



## Music, art, and power in 'Adil Shahi Bijapur, c.1570–1630.



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In 1668/69 in Delhi, a minor Mughal functionary by the name of Kamilkhani wrote a treatise on the ragas of Hindustan. The work was prepared for one of Aurangzeb ‘Alamgir’s favourite officers, Mir ‘Abdul Qadir Diyanat Khan, who spent much of his career as Mughal governor of Aurangabad and the Deccan. Kamilkhani’s reason for writing was this:

ragas I...found myself utterly in the dark as to why the people of Hind have specified a time for every raga at which its performance is most pleasing; for example, the fact that Raga Bhairava should be sung in the morning.... I made searching inquiries of scholars, ustadhs and performers alike, but not one gave a satisfactory answer to this question.... Therefore, I...have spent much time conversing with the singers of raga, the players of instruments, and friends who are connoisseurs of this art; and I have also to a small degree myself learned the practices of singing, composing and instrumental playing. I have thought in depth about...the sciences of astrology and of mathematics; and in this respect the endeavours of previous authors on the sciences of music and astrology, as well as the pronouncements of some of the ascetics and devotees of God, were gifts to this inquirer. The result is this guide, which I have written to explain why the ragas must be sung at their specified times.<sup>1</sup>

Kamilkhani was simply capturing the spirit of his age. The first two decades of the reign of ‘Alamgir (1658–1707) saw an explosion of Persian-language treatises written by Mughal connoisseurs, aimed at getting to the bottom of the fascinating subject of the raga.<sup>2</sup> The authors were obsessed with the relationship between the sonic properties of the raga as a

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framework for composing melodies, and its extramusical powers, embodied in visual and poetical imagery, to awaken specific emotional states in the listener or to change the natural world, if sung at exactly the right time.<sup>3</sup>

The 17th-century theorists were not merely determined to establish each raga’s “potent effect on the listener” when harnessed correctly—“that is to say, why it is that the gentle singing of the beautiful voice causes dusk to fall, or vengeful snakes to be tamed by melancholy harmonies, or deer to faint dead away from listening to heart-stealing melodies.”<sup>4</sup> They were also terrified of the consequences of getting it wrong. Qazi Hasan, writing in Daulatabad in 1664, took musicians of his day to task in the strongest terms for their

ever be followed by its own relations, i.e. its own raginis. The treatises state that if a raga is...followed by the wife of another raga, the singer forces the two to commit adultery! However, today's singers do not perform music as it is [set out] in the treatises. Every day they pay lip service to the music of the [great] musicians of the past.... But today's singers don't know the [proper] times of the ragas and raginis at all! [...For example,] Sarang is a ragini of Raga Megh, whose time is [specified] as night. But Sarang is now sung at sunset.... This is an error.... Many other ragas are now sung in a topsy-turvy fashion and their correct times are no longer known.

Because of this, God's blessings have fled [the perpetrators'] households.<sup>5</sup>

These Mughal writers were clearly baffled by an apparent disconnect between what they heard and experienced when great musicians performed the ragas in musical assemblies, and the infinitely variable systems of six ragas and multiple raginis they saw in Ragamala paintings and read about in music theory and Ragamala poetry—in other words, between the sounded and visualized forms of the raga.<sup>6</sup>

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What was it—what is it still—that has made the raga such a compelling object of contemplation, and at the same time so mysterious in the workings of its multifaceted power? For both powerful and elusive it undoubtedly is. The Ragamala—that perfectly proportioned garland of 36 ragas and raginis dressed as deities, joginis, nayakas and nayikas—has been suffused not just with supernatural but with sovereign power since its first flowering in the 14th to 16th centuries.<sup>7</sup> For reasons that will become clear below, from very early on, exquisite Ragamala paintings and poetry, and major works of musicology containing Ragamala chapters were used to consecrate the power of new potentates, large and small (figures 1–3)—from the Mughal emperors Akbar and 'Alamgir to Shah 'Alam II, from Asaf-ud-Daula of Avadh to Sikander Jah of Hyderabad, from the Maratha general Raja Rao Rambha to the Bengali banker Jagat Seth, all the way down to the Empress of India, Queen

on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee in 1887.<sup>8</sup>

A hundred years after this rash of Mughal raga theory in ‘Alamgir’s reign, those Europeans who arrived in India to take over what had recently been Mughal territory found the intense and complex power of the raga similarly compelling—and equally baffling. What famous scholars and collectors like William Jones and Richard Johnson tried—and failed—to do was crack the code of correlations between (1) Ragamala paintings and poetical descriptions; (2) the raga as a purely sonic entity; (3) the time theory of the raga; and (4) each raga’s emotional power (see figure 12).<sup>9</sup> And despite scholars having expended a great deal of energy on the question in the centuries since, the relationship between Ragamala paintings and their melodic inspiration remains unclear.<sup>10</sup>

This is because there *is* no one-to-one correlation between brushstroke and glissando, pigment and note; between the sonic and iconic forms of the raga. From the beginning, Ragamala paintings were often framed with verses evoking the raga icons, but generally they





































