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Source: *Asian Music*, Vol. 25, No. 1/2, 25th Anniversary Double Issue, (1993 - 1994), pp. 69-80

Published by: University of Texas Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/834191>

Accessed: 11/08/2008 22:08

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WHY HINDUSTANI MUSICIANS ARE GOOD COOKS: ANALOGIES BETWEEN MUSIC AND FOOD IN NORTH INDIA

by

Adrian McNeil

Introduction

Culinary and gastronomic activities are very common, and sometimes favourite, topics of conversation amongst many classical musicians in North India. Accordingly, it is not unusual for similarities between the cognitive and sensory processes that determine culinary and musical aesthetics and creativity to be articulated by musicians.¹ Whilst acknowledging that any connection between the aesthetic and/or physiological sensations of music and food has not, and is unlikely to be, quantitatively established along scientific principles, nevertheless such a connection currently remains in practice.

Generally speaking, the crossover between music and food in North India takes place by way of musical analogies for taste sensations, or culinary/gastronomic analogies for specific, and usually very subtle, musical phenomena. This paper explores two genres of analogies commonly evoked by musicians in North India. These two genres can be categorized according to whether they are intended as an aid in teaching the fundamentals of Hindustani music, or alternately as a means of elucidating finer points of musical aesthetics. In this paper, the first of these genres is described as the Culinary Perception of Melody and the second as the Melodic Perception of Food.

While pedagogical applications of the first genre are useful for explaining and demonstrating principles of melodic organization and structure, the other type of music/food analogy is effectively applied when subtle points of melodic intonation, phrasing, or interpretations of *rāgs* are concerned. In this latter case, aesthetic subtleties can be emphasized by recourse to conventionally established types of taste sensations, such as found in the specific combinations of ingredients or spices used in the preparation of food in North India.

It is not envisaged that these analogies will ever replace the more conventional techniques in teaching Hindustani music. Rather, it is hoped that these analogies will make complex musical concepts

more accessible, and more communicable, to those wishing to gain a taste of the fundamentals of Hindustani music.

The Culinary Perception of Melody

The melodic system inherent in Hindustani music has been developed by countless musicians over many centuries. This gradual process of development has been well documented over this time through numerous Sanskrit and Persian treatises on music. By studying these treatises we are able to come to some understanding of the logic which initially constructed and continuously shaped the fundamentals of such a rich and complex melodic tradition. However, it is the way in which these fundamentals are perceived and articulated outside of India which raises questions on how such culturally specific phenomena as *rāg* (the practical distillation of these melodic principles), are defined outside of their indigenous cultural context. Definitions of *rāg* in Western studies of Indian music invariably depend on technical nomenclature specific to western music culture. As to how well, or indeed whether or not, this nomenclature appropriately articulates the conceptual complexity of *rāg* is at issue here.

Just as there are no satisfactory correlations in the technical parlance of Indian music for characteristically Western musical concepts such as plagal cadences and multipart harmony, so too the semantic and conceptual framework for describing the multifaceted concept of *rāg* is also lacking in Western music. Attempts to define a *rāg* usually focus on Western conceptions of scale or mode. Whilst these terms certainly convey something of the basics of a *rāg*, at the same time such definitions, when considered on their own, ignore many other fundamental elements which are as equally important to any serious consideration of the nature of *rāg*.

Having touched on the conceptual problems of transplanting and interpreting the culturally specific phenomenon of *rāg*, I would now like to adopt a culinary perspective of this term in order to construct a more holistic understanding of the melodic system of Hindustani music. In doing so I would first of all like to disaggregate the various components of *rāg*, and then briefly explore the inter-relationships between these components by way of an analogy to a recipe for preparing food.

Turning our attention to the various elements which collectively give that these elements can be classified according to two categories. Firstly, there are the tonal elements which are associated with the melodic formula of the *rāg*. Secondly, there are the extramusical elements which generate the desired aesthetic effect or results.

The tonal elements of a *rāg* include the melodic inventory of the basic notes; the melodic hierarchy which orders these notes; the procedure for combining notes; the characteristic phrase or phrases of the *rāg*, as well as the prescribed ornamentation and correct use of microtones.

On the other hand, the extramusical elements of *rāg* include such things as the overall "flavour" or sentiment; the conventionally established time of its performance; its religious associations; and metaphysical effects, such as, for example, whether a particular *rāg* cures fever (*Bihāg*), or causes rain (*Malhār*).

In this paper I would like to suggest that all these features can be simultaneously reconciled if the multifaceted concept of *rāg* is approached in the same way that a recipe may be approached in cooking.

If we consider a recipe for a dish in Indian cuisine, it is evident that there are two distinct parts to the preparation of such a dish. The first of these consists of acquiring the necessary ingredients. The second concerns the method of combining these ingredients. In order to elucidate this point further, let us look at the structure of a recipe typical to the style of Hindustani cooking, and compare it to the melodic prescription of a *rāg*.

Culinary Recipe

In a typical recipe the first thing that is indicated is a list of ingredients for that dish. Below it is shown how three levels of classification can be found amongst such a list.

Ingredients:

Primary - e.g., chicken, potatoes, etc.

Secondary - e.g., onions, ginger, garlic, tomatoes, oil, water, etc.

Tertiary - e.g., spices, salt, etc.

The classification of these ingredients have been done according to:

- 1) relative quantity (descending order).
- 2) potency of taste production (ascending order).

Method:

Prepare the primary ingredients: i.e., cut them to appropriate size, marinate them, in other words define their shape and quantity relative to the dish at hand.

Prepare, then fry, the secondary ingredients, i.e., onions, garlic, etc., being mindful of their quantity relative to the primary ingredients.

Fry the tertiary ingredients, i.e., spices, until the desired consistency and flavour have been attained. Add the primary ingredients. Cook for the necessary amount of time to bring out the desired flavour and texture.

Serve the dish with rice or bread. Also serve it at the appropriate time of the day, i.e., breakfast, lunch or dinner. A picture/illustration in a recipe book (see Fig. 1) can be used as a visual guide to how the dish should appear when it is served.

When this same approach is applied to *rāg*, we arrive at the following melodic recipe.

Melodic Recipe

Ingredients:

Primary - basic scale, mode.

Secondary - *vādī* (the note of a *rāg* requiring greatest emphasis); *samvādī* (the note requiring second greatest emphasis); *chalan* (outlines hierarchy of notes); *pakad* (characteristic phrase(s)).

Tertiary - *gamaks* (ornamentation); *shrutis* (microtones).

As was the case in the above recipe, these ingredients can be classified and ordered according to:

- 1) relative structural importance (descending order).
- 2) potency of "taste" production (ascending order).

Method:

Prepare the primary ingredients according to established conventions.

Temper these primary ingredients with the constrains of the *rāg* outlined in the secondary list of ingredients. Do not overcompensate the secondary ingredients in relation to the primary ones. Maintain the correct emphasis on the *pūrvāṅg* and *uttarāṅg* (lower and upper tetrachords, respectively) of the *rāg*.

Within this framework add the tertiary ingredients to the above structure at the appropriate places in order to attain the desired flavour.

Perform the melodic preparation against a suitable drone. Present the *rāg* at the appropriate time of the day. The illustrations depicted in miniature paintings can be used as a visual guide to the sentiment of the *rāg* achieved during performance (e.g., see Fig. 2).

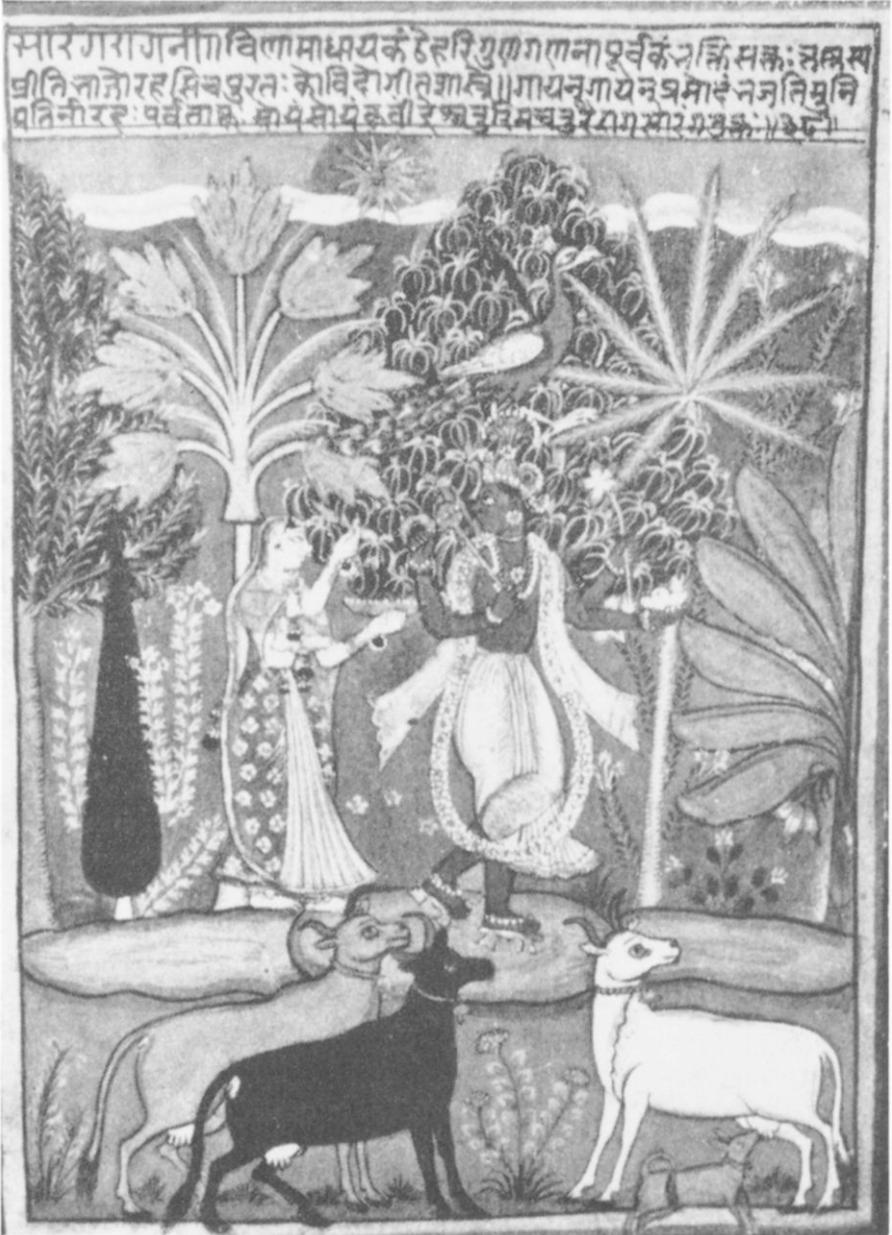
In both the culinary and melodic recipes described above, it is essential to use the correct ingredients in their appropriate proportions and to follow the conventionally established methodology for combining these ingredients. Due care should then be given to both of these considerations at the time of preparation or performance, as the case may be. In both instances the end result is expressed through the aesthetic marker known as *ras*. A dictionary definition of *ras* informs us that it means "relish; sentiment; pleasure, enjoyment; taste or flavour" (Chaturvedi and Tewari 1983:640). *Ras* therefore refers to an aesthetic experience which in effect ranges from a purely emotional sensation, viz., sentiment, pleasure, enjoyment, to a physical one, viz., taste or flavour.

If the correct *ras* is not attained in the flavour of the food, then the obvious result will be that the dish will taste awful. In other words the conventionally established taste, or *ras*, that is desired in that dish will not have been achieved due to the incorrect proportions

**Plate 1: Depiction of Potato with Ginger and Puris
(Jaffrey 1985:38)**



Plate 2: Depiction of Rāg Sārānt (Ebeling 1973:207)



of ingredients, the ingredients being over- or undercooked, or else of poor quality.

In the case of the melodic recipe, the *ras* of the *rāg* will not be attained unless due attention is paid to the same details mentioned above. That is to say, the quality of the ingredients, which can be equated with the sound quality or intonation produced by the instrumentalist or the vocalist, must also be of an appropriate quality. The potency of taste that spices elicit in a dish can be readily compared with the “flavour” produced by an artist through precision in executing the correct intonation of microtones. Therefore, just as the correct proportion of spices, along with the primary and secondary ingredients, should be maintained in cooking, so too the proper flavour of the *rāg* can only be produced through the correct tempering of its primary and secondary melodic material with the appropriate microtones.

The unpleasant sensation of a poorly prepared dish has a physiological equivalent in an incorrect performance of a *rāg*. There is a story told me by my teacher, the *sarodiyā* Ashok Roy, which outlines this latter predicament.

There was once a vocalist whose ego was greater than his musical talent. Having learnt a number of *rāgs* from his *gurū*, he took it upon himself to decide that his musical education had been completed. Within a short period of time he began to perform these *rāgs* in public believing that he was an accomplished musician.

One night he had a dream in which he was transported to some idyllic mountainous abode where he was greeted by a learned sage. He felt very at ease in that place until he realized that there were moans and cries of pain coming from a nearby enclosure. On hearing these sounds he turned to the sage and inquired as to what caused this sound. The sage then took him to the enclosure and showed him dozens of people writhing on the ground in great pain with contorted bodies and disfigured limbs.

The musician was horrified. He asked the sage, “Who are these people and why are they in such pain?”

The sage replied, "They are the embodiments of the *rāgs* that you have been singing. It is your ignorance and incorrect interpretation of *rāgs* that have caused this suffering." The musician was mortified and wanted to know what he could do to alleviate their suffering. The sage again replied, "You must go back and learn how to perform *rāgs* correctly and in the tradition handed down through your *gurū* and only then will this suffering cease."

The parallels that exist between *rāg* and recipe can continue to be noted ad infinitum. However, suffice to say that by introducing the concept of *rāg* in Hindustani music through the analogy of a melodic recipe, it has been the aim of this paper to provide an effective glimpse of the holistic complexity of the Indian melodic system and the dynamics of the musical and aesthetic components of *rāg*. While to date, a reliance on Western musicological nomenclature by ethnomusicologists has identified most of the fundamental components of *rāg*, it has not been able to communicate the inner workings and interrelationships of these components to those wishing to understand Indian music. It is the dynamics of the component parts in performance that provide the essence of *rāg*, in the same way that a good cook's knowledge of how to combine ingredients, what flavours they require, and the method in which they should be prepared is essential to the taste of a dish.

The Melodic Conception of Food

The interpretation of musical events through references to the taste of certain foods or a process involved in cooking is sometimes evoked when musicians wish to verbalise subtleties and nuances of melodic expression. There are many ways that I have heard this done, ranging from a serious point of comparison to a more jocular one. I would like to provide a brief depiction of the variety of these comparisons by focusing on three specific examples that have been told to me during lessons or general discussions on music.

The first example concerns the interpretation of a *rāg* known as *Madhuvantī*. As with all *rāgs*, the basic tonal ingredients of *Madhuvantī* consist of a *pūrvāṅg* (lower tetrachord) and an *uttarāṅg* (upper tetrachord). The *pakaḍ* of the *pūrvāṅg* of this *rāg* is *ni sa ga ma pa* (i.e., B, c, eb, f*, g). This phrase produces what some describe

as a *chatpaṭā* or tangy sensation. By contrast the correct performance of the *paḳaḍ* of the *uttarāṅg* of the same *rāg*, *ni sa dha pa* (i.e., b,c,a,g) is said to produce a very smooth and sweet flavour.

Madhuvantī is known as an afternoon *rāg*. This is a time in North India also associated with the consumption of hot *samosā* (fried vegetable or meat morsels in a triangular-shaped pastry) and sweet chutney. It was explained to me that the proportion that should be maintained between these two basic characteristic phrases should follow the same relative proportion that would be used when eating *samosā* (*pūrvang*, greatest amount of taste) and chutney (*uttarāṅg*, least amount of taste). Having experienced the taste sensation of good *samosās* and chutney, I found this analogy to be more immediate in its verbalization of the relationship between the *pūrvang* and *uttarāṅg* of this *rāg* than could be communicated through purely musical means.

The second example follows this same line, in that it compares the *ras* of a particular dish of food to the *ras* of a *rāg*, thereby adding a further dimension to the interpretation of the *rāg* during performance. Once while struggling to bring out the difficult flavour of *rāg puriyā dhanāshrī*, my teacher, Ashok Roy, once mentioned that I should think about the taste of *karelā* (a bitter gourd) whilst playing. This analogy immediately shed light on how the microtones, particularly those around the sharp 4 and flat 2nd of this *rāg*, should be approached, as they can be argued to elicit a similar sensation to the bitter taste of the gourd.

This melodic perception of food adds another dimension to the musician's interpretation of *rāg* as it, perhaps besides poetry, is the most suitable verbal, i.e., nonmusical, means of articulating the workings of the Hindustani melodic system and the sensations it elicits in Hindustani musicians.

The third example I would like to mention concerns the use of food imagery to aid the speedy transmission of a musical idea. This analogy differs from the first two examples in that it emphasizes a rhythmic phrase rather than a melodic subtlety. The story, as it was told to me, concerned a *mridangam* player who was part of an ensemble recording a sound track for a Bombay film.² The musical director recited a fairly straightforward rhythmic phrase which he wanted the *mridangam* player to play.

As it was the end of a long recording session and the musicians' minds were already on the dinner arrangement that had been made, the *mridangam* player was just unable to catch that particular phrase. Knowing that the percussionist was particularly fond of *biryānī* chicken (chicken prepared with rice), the musical director then took the words of that musicians' favourite dish, and like a mantra recited the syllables to the rhythm of the phrase he desired: *biryānī chicken khā* (lit., eat *biryānī* chicken):

1	2	3	4
khā	chicken	ō	biri- yānī
O	chicken	ō	biri- yānī (repeat)

ō = 1/2 beat rest

O = 1 beat rest

The *mridangam* player immediately played the phrase correctly and was on his way to dinner as quick as a flash.

Conclusion

The realization of a *rāg* through performance is a musical process that involves adherence to a prescribed melodic recipe which is then tempered by a musician's own interpretation and imagination. A musician must know how to bring out the primary *ras* of a *rāg* right from the beginning of a performance in the same way that a chef will be aware of the flavour and texture of a dish from the beginning of the cooking process.

I have observed during my association with many practicing Indian musicians over the last decade or so, that on the whole their ability to prepare tasty food is by no means confined to one or two individuals from amongst this profession. This situation could be due to the parallels that exist in the cognitive processes involved in preparing a tasty dish of Indian food and interpreting a *rāg*, as has been described above. It is for this reason that I assert that Hindustani musicians are good cooks.

Notes

¹These aesthetic parallels are not exclusively confined to India. Similar points of comparison are also noted in other music cultures. For example, Ruth Stone in her study of the Kpelle people of Liberia, *Let the Inside Be Sweet* (1982), also draws some parallels between the aesthetics of musical performance and specific taste sensations.

²Communication with Aneesh Pradhan, a disciple of Pt. Nikhil Ghosh.

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