

An analysis of Rāgalakṣaṇa annotations in the Marginalia of Thanjavur Manuscripts

K. Srilatha

Research Scholar

Jain (Deemed-to-be) University, Bengaluru, India

Email ID: srilathakris1@gmail.com

Abstract

The palm-leaf manuscripts of compositions of the Caturdaṇḍī (ālāpa, ṭhāya, gīta, prabandha) and suḷādi forms in the Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Saraswati Mahal Library contain considerable musical information. These compositions from the 16th to 18th c. CE appear along with their sargam notations and paint a unique picture of the music of the era from the perspective of the lakṣya (aural/performance) tradition. A few recent studies have focussed on the compositional forms and the musical features seen in these notations. The present study takes up a lesser-known aspect, that of the brief raga descriptions seen in the margins of the manuscripts. A range of examples taken from the manuscripts give insights into what appears to be a unique scheme of describing the ragas.

Keywords: Caturdaṇḍī, Raga lakṣaṇa, Thanjavur Manuscripts, TMSSML

1. Introduction:

In his book on 'Rāga Ālāpanas and Ṭhāyams', Vasudeva Sastri introduces us to the palm-leaf manuscripts containing notated songs of the Caturdaṇḍī (the ālāpa, ṭhāya, gīta, and prabandha) forms in the TMSSM Library¹ (1958). The hand-written research notes of Seetha contain annotated indexes of manuscripts, pointing to an abundance of such compositions, many from composers of the 16th to 18th centuries (1966) (1967). Veturi Anandamurthy (In press) critically analyses some of the gīta and prabandha compositions². Recent studies of these 'Caturdaṇḍī manuscripts' (CDMSS) reveal the musical features of the suḷādis and prabandhas (Rao, 2015) (Rao, 2022) (Srilatha, 2019) (Srilatha, 2020). However, this set of manuscripts continues to be a source of mystery. One of the little-studied aspects is that of their marginalia, which contains annotations on ragas. These brief raga descriptions will be taken up in this article through examples drawn from the manuscripts.

2. Features of the marginalia:

Considerable musical information is present in the marginalia and the headings of the manuscripts. These include the name of the raga, tāla, the type of composition, and sometimes,

¹ Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Saraswati Mahal Library

² Report of his study undertaken as a Tagore National Fellow during 2015-2017.

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a brief description of the scale of the raga³. Figure 1 shows an image of a manuscript describing the raga Chāyāgauḷa as ‘*niṣāda graham sampūrṇa rāgam gauḷa mēlam*’ and the type of composition as ‘*āyittam*’⁴. Some of the marginalia simply duplicate and highlight the description that appears in the heading section of the song in that folio (Figure 2). In some cases, all ragas that appear in a manuscript are listed and described briefly in an endnote or appendix, as in Figure 3.

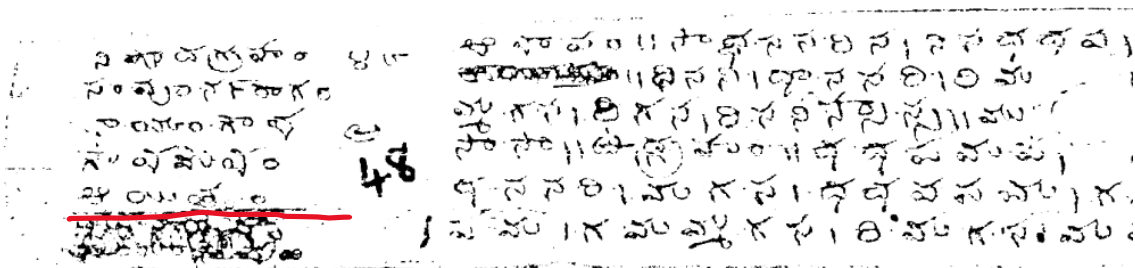


Figure 1 Example of Marginalia - “*niṣāda graham sampūrṇa rāgam chāyāgauḷa gauḷa mēlam āyittam*” (B11573 - Gitam, p. 48)

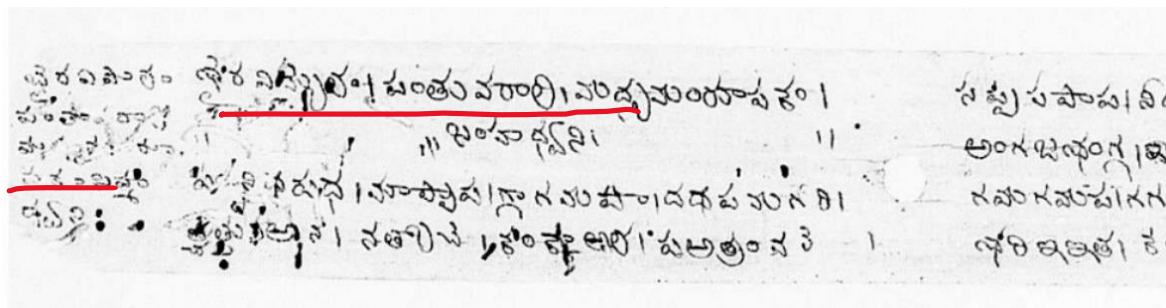


Figure 2 Duplication of information in heading and marginalia: *bhairavi mēlam pantuvarāḷi madhyamam rūpakam simhadhvani* (B11575 - Gitam, p. 105b)⁵

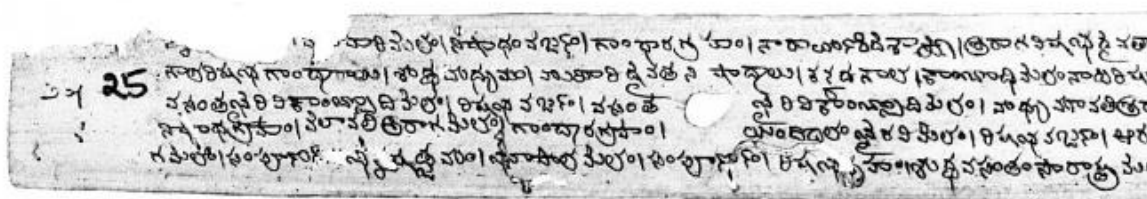


Figure 3 Endnotes containing descriptions of all ragas in the manuscript (B11572 - Gitam, p. 25)

An interesting feature of the CDMSS is that the compositions are usually grouped by ragas. For example, compositions in raga Sāmantam might appear together in the beginning, followed by compositions in raga Bhairavi and so on. A raga lakṣaṇa annotation, when present, usually

³ The information in marginalia and headings of compositions have been noted in previous surveys of the manuscripts (Srilatha & Rao, 2019)

⁴ Āyittam refers to the first section, ākṣiptikā, of an Ālāpa. In the manuscripts, this term seems analogous to an ālāpa

⁵ Rāga Simhadhvani (Bhairavi mēlam, pantuvarāḷi madhyamam) Tāla Rūpakam, Composition type: Āyittam

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appears at the beginning of such a group of compositions belonging to the same raga⁶. This raga-wise grouping of compositions is seen even in many modern music books such as the Saṅgītasampradāyapradarśini (1904), where songs of different musical forms, eras and composers are grouped together and presented under their respective ragas.

3. Cryptic narratives:

The annotations on ragas are usually confined to descriptions of the constituent notes in a raga. A raga is described in terms of its mēla. Details such as varjya/varja⁷ svara, auḍava/śāḍava/saṁpūrṇa⁸ and graha svara⁹ are also seen in some instances. Traditional descriptions of ragas in musicology texts often include graha, nyāsa¹⁰, aṁśa¹¹ and vādi, samvādi¹² svaras. These are noticeably absent in the CDMSS. Some examples are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Examples of Descriptions of ragas in the marginalia of CDMSS

S.No.	Raga	Description in marginalia
1	Āndhālī	<i>Śrīrāga mēlam gauḷa gāndhāram</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 69)
2	Bhinnaṣaḍjam	<i>Bhūpāla mēlam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 25)
3	Chāyātaraṅgiṇi	<i>Sāmanta mēlam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 20)
4	Ghaṇṭaravam	• <i>Bhairavi mēlam</i> (B11584 - Gitam, p. 45b) • <i>Ghaṇṭa Bhairavi mēlam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 24)
5	Hejjijji	• <i>Gauḷa mēlam Mukhāri niṣādam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 29) • <i>Gauḷa mēlam śuddha niṣādam saṁpūrṇam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 29)
6	Huśāni	<i>Kāmbhōji mēlam Bhairavi gāndharam</i> (B11588-A - Gitam, p. 98)
7	Kalyāṇi	<i>saṁpūrṇam Kāmbodhi mēlam heccu madhyamam nija madhyamamunnu</i> (B11573 - Gitam, p. 235b)
8	Mēcabauḷi	<i>Gauḷa mēlām saṁpūrṇam śaḍja graham </i> (B11573 - Gitam, p. 236)
9	Mōhanam	<i>Kalyāṇi mēlam madhyama niṣādālu varjyam</i> (B11576 - Gitam, p. 40b)
10	Rēvagupti	<i>Gauḷa mēlam madhyama niṣādālu varjam ganaka auḍavam</i> (B11575 - Gitam, p. 10b)

⁶ The reasons for such grouping are explored in the dissertation on prabandhas (Srilatha, 2019)

⁷ Excluded notes

⁸ Pentatonic, hexatonic and heptatonic scales

⁹ Commencing note

¹⁰ Resting note

¹¹ Characteristic note

¹² Consonant and dissonant notes

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S.No.	Raga	Description in marginalia
11	Rāmakriyā	• <i>yinduku gauḷa mēlam gauḷa riṣabha gāndhārālu varāli madhyamam</i> (B11573 - Gitam, p. 56) • <i>pantuvārāli myālam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 21)
12	Sāmāntam	• <i>Śaṅkarābharaṇa mēlam</i> (B11573 - Gitam, p. 1) • <i>Śrīrāga mēlam</i> (B11573 - Gitam, p. 273)
13	Sāmavarāli	<i>Varāli mēlam, nijamadhyamam, ārōhini gāndhāram naḍavadu, sampūrṇam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 91)
14	Simharavam	• <i>Śrīrāga mēlam varāli madhyamam sampūrṇam</i> (B11576 - Gitam, p. 54) • <i>Bhairavi mēlam varāli madhyamam</i> (B11580 - Gitam, p. 57) • <i>Bhairavi mēlam heccu madhyamam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 36) • <i>Bhairavi mēlam</i> (B11575 - Gitam, p. 3b)
15	Śuddha vasantam	<i>Gauḷa mēlam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 47)
16	Udayaravicandrikā	<i>Nāṭa mēlam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 26)
17	Vasantabhairavi	<i>Vasantabhairavi gauḍipantu mēlam, Bhairavi niṣādam</i> (B11593 - Gitam, p. 40)
18	Vēgavāhini	• <i>Kāmbōdhi mēlam</i> (B11587 - Gitam, p. 1b) • <i>Kāmbhōji mēlam gauḷa riṣabhaḥ kvacit</i> (B11584 - Gitam, p. 55) • <i>Saurāṣṭra mēlam sampūrṇam</i> (B11587 - Gitam, p. 174)
19	Vēlāvali	• <i>Śrīrāga mēlam</i> (B11573 - Gitam, p. 36) (B11580 - Gitam, p. 57) • <i>Mukhāri mēlam</i> (B11591 - Gitam, p. 57) • <i>rāgāṅgam Śaṅkarābharaṇa mēlam</i> (B11584 - Gitam, p. 53b)

1.1 Deciphering the conventions:

As mentioned earlier, the ragas are described in terms of mēlas. However, very few mēlas are used for this purpose. The frequently used melas are Śrī, Gauḷa, Bhairavi, Kāmbhōji, Varāli, Nāṭa, and Mukhāri^{13 14}. These seven mēlas themselves are almost never described in the manuscripts, possibly because they were widely known and there was consensus among musicians and musicologists on their constituent notes. Only in rare instances, ragas or melas other than these are used, as in Chāyātaraṅgiṇi and Vasantabhairavi (see Table 1).

¹³ Mukhāri of this period takes the notes of mēla 1 in the 72-mēla scheme

¹⁴ For an account of these ragas prevalent in that period, refer to their descriptions in the RLS (Śāha Mahārāja, 1990)

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In texts, the svaras are prefixed with qualifiers such as antara(gandhara), kākālī (niṣāda), cyuta-pañcama (madhyama). In the manuscripts, these technical qualifiers are rarely used. Therefore it is important to understand the convention used in the CDMSS to describe the ragas. Two cases need to be considered:

- Use of a single mēla to describe a raga:** The simplest case is when the notes of a raga are explained through a single mēla, as in the case of Ghaṇṭaravam ('*Ghaṇṭaravam Bhairavi mēlam*').
- Use of more than one mēla to describe a raga:** Sometimes a raga cannot be described only in terms of any one of the seven well-known mēlas. In such a case, notes from other mēlas are brought in. For example, Hejjijji is described as 'Gauḷa mēlam Mukhāri niṣādam' (Table 1). There are two ways of interpreting this statement, resulting in two differing sets of svaras (Table 2)

Table 2 Different interpretations of the cryptic description of Hejjijji "*Gauḷa mēlam Mukhāri niṣādam*"

Interpretation	Resultant notes
1. Svaras of Gauḷa mēlam + niṣādam of Mukhāri	Śuddha ṛṣabham, antara gāndhāram, śuddha madhyamam, śuddha dhaivatam, kākālī niṣādam , śuddha niṣādam
2. Svaras of Gauḷa mēlam - niṣādam of Gauḷa + niṣādam of mukhari	Śuddha ṛṣabham, antara gāndhāram, śuddha madhyamam, śuddha dhaivatam, śuddha niṣādam

It is not immediately clear which one of the two is intended. To determine this, other examples are studied. When inspecting other examples, we observe a pattern: When a raga cannot be described using only one of the well-known mēlas, a mēla that is closest¹⁵ to it is picked and the variant of a svara is specified in terms of a second mēla. For Hejjijji, replacing the (kākālī) niṣāda of Gauḷa with the (śuddha) niṣāda of Mukhāri results in the notes of mēla 13 of the 72-mēla scheme. This outcome is consistent with the descriptions in the texts (Hema Ramanathan, 2004, pp. 527-38). Thus, the second interpretation in Table 2 appears to be correct. The notes of other ragas such as Āndhālī and Huśāni may similarly be inferred.

The nomenclature of the svaras in the marginalia and their apparent equivalents in the texts Caturdaṇḍīprakāśikā ('CDP', 1650 CE) and the Rāgalakṣaṇamu of Śāha Mahārāja ('RLS' ca. 1700 CE) are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Svara names in the marginalia and their apparent equivalents in texts

Name of svaras in manuscripts	Name in CDP	Name in RLS

¹⁵ A mēla is closest if it shares many svaras with the rāga being described

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Gauḷa ṛṣabham	śuddha ṛṣabha	śuddha ṛṣabha
Bhairavi or Śrīrāga ṛṣabham	pañcaśruti ṛṣabha	pañcaśruti ṛṣabha
Nāṭa ṛṣabham	ṣaṭśruti ṛṣabha	ṣaṭśruti ṛṣabha
Mukhāri gāndhāram	śuddha gāndhāra	śuddha gāndhāra
Bhairavi gāndhāram	sādhāraṇa gāndhāra	sādhāraṇa gāndhāra
Gauḷa, Kāmbhōji gāndhāram	antara gāndhāra	antara gāndhāra
Nija madhyamam ¹⁶ or 'madhyamam' prefixed with the name of one of the well- known śuddha madhyama ragas	śuddha madhyama	śuddha madhyama
Varālī madhyamam or heccu ¹⁷ madhyamam	Varālī madhyama	cyuta pañcama madhyama
Gauḷa dhaivatam	śuddha dhaivata	śuddha dhaivata
Kāmbhōji or Śrīrāga dhaivatam	pañcaśruti dhaivata	pañcaśruti dhaivata
Nāṭa dhaivatam	ṣaṭśruti dhaivata	ṣaṭśruti dhaivata
Mukhāri niṣādam	śuddha niṣāda	śuddha niṣāda
Bhairavi or Kāmbhōji niṣādam	kaiśikī niṣāda	kaiśikī niṣāda

¹⁶ The 'true' middle note of the octave, which is the śuddha madhyama. The meaning of the 'nija' is clarified in the description of raga Kalyāṇi, which has both the higher madhyama and the nija madhyama 'heccu madhyamam nija madhyamamunnu'

¹⁷ Heccu means High in Kannaḍa

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Gauḷa or heccu niṣādam	kākalī niṣāda	kākalī niṣāda, cyuta ṣaḍja niṣāda
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In the musicological treatises of the 16th to 18th centuries, there is considerable divergence in the number of mēlas. The SMK recognizes fifteen, the CDP describes nineteen and the RLS describes a different set of twenty mēlas. The manuscripts that were examined for this study do not seem to adhere to any single one of these treatises. As already noted, only seven melas form the basis of most raga descriptions. Moreover, some ragas such as Sāmāntam and Āhari that were deemed mēlas in the SMK and the CDP are described using other mēlas in some manuscripts (Table 1). In one manuscript, Vasantabhairavi is described through the Gauḍipantu “mēlam”; while Gauḍipantu is not identified as a mēla in any known text (Hema Ramanathan, 2004, pp. 449-52).

1.2 Conundrums:

While the format of describing ragas appears standardised, the raga descriptions themselves demonstrate variety (Table 1). The mēlas used to describe a raga often vary from manuscript to manuscript, resulting in inconsistent interpretations of some ragas. These must have puzzled the musicians and musicologists who referred to the manuscripts. The following case studies illustrate some of the conflicts:

Case 1: Vēgavāhini is assigned to ‘Kāmbhōji mēlam with Gauḷa ṛṣabham’ in one manuscript and to ‘Saurāṣṭra mēlam’ in another. Both result in the same set of notes: śuddha ṛṣabha, antara gāndhāra, śuddha madhyama, pañcaśruti dhaivata and kaiśikī niṣāda. However, the third description ‘Vēgavāhini Kāmbhōji mēlam’ appears to conflict with the former two narratives.

Case 2: Sometimes the descriptions are at odds with those in the lakṣaṇa texts. For example, Āndhālī is described as ‘Śrīrāga mēlam gauḷa gāndhāram’ in the manuscripts. The CDP assigns Āndhālī to Śrīrāga mēla while the RLS assigns it to the Kāmbhōji mēla (Hema Ramanathan, 2004, pp. 146-7).

Case 3: Vēlāvali is variously assigned to Mukhāri, Śrīrāga and Śaṅkarābharaṇa mēlas, which result in different sets of svaras. Interestingly, the lakṣaṇa texts seem to reflect these variations. While the CDP and the RLS assign Vēlāvali to the Śrīrāga mēla (Hema Ramanathan, 2004, p. 1542), the Saṅgītasarāmṛta of Tulaja (SSA) deems it a mēla, equivalent to mēla 23 in the 72-mēla scheme (Hema Ramanathan, 2004, p. 1543). In any case, none of the texts assign it to the Mukhāri mēla. While this may reflect the existence of different versions of the raga, erroneous ascriptions by scribes cannot be ruled out.

Such differences seem to reflect an era when the technique of assigning ragas to melas was not standardised and the authors were describing the ragas intuitively, based on whichever mēlas they thought were closest to the one at hand. It could also be that the same raga was handled differently in multiple traditions.

1.3 Deletions and mutations:

In examining the manuscripts, how does one tell a variation apart from an error? A frequently observed error is that of truncation, where deliberately or inadvertently the scribe leaves out a part of the description. This subsequently results in a new, mutant description of the raga. In

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some cases we can clearly identify variations brought about by scribal omissions. This is illustrated by the example of Simharava (Table 1). While three of the four manuscripts describe Simharava as taking the ‘*heccu madhyamam*’ (the higher madhyama), the last one does not record this exception. This may have been the result of an eyeskip or a lacuna in the manuscript seen by the scribe.

We also note some obviously incorrect descriptions. The raga Rāmakriya, taking the antara gāndhāra (mēla 51 in the 72-mela scheme) is ascribed to the Pantuvarāli mēlam (mēla 45), which has the sādghāraṇa gāndhāra. Simharavam (mēla 58) is assigned to the Bhairavi mēlam (mēla 20), which would incorrectly ascribe the śuddha dhaivata to the raga. Some of these are likely to be scribal errors since copyists were often not acquainted with the subject of their texts.

Raga names seem to have undergone changes in the 16th to 18th centuries. Some of these are recorded in the manuscripts. For example, a composition ‘*supari maṇikarṇikā tīra*’ in raga Sāvēri in one manuscript (B11590 - Gitam, p. 62) is assigned to Śuddha-sāvēri (B11593 - Gitam, p. 167) in another. The use of ‘Śuddha-Sāvēri’ to denote the pentatonic scale is first noted in the Rāgalakṣaṇamu of Śāhajī, to differentiate it from the dēśī, saṁpūrṇa, Savēri (Hema Ramanathan, 2004, p. 1294). Similarly, the change of name of the raga Dhanyāśi to Śuddha-Dhanyāśi is also recorded in these manuscripts.

Conclusion:

In this article, I have detailed the ingenious scheme of describing the notes of a raga used in the Caturdaṇḍī manuscripts. It appears that this scheme was mainly used as a shorthand by musicians, avoiding textbook terms (such as upāṅga, pañcaśruti).

The CDMSS place the raga descriptions (lakṣaṇa) together with the musical samples (lakṣya). This contrasts with texts that contain only raga descriptions or only songs¹⁸. The descriptions of ragas are multifarious and distinctive, and they eschew technical terms used in texts. These features all point towards a non-standardized, practice-oriented scheme of describing ragas developed by practitioners of music. Such a scheme would have allowed practitioners to quickly learn the ragas and compositions directly from notations.

This simplified scheme might have insulated the practitioner from the debates over finer-grained calibrations of svaras (such as catuśśruti and pañcaśruti). However, simplification comes at a cost. A musician trying to understand a raga solely through the manuscripts might err based on faulty or incomplete descriptions. And if this musician were a composer, the (erroneous) version of the raga expressed in their composition might become mainstream over time.

It appears that at this point in the history of South Indian music the melodic identities of ragas were in flux. This flux is reflected in the musicological texts of the period. While the manuscripts too manifest the varying identities of ragas, the errors in the manuscripts make them a contentious source of raga lakṣaṇa. Musicologists of the past must have had to grapple

¹⁸ Some manuscripts do not contain any raga lakṣaṇa information

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with all these issues. Further studies may reveal more details of the relationship between these manuscripts and the musicological texts of the late-medieval era.

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Abbreviations:

TMSSML	Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Saraswati Mahal Library
CDMSS	'Caturdaṇḍī manuscripts' - Palm-leaf manuscripts in Telugu script in the TMSSML, containing compositions of ālāpa, ṭhāya, gīta, prabandha and suḷādi forms.
SMK	Svaramēlakalānidhi of Rāmāmātya (1650)
CDP	Caturdaṇḍīprakāśikā of Vēṅkaṭamakhin (1650 CE)
RLS	Rāgalakṣaṇamu of Śāha Mahārāja (circa 1700 c. CE)
SSA	Saṅgītasarāmṛta by Tulajājī (1729-1735 CE)