhya ragas are those which have been adopted from folk tunes of different regions of India. Folk songs are the first musical expression of common

⁵ Gautam, M.R., Evolution of Raga and Tala in Indian Music, p.98

⁶ Prajnanand, Swami, A History of Indian Music, p.98

⁷ Gautam, M.R, Evolution of Raga and Tala in Indian Music, p.37

⁸ Chowdhury, Subhadra, Sharang Deva Krita Sangeet Ratnakar, p.13

people and it is believed that the folk forms are the forerunner of any kind of musical forms. Later on with the change of time and through a deep analysis these folk melodies have been transformed into ragas. Today there are various ragas whose origin can be found in folk forms such as the scale of raga Bhairavi has been found in the folk song Heer of Punjab, raga Mand is sung in different folk songs of Rajasthan. Likewise, the North Eastern part which is familiar for its folk tradition has various folk forms among them Bihu from Assam exhibits the scale of raga Dhani. There are few works also have done by some musicologists on this topic and have accepted and appreciated well. Pandit Kumar Gandharv is one of them who strongly accepted this matter and established it through the creation of his Dhun-Ugam ragas based on the folk melodies of Malwa region. Late Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan of Patiala ghrana also held the same view in this regard. Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan has discussed about this in one of his talks on All India Radio and talked about the raga jayjawanti which has been adopted from folk melody. Ragas like Pahadi, Mand, Sindh Bhairavi have also derived from folk origin. In modern period the concept of transformation of folk melodies into raga melody is affirmed by various scholars, as B.C. Deva has mentioned in his book 'An Introduction to Indian Music' the folk tune played by the snake charmer developed into raga Punnagavarali of south India⁹.

Ragas from South Indian origin:

Classical music of South India, while primarily derived from song, is, like its northern counterpart, an improvised music, the performer is acclaimed not for interpretation but for creativity. In 12-13th centuries with the beginning of Muslim influence in India, Indian music system divided into two parts as North Indian Classical Music (Hindustani) and South Indian Classical Music (Karnataka). The concept of raga is common in both styles but their style of rendition is different. There are few ragas which have been adopted and synthesized in North Indian music like Abhogi, Vachaspati, Charukesi, Hamsadhwani, kirwani etc. Abdul Karim Khan, the founder of kirana gharana, popularized some of the south Indian ragas in North Indian music. He not only borrowed karnatak ragas but composed various compositions on them for example; his composition 'Banira Rangila' in Abhogi has won great popularity. Moreover, there are few North Indian ragas which are sung in South Indian style also.

Syncretism in creation of new ragas:

In medieval period (around 15th -16th century) raga classification came into existence and raga was divided into three categories such as Shuddha, Salag and Sankirna. The raga classification was introduced by Bhavabhatta in his text 'Anup Sangit Ratnakar'. He mentioned 16 types of Nat raga such as, Suddha Nat, Salag Nat, Kedar Nat, Abhir Nat. According to him Kalyan raga had 14 types like Shuddha Kalyan, Hamir kalyan, Bhupali kalyan, Kamod kalyan etc. The

⁹ Deva, B. Chaitanya, . An Introduction to Indian Music, p.2

author of 'Sangit Parijat' Pt. Ahobal has spoken about the types of Todi raga like Chhaya Todi and Marga Todi. Shaikh Bahauddin Jakriya have started creating new ragas by merging two or more ragas around 12th century and he created a new raga Multani-Dhanashree, by mixing dhanashree and malashree raga. The emperor of Jaunpur, Hussain Shah Sarqi mentioned 12 types of shyama raga like Gour Shyam, Malhar Shyam, Megh Shyam etc.¹⁰ The above mentioned ragas are nothing but the results of syncretism. Presently, there are various ragas which are mixed ragas, sung or played by musicians in different musical events such as Puriya dhanashree, Nand, Jait kalyan and so on. Moreover, we can say that all newly created ragas are the results of syncretism.

Compound ragas are generally considered as syncretic ragas because a compound raga comes into being when two ragas are combined together in such a manner as to retain both their melodic personalities in the compound so created. In Hindustani Music compound ragas are formed by two classical methods. The directional fusion method occurs when the ascent of one raga combines with the descent of the second raga and the scalar fusion indicates the procedure where one raga in lower tetra chord combines with another raga in upper tetra chord. Raga kafi kanhara generally belongs to the directional fusion category and raga Bagesvari bahar, Bhairav bahar, Desh malhar are examples of scalar fusion method.¹²

Conclusion:

Syncretism played really an excellent role in the evolution of raga. Evolution of raga has various dimensions as covered by this paper and in every aspect of evolution or in every particular area syncretism occurred in its form. Raga does not cover only one area of its evolution but a good number of dimensions that really show how its origin is related with other areas. In ancient period ragas were sung in the form of jati or grama ragas, moreover in geetis but in course of time it has been found that local tunes or desh dhuns were transformed into ragas as there are few ragas, based on the names of different places or tribes of different regions. Besides all these, there are various ragas which have been adapted from South India into north Indian music system, but they are sung in North Indian style, in the same way few ragas from North Indian music system also have taken into south India. In medieval period different musicians have done a great job by creating new ragas which strictly followed the process of syncretism and still this process is prevailing in invention of new ragas. Syncretism is a very ancient theory of formation of any new belief, custom and practice; besides other fields it influenced the whole system of music as different musical forms are created by mixing two or more forms. So, syncretism holds an important role in evolution of raga and creates a great scope for further research.

¹⁰ Nahar, Premlata, Hindustani Sangeet Main Sarang Malhar Aur Kanhara, p.10

¹² Raja, Deepak., Hindustani Music: A tradition in transition, p.142

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