

RĀGIṆĪ BHAIRAVĪ
A Case Study of Select *Rāgacitras*
from the Miniature Paintings of Mewar
(16th–17th Century C.E.)

The concept of painting melodic modes (*rāgas*) constitutes a unique genre of Indian painting. What was its genesis? How was it that an abstract form (*amūrtarūpa*) transformed into a concrete form (*mūrtarūpa*) in a material medium? This paper is divided into two parts; the first part addresses a brief history of Indian music, the antiquity of the *rāga* form it seeks to investigate and the relationship between music and *rāgacitras*. The second part deals with the case study of *Rāgiṇī Bhairavī*.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata deals with two distinct forms of ancient Indian music d Gandharva and Gāna. Abhinavagupta, the foremost commentator of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* a carefully distinguishing between the two systems of music. Gandharva music represented the classical form of ancient Indian music, while Gāna or Dhruva-gāna was the music of the theatre, moulded to suit the structure and atmosphere of dramatic plots. The fundamental distinction was that Gandharva music had a rigid framework and was ritualistic music resulting in transcendental merit. On the other hand, Dhruva-gāna was free from rigid, ritualistic restrictions. Its ultimate purpose was to produce *rasa*, which is an evocative mood created by the art object and thereby imparts pleasure to the audience. The Dhruva songs were set to musical forms such as *grāma-rāgas*, *rāgas*, *bhāṣā*, *vibhāṣā* etc. *Rāgas* are explicitly referred to in the seventh century musicological text *Bṛhaddeśi* of Mātaṅga. He clearly states that ““that which is pleasing to people is called *rāga*.”¹⁾

¹⁾ Shastri (1928: v. 281).

In fact, the word *rāga* is derived from the Sanskrit root *rañj*, which means ‘to please’ as also ‘to colour’. Mātāṅga distinguishes between the *mārga* and *deśi* forms of music, which may be roughly rendered as classical and popular respectively, *rāgas* being the *deśi* form. Till about the 13th century C.E., when Śarṅgadeva wrote his *Saṅgītaratnākara*, Indian music grew through a continuous process of popularisation and standardisation. There was a continuous effort to retain ancient conventions but also to bring together *lakṣaṇa* (theory) and *lakṣya* (practice). In the course of time, with the efflorescence of Gāna and its musicological elaboration, within the Gāna system itself, a distinction was made between the comparatively regulated and standardised singing on the one hand and improvisation on the other, which led to the evolution of the *rāga* and *rāgiṇī* system.

In the 13th century C.E., the *Saṅgītaratnākara* of Śarṅgadeva refers to ancient well-known *rāgas* (*prākprasiddha rāga*) and contemporary well-known *rāgas* (*adhunaprasiddha rāga*). The Gandharva system was now discussed in musicological texts but it was the *rāgas* and their derivative forms that were prevalent in practice. It is interesting that though Mātāṅga mentions *rāgas*, there is no reference whatsoever to any visual depiction of *rāgas*. In fact, Mātāṅga refers to *rāga* as *deśi* or a popular form of music and refers to it as something without concrete form (*amūrta*). This is further strengthened by the fact that, the *Citra-sūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (approx. sixth century C.E.), which discusses painting at length, does not refer to any paintings of *rāgas*.

The earliest surviving *rāga* paintings are those painted in the West Indian tradition on the back of a *Kalpasūtra* manuscript dated to about the 15th century C.E. (Fig. 1).²⁾ It depicts six multi-headed male deities labeled as *rāgas* which are Śrī, Vasanta, Bhairava, Pañcama, Megha and Naṭanārāyaṇa. In the Jain paintings there are six female figures called *bhāṣas* who are depicted as the consorts of the deities. Here we see not only the visualisation of abstract melodic modes, but also a classification of the melodic modes into male and female. Thus, the earliest depiction of *rāgas* seems to be as *rāga dhyānas* i.e. meditations on the form of a *rāga* before the commencement of singing. It is interesting that to the three constituents of music - *svara* (notes), *tāla* (tempo) and *pada* (lyrics) - Acharya Dattila adds a fourth important factor which was *avadhāna*. The literal meaning of *avadhāna* is attention. According to

²⁾ *Rāgas* and *rāgiṇīs* painted in a Jaina *Kalpasūtra* manuscript dated approx. 1475 C.E., West Indian Style, taken from Nawab (1985).

Abhinavagupta, *avadhāna* is *yogarūpam* o i.e. of the nature of meditation. The word, it seems, stood for a meditative idea, a certain psychic concentration and attitude required for the proper singing of classical music. The idea of *rāga* painting, it appears, arose as *avadhānarūpa* to assist the musician in his practice of music as a sacred ritual. As such, they seem to be painted for the purpose of *dṛṣṭadr̥ṣṭa phala* i.e. their purpose seems to be both pleasure and spiritual merit. However, this set of *rāga* paintings of the Jaina *Kalpasūtra*, painted in the West Indian style is the sole survivor of its type. By the 16th century, the *rāga* paintings show a completely different iconography. This is because these paintings are no longer *dhyānarūpa* (meditative aid) for the musician but are painted solely for the aesthetic delectation of kings and aristocrats who were the patrons of these paintings. Their purpose was distinctly *dṛṣṭa phala*, or immediate sensual pleasure.

The *rāga* paintings executed between the 16th to the 19th centuries in Rajasthan, Madhyadesha (which comprises the present day Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh) and the Pahari and Deccan regions have an iconography which may be broadly classified into two main divisions. The first division is associated with a religious theme or *bhakti* rasa as the immediate evocative mood of the aesthetic object. The second division is associated with *śṛṅgāra* rasa or the romantic mood as the basic theme.

The word *rāgamāla*, used by many scholars for *rāga* paintings simply means a garland of *rāgas* (*rāganam māla*) denoting several *rāgas* strung together. Since a *rāga* is intrinsically an audible component with no visual faculty attached, the word *rāgamāla* denotes only an audible component. Moreover, the word *māla*, which is quite redundant, connotes plurality. In order to transform this audible component to a visual one, the word 'citra' needs to be appended to *rāga*. The term thus formed would be *rāgacitra* or *rāga* painting, which, in my opinion, is a more appropriate word to represent the visual and the melodic together.

The primary sources consulted for this paper are *Nārādīyaśikṣā*, *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2nd century B.C.E.–2nd century C.E.) by Bharatmuni, *Dattilam* by Dattila, *Bṛhaddeśi* (7th century C.E.) by Mātaṅga, *Bharatabhāṣya* – two volumes (9th century C.E.) by Nānyadeva, *Abhinavabharati* (11th century C.E.) by Abhinavagupta, *Aparājitapṛccha* by Bhuvanadeva (approx. 12th century C.E.), *Saṅgītaratnākara* (13th century C.E.), *Saṅgītarājā* (1456 C.E.) by Rāṇā Kumbha, *Saṅgītopaniṣatsaroddhāra* (1556 C.E.) by Vācanācārya Sudhākalaśa, *Rasakaumudī* (16th century C.E.) by Śrikanṭha, *Kitāb-i-Nauras* (1590 C.E.) by Ibrahim Adil Shah, *Rāgavibodha* (1610 C.E.) by Somanātha, *Saṅgītararṇa*

(1625 C.E.) by Dāmodara Mīśra and *Rāgamāla* (1758 C.E.) by Yaśodānanda Śukla.

A significant factor underlying one's comprehension of the audio-visual component of *rāgacitras* is an understanding of the *citrapada* or the text given in the painting. *Citrapada* is a technical term culled by me from the 15th century text of *Saṅgītarājā* by Rāṇā Kumbha of Mewar. Often the works on *rāgacitras*, provide a well-documented list of paintings of various *rāgas* and *rāgiṇīs*, but fail to provide a coherent understanding or co-ordination between the text and image. The translation of the text of the painting is largely ignored.

Some scholars have thought that the verse of the painting, written in old *devanāgri*, reveals corrupt text in the painting. I have been researching the *rāgacitras* for more than a decade now and, to my understanding, the verse mentioned is mainly uncorrupted and is often in close coordination with the painting. To understand this correlation between the text and the painting, the methodology followed for this paper is based on translating the *chanda* or the Sanskrit meter of the verse. Thus, when the text of the painting, which is often seen to be written as a prose line, is analysed and understood as a *chanda* or metre, one realises that it is a verse. I have tried to put the 'text' in 'context', since the mere aesthetics of the painting do not do justice to the representation of the *rāgacitras*.

As a case study, this paper discusses the *rāgiṇī* Bhairavī or the melodic form of Bhairavī from Mewar (16th–17th century C.E.). These paintings are selected from the Bharat Kala Bhavan collection, from Varanasi, Gem Palace Collection of the National Museum and Birla Academy of Arts and Culture from Kolkata. Both the Bhairava and Bhairavī *rāgas* are connected with the worship of Śiva. Bhairavī, as the name suggests seems the consort of Śiva. In fact, in the early texts, Bhairavī is clearly referred to as derived from Bhairava.³⁾

By the mid-16th century, the earliest *rāga dhyāna* seem to have been conceptualised in *Rasakaumudī*.⁴⁾

***Rasakaumudī* 117**

सुवर्णवर्णा घनबाह्यहस्ता विशालनेत्रा द्विजराजवक्त्रा ।
नित्यं स्थिता स्फाटिकचारुपीठे कैलासशृङ्गे किल भैरवीयम् ॥

³⁾ Mankad (1950: 238.18). also see: Rana Kumbha (1963).

⁴⁾ Jani (1963: 2:117).

*Suvarṇavarṇā ghanavādyahastā
Viśālanetrā dvijarājavaktrā
Nityaṃ sthitā sphāṭikacārupīṭhe
Kailāsaśṛṅge kila bhairavīyam.*

This has been translated by myself as follows:

“One who is golden hued, with cymbals in her hand, with large eyed, ever standing on a beautiful crystal pedestal (shrine), on the summit of the Kailāsa mountain, she is indeed Bhairavī.”

The image of a fair, beautiful woman, with *mañjīra* or cymbals in her hand, seated in a crystal shrine and apparently worshipping is taken and developed thereafter in the *rāgacitras*. We may see this in the early 16th century Bharat Kala Bhawan series. However, the crystal shrine is located not on the summit of mountain Kailāsa but on a lake.

All the *citrāpadas* or the texts of all the paintings have been deciphered and translated by myself.

The Bharat Kala Bhawan painting of Bhairavī is one of the earliest. It is dated by the museum to 1575 C.E. and the Acc. no. is BKB9070/2 (Fig. 2).

नन्दभैरवी
सरोवरस्थे स्फटिकमण्डपे
सरोरुहैः शंकरमर्चयन्ती ।
तालप्रभेदे प्रतिबद्धगीते
गौरी तनोति स्म सुनन्दभैरवी ।।

*Nandabhairavī -
Sarovarasthe sphaṭikamaṇḍape
Sarorūhaiḥ śaṅkaramarcayantī⁵⁾
Tālaprabhede pratibaddhagīte
Gaurī tanoti sma sunanadabhairavī.*

Translation:

⁵⁾ *Arccyantī* is amended to *arcayantī*.

“In the crystal shrine on the lake, worshipping Śaṅkara by lotuses, the song fitted to a difference in *tāla* (rhythm), the beautiful, delightful Bhairavi spreads around as a Fair One.”

The metre is *upajāti*.

The text and image of the Bharat Kala Bhavan series is well-coordinated, though the painting appears incomplete. It shows a woman inside a shrine, cymbals in hand worshipping a *śivaliṅga*. The shrine, which we assume to be a marble one, is situated nearby a pond. However, the colouring of the *śivaliṅga*, the shrine, fish in the pond and the tree near the pond is incomplete. The painting is seen in an incipient state with minimalistic drawing and colouring. The colour palette is also limited. The female figure shows influences of the west Indian tradition, particularly Jain paintings and this may be seen in the style and rendition such as the posture of sitting, textiles and figural representation (except for the projecting eye). The scale of the figure is large as compared to the shrine. The textile pattern on the *odhnī* (mantle) and the canopy above the *śivaliṅga* is similar. The painting also suggests an early stage of *rāgacitras*.

The early 17th century painting of Nisardi (1605) is housed in the Birla Academy, Kolkata (Fig. 3).

नादभैरवीरागिणी:-

सरोवरस्थस्फटिकस्य मण्डपे

सरोरूहैः शंकरमर्चयन्ती ।

तालप्रयोगप्रतिसन्नतांगी

गौरी शुचिर्नादसुभैरवीयम् ॥

Nādbhairavīrāgiṇī –

Sarovarasthaspha⁶⁾ṭikasya maṇḍape

Sarorūhaiḥ⁷⁾ śaṅkara⁸⁾marcayantī

Tālaprayogapratīsannatāṅgī

⁶⁾ *Sphu* has been corrected to *spha*.

⁷⁾ *Hi* has been emended to *haiḥ*.

⁸⁾ *Saṅkara* has been emended to *Śaṅkara*.

*Gaurī śuci*⁹⁾*rnādasubhairavīyam.*
*Nādabhairavirāgī*¹⁰⁾*ṇī*

Translation:

“In the crystal shrine situated on the lake, worshipping Śaṅkara by lotuses, with her well-formed body bent forward for playing the *tāla* (rhythm or), fair and bright, she is the beautiful Nādabhairavī.”

In the Birla Academy collection, in place of the visual representation of a lady in the shrine, one or more ladies are added with a red-green combination of *ghāghrā* (skirt)-*colī* (blouse) and transparent *oḍhnī* (scarf), seated outside a shrine (not inside), next to a lotus pond, playing cymbals and singing. They are accompanied by three male figures who look like pilgrims. What is connoted by this composition? It appears that this is not an ordinary lake but a sacred place, a *tīrtha-dhāman* or a place of pilgrimage. The pond, therefore, is not an ordinary lake; this an attempt to show the Mānsarovar on the Kailāsa mountain as also mentioned in the *Rasakaumudī*. The water in the lake is rendered with a basket weave pattern with full blown lotuses. The presence of male figures connotes devotees, of whom one is preparing to smear ashes on himself while one has smeared ashes on himself and is resting on the steps of the pond and one has already smeared himself with ashes and ready to perform *pūjā* or worship. It is evident that these are *śaiva* pilgrims who follow the *śaiva* rituals, especially, the Pāśupata rituals of smearing ashes on their bodies.

The *śivaliṅga* is placed against a red background inside a shrine faced with marble. A black *śivaliṅga* rest on a white marble pedestal. Instead of a hanging pot above the *śivaliṅga*, the pot is now placed on a stand above the *śivaliṅga*, out of which water is dripping rather than seeping out. Above the shrine, we can see a pair of peacocks in the background.

The overall composition of the painting is dense with different non-traditional components inserted. The figures are more prominent with regards to physical and architectural setting of the temple precinct. The archetypal format of lush green environs and knack for detailing, which is depicted in the Gem Palace painting, is not seen here.

⁹⁾ *Suci* has been emended to *śuci*.

¹⁰⁾ *Ga* has been amended to *gi*.

The mature phase of development of this *rāgiṇī* is seen in the *rāgacitra* of the Gem Palace collection (1640-60 C.E.) in the National Museum, New Delhi, Acc. no. – 50.354/29 (Fig. 4).

The verse of the Gem Palace *rāgacitra* is almost similar.

नादभैरवीरागिणी:-

सरोवरस्थस्फटिकस्य मण्डपे
सरोरूहैः शंकरमर्चयन्ती ।
तालप्रयोगप्रतिस्रजातांगी
गौरी शुचिर्नादसुभैरवीयम् ।।

Nādashairavīrāgiṇī-

*Sarovarasthasphaṭika*¹¹⁾ *sya maṇḍape*
*Sarorūhaiḥ śaṅkaramarcayanti*¹²⁾
Tālaprayogapratissanatāngī
*Gaurī śucirnāda*¹³⁾ *subhairavīyam.*

Translation:

“In the crystal shrine situated on the lake, worshipping Śaṅkara by lotuses, with her well-formed body bent forward for playing the *tāla* (rhythm), fair and bright, she is the beautiful Nadashairavī.”

Though this is the *upajāti* metre, yet the first *pada* has twelve syllables as in the *vaṃśastha*.

A marble shrine is depicted either on or near the lake. Aquatic flora and fauna abound in it, with lotuses fully blooming, half-blooming and buds may also be seen as tiger-fish. The wall of the shrine inside is painted a bright red and the floor green. On a black-marble, the *yoni pīṭha* is placed, with a sandstone *śivaliṅga* which is fragrant with offerings of lotus-petals and jasmine flowers. Above the *śivaliṅga* is a water pot covered in muslin. It is tied to the ceiling for the water to fall, a drop at a time, on the *śivaliṅga*. A lady dressed in a saffron skirt, red scarf, blue blouse and wearing gold anklets, bangles and *borla* (head-ornament) sits on the ground for worship.

¹¹⁾ *Sphaṭika* has been emended to *sphaṭika*.

¹²⁾ *Arccayanti* has been emended to *arcayanti*.

¹³⁾ *Śucināda* has been emended to *śucirnāda*.

She plays the cymbals, possibly for marking the rhythm for the Shiva *bhajan* (devotional song) that she sings. By her dress, ornaments and the worship paraphernalia (all of gold) besides her, it appears that she is an aristocratic lady. A Palm tree and a Banana tree flank the shrine and a peacock perches majestically near the pristine white dome.

The Gem Palace *rāgacitra* evokes the various senses of audio-visual-olfactory and imbues an evocative mood to the *rāgacitra*. The white marble shrine scintillates against the darkness of the pond and the late evening. The saffron-gold figure of the woman glows beautifully inside the shrine. The melodious singing of the lady inside the shrine is contrasted by the harsh sound of the peacock on top of the dome. The artist has created a fragrant environment in the *rāgacitra* to evoke the olfactory senses with the blooming of jasmine flowers and lotus buds around the *śivaliṅga*.

From the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Birla Academy and Gem Palace series and thereafter, Bhairavī shows a fairly consistent iconography in the various schools of painting. Thereafter, the standard visual imagery of *rāgiṇī* Bhairavī is that of a lady or ladies worshipping a *śivaliṅga* around a shrine (generally marble) which is often shown near or on a lake. In fact, *rāgiṇī* Bhairavī and Vasanta *rāga* are one of the two prominent *rāgas* which have had a fairly consistent iconography. Paintings seen from Rajasthan, Malwa, Deccan and Pahari *rāgiṇī* reflect the similarities in the depiction of Bhairavī *rāgiṇī* in Indian miniature paintings.

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Fig. 1. Rāgas and Rāgiṇīs painted in a Jaina *Kalpasutra* Manuscript dated approx. 1475 C.E. After *Jaina Paintings* Vol.II of Sarabhai Manilal Nawab



Fig. 2. Rāgiṇī Bhairavī, Mewar, 1575 CE, Courtesy: Bharata Kala Bhawan, Varanasi



Fig. 3. Rāgiṇī Bhairavī, Mewar, 1605 CE, Courtesy: Birla Academy, Kolkata

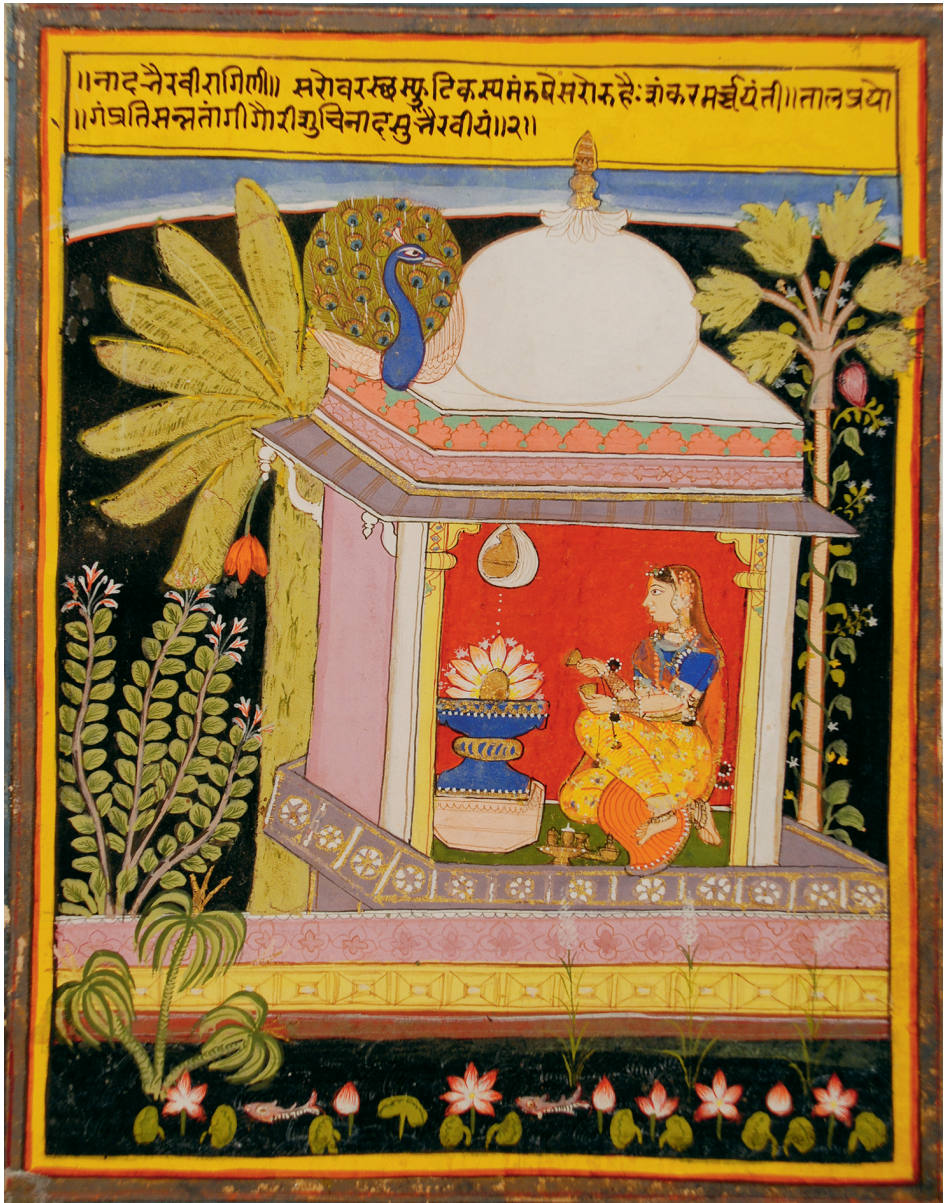


Fig. 4. Rāgīnī Bhairavī, Mewar, 1640–60 CE, Gem Palace, Udaipur, Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi