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Melody and/or Prosody: The Double History of *Rāga* in Odisha

Before printing became widespread in Odisha (a region of eastern India), Odia-language poetic compositions were inscribed on palm-leaf manuscripts. At the beginning of most compositions, be they individual songs or sections (*chāndas*) of long-form poetic works (*kāvya*s), one usually finds written the name of a *rāga*.¹ A modern reader at least passingly familiar with music in India might assume that this indicated the type of melody in which the composition should be performed. If so they might be surprised to read the opinion of the eminent scholar of Odia literature, Gaurīkumāra Brahmā. He wrote in 1967:

The *rāgas* of Oṛiā *chānda* literature [= premodern Odia *kāvya* poetry] should not be understood according to the descriptions of *rāgas* in the *saṅgīta-śāstras* [= Sanskrit music theory treatises]. Moreover, the word “*rāga*” has been used in the common sense of “*ḅṛtta*” [meter containing a fixed number of syllables] in Saṁskṛta. Oṛiā poets [are] particularly indebted to the Saṁskṛta *saṅgīta-śāstras*. Taking the names of *rāgas* and *rāgiṇīs* from those, they have given [them] to Oṛiā *chandas* [meters]. (1967: 15)

When I first read this statement I found it to be rather perplexing, not least because, as a student of Indian music, I had always been taught to understand *rāga* as a melodic system. This paper has developed out of my attempts to make sense of Brahmā’s statement and the context in which it was made. Although Brahmā would later revise his understanding of *rāga*, I believe he was in the above statement partly correct. Indeed, his peculiar explanation of *rāga*

¹ This practice is retained in modern printed editions.

in Odia literature points to a history of musical and poetic thought that has, apparently, yet to be told.

Brahmā was by no means alone in his understanding of *rāga*. At the time of Brahmā's writing there were in fact two prevalent ways of understanding the term “*rāga*”: (1) according to the tradition of the *saṅgīta-śāstras*, as a system of melody; or (2) as a system of prosody (in the sense of versification), the history of which notion is rather more mysterious. Perhaps nothing encapsulates the coexistence of these two streams so nicely as a famous bilingual encyclopedic dictionary published in the 1930s. Examining terms related to melody and meter we find:

Term	Odia Definition	English Definition
Bāṇī	4. The <i>ḅṛtta</i> or <i>rāga</i> [used in] singing a song.	4. Air of a song.
Bṛtta	3. <i>Chandaḥ</i> ; <i>chānda</i>	3. The tune of a poem.
Chanda	1. <i>Rāgiṇī</i> ; <i>chānda</i>	1. Metre; musical air
Chandas	3. The <i>rāga</i> or <i>rāgiṇī</i> of verse [<i>padya</i>].	3. Poetical air or measure; metre; cadence.
Chānda	1. The <i>rāgiṇī</i> of verse. 2. The <i>rāga</i> of song. 3. Verse or song set in a <i>rāgiṇī</i> .	1. Metre of a poem. 2. Musical air. 3. Poem composed in a particular metre.
Rāga	24. The types of pitches [<i>swara</i>] or tones [<i>dhwani</i>] of music (which pitches or tones please the listener's mind).	24. A mode or tune in music.

Remarkably, all the terms refer to each other and most are translated as *both* meter and melody (“air,” “tune”). The “*rāga*” entry in fact continues on for several pages beyond the definition given here, first summarizing explanations found in the *saṅgīta-śāstras*, then outlining the verse-forms of *rāgas* as found in an early-twentieth-century Odia-language manual on rhetoric (i.e., K. Dāśa 1929).

The association of *rāga* with meter is already clearly in evidence in the late nineteenth century. The British colonial administrator and scholar John Beames, in an 1872 essay on a famous Odia *kāvya*, described the meter of the first canto as “Rāg Gujari.” This consists, according to him, of two lines of thirteen syllables, with caesuras after the eighth and thirteenth syllables. In the first colonial-era, Odia-language writings on poetics that followed at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, some thirty or so *rāgas* would be formally defined in terms of syllable quantities and caesura patterns (see, e.g., K. Dāśa [1929] 1991: 174–188; Rājaguru 1964: 1–44).

The prosodic concept of *rāga* was widespread in literary scholarship at this time and was used to interpret premodern writings. When Kuḷamaṇi Dāśa wrote in 1928 of the Odia *Bhāgabata* of the late fifteenth century that, although the author had relied on Gujjarī *rāga*, some later interpolations are seen in Maṅgaḷa Gujjarī and Baṅgaḷāśrī *rāgas* (K. Dāśa [1928] 1962: 43), it is clear he is speaking of meter. The notion of *rāga*-as-meter influenced editing choices in preparing modern editions. For example, the 1972 editor of a certain eighteenth century work explained in a footnote that the original manuscript indicated *rāga* Cokhi for its third section. However, since Cokhi (in the understanding of the editor) referred to a meter of four lines with twenty-nine, twenty-nine, nine, and thirteen syllables respectively, and the actual meter used contained two lines of fourteen syllables each, the editor “corrected” the *rāga* indication to Basanta (Rautarāya 1972: 46n55).

Rāga-as-meter was also used in the composition of new poetry. A clear example of this comes from prolific early-twentieth-century writer Cintāmaṇi Mahānti. His 1907 poem on the names of Viṣṇu is written in *rāga* Laghu Bhūpāḷa. At the beginning of the poem he indicates the caesura pattern of the *rāga* (6 + 6 + 6 + 4) and demonstrates this throughout the poem with the strategic use of whitespace (C. Mahānti 1937: 481).

Certain questions arise, however, regarding the use of *rāga* names for poetic meters. Why would poets, or at least the scribes who notated their works, go to the trouble of indicating the meter at the beginning of a poem? There may be some justification for this in that, because of the space restrictions of palm-leaf manuscripts, individual lines of a verse are not separated as they are in modern editions; thus the meter is not always immediately identifiable (this would matter for purposes of recitation). But even if this were the case, why use one set of names to refer to two rather different kinds of phenomena?²

Another serious question can be raised with regard to the consistency of *rāga*-name usage. In my in-depth study of a famous early-nineteenth-century Odia song cycle,³ I have compared numerous palm-leaf-manuscripts and modern-printed editions of the work and found that no edition agrees entirely with any other in terms of *rāga* names. I have obtained a similar result from a less systematic comparison of editions of the *kāvya*s and songs of other important premodern writers. If *rāgas* really were names for meters (rather than melodies) in the premodern period, one might expect to find a high degree of similarity among the *rāgas* found in different editions of a given work—given that the actual verse meters remain invariable between editions.

Now later in his book Brahmā argues that *rāgas* do not refer *only* to meters, but rather to the way they are recited (1967: 17–20). In his view different *rāgas* indicate different caesura patterns within a particular syllable structure, that is, where the reciter should pause within the poetic line. Again the diversity of *rāga* indications provides a problem, as there simply are not very many caesura patterns a reciter could consistently follow throughout a given poem such that all the lines still make sense. And if Brahmā explains here why more than one *rāga*

² One possibility, though there is as yet no direct evidence to support this, is that an analogy was perceived between the creation of music and the creation of poetry. This may have supported the use of identical terminology, for in each case *rāga* provided a framework (a set of basic rules) for the creation of something new.

³ That is, Kabisūrīya Baḷadeba Ratha's *Kiśoracandrānanda Campū*.

might be indicated for the same verse-type, the reverse remains unexplained: that is, why different verse-types may be associated with the same *rāga* (e.g., what do nine-syllable *rāga* Gujjarī and thirteen-syllable *rāga* Gujjarī, as this *rāga* is variously defined, have in common?).

There is also evidence that premodern “poetry” was typically performed in a *musical* way, making the melodic associations of *rāga* hard to escape. Although John Beames understood *rāga* only in terms of prosody, he also understood Odia poetry as *sung* literature. Writing almost a century before Brahmā, at the very beginning of what I would call Odisha’s period of colonial modernity, he remarked of the *Rasakalloḷa*:

The metres are very light and graceful, and the poem was intended, as most of these poems are, to be sung. Indeed the Pandits strongly object to our English habit of reading poetry, and affirm that the full beauty of the metres cannot be appreciated unless they are sung, i.e. chanted through the nose in a dolorous minor key. To our ears this lugubrious whining, with the harsh voices which all Oriyas unfortunately possess, varied by an insane howl and accompanied by the dulcet tom-tom and the harmonious penny-whistle of the country, is not on the whole pleasing or enjoyable. (1872: 216)

Beames distinguishes meter and melody here, associating *rāga* solely with the former; indeed, he manifests little appreciation for or understanding of Odia melody. Yet his description is instructive for us because of his mention of musical instruments—probably a *mṛdaṅgam/pakhāwaj*-type drum and flute—and musical vocalization. I interpret “insane howl” to be a reference to the melismatic vocalizations that, at least in performances of the twentieth century and later, are often performed at the ends of verses or major poetic phrases during a sung performance.

It is tempting to see Beames’s discussion as based on a colonial confusion over native terminology, a confusion that in turn generated the conflicting views of *rāga* perceivable in later discourse. As we shall see, colonial epistemology played a role here, but the prosodic notion of *rāga* actually has deeper roots in Odia culture. An important clue is found in the work

of the eighteenth-century poet, scholar, and theologian Sadānanda Kabisūrīya Brahmā. The eighteenth century saw a new focus on Odia-language writings in poetics and music theory (previously almost all such works were composed in Sanskrit), and Sadānanda left behind at least two works in this domain. Manuscripts of one, known as *Sanḡīta Sadānanda*, no longer appear to be available, but according to a description left by one scholar (B. Ratha 1982: 63–4), it provides a summary of the Sanskrit *sanḡīta-śāstras* known at the time. That is, it treats *rāga* in the widely-known Sanskrit manner as a melodic system with associated poetic imagery and proper singing times.

The second text, *Bālābodhinī* (Instruction for the Child), fortunately is still available in palm-leaf manuscript form.⁴ The text is pedagogical, as Sadānanda explains at the outset:

For introducing *rāga*,
 Causing discernment to melt into the mind,
 [From] verse to verse in *rāgas*,
 Gradually the syllables will increase.⁵

Each verse of the following text describes a different *rāga* in terms of its metrical properties, while also demonstrating those properties using Vaiṣṇavite imagery (in this case, Kṛṣṇa-worship). For example:

rāga mukhāri dasākṣara /
kṛṣṇa kahanti madhura swara /
mū kālīā ati asundara /
mote rasu bandhu ki bicāra //

(*Rāga Mukhārī* has ten syllables:
 Kṛṣṇa says in sweet tones,

⁴ Two versions of the text are available at the Odisha State Museum: OL/667, a palm-leaf manuscript, and CY/436, a hand-written paper manuscript. As the manuscripts are short, but inconsistently numbered, I have not given verse numbers in the quotations.

⁵ *rāga cihnāibā pāi / bicāra mane drabāi /*
padaku pada rāgare / krame baṛhiba akṣare //

I have a very ugly black complexion,
Is there judgment, friend, in loving me?⁶)

Each of the three lines beneath the *rāga* name contains ten syllables. The verses continue like this with increasing length and complexity.

It is unclear how this text would have been used. No elements of melody are mentioned, but one wonders whether the verses might have been sung to the *rāgas* being described metrically. Aside from two paragraphs devoted to it by Sadānanda's sole modern biographer, Banamāli Ratha (1982: 64–5), I have not seen or heard this text (or any similar text) discussed or mentioned elsewhere. Ratha suggests that, as its name would indicate, the text was used to instruct children in the rules of *rāga*, here apparently meaning versification. The verses, in other words, may have provided a simple way for children to grasp the rules of Odia meter.

As is clear from the description of Sadānanda's *Saṅgīta Sadānanda* and occasional depictions of musical performance in his literary works, Sadānanda was certainly acquainted with the concept of *rāga* as a melodic entity. For example, a scene from his *Mohana Kālpātā*:

The doe-eyed one plays the *bīṇā*,
[Her] tired companion gently indicating the *tāḷa*.
The enchanting tones, *sā-ri-ga-ma pa-dha-ni-sā* [= Indian solfège syllables],
Their reverse, *sā-ni-dha pa-ma ga-ri-sā*.
Doing an affectionate *ālāpa* [= improvisation] [in] Gujjarī, she,
Immersed in thought, has used *tā nā nā nā ri* [= vocables used in improvisation].
[She] sang the story of Śrīrāma and Jānakī,
When they saw each other for the first time.⁷

⁶ That is, loving Kṛṣṇa is beyond judgment.

⁷ *bīṣālanayanā bīṇābādana kari /*
parimalā āḷi āḷpa tāḷaku sūcai ye //
sā-ri-ga-ma pa-dha-ni-sā swara manohara /
sā-ni-dha pa-ma ga-ri-sā pratiloma tāra ye //
premaśīlā āḷapa se karai gujjarī /

Here we have *rāga* Gujjarī as music.⁸ So what are we to make of the dual senses of *rāga* apparent in his works? It is possible, given what we know of *Bālabodhinī*, that the prosodic concept of *rāga* was a pedagogical convention of the time, rather than a more widespread normative concept. But why should *rāga* names be used to refer to prosodic entities? And are these purely prosodic entities or do they include melodic content as well?

One clue in all this may be found in the fact that Sadānanda discusses not only *rāgas* in *Bālabodhinī* but also what are called *bāṇīs* (or “*vāṇīs*”). In common practice a “*bāṇī*” represented a stereotyped melody, mostly deriving from, or at least being associated with, a popular composition; one could “recycle” the melody of a previous composition, setting new words to it. In written form the new composition would begin with the instruction, for instance, “*āṣārha śūkla bāṇīre gāiba*” (“shall be sung with *Āṣārha Śūkla bāṇī*”). In other words, a *bāṇī* was a pre-given melodic-prosodic entity to which one only needed to set new words of the appropriate syllable structure. In his discussion of *bāṇī*, Gaurīkumāra Brahmā even quotes approvingly Bināyaka Mīśra, who notes the pitch content of *bāṇī*: “Where a well-known composition’s name is mentioned for singing another composition in a melody [*saṅgītara swara*] combined with *tāḷa* and *laya*, the word *bāṇī* is used” (quoted in Brahmā 1967: 24).

It is possible that certain *rāgas* also began to assume a stereotyped melodic-prosodic form; and it is possible that these stereotyped or conventionalized forms, stripped of their melodic aspects, were what Sadānanda was explaining in his text. On the other hand, it is also easy to imagine the continued, orally-transmitted presence of melody to aid the student in the memorization and later deployment of these poetic meters.

tā nā nā nā ri ri mīḷi achi ghara dhari ye //

gāyana kale śrīrāma-jānakī carita /

prathamābalokanare se beni yemanta ye // (quoted in S. Dāśa 1966: 417–18)

⁸ *Bālabodhinī* does not mention Gujjarī per se, though it does define Maṅgaḷa Gujjarī.

If my hypothesis about Sadānanda’s work is correct, that certain *rāgas* had assumed a conventionalized application to poetry, the question remains as to why for so many scholars *rāga* took on a purely prosodic association by the early twentieth century. I have found no definite explanation for this, except that many scholars were simply unacquainted with traditional music training. The British of the nineteenth century held a strong belief in the potential of literature—whether English or Indian—for moral education (see Schwartz 2000); on the other hand, at least in India, they showed no great interest in music education. Indeed, many Odias who passed through English-style institutions, by the early twentieth century, maintained a certain suspicion toward musical performance because of its association with “immoral” behavior such as prostitution (see P. Mohapatra 1997: 148–9). Musical training did not even begin to enter modern educational institutions in the region until the 1930s.⁹ So it is not surprising if many Odia intellectuals were relatively ignorant of Indian music theory.

This was not true of everyone, of course. There were those who had chosen to study music in the traditional manner, even as they received a modern education in other subjects. Publications on music, though few and far between, also began to appear. For example, a major publication from 1929, citing various Sanskrit *saṅgīta-sāstras*, defined *rāga* in unambiguously musical terms, even giving musical notations for a number of premodern poetic compositions (Sāmanta 1929).

Eventually these two concepts of *rāga* would come into conflict. The poet-dramatist-musician-scholar Kālīcaraṇa Paṭṭanāyaka (1897–1978) was among those who studied traditional music even while attending Western-style schools. Since the late 1940s he had been promoting what he referred to as “Odissi music”—claimed as a regional style of classical music on par with, yet distinct from, the more widely practiced Hindustani and Karnatic styles (see

⁹ Even today, as far as I am aware, no general education school in Odisha holds music classes; if one wants to learn Indian music, one enrolls in a specialized school or finds a private teacher.

Dennen 2013). He also during this period had done much work in uncovering and studying *saṅgīta-śāstra* manuscripts. In his writings he did not shy away from attacking those whose views conflicted with his project. Kāḷīcaraṇa, in the tradition of Orientalist scholarship on Indian music (see Subramanian 2006: 56–65), saw adherence to the *saṅgīta-śāstras* as the true foundation for a classical music; the notion of *rāga* as something bound, partially or wholly, to poetic form did not jibe with the more abstract view found in these texts. In reference to writers like Brahmā, he wrote,

Rāga-rāgiṇī or the play of tones [*swara-vihāra*] cannot be confined by the bond of syllables [= poetic meter]. Therefore, it is absolutely ridiculous to say that a certain *rāga* is furnished with a certain number of syllables. This is a very deadly proclamation on behalf of Oṛiśī music.

It is very sad that some writers, ignorant of music, have published books describing the “*yati*-method in *chānda*” [= caesura patterns used in reciting verse]. The prevalence of those books throws mud in the face of our musical art [*saṅgīta-kaḷā*]. (1968: 19)

He goes on to cite various offending books, beginning in the late nineteenth century and ending with Brahmā’s published the year before (1968: 20).

Kāḷīcaraṇa’s rhetoric had an effect. Brahmā’s 1975 study of the early-eighteenth-century poet Upendra Bhañja features a striking about-face. Gone are descriptions of the syllable structure of *rāgas*, replaced with concepts and terminology drawn from the Sanskrit *saṅgīta-śāstras* (e.g., “*adhrubā-pāñcālī*” for the form of Odia *chānda* compositions [1975: 95]).

Although he does not explicitly cite Kāḷīcaraṇa, the same rhetoric of Odia cultural exceptionalism that pervades the latter’s works is there,¹⁰ as are extensive quotations from the

¹⁰ K. Paṭṭanāyaka: “*Chānda* ... [is] Oṛiśā’s absolute distinction”; “in all of India there was nothing similar to our *chānda* compositions” (1968: 14, 19). Brahmā: “As *chānda* literature [is] Oṛiśā’s distinction, as Oṛiśā’s *kābyas* [are], on the one hand, verse and, on the other hand, full of music, that is not at all [the case] in India’s other literatures” (1975: 94).

writing of Kālīcaraṇa's colleague, Śyāmasundara Dhīra (whose Sanskrit-style treatise on the Odishan style of music was published ten years prior [Dhīra 1964]) (see Brahmā 1975: 95–6).

And yet, as I mentioned at the beginning, Brahmā was not entirely wrong the first time. I think Kālīcaraṇa and later Brahmā made a mistake in thinking *rāga* was *either* prosodic or melodic. For eighteenth century poets like Sadānanda it apparently could be both. Over the next two centuries, for some, colonial modernity would obscure traditional music; for others, the spell cast by Sanskrit theory and ideas of classicism would obscure vernacular methods of understanding and transmitting musico-poetic knowledge. Thus the terminological confusion of the twentieth century. At present we can only imagine the interplay of these two concepts of *rāga* in earlier ages; it remains to be seen whether the situation in Odisha is unique, or whether relevant histories in other parts of India can provide further illumination.

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