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### Ragas, Recipes, and Rasas

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#### **[–] Abstract and Keywords**

The concept of raga in Hindustani classical music is a complex phenomenon not least of all because it is simultaneously an inventory of melodic elements, a performative process, and an aesthetic outcome. These different dimensions to raga pose challenges to systematised ways of accounting for how it works in performance. Symbolic modes of thought in the tradition have long taken recourse to analogies to attempt to portray the gestalt of raga and also provide alternate modes of pedagogical knowledge and aesthetic sensibility for engaging with raga. Building on the long-held predilections between music, food, and cooking in Hindustani music, this essay provides another vantage point from which to consider raga and also the significance of rasa in the performance of raga.

Keywords: Hindustani music, raga, rasa, food, recipe

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Imagine the most sumptuous meal spread out in front of you. The delicious flavours, textures, and aromas fill, coalesce, and embrace the conviviality of a space shared with close friends. Sensations of the palate and the body anticipate and mingle with memories and expectations of past experiences. The smell, the look, the taste, the feel, the sounds, the warmth of the occasion emanate pleasure, meaning, and resonance. This harmony of the senses is further enhanced by the mood and touch of the chef having a good night, the right company on song, and the ways their presence contribute to the ambience of the occasion. All of these diverse elements combine and create a sensual pleasure of savouring, relishing, feeling, desiring, and consuming.

Whether it is an encounter with gustatory sumptuousness or with a compelling and emotionally moving performance of drama, dance, music, storytelling, or the like, what permeates through them all is some sort of desire for a sensual and aesthetic experience. Idealised ways of accounting for these experiences and discerning the embodied qualities that they give rise to in their participants varies according to place, culture, and context. The *tarabi* of Arabic story telling and musical traditions, the *duende* of Flamenco, the *hal* of the Sufis, along with many other systems of aesthetic thought, all converge on or highlight that intangible, desirable thing so valued in such creative endeavours, which is also paradoxically so resistant to articulation.

From a South Asian perspective, the concept of rasa, like these and many other systems of aesthetic thought on this planet, informs the creative act. Rasa theory is the product of Sanskrit intellectual culture, which in broader terms has nurtured an insightful capacity into the classification and systemisation of vast areas of human experiences and natural phenomena. Like many such terms, *rasa* has both a specific and more general multiple significations. It is both a technical term formalised within an aesthetic intellectual tradition and an everyday word used in regional languages in many different ways to describe sensual experiences. The heterogeneity of the circumstances in which it is invoked, including the diverse historical and cultural contexts, technical considerations, and material cultures, define and emphasise the distinctions that exist between different interpretations of the term. Nevertheless, what is common to all the uses and significations of rasa is how the term identifies and engages with the intangible qualities of tangible things and actions. The concept of rasa as a desired intangible element permeates each context and is the point of aesthetic commonality between them. In its formal

understanding as an aesthetic theory, *rasa* primarily signifies emotional flavour, while in its more informal usage *rasa* signifies intangibles such as gustatory flavour, sentiment, essence, zest, nectar, humour, delicacy, and so on. An interplay exists between these formal and informal significations of the term. For example, the *Natyasastra*, probably written sometime between 200 BCE and 200CE, discusses the technical requirements and desirable aesthetic outcomes of an idealised dramatic performance. In this oft quoted passage from this important treatise, sometimes referred to as the fifth *Veda*, the formal and informal significations of *rasa* are conflated to great effect.

Just as noble minded persons enjoying delicious food seasoned with different spices relish the taste with delight, so does the knowing audience relish and savour the experience of emotional states in a performance and are moved by them

(*Natyasastra* Chapter 6, verses 32–33).

What is highlighted here is a shared idea of a desired aesthetic outcome, a flavour, and that could be gustatory and/or emotional. It is from this point of correspondence that possibilities for engaging in analogies and metaphors between the two open up. While the *Natyasastra* is concerned primarily with drama, the correspondence between emotional and gustatory flavours is equally understood to be both an organising principle and an aesthetic outcome of an idealised creative act including, of course, musical performance. This becomes the creative foundation for analogies between food and music contained in the orally transmitted anecdotes and other types of stories that are part of Hindustani music culture.

Correspondences between gustatory and musical characteristics are voiced in diverse ways in these anecdotes and analogies. This can happen through recollections of such and such a musician having a “sweet hand”; a desired sound quality expressed in terms of its “oiliness,” or in the case of the great sarod player Ali Akbar Khan—who was also renowned for his *masoor dal* (a dish of red lentils)—who compared the action of his right hand technique to that of stirring food in a pot. It can also be invoked to explain the affect of performance, for example,

[Alladiya] Khansahab would present the audience the distinct form of different ragas. Those who knew how to notate would feel as if they had understood the form of the raga fully, but the moment Khansahab began a new raga they would forget the lifeless notational skeleton of the earlier raga. As in a feast, when one forgets an earlier dish the moment one begins to partake of another, and finally remembering only the enjoyment of the whole feast one would remember Khansahab’s concert as a whole, as a memorable experience.

(Khan 2012:111)

The connection between music and food is so commonly encountered in anecdotes that musicians recall that it would be difficult to undergo traditional methods of training without having encountered many such stories in one form or another. Apart from compositional and technical material, this narrative also takes the form of stories, anecdotes, recollections, and so on, all of which are central to the cultural imagination and pedagogy of this music.

The significance of such a narrative becomes even more pertinent when it is considered that in premodern times musical knowledge was the domain of communities and family lineages of hereditary musicians who orally transmitted this knowledge from generation to generation. Oral transmission meant that the collective knowledge of the community or the family was inherited by individuals more like the acquisition of a mother tongue than as a formally learned closed system of exercises and rules (Hall 1992:225). In such an endogamous social context, the oral narrative exists as a diverse, parallel, creative, and multilayered conduit in the transmission of specialised knowledge of Hindustani music.

Even today what is highlighted in this rich narrative are stories, anecdotes, recollections, and many other informal elements, which can be powerful adjuncts to technical training as they stir the deeper cultural imagination and flavour the pedagogical conduits of this music. The diverse fabric of this material invokes a sense of the musical past and its traditions by recalling its luminaries, their qualities and experiences, but this fabric also abounds in metaphors and analogies that impart core sensibilities about the social, creative and aesthetic values of the tradition and the creative processes and technical demands it contains. Technical training is one part of this orality, and it is difficult to isolate this from the performative, the aesthetic, the social, and the moral/ethical dimensions of acquiring musical knowledge. It is in this endogamous social organisation of premodern times that

the oral narrative is a core conduit in the transmission of knowledge. To date it has largely resisted theorisation. A notable exception is Das Gupta's and Bhirdikar's writing,

Not only is it the mode in which history appears to us in the case of music, it enters deeply into the ways in which musical transactions are effected even to this day, with stories about the compositions or styles accompanying the instruction in that particular matter. Much remains to be done in the direction of analysing the structures of musical anecdotes; in many cases they serve to make technical points easier to remember, or create a historical context for a composition in terms of a notable performance or particular incident associated with it. Equally clearly one can make out certain ideological moves: anecdotes validate particular interpretations of musical pieces and problems

(Khan 2012:4).

Outside of food, other correspondences abound in the oral narrative of Hindustani music, but of course such things are not confined to this music culture. Similar correspondences have been noted, for example by During (1982), who has written on how shared aesthetic formulations and sensibilities of space in Persian culture has led to the discernment of correspondences between a market place, the structure of traditional poetic forms, and improvisatory structures of traditional music. In a completely different context, Feld writes about the correspondences between the coded sensibility that organises individuals into a social system and that which orders sound into a musical system. In doing so, he states,

[I do not]... equate explanation with normative statistical correlations or causal analysis. I am more concerned with explaining the situated meanings of sound patterns in the intersubjectively created world of actors and actions, and I am concerned with the role local ideologies play in constituting and maintaining those local, specific sociological models of, and for, musical realities.

(1984:404)

This essay considers how correspondences can extend and embellish ways of thinking about the deeper structures and sensibilities of Hindustani music. In doing so, the concern is not with trying to establish any sense of causality between them, as Feld has mentioned. Rather, what becomes of interest here is how meaning and sensibility about raga can be revealed indirectly through recourse to analogies with food. The intention is to explore how the familiar, in this case cooking, can be useful in revealing the unfamiliar, namely the multilayered intricacies and complexities of raga.

### Ragas and Recipes

Raga is a complex concept, not least of all because it is simultaneously an inventory of melodic elements, a performative process, and an aesthetic outcome. The complex beauty of a raga is precisely derived from each of these components being in dialogue with, and dependent on, each other—what otherwise might be called the *gestalt* of the raga. An awareness and appreciation of this interrelationship is a core sensibility of the tradition, which needs to be learned gradually and methodically over a sustained period of time.

Given that in the modern systems of learning raga, it is not surprising that the inventory of melodic materials and technical concerns of raga grammar and syntax are usually foregrounded in formal definitions of the term. When first learning or learning about raga, what tends to be overwhelming are technical concerns such as sound production, the grammar and syntax of individual ragas, how they are shaped melodically, how the intonation of notes are to be articulated, how ragas that share common melodic characteristics are differentiated from each other, and so on. These are important foundational, technical, and structural concerns that need to be mastered in this journey.

As with the preparation and enjoyment of a sumptuous meal, the performance of a raga is a different thing. It is a textured and emotionally flavoured experience to be savoured by *rasikas* (the purveyors of *rasa*), be they the performer or the listeners. It is in this spirit that the more poetic definitions of raga, such as the technically unencumbered “that which colours the mind” arise—derived from the Sanskrit word, *ranjayati*. Just as with a shared meal, it is the combination of both equally essential qualities of the technical and poetic that together lend aesthetic meaning, melodic form, and conventional sensibility to a raga, through its performance. Definitions of

raga that are constrained to technical terms alone can feel as unsatisfying and clinical as a dietary analysis of that meal. Therefore a more accurate depiction of raga would be one that can equally accommodate its technical, performative, and the aesthetic dimensions. Interestingly, these dimensions of raga can be mapped on to the way a typical recipe of a North Indian dish works.

An exploration of this analogy begins by considering a typical recipe from North India, *alu gobi* (potatoes and cauliflower).<sup>1</sup> This is followed by a consideration of how this approach can open up a way of thinking about raga as a combination of ingredients that need to be cooked according to a conventionally established method. Finally the points of correspondence between the emotional flavour of a performance of a raga and the gustatory flavours of a traditional North Indian dish become the departure point for extending this analogy.

### Ingredients

Recipes commonly display two primary concerns, the ingredients required to make a dish and the method required for realising it through cooking. The ingredients of a recipe are typically encountered in cookbooks in the form of a list. They are usually ordered within the list according to their importance in the recipe and/or whether they contribute the greatest volume or quantity to the dish. Some instruction is provided on how the ingredients are to be prepared; something should be peeled, something else chopped in a particular way, and so on. In other words, the given quantities of the basic ingredients have to be prepared and shaped so that they are in proportion with each other and appropriate to the desired results of the particular dish being cooked.

The list of ingredients of *alu gobi* would typically include

- 1 medium sized cauliflower (washed and cut into florets)
- 3 medium sized potatoes (peeled and cut into small pieces)
- 1 large onion (diced into small pieces)
- 4 cloves of garlic (cut finely)
- 1 small piece of fresh ginger (peeled and cut finely)
- 2 medium sized tomatoes (cut into small pieces)
- 2 cups of water
- 1 teaspoon of cumin powder
- 1 teaspoon of coriander powder
- ½ teaspoon of garam masala powder
- 1 teaspoon of turmeric powder
- Salt to taste
- 2–4 fresh green chillies

These ingredients can be thought of as grouped into three tiers; what can be called primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of ingredients. In this particular recipe, the primary ingredients are obviously potatoes and cauliflower because they lend their name to the dish, and it is also on this basis that the dish is conventionally recognised.

Onions, garlic, ginger, and tomato form the secondary tier of ingredients, which when combined become the base for a textured sauce that envelops, adheres to, and flavours the primary ingredients. The water provides the essential medium for the sauce and it also acquires and carries its flavour. The volume of each of the ingredients in this tier are far less than the volume of each of the primary ingredients, but each secondary tier ingredient is imbued with a far more concentrated and intense flavour than is the case with the equivalent amount of the primary ingredients.

The fresh chilli, different spices, and salt form the tertiary tier. Again, the volume of these ingredients is less compared to those in the primary and secondary tiers, but the concentration and intensity of flavour that they carry and contribute to the dish is far greater than either of the other two tiers. To illustrate this further, imagine how the difference in taste sensations between placing one teaspoon of raw cumin powder in the mouth and one teaspoon of raw potato. What you can see and measure out is one thing, but the intensities of their taste is a different matter altogether.

Each tier of ingredients then, can be differentiated according to both its volume and the intensity of concentration

of flavour that each possesses. Going down the list from primary to tertiary tiers, the quantity or volume of the ingredients diminishes, but also the intensity of their flavour increases. In other words, the volume of the ingredients, on one hand, and the potency of the flavour, on the other, form two independent axes in their contribution to the desired outcome. This is an important consideration to take into account when considering the list of melodic ingredients of a raga.

### Method

The quality of the ingredients, their freshness, the way they have been prepared, and so on are certainly essential to the overall outcome of the dish. However, once these have been assembled, it is the method for turning these prepared individual raw ingredients into the recognisable form, taste, and texture of the dish that embodies the recipe by guiding the transformation of the uncooked into the cooked. It is in the method that the skills, experience, and creativity of the cook come into play. It is this process that ultimately gives meaning to the recipe because of its emphasis on this transformation and the outcome. In the case of the *alu gobi* recipe the basic outline of the method is

Heat the pan then add the oil and fry the cumin seeds for a few seconds then the add the onions and fry until golden brown. After that add the garlic and chillies and fry for 30 seconds or so. Turn down the heat and add the spices, stir for a minute or so until the aroma of the cooked spices can be detected. Add the chopped tomatoes and salt. Raise the heat and stir. Turn the heat down again after the tomato has become paste-like and when the oil separates from the sauce add the cauliflower florets and the potato pieces. Stir for a couple of minutes. Then add the water and turn the heat right down and cover and simmer the dish until the vegetables are cooked appropriately. Garnish with fresh coriander leaves before serving with rice or roti.<sup>2</sup>

While this description provides a basic outline of the actual cooking process, other considerations that have a significant affect on the outcome also come into play. These can include, for example, the mood of the cook, the appetite of the diner, the conditions under which the dish is prepared and consumed, how the heat is applied, the timing of the flow of events, the nuances of touch, and so on. In addition to this there are also the less tangible, but equally important, considerations of memory and experience in informing and guiding the way the ingredients are thought about and treated. These are concerned with wider conventions surrounding this dish, such as how it is prepared in different places, at different times, and under different conditions. It can also be mediated through the personal and perhaps subconscious recall of idealised or imagined experiences by the cook or the diner. In other words, the success of the outcome is determined through multiple levels of considerations. Some are tangible, quantifiable elements such as the ingredients themselves. Some elements are totally intangible elements such as the flavour the ingredients carry or acquire in cooking, or they can reside in the “touch” of the cook and the harmony and balance that is achieved in the way the different tiers of ingredients are conceived and combined. Bear in mind that even the highest-quality ingredients can be destroyed if they are cooked unthinkfully. Whatever the case, one thing is certain: even though one might follow the same recipe on repeated occasions, the outcome will always be different.

### Raga as Recipe

Correspondences between recipes and descriptions of ragas can be discerned in how the melodic elements of a raga have been presented and ordered in many publications in the past. In the monumental six tomes of *Hindustani Sangit Paddhati Kramika Pustaka Mallika*,<sup>3</sup> published in the early twentieth century, the seminal figure in modern Hindustani music, Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, has outlined dozens of ragas and provided the notations for many compositions in each raga and especially of the principal ragas. Invariably the formula followed provides the time of day it is conventionally performed, the larger melodic grouping it belongs to, the basic notes on which it is based, a melodic inventory arranged in ascending and descending order of pitch, any primary features of how one should move through this inventory, and the primary characteristic phrase of the raga. These outlines are sometimes further extended in the case of a number of ragas through a *swar vistaar*, which describes major melodic pathways that can be followed to vary, extend, and shape the fixed core of melodic ingredients that belong to the raga—its basic melodic ingredients. This same convention is widely used in the significant number of raga pedagogy publications that are widely available.

## Melodic Ingredients of Raga and Their Preparation

Out of the dozens of ragas compiled by Bhatkhande, the major raga, *Bhupali*, is taken here as a typical example. As a raga, it shares no special aesthetic correspondences with *alu gobi* in terms of flavour or any other intangible or tangible elements. What perhaps does link these two distinct creative pursuits is a broader sensibility about, and approach to, assembling and transforming the uncooked (fixed) into the cooked (expanded, varied, extended, improved).

What appears first in this description of raga *Bhupali* is a series of rhyming quatrains or couplets in which the primary basic nutshell of the raga, as recorded in past treatises and pedagogical works, is presented in Hindi. For example:

In the ascending and descending movements Ma and Ni are *tyag* (eschewed)

Ga, dha are the Vadi and Samvadi, and it is called Bhupali raag.

(1995, Vol. 3: 23)

Following this, a brief background is given of the parent scale (*that*) to which the raga belongs; its inventory of notes; its scale type (*jati*), that is, pentatonic, hexatonic, or heptatonic; and what time of the day and year it should be performed. Then some defining characteristics are detailed, an acknowledgment of ragas with similar melodic ingredients is included, and a caution about not straying into their territories is issued. After this the melodic ingredients of the raga are listed.

As with the gustatory recipe, different levels of ingredients can be discerned within this list. In this instance the primary tier is concerned with the ascending and descending order and scalar framework (*aroha-avroha*) and the secondary with the elements that begin to define and shape the characteristic melodic movement within the confines of that framework. Belonging to the latter category are the principal and secondary guide tones (*vadi, samvadi*), which designate melodic weighting (*vadi bheda*) within the *aroha-avroha* by assigning the role of guide tones to two of the swars (notes). To this is added the basic pathways and the rules and grammar for moving through the *aroha-avroha* (*chalan bheda*) and the *pakad* (characteristic phrase of the raga). Each raga has a *pakad* that is only associated with it and consequently by which a raga can be identified.

### *Primary ingredients of Bhupali:*

Aroha: Sa Re Ga Pa, Dha, **Sa** (1 2 3 5 6 1)<sup>4</sup>

Avroha: **Sa**, Dha Pa, Ga, Re, Sa (1 6 5 3 2 1)

### *Secondary ingredients of Bhupali:*

Vadi: Ga (3)

Samvadi: Dha (6)

Chalan: Ga, Re, Sa *Dha*, Sa Re Ga, Pa Ga, Dha Pa Ga, Re, Sa (3 2 1, 1 6 1 2 3, 6 5 3, 2, 1)

Pakad: Ga, Re, Sa *Dha*, Sa Re Ga, Pa Ga, Dha Pa Ga, Re, Sa (3 2 1, 1 6 1 2 3, 6 5 3, 2, 1)<sup>5</sup>

In this inventory, however, there is no direct mention of tertiary ingredients, that is, the microtones (*shrutis*) that are conventionally associated with this raga. However, by designating that this raga is derived from the Kalyan *that*, the description indirectly indicates that the broader approach to the intonation and the shaping of the notes (*swars*) through microtonal inflection (*uccharan bheda*) is in the manner (*ang*) of the broader Kalyan family of ragas.

The interpretation of this ensemble of *swars* (notes) and their *shrutis* in *Bhupali* has been established over countless generations and according to long-held conventions. Even so, it is open to the personal interpretation and creative nuances of the performers, guided by their experience, memory, creativity and sense of taste. This liberty is in itself guided by conventions of musical style (*gharana*) and genre but also by the desire to maintain an overall consistency in the emotional flavour of the performance. With the right application *shrutis* shape and flavour the swars with emotional intensity, and in this sense they are dependent on each other.

Despite attempts over the years to somehow standardise or quantify this relationship or to assign exact pitch settings or wave frequencies to the use of *shrutis* in performance, they continue to evade such an approach or



understanding of both the manner of their application and their potential for aesthetic potency. The absence of direct indication of these tertiary ingredients in these pedagogical descriptions of ragas is notable and perhaps in itself reveals something about the nuanced and complex ways in which they are open to be tastefully exploited in the performance of a raga.

In recalling an exchange between the great vocalist and founder of the Jaipur gharana, Alladiya Khan, an enigmatic legendary figure in modern Hindustani music, and the English musicologist Sir Ernest Clements in the early part of the twentieth century, the Maharastrian musicologist Govindrao Tembe highlights the problems with interpreting shrutis as fixed melodic points or pitch frequencies:

Then Clementsahab said: "Khansahab, I have constructed a harmonium and have fixed shrutis in it. Please listen to it," and he sat down to play it himself. [Alladiya Khansahab recalls] I heard him for some time. Then he asked my opinion. I said: (Sahab) the function of the shrutis is that when a shruti is produced perfectly it affects the listener's heart. He is moved to tears. Whereas when one hears your shrutis, one feels like running away. These are not shrutis but untuneful notes. The shrutis have their effect when they are produced in the singing, and they cannot be established or fixed.

(2012:99)

For those familiar with Indian musicology, this anecdotal representation of shrutis sits somewhat at odds with the methodical list of twenty-two shrutis that are described in the *Sangeet Ratnakara*. In the written *shastric* tradition, the octave is divided into twenty-two divisions with each of these divisions, named and identified as distinct and fixed melodic microtonal pitches (*shruti*). Whilst this way of approaching shrutis is useful in explaining the broad intonational divergences between what would be called "untempered scale types" in Western musicology, it is not a prescriptive guide as to how to engage with them in performance, even though occasionally they are mistakenly interpreted like this. The *shastric* account of shrutis is more like describing a collection of the basic spices essential to Indian cuisine with each stored in a separate container. They acquire their utility, potency, and meaning only when they are blended with other ingredients and used appropriately in the cooking process. What Alladiya Khansahab directly states here is that when they are applied in performance in their raw form they create an unpleasant sensation, like what happens when raw cumin powder is placed in the mouth. This understanding underlines the different approach to shrutis between that quantified in the formalised, *shastric* tradition and that followed in the informal practice based approach that informs the oral transmission of musical knowledge. The primary difference between the two being that shrutis are regarded as acquiring meaning and affect in a wider melodic context in the latter.

What is highlighted here are the differences in sensibilities and concerns of the *shastric* and the oral in approaching and articulating musical knowledge. What also becomes evident are the different ways shrutis have been classified and quantified in intellectual terms and how this sits at odds with their effect and application in performance where they are understood more in terms of flavour, and in so doing their qualities and effects are foregrounded rather than a set pitch frequency. The swars are embellished by shrutis in endless ways in performance as a means for exploring possibilities of emotional expression, both in keeping with the aesthetic conventions of the tradition and according to the creative imagination and "taste" of the performer.

### Method for Cooking Raga

Leaving a definition of raga at this point is not dissimilar to leaving a bunch of raw ingredients on a chopping board. Both are a long way from their realised form. Just as ingredients need to be cooked, similarly the melodic ingredients of a raga once prepared need to be "realised" in performance. In other words, the method of realising the raga out of an inventory of basic prepared ingredients is also an essential consideration in accounting for what a raga is, just as the method is in a recipe. Or as Rajan Parrikar has aptly put it:

Among the deleterious habits to have come to nest in the realm of Hindustani pedagogy is the urge to pigeonhole ragas into an *aroha-avroha* set, then tack on the *vadi-samvadi* pair, a *pakkad* [*sic*] phrase, and then presume that one has successfully described the raga. The *aroha-avroha* set is an *ex post facto* construct that ought not to be the starting point of inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

There are many methods through which ragas are realised in performance. These methods are determined by the

conventions and preferences of the genre and the *gharana*, but also by the previously mentioned creative sensibilities of individual artist themselves. The different styles and structures of the many vocal genres of Hindustani music, namely, dhrupad, khyal, tarana, thumri, along with the variety of instrumental forms, all offer different musical settings that determine what is often referred to as the “treatment” of the raga. The *gharana* in modern times, the *sampradya* and *banis* in older times, are “schools” of music formed around hereditary musical lineages with different stylistic, technical, and aesthetic interpretations of the principal genres of their times. Each of these have been carried from generation to generation through hereditary lineages and other phalanxes as a musical inheritance passed on through time. These community and musical affiliations provide a landscape in which musicians are able to follow their own personalised interpretations in the performance of raga according to their experience and artistry.

Consequently the treatment of a raga such as Bhupali is open to a multitude of ways of interpretation across and within genres, as well as through individual preferences. This is not unlike the variety of ways and settings in which food is prepared, depending upon the type of food, the type of kitchen and its equipment, the types of pots and pans and other utensils available, and the training, experience, and preferences of the chef. In the end it seems that there potentially could be as many ways of performing a raga as there are of cooking a set of ingredients. All have different artistic outcomes; some are complicated extended musical feasts, others are closer to more modest, snack-like delicacies.

Amongst this range of possibilities in the methods for performing raga, a fundamental distinction exists between raga elaboration in *anibaddh* (unbound) and *nibaddh* (bound) contexts. The fundamental difference between the two is that when melodic activity is set to fixed rhythmic cycles and engages with set compositions, it becomes *nibaddh*. This context determines the types of rhythmic frameworks and performance structures available to draw upon and with which to engage with the raga. On the other hand, the quintessential method prescribed in an *anibaddh* context is the *alap* section of a performance of the dhrupad genre. In the method of performing a raga in dhrupad *alap*, rhythm and rhythmic frameworks are certainly significant and essential elements; however, the *alap* is not constrained by formalised rhythmic cycles (*talas*).

The *alap* practiced in the instrumental tradition of dhrupad is perhaps the consummate context for “cooking” raga. Not being reliant on text, song structure, or *tala*, the method in treating raga in the dhrupad *alap* is essentially based on abstracted sound. The structures, styles, and technical challenges of the dhrupad *alap* are complicated, expansive, and difficult to master. The beauty of this form of *alap* is in how it provides a methodical approach for exploring raga through the harnessing of an ever increasing intensity of energy. The contour of this method, reduced to its most essential form, involves an aesthetic journey that begins with an emphasis on *swar* and *shrutis* and then methodically follows a path through an ever increasing use of rhythmic devices and temporal concentration.

Perera (1994:206) provides an outline of the fifteen sections of traditional dhrupad instrumental *alap*. Over the course of the three stages of *alap*, the rhythm becomes more and more a part of the melodic exploration until the last sections are dominated by a driving pulse. This gradual concentration of rhythm has the effect of cooking the basic melodic ingredients; it provides the fire by which this can occur (Table 1).



Table 1: The structure of dhrupad instrumental alap

First stage of alap in vilambit laya	Second stage of alap in madhya laya	Third stage of alap in drut laya
Sthayi	madh or madhya jor or barabar ki jod	lari
Antara	gamak jod	lari guthao
sanchari	lari jod	lar larpet
Abhog		lari jhala
		thok jhala
		tarparan
		ulta jhala
		siddha jhala

The foundations and intricacies of each section are learned as part of traditional training. Each section has specific technical demands, as well as ways of constructing and playing with underlying melodic and rhythmic foundational structures. It is rare to hear this full structure followed precisely in performance nowadays; nevertheless, the overall form of fast to slow is the prevailing convention. What becomes of interest to this discussion is that one part of the method for performing raga involves a structural logic embedded in a basic framework of form. Further, different genres of Hindustani music such as dhrupad, khyal, thumri, tappa, and so on provide the performer with different types of structural contexts and form-based methods for engaging with the raga.

As different dishes require different cooking methods, so too do ragas. For example, the morning raga *Nat Bhairav* is sometimes said to be best performed with an approach that recalls the state of mind when first awaking from sleep. Performances of raga *Darbari Kanra* should try to avoid fast scalar passages (*tans*), as these detract from the deep affect of the *uccharan bheda* (microtonal shading) that flavours this raga and such fast passages run the risk of diluting the desired *gambhirta* (gravity) of its mood. It can become unsatisfying if different ragas are all cooked in the same way.

## Improvisatory Practices as Method

Within the framework of a fixed structure of form, improvisatory practices provide ways of engaging with the ingredients of a raga through a variety of melodic and rhythmic strategies and devices. Understandings and practices of improvisation vary from culture to culture, genre to genre, and idiom to idiom, and there are seemingly innumerable dimensions to this complex and diverse musical domain. The realisation of raga in performance also involves a diversity and depth of improvisatory practice that resists being tied down to any one set of analytical or technical criteria. This may account for the reason that there is no single term that carries the same meaning in vernacular languages in India as the open-ended term, improvisation, does in English. Rather there are a number of distinct and specific terms that signify different types of improvisatory practices in Hindustani music. Therefore, simplistic interpretations of improvisation that would position it in opposition to what is composed, in other words defined in terms of what it is not (i.e., composition), are not really helpful in trying to understand how these practices work in the context of raga.

While recognising the difficulties in framing the parameters of improvisatory practices in Hindustani music, nevertheless there are a couple of relevant observations that can be proposed here. The first is that taken together these improvisatory practices become an essential part of the method by which a raga is cooked. The

second is, what fundamentally emerges from amongst a range of improvisatory practices is the idea of taking something that is given or fixed, which is then extended, varied, worked and intensified, and in the process transformed into something else. Whatever the performance context of the raga, whether instrumental dhrupad alap or the vocal *bara khayal*, what is common across a range of raga-based performance genres is this dynamic playing around with what is fixed. This “playing around” draws upon systematically learned applied practices, ingenuous strategies, and other creative approaches for engaging with given elements, which are intended to being pulled apart and “worked.” It is in exploring the ways that the two are interrelated that an important entry point into the performance dynamics of a raga and the methods by which it can be cooked emerges.

Outside of the basic melodic ingredients, the fixed or given elements of raga are too numerous and varied to be accounted for here, and so what follows is a list of some of the key elements of the primary and secondary tiers. These fixed melodic elements provide a highly condensed and compressed form of information in the raga, along with a grammar and syntax that informs shapes how this material should be unpacked. The tertiary ingredients of a raga are not systematically listed in text based pedagogical sources. Rather this level of melodic organisation is an indication of the broader approaches to intonation and emotional affect based on affiliations described with broader families of ragas (such as the *Kalyan* grouping). To these melodic ingredients can be added various types of melodic devices and tools such as the *paltas* and *alankaras*, along with the mathematical permutations and combinations of the *merukhandi* system, technical mechanisms that provide core strategies for working these ingredients. There is also the corpus of vocal and instrument compositions in every raga set to different rhythmic cycles and tempos; these compositions provide another level for exploring fixed elements in the *nibaddh* section of a performance and become a launching pad for melodic, rhythmic, and textual creativity. On another level, the structural elements and form of a genre provide a fixed framework, and another layer to the method, for guiding the temporal unfolding of raga in performance. In addition, there are many fixed rhythmic elements and devices, such as and the subtle application of a steady pulse throughout the alap and the structure of a rhythm cycle articulated through the *theka* of a tabla or pakhawaj. To these can be added *parans* (set material drawn from the percussion tradition), polyrhythmic applications and strategies (*layakari*), and many other tools and devices that can be folded into the method of working the raga.

Taken together, these fixed elements and methods provide the materials to be explored and worked in performance according to the idioms of the genre or style. They essentially serve as the seed elements (*bij*) for creativity, a notion that also resonates in wider philosophical systems of thought in India. On this subject Rowell explains,

... truth exists in the form of a seed or kernel—a nuclear idea of enormous potential but in need of analysis and elaboration before its full range of meaning can begin to become apparent. In the effort to understand why Indian music thought is the way it is, it will be necessary to keep this image constantly before us.

(1991:24)

Creative engagement with given fixed seed ideas, and other melodic and rhythmic devices, becomes the primary method in realising a raga in performance. The conventions inherent in each type of musical genre encourages a different outcome with regard to the texture, form, flavour, and overall affect. The skills for working the seed ideas are acquired bit by bit, piece by piece, through training and experience over a long period, as might also happen with how chefs acquire their culinary skills. The tool box of skills acquired and the knowledge of how different methods for working the seed elements should be applied eventually enables experienced musicians to be able to play with the core elements in performance. How this might happen and what method might be used in doing so becomes the creative challenge to the performer—a challenge that includes a sort of spontaneously occurring dance between the fixed elements of a raga and the elements that can, and should, be varied.

### Raga and Rasa

In the realm of Indian aesthetic sensibility, rasa theory can inform and guide ways of thinking, feeling, and achieving what is desirable in a performance. Eight rasas were identified in the *Natyasastra*, the erotic (*sringara*), the comic (*hasya*), pathos (*karuna*), fury (*raudra*), the heroic (*vira*), the frightening (*bhayanka*), the odious (*bibhasta*), and the wondrous (*adbhuta*), to which a further one of *shanta* (peace) was later added. As these were distilled within a dramatic context, not all of these (for example *raudra* and *bhayanka*) are necessarily relevant to a

musical context.

The formalised system of *rasa*, as elucidated in the *Natyasastra* and other scholarly commentaries, extends into a far more extensive field of aesthetic thought and sensibility beyond identifying just these *rasas*, and this is what makes it relevant to a wide range of creative endeavours. The workings of this powerful, multidimensional system lay beyond the limited scope of this discussion, as do considerations of how and to what extent this formal system is explicitly or implicitly engaged with in practice. Nevertheless what can be said is that convention has established that certain melodic configurations have the potential to theoretically evoke various combinations and shades of *rasas* that are useful in guiding and lending emotional flavour to a performance. However, in practice the situation is more complex than this simple depiction. A more realistic portrayal emerges out of discerning a shared sensibility between how the performance of *raga* can be informed by a desired emotional sensibility and how the desire to achieve a particular combination of flavours or taste in cooking can also serve as a corresponding navigation point and guide for a chef. As is the case with cooking, the outcome of the performance of each *raga* can be so different.

One of the things that make *rasa* theory complex is that it can take into account not only the qualities the musician brings to a performance and the emotional flavour of the *raga* they create, but also how these fundamental elements are connected to and interact with the characteristics of the performance space, the sound, and the audience. In other words this aesthetic understanding is concerned not only with the emotional flavour of the music itself, but also with the inner states of the musician, the modes of communication and reception of it by others, and the unified field that all these can collectively give rise to. The metaphor invoked in the *Natyasastra* and the portrayal of the sensual scenario of the shared banquet portrayed earlier are ways of expressing this holistic understanding of the aesthetic experience. The formalised system of thought that is *rasa* theory provides an analytical way of thinking and engaging with ideas of quality, affect, value, and sentiment.

The degree of intensity and potency of *rasa* invoked in performance is dependent on a matrix of interrelated and interdependent performance concerns. The potential to engage with *rasa* can be simultaneously located across a number of levels: in the properties of the three tiers of ingredients and how they are interrelated; in the spontaneity of the choreography between fixed elements and the improvisatory practices that are applied to them; in the dynamics of the interplay between structures and forms and the melodic and rhythmic elements; and in the alchemy of transforming something fixed and static into something dynamic and fresh, or from something raw to cooked. It also characteristically resides in the romance between the *shrutis* and the *swars*. Taken together these few examples can perhaps be considered as starting points for exploring the layers and connections that tie together a *raga* and the affect of *rasa* in performance.

### Conclusion

The goal of this discussion has been to find a new and fruitful vantage point from which to consider *raga*. The idea that *raga* can be usefully conceived as a melodic recipe cannot readily be dismissed as whimsical, given the place that food occupies in the musical imagination and oral narrative of Hindustani music. Such an understanding may appear to sit at odds with more systematised accounts of *raga*. Pedagogical texts such as those compiled by Bhatkhande are driven by technical concerns focused on the quantifiable, that is the fixed material or seed ideas. By contrast to this systematic approach, the idea of *raga* as a melodic recipe resonates within the mode of symbolic thought. Rowell observes that in Indian musical thought, “symbolic thinking—in the form of vivid metaphors, similes and analogies—became a popular means for getting at the essence of things that are either too subtle or too complicated to grasp by ordinary observation or reasoning” (1991:32).

The systematic tends to be written, while the symbolic is more at home in modes of oral transmission. As a consequence symbolic thought can be harder to access because it is embedded in the anecdotes, sensibilities, and sentiments that connect with wider sensibilities and ways of seeing the world that reside in culture. The musicologist Ashok Ranade was of the opinion that “what’s required to play Hindustani music is the sensibility of a Hindustani musician.”<sup>7</sup> Conversely, this perhaps also explains why so many Hindustani musicians are also known to be good cooks.

It is not that either the systematic or symbolic mode of thought is mutually exclusive or even necessarily resistant to the other. Traditional pedagogical practices have long relied on a fertile combination of both systematic and

symbolic modes of thought. Within these practices, the symbolic has played with the systematic in Hindustani music like improvisatory practices play with seed ideas. However, the nature of the relationship between the two changed when the wider effects of modernity came to bear on musical thought in North India in the early twentieth century, and as a consequence symbolic and systematic became a little more distant to each other in matters of musical training. Even so, symbolic modes of thought still provide relevant and useful ways of thinking about raga because they complement and extend the systematic thought of technical musicological explanations. On its own, symbolic thought can also illuminate ways of thinking about the underlying dynamics of improvisatory practices that are otherwise difficult to articulate, thereby offering valuable pedagogical insights into one of the most complex musical practices of Hindustani music. It can also reveal something of the sensibility of traditional methods of musical training according to the *guru shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition), which offers an embodied and multisensory experience of learning by recruiting and relying on modes of expression beyond the systematic. Taken together, the systematic and symbolic provide a more complete portrayal of raga and, just as important, of the significance of rasa in the performance of raga. The two modes generate and are tied together via a series of oppositions that can be folded into more nuanced ways of thinking about raga, namely: systematic—symbolic; cooked—uncooked; written—oral; traditional conventions—individual interpretations; fixed—variable; post-facto—prescriptive; formal—informal; static—dynamic; and so on. These oppositions complement and are useful in explaining each other. They also alert us to the depth and richness of raga and the multiple levels of which it operates as an inventory of melodic elements, a performative process, and an aesthetic outcome. The back and forward dynamic that plays out between these oppositions continues to play a significant role in shaping understandings and engagements with raga in the tradition—in the process, revealing to musicians the creative possibilities it offers.

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### Notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) Apart from the fact that *alu gobi* is a very common dish in North India, the choice of this specific recipe is an entirely arbitrary one, and lots of other types of dishes in North Indian food could be equally relevant to this discussion.

(<sup>2</sup>) It is tempting to extend the analogy further here by suggesting that the rice and roti generally, but not always, serve as a counterpoint in terms of flavour with the dish itself, as they are the constant foundation through which taste and flavour are contrasted. These provide another layer of texture to the dish and are an essential element in the tradition and conventions of cuisine in North India. In the performance of raga, the melodic drone perhaps can be thought of as providing a similar function. It helps in bringing out the *uccharan bheda* by providing at a primary level a constant reference point that supports and guides the intonational shaping of swars through shrutis but also in providing an ongoing reference point on top of which the basic pitch can be served. Its constant background presence also acts as a counterpoint to the emotional flavour of the rag in a way that is evocative of the contribution of rice or roti to an Indian meal.

(<sup>3</sup>) The way that ragas are depicted in these volumes is common to the majority of pedagogical publications on Hindustani music at the time and published since then, even in the resources available online. The same format is used for vocal and instrumental music. Bhatkhande's works are chosen here because they are the most widely available publications and the most consulted. Originally published in Marathi, these volumes have since been translated into other Indian languages such as Hindi, which is the version that is consulted here.

(<sup>4</sup>) The notes here are listed in the sargam (solfege) used in Hindustani music, Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa. The numbers are used here to designate the equivalent pitch degree within this pentatonic scale. Pitches in bold here indicate they belong to the upper octave (*tar saptak*) whilst those in italics belong to the lower octave (*mandra saptak*). All other notes belong to the middle octave (*madhya saptak*).

(<sup>5</sup>) In this particular example, the *chalan* and the *pakad* are essentially the same progression of notes. However a typical and more extensive *chalan* progression for this raga appears here in the melodic movement of the *aroha/avroha* of the first composition.

(<sup>6</sup>) <http://www.parrkar.org/hindustani/kamod/> (accessed 26/10/2013).

(<sup>7</sup>) Personal communication, 2009.

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