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A Comprehensive Analysis of Sarasvatī Kṛtis by Prof. R. Visweswaran

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1. Introduction

“Ambitamē nadītamē dēvi tamē Sarasvatī
Apraśatā iva smasi praśastimamba naskṛdhi”

O Dēvī Sarasvatī! The greatest among the Mothers, the most divine among the Goddesses, Grace us with the highest knowledge. May your blessings of wisdom confer the supreme accolades. **(Ṛgvēda 102)**

The Ṛgvēda makes at least seventy references to the river Sarasvatī. The Sapta Sindhu is mentioned in the Vēdas, especially the River Sarasvatī, which indicates that this divine river of knowledge occupied an unequalled place in the ancient civilisation of India. The Sapta Sindhu was referred to as ‘Hapta Hendu’ by the Persians. **(Grenet 34)** The people of this region were called Sapta Saindhavas. In the nadi stuti sūkta of Ṛgvēda, we find the following 10 rivers: Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Sarasvatī, Sutudri, Paruśni, Asikni, Marudvrdha, Vitasta, Arjikiya, Susoma. The Shutudri was Sutlej, Paruśni was Ravi, Asikni was Chenab and Vitasta was Jhelum. The 5 rivers, Sutudri, Paruśni, Asikni, Vitasta, and Vipasa, were all tributaries of the Sindhu River. Together with Saraswati and Sindhu, these 5 rivers constituted the Sapta Sindhu. **(Which Were the 7 Rivers)** Though the river Sarasvatī has been a myth for many, satellite imagery analysed by Yash Pal and others clearly shows that a river system with a very wide basin right up to the Rann of Kutch did exist. In his essay ‘Saraswati and Her Consorts’ from ‘On the Veda’, Sri Aurobindo says, “The psychological significance of Sarasvatī carries with it a psychological significance of the whole symbol of Vedic waters”. **(Aurobindo 107)**

With due course of time, Sarasvatī is worshipped as the river of consciousness and enlightenment whose rays dispel the darkness of ignorance. The current case study deals with the compositions on Goddess Sarasvatī composed by Saṅgīta Chūḍāmaṇi Prof. R. Visweswaran. In the contemporary parlance, Goddess Sarasvatī, who once existed as a river and nourished the human civilisation, has now remained immortal in the hearts of millions of artists, nourishing the belief in absolute truth. In this case study, an in-depth analysis of the Sarasvatī stutis composed by Prof. R. Visweswaran is conducted to bring forth the intricacies of rāgas and talas employed along with their lyrical beauty. The group kṛtis on Goddess Sarasvatī is a set of 11 kṛtis, composed in rāgas ranging from mēla, audava, vakra, rakti and Hindustānī rāga. The compositions are beautifully woven with apt rāga mudras, svarākśaras, chitte svaras, madhyamakāla sāhityas and scholarly usage of Saṁskṛta and Telugu languages. A detailed description of the kṛtis and their investigation in order to understand the musical vitality is undertaken in the present study. The above-mentioned kṛtis on Goddess Sarasvatī

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draw us back to the ancient period in Indian scriptures with their special mention of the following usage of Sanskrit lyrics. A few kṛtis have been taken for illustration in the current case study

2. Literature Review

The scholarly foundation for Sarasvatī studies rests primarily on Dr. K.S. Narayana Charya's *Veda Samskr̥tiya Parichaya*, which establishes the Vedic understanding of Sarasvatī's significance in ancient Indian civilisation (Narayana Charya 93-94, 482-490). Sri Aurobindo's *On the Veda* provides a crucial interpretation of Sarasvatī's "psychological significance of the whole symbol of Vedic waters," offering a hermeneutical framework for understanding devotional compositions (**Aurobindo 107**).

In Carnatic musicology, Dr. S. Bhagyalekshmy's *Rāgas in Carnatic Music* offers systematic rāga classification essential for analysing contemporary devotional compositions. Prof. R. Visweswaran's *Vaggeya Vishweshwari* serves as primary source material, documenting his compositional methodology and the philosophical foundations of his Sarasvatī compositions, including his account of rāga innovations like Antara Kaiśikī (**Visweswaran 379, 395**).

Contemporary interdisciplinary research, including Tara Rajendran's study of anatomical analogies between the human body and Sarasvatī Vīṇa, demonstrates expanding analytical approaches to traditional symbolic understanding. These works collectively establish the theoretical foundation for examining how modern composers continue the ancient tradition of honouring Sarasvatī through musical composition.

3. Methodology

This study employs systematic musicological analysis to examine eleven Sarasvatī kṛtis composed by Prof. R. Visweswaran. The methodology integrates traditional Carnatic music analytical techniques with textual analysis to understand both musical craftsmanship and devotional content.

3.1 Analytical Framework

The research examines each composition across three dimensions: **musical structure** (rāga analysis, tāḷa employment, and melodic architecture including rāga mudrās, svarākṣarās, and chīṭṭe svarās), **textual analysis** (Sanskrit and Telugu lyrical content, literary devices, and philosophical concepts), and **cultural contextualization** (connections to Vedic traditions and contemporary practice).

3.2 Selection and Scope

The study focuses on representative compositions from Prof. Visweswaran's complete eleven-kṛti cycle, selecting works that demonstrate diverse rāga treatments (mēḷa, auḍava, vakra, rakti, and Hindustānī classifications) and varied textual approaches. This selective analysis allows detailed examination while maintaining a comprehensive understanding of the compositional cycle's artistic unity.

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4. Objectives

- To critically examine the musical architecture and stylistic nuances embedded in the Sarasvatī kṛtis composed by Prof. R. Visweswaran
- To undertake a rigorous textual analysis of Vedic and post-Vedic scriptures that invoke or conceptualise Goddess Sarasvatī

5. Musical and Lyrical Analysis of select kṛtis

The kṛtis “Svadhāmēkrita” and “Jagadrakṣiṇi” in rāgas Hindōḷa and Amṛtavaraṣiṇī, respectively, speak of Vīṇa held by the Divine mother. In the Hindōḷa kṛti, the line “Sarasa kacchapi vinādi nādamśuke” speaks of the kacchapi vīṇa that is in the shape of a tortoise. In the ancient sculptures of Indian tradition, such a portrayal of the vīṇa was very much prevalent. The Amaravathi school of sculpture showcases similar artwork. (Visweswaran 395) Vīṇa is considered to be the divine instrument. The Vīṇa held by Goddess Sarasvatī is called Kacchapi. The mention of kacchapi Vīṇa is seen in Lalitā sahasranāma in the line “Nija sallāpa mādhyura vinirbharsita Kacchapi”. The cosmic vāk in Goddess Lalitā Paramēśvari overpowered the divine sound of Kacchapi held by Goddess Sarasvatī. There is an instance which explains the above Saṁskṛta verse, wherein Goddess Sarasvatī felt it appropriate to remain silent without playing the kacchapi Vīṇa in order to contemplate on Goddess Lalitā’s ethereal voice. The following line in the kṛti Jagadrakṣiṇi “Vipaṅci vādana samaye tvannakha kiraṇa nindita” (the lustre of the finger nails of the Goddess that play the Vipaṅci vīṇa over shadows the rays of the Sun) in the rāga Amṛtavaraṣiṇī, unveils the composer’s subtle experiences with the Divine mother and his admiration for the Divine just as a child adores its mother. The mention of Vipaṅci Vīṇa is also mentioned in the Soundarya Lahari of Jagadguru Shankaracharya in the verse, “Vipaṅcyā gāyantyā Vividham apadanam paśupate”. (**Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, Shloka 66**) In this kṛti, the composer articulates that the Vīṇa held by Goddess Sarasvatī is a symbolic representation of Advaita Philosophy. This thought has been earlier supported by an Advaita follower. Yedatore Subramanya Sharma. The two Kannada books, namely ‘Sandhyā vandanīya tatvārtha’ and ‘Vēda Prakāśike’, authored by Yedatore Subramanya Sharma, published in 1936, seem to be one of the earliest literary works which give an impressive description of Vīṇa and its resemblance to the human body. The anatomical similarity between the whole spine sagittal Computerised Tomography (CT) image and the sagittal view of Sarasvatī Vīṇa is enigmatical. (**Rajendran**) It is thought-provoking, especially with the 24 human presacral vertebrae size and the inter-fret distance towards the dragon head of the Vīṇa. There is something peculiar about the 24 frets of Sarasvatī Vīṇa. The inter-fret distance increases towards the dragon's head. There exists a curve at both the sacrococcyx and the dragonhead of the instrument. The Vīṇa strings that run parallel over the fretboard are close to how the spinal cord is enclosed within the vertebral column. This might be a fascinating avenue to explore in the future. (**Rajendran**) This is definitely a study to be undertaken for further clarity on the subject. The Vīṇa serves as a reminder to tune one’s heart and mind to live in harmony with others in the world.

Another interesting feature of the Hindōḷa kṛti ‘Svadhāmīkṛta’ is its employment of Atīta graha to the entire kṛti, the pattern of tala commencement after a few notes of music. The kṛti also speaks of the Sārasvata Tradition. This tradition is believed to have been followed by people who inhabited the northwestern part of India, the region between the Sarasvatī River and the Driśadvati River, thousands of years ago. There are a number of references given

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about the Sārasvat clan in works like Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, Sahyadri Kānda of Skanda Purāṇa and in the great epic Mahābhārata. The version given in the Mahābhārata emphasises how the Sārasvat community, consisting of 60000 people, learnt Vēdas from one surviving Vedic preceptor of that period, Maharṣi Saraswat (Son of Maharṣi Dadhīci). This probably gave rise to the Sārasvat Tradition or the Vedic Tradition on the banks of the River Sarasvatī, who actually groomed Sarasvat Maharṣi. **(Our History)** The last line of the caraṇa refers to the slaying of the demon Dhūmralōcana. This makes one recall the verses of Lalitā Sahasranāma and Durga saptaśati from Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa and Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, respectively.

The Kṛti “Namōstute Sarasvatī samasta vāgadhīśvari” in rāga vāgadhīśvari is the first one according to the composer in the bunch of these kṛtis. The word vāgadhīśvari serves as the rāga mudra, and it is also suggestive of the higher faculties of speech, the Para, Paśyanti, Madhyama and Vaikhari. The composer describes her as samasta vāgadhīśvari – the one who is the cause of the speech, in the entire world. The para, paśyanti, madhyama and vaikhari are the four sequential faculties of vāk through which we communicate. Vaikhari is the verbally expressed thought through the mouth. For example, the daily spoken language. This resides in the mouth. Madhyama is the speech that comes after considerable thought and action done wisely. This resides in the mind and intellect. The language spoken from the heart is the paśyanti. This resides in the heart. The ancient sages, through their yogic powers, used to communicate through the heart. Para is the highest and the supreme. It is the highest eternal sound. This can be heard or realised only in the state of ‘no mind’. This originates in the first chakra of the human body, the mūlādhāra cakra. In the normal course of our daily lives, we experience only the vaikhari. **(Svododa)** The other three are hidden inside our body, and it is experienced by only self-realised souls. The ancient sages who formulated the divine hymns of Ṛgvēda attained this supernatural power of higher faculties of speech on the banks of the river Sarasvatī. That justifies why Indians look up to Goddess Sarasvatī as a river of knowledge.

The viḷamba kāla kṛti in rāga Kīravāṇi ‘Kīravāṇi Gīrvāṇi’ describes Goddess Sarasvatī as the bestower of non-dualistic knowledge to sincere spiritual seekers. “Paramadvaita tatva jnana prade”, which means she, who is the parabrahma svarūpiṇi, confers on her true devotees the knowledge of “Tat tvam asi”- *Thou art that*. This is the slogan word of Chāṇḍōgyopaniṣad of Sāmavēda, the Absolute truth preached by Uddālaka to his son Svētakētu. ‘*That*’ refers to Brahman, and ‘*Thou*’ refers to each individual soul. The composer has very beautifully fashioned this kṛti in a viḷamba gati, the profoundness of which subtly suggests how difficult it is to understand the absolute truth. It has to be assimilated by true seekers in an unhurried and tolerant manner (viḷamba gati). The structure of the composition gives ample scope for an artist of high calibre to perceive it into a Pallavi of the Rāgam Tānam Pallavi genre, the epitome of Manōdharma Sangīta in Karnāṭaka Classical Music.

The kṛti in rāga Antara Kaiśikī “Sarasvatīm Aham āśrayāmi” can be described as a fine fabric embroidered with meaningful usage of rāgamudra and yati. The Rāga Antara Kaiśikī is a Svarāntara rāgaḥ with 4 svaras in the ascent and descent of its scale. Along with the prakṛti svara sa and pa, it has antara gāndhāra and Kaiśikī nisāda employed to rightly suit the nomenclature “Antara Kaiśikī”. The rāga mudra appears in the first line of the Anupallavi as “Bharatīm tām hṛdayāntara Kaiśikī prachōdinim”. It explains that Goddess Sarasvatī is the inspiration behind our expression of the heart. A stellar representation of Śrōtōvāha yati can

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be observed in the Pallavi section of the kṛti; the sahitya syllabus is arranged in such a manner that it resembles the flow of a river.

Sarasvatīm aham āśrayāmi vidyāpradām
Sarasvatīm aham āśrayāmi Kavītā vidyāpradām
Sarasvatīm aham āśrayāmi jñāna smṛti Pratibhā Kavītā vidyāpradām

The intriguing feature is whether the choice of Śrōtōvāha is coincidental or intentional by the composer! Śrōtōvāha suggests the flow of the river, and in this context, Goddess Sarasvatī is equated with the Sarasvatī River of Rig Vedic civilisation. The phrase Bhārata jñāna in the second line of Anupallavi suggests both the Sanātana Dharma of India and also Bhāva, Rāga, Tala (Bha, Ra, Ta), which is the heart of Indian music and dance. The composer also mentions in his work “Vaggeya Vishweshwari ” that this Svarāntara rāgaḥ(4 svaras) – Antara Kaiśikī was the first rāga that was discovered by him during the 1950s. The composition of the above kṛti was in the 1970s, and later during the 1980s, Dr. Balamurali Krishna was credited as the discoverer of Rāga Mahati, which bore exactly the scale as of Antara Kaiśikī. **(Visweswaran 379)** He expresses how certain research-oriented explorations can be episodes of recurrence by different persons periodically!

The kṛti in the rāga Rasāli is another exclusive pearl in the garland of Sarasvatī kṛtis. The main characteristic feature that draws the attention of the listener to the kṛti is its usage of the word Bhārati. The composer has drawn inspiration from the Tyāgaraja kṛti ‘Aparadhamulanōrva’, which is probably the only known composition in this rāga. In order to delve into the depths of this rāga, a meticulous attempt has been made with the finest intricacies in the approach to rāga and also the Rhetorics. The composer has employed the yamaka alaṅkāra, an interesting figure of speech wherein a particular word is used with more than one meaning in different contexts.

P|| Bhāratīm Gāna Bhāratīm ||
AP || Bhāratīm karadhṛta pustakākṣa mālā Bhā ra tim ||

The word Bhārati is the Saṁskṛta name for one of the four styles of dramatic performance. The theatrical presentation, which is characterised by a preponderating use of speech (in Skt..) and in which male characters are exclusively to be employed, is said to be in the *Verbal Style*. **(Bharata Muni 401)** This is applicable mainly in the evocation of the Pathetic and the Marvellous Sentiments. In the present context, the first **Bhāratīm** refers to Goddess Sarasvatī, the second **Gāna Bhāratīm** refers to one who is proficient in music, the third **Prabhārati** refers to the delight(rati) experienced by Goddess seeing her own lusturous finger nails (**nakha prabha**) while playing the Vīṇa. The fourth Bhaa (shine brightly)– ra – ti (happy) means the reflection of her sparkling nails is seen in her quartz beads (sphatīka akṣamālā) held in her fingers, making her look cheerful. Also, in the split of the word Bhārati, Bha means philosophy of the higher consciousness (Brahma tatva). Rati means the eternal bliss. Bhārati is the embodiment of supreme ecstasy.

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Further on, in the same kṛti, in rāga Rasalī, the composer relates to Āhata and Anāhata nāda in the last two lines of madhyamakāla sāhitya. “Sunāda svarūpam Āhataanāhata prēraṇam”. In the true journey of every music student, he or she encounters the terms Āhata nāda and Anāhata nāda. Āhata nāda is the sound produced by the acoustics of friction, and heard by all. Anāhata nāda pertains to the unstruck or the unbeaten sound, which is the cosmic sound. It is all-pervasive and omnipresent, audible only to yogic minds. However, both the sounds can be realised only with the will of the Providence.

The viḷamba kala kṛti **Gandharva vēda rūpiṇi** in Rāga Śuddha Kalyān is a solid illustration of how music is transformed from Hindustānī Classical Style of music to Karnāṭaka Classical style. This kṛti is composed in the Dhruvad style. The intent of the Dhruvad style of singing was to introduce spirituality in the performer and create peace and contemplation both in the singer and the listener. It has its roots in Sāmavēda. It is often said that this kind of pensive music can be experienced and revered only if the spirit of Yakśas, Gandharvas and Yakshas is initiated in an individual. Yakśas, Kinnaras and Gandharvas are divine forces who are well versed in performing arts like dance, music and theatre. According to ancient Indian science, it is said that these spirits are custodians of certain skills, and they manifest in a true performer through right inspiration. The knowledge of music, dance and theatre is termed as Gandharva vēda or Pañcssama vēda. This is again an expression of the Divine Mother Sarasvatī. It is through her invocation that these skills can be nurtured and passed on to posterity. Prof. Visweswaran has composed this kṛti in a very impressive and erudite style, with ample scope for elaboration and reflecting the serenity of the mind required to comprehend the music of the soul.

6. Conclusion

From an overall perspective, the study and practice of the Sarasvatī group kṛtis composed by Sri. Prof. R. Visweswaran gives us an opportunity to recapture the Sanātana Dharma that was prevalent in India during the Vedic Sarasvatī civilisation. It is a path that is crucial to every individual towards personal growth and self-realisation. A cursory look into the other cultures of the world brings us back to the exact intent that Indian culture built its foundation thousands of years ago. Confucius in China stated, “Music is that which moves man from the internal. True literature is one which cultivates and refines an individual”. Pythagoras in Greece observed that certain tunes can calm the mind and the soul. It is said that he preferred string instruments like a lyre, and this again is a hint towards the practice of Vīṇa, a stringed instrument which is our ancient Indian tradition. **(Pythagoras on Music)** Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and theologian of the 15th century, believed that he who knows music has a good nature, and he was strongly convinced that music should play a central part in children’s education. **(Martin Luther and Church Music)** The diverse views of different philosophers of the world point to that eternal belief which Indians have always been inclined towards from time immemorial, and that is Sanatana Dharma, a universal, axiomatic law beyond the temporary belief system.

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