

CHAPTER - 3

T H E S E V E N T Y - T W O

M E L A S C H E M E

A N D

I T S I M P A C T

THE SEVENTY-TWO MĒLA SCHEME AND ITS IMPACT

The seventy-two mēla scheme, as expounded in the Caturdaṇḍi Prakāśika, was intended to classify rāga-s (on the basis of the svarasthāna-s). A mēla, according to this scheme is a group of seven svara-s in their natural order. Dr.Seetha, speaking of the order of the svara-s in a mēla, says:

The rule that a melakarta* should be sampurna both in ascent and descent, with the same kinds of svaras in both and with a regular order of ascent and descent is also a later concept. Venkatamakhi, the architect of the scheme of 72 melakartas, had not subscribed to this theory. Only during the period of Govindacharya, the author of Sangraha Chudamani, and after him, the concepts of mela and janya came to be interpreted in a different connotation. Govindacharya's definition of melakarta helped in the identification of the form of the mela and its identification on the basis

*Dr. Seetha, however, does not make it clear whether the term mēlakarta has been used by Venkaṭamakhi himself or is a later coinage. In most contexts, the term mēla seems to have been used.

of identical svarasthana-s and nothing beyond.¹

The 72-Mēla scheme suffers from a serious drawback as a system of rāga classification. Only those rāga-s taking only one form of ri, ga, ma, dha and ni admit of being classified under a single mēla. Many Auḍava rāga-s lend themselves to be classified under more than one mēla. "It is this absence of one rāga-one mēla equation which makes this scheme ineffective as a system of raga classification, but this fact seems to have gone unnoticed. The exhaustive nature of the scheme and the orderliness about the structuring must have had an instant appeal to Vēṅkaṭamakhi 's contemporaries. Its charm should have been enhanced later by the Kanakāṅgi --- Ratnāṅgi nomenclature with Kaṭapayādi prefixes."*

The definition and original connotation of the term mēla are interesting. A group of rāga-s with similar svarasthāna-s were classified under a mēla---the mēla's name being given after one of these rāga-s in the group. For

¹Dr. Seetha, ed. Ragalaksanamū of Saha Maharaja, (Madras, Brhaddhvani, 1993) in her Introduction, P. xi

* Discussions with Dr. Sharada Gopalam during my lessons.

example, Śrī mēla could mention Śrī Rāga as its first janya the mēla itself was a full fledged rāga and not a logically designed svarasthāna sequence.

"Further, a careful analysis of the janya raga-s and their features revealed in the illustrative sancaras quoted in these works serves to emphasise the fact that all the ragas grouped under a particular melakarta are seen to have common or similar characteristics, not only because the same svaras are found in them, but because of the presence of a melodic affinity which permeates each one of the ragas. At the same time each raga has a distinctive individuality also. Janyas of Sri raga mela and of Malavagaula mela have definite family characteristics and which cannot be defined in terms of svarasthanas, arohana and avarohana, graha and amsa svaras and so on. That is the reason that in all the earlier melakarta-janya classification, the so called melakarta was essentially a full-fledged raga

having a greater aesthetic potential and popularity and not a mere scale, heading a group of ragas."²

Yet one distinction between the earlier form and the new form is unmistakable:

"But it is certainly reasonable to concede that the pre-Govindacharya treatment of melakartas and janya ragas emphasised more the emotional fervour as the basis of affinity between the raga form rather than of the scale form."³

This conception of the mēla changed with the 72 mēla scheme in which each mēla was only a logical sequence of svarasthānas. The mēla-s mentioned were not potential rāga-s nor were they intended to be sources for the origin of new rāga-s.

In contemporary practice, almost any scale lends itself to rendering as a rāga. This scheme has served a different purpose by being the source for the origin of new rāga-s. Many rāga-s, like Cārukeśi, Gaurimanōhari, Kīravani, Dharmavati and Hēmavati emerged only later. Today, almost

²Dr. Seetha, Introduction, Raga Laksanam, cited above, p.v

³Dr. Seetha, Introduction, Raga Laksanam, cited above, p.xi

every mēla seems to be "singable"---thereby giving rise to the question whether all these scales are potential rāga-s. The answer is both "Yes" and "No". Although the principles of Gamaka-s could be applied to any scale, creating the impression of a rāga, the scales are considered to be rāga-s only by a few. The well-established rāga-s in our system have, for their basis, aesthetically designed melodic structures. The presentation of this scheme (the 72 Mēla-s) and classifying all existing rāga-s under them, may create an impression that the scheme was older than the real rāga. The raga Mōhanam in its present form, for instance, was not born or conceived as a scalar structure eschewing a few notes from a seven-svara-ed scale.⁴ Bilahari is not conceived as a structure with Mohanam in the Arohana and Saṅkarābharaṇam in the Avarōhaṇa.

A real rāga should be governed by aesthetic principles, and not a melodic manipulation of svara-s permuted from the scale. While this is one side of the rāga system, the possibility of a scale evolving into a rāga cannot be ruled out. At the moment, all existing scales

⁴Even Saṅgita Ratnakara presents auḍava and ṣaḍava forms as though derived from the "complete form" (seven svara-ed) scale by the process of elimination of notes. This way of explaining a scale structure sounds very logical, but a rāga, atleast in its present form, is complete by itself, understood through its own self and not by "eschewal" of svara-s.

called rāga-s are not really rāga-s. Some of them have been supplied a rāgatva and there is a gradation even in the level of the rāgatva --- the amount of "rāga" in any given rāga. Many scales are sung, many compositions also exist, in those rāgas, which are still in the process of evolving into full fledged rāga-s.

The scheme has also promoted a scalar understanding, and some influences even on the technique of rendering phrases can also be observed.

1) It is natural for a jaṇṭa sphurita --- say for the svara "Ga" --- to hit the "Ga" from a microtone lower. Some performers, say in Mōhanam, consciously employ the sphurita from Ri ---- probably to avoid a microtone not quite in the scale structure.

2) Singing Sadhāraṇa gāndhāra in rāga-s with the pratimadhyama as M g, m (as in Śaṇmukhapriya) is a prevalent practice. Some performers are observed to deliberately avoid this movement, as the character of "ma" is dominant which is again contradictory to the scale.

Normally, Lakṣya should be the basis for lakṣaṇa. But here, to present any idea logically, lakṣya is reduced to

simple facts and then gradually the theoretician proceeds to give the lakṣya. In reality, the melody gives rise to concepts arising out of a detailed analysis. The analysis influences the melody later not at a grammatical level but on the aesthetic plane.