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Turning Audibility into Visuality: Narratives in the *Ragamala* Painting with Special Reference to the *Raga Bhairava* and the *Raga Meghmallar*

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Abstract:

The dispute over visual art's recognition as a narrative is not new in the field of academics. Some scholars and critics strongly oppose its narrative property as it apparently lacks dimension. But *Ragamala* painting presents a unique trend of visual art in India where the music itself has been given the form of visuality, and has thus attributed divinity by connecting the modes of melodies with the deities. The play of symbols merges and shapes the mythic past, which is sufficient enough to show that the visual art can even incarnate the impalpable (here, the Indian Classical music) to tell the stories once framed and structured by our distant ancestors. The aim of this paper is to analyse the same with a special reference to the raga *Bhairava* and *Meghmallar*. The association of these two ragas with lord Shiva and Krishna respectively has brought the cultural aspects to the fore and produced the visible form of the melodic modes. The temporality associated with the *ragamala* painting has been shown according to the time of performing the particular raga. Usually divine figures have been associated with the features of ragas but once the *Bhakti* movement came into existence, the deification was shifted to the narrative scenes. By discussing all these aspects, this paper tries to justify the argument of the narration through the media of visual art, more precisely in *ragamala* painting.

Keywords: Indian Classical music, *Ragamala*, *Bhairava*, *Meghmallar*, *Sangeet*, *Raga*, *Taal*.

In the domain of visual art, painting has been regarded as narrative in still frame. Today, when the field of humanities has become interdisciplinary, it is quite relevant to investigate the structure and content of separate (in a traditional sense) branches of art, and lay a common ground among them, based on the cultural soil, which germinates the seeds of art.

The study of 'visual art', which was born as a child of art history and cultural studies, distinguishes itself from the other forms of art by being spatial or say, two dimensional. The gradual unfolding of time (linear/non linear), which is easily demonstrated in the written words of a page cannot be illustrated in the same way in a piece of painting. Now the core of the controversy whether painting can be a narrative (as narrative connotes a sense of dimension, therefore, time and motion) can only be dissolved by surveying and analysing some authentic pieces of painting, here the *Ragamala* painting of Rajasthan.

It can be observed anywhere that each particular community needs to underlie some rules and regulations for its survival, taking into consideration the geographical and ethnic characteristics, which we can broadly call as culture. It is one of the reasons behind the multidisciplinary nature of the humanities that every art form in some way or the other manifests the cultural codes. Painting at a superficial level may be considered static but with the help of certain masterly techniques they successfully convey the time division even in a single frame. *Ragamala* painting, which can claim its uniqueness of being a distinguishable trend, hardly to be found anywhere else, is a genre holding significant importance to give a substantial answer to the above-discussed controversy of painting's narratological property.

The *Ragamala* painting, the visual representations of the fusion of two artistic modes- painting and music depict the journey from impalpable to incarnation. The study of history of art

(here painting) shows that in Europe, the interrelation of painting and music had been experimented much before and came to prominence from the Renaissance period:

In the fourteenth century, perspective and and preharmony evolved together out of the basically unperspective and unharmonic world of the later Middle Ages. At the beginning of the Renaissance there was a radical shift to perspective and harmony proper. As long as painting had persisted in a two-dimensional attitude, music had been 'linear, preceeding either in one single unaccompanied line, as in the Georgian chant, or else combining these single lines with other single lines simultaneously in a type of counterpoint essentially different rom the harmonically based counterpoint of the polyphony of the Later Ages. The painter's increasing confidence in perspective is synchronized with the composer's confidence in harmony.

In Renaissance times musical consonance now formed the basis of ideal proportion in painting. Alberti taught that the musical intervals most agreeable to the (Renaissance) ear, the octave, fifth and fourth, correspond to the division of a string in two, in three, or in four-1:2; 2:3; 3:4.....These proportions, universally employed in Renaissance painting, were known as the diapason, diapente, and diatessaron. Raphael, (1483-1520), and Leonardo da Vinci, (1452-1519), were aware of the musical relationships and made use of the ratios of consonance. Moreover, Leonardo, who had a passion for music, one of his many accomplishments, wrote with great subtlety on its relations with painting. (Mane 3-4)

The medieval Europe had a firm belief in the holistic concept of the universe, which was perceived as a cosmic symphony with a proper proportion of harmony among all the constituents in the nature. It can be said that the merging of poetry, painting and music flourished mostly in the age of Romanticism, which was, to a great extent influenced by Germany. The renowned German thinkers like Gauguin and van Gogh also "believed that painting promised to become more like music". (Mane, iii) Broadly speaking, in every movement of art, from Expressionism to Orphism, reciprocal influence of painting and music on each other has been explored. But the occidental approach to this interphase of painting and music is based on certain parameters like

the mathematical calculation, required in both the art forms. The musicality in colour or the rhythmic quality of the shades to bring life to a painting became a popular phenomenon to reach the harmony of the tone:

The soul that loves proportion and equality takes more pleasure in the sounds of instruments and in the accents of voices in which the numbers are whole, and in which there is less dissonance. So also the painting of which the whole beauty consists in symmetry and fine proportion... (Mane 8)

But in India, the entire notion of the art differs from the west. In *Rajasthani Ragamala Chitra Parampara*, Sharma referred to Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, a highly regarded classical text in India, which shows the harmony existing between different forms of performing arts and the incompleteness of meaning if they are performed separately. (26) The Hindus' belief in sacredness of the words, which led to the rich oral tradition of literature, is the major factor of this interdependence:

The origins of the romantic emotion are to be found in poetry, which in its primeval form was oral and from that primal art form many new art forms were to emerge. For when poetry was recited with a certain metre and melody a song was created. When that poetry was turned into a *bandish* it lent a certain emotional content or *khayal* to a *raga*. And when *ragas* were converted to *ragamala* paintings the inspiration for it arose from a poetic imagination of a *raga*. And when a song was performed on stage with gesture and movement we had *natya* or dance drama. And when that oral poetry was given a spatial dimension it became *shilpa* or sculpture. And when that very poetry inspired artists to create a painting it led to *chitra* which was visual poetry. (Dehejiya 15-16)

To perceive the cultural attribute to the Indian art, the Sanskrit term '*Sangeet*' needs to be understood. This very word embraces all the traditional media of art such as dance, music and poetry while keeping music at its centre. The birth of music in India, apparently, can be traced in

the chanting of the mantras in the Vedic age. (Sharma 23) It is believed that besides the four *Vedas*, there is also a fifth *Veda* called the *Gandharva Veda* (Sharma 25), which provides a detailed description of music and songs. *The Sama Veda* is a collection of mantras which were chanted in the form of songs during the performance of any worship, ritual or sacrifice. It is a historical fact that the *Vedas* were transmitted orally for decades and thus, some modification according to the need of time might have taken place. The essence of any art in ancient India was *sadhna*, which refers to attaining something higher than the mundane achievement. The ragas or the classical melodic modes were believed to have power to do wonder according to their properties. The *raga Deepak* and the *raga Meghmalla*, it is said, can produce fire and heat and, rain respectively.

Dr. Mahendra Kumar Sharma has explored the salient features of the *Ragamala* painting and established its relation to the classical music. In his book, *Rajasthani Ragamala Chitra Parampara*, he has argued that the Indian classical music has been attributed two forms, which are *naadmay* (sound with a particular frequency) and *devtamay* (divine). (Sharma 37) The theory of Kinetic energy has proved that sound can produce energy and therefore, it can cause some visible effects. It is said that the sacred syllable *Om* becomes powerful enough if it is pronounced in a proper way with perfect tone and frequency. The very syllable bears the meaning of Self and the universe within itself. Considering music as divine may have some ground in that. Further manifestation of the same idea can be found in the notion of *naad brahma*, which directly identifies sound with the creator of the universe. Besides that, as it is assumed by Dr. Sharma, correlating music with the deities could be an attempt to retain its purity. (Sharma 37)

But what makes the *Ragamala* painting a distinct genre is that it is the transformation of the words into the lines and colours. Personifying the music was quite an old practice in India.

Glynn, Skelton and Dallapiccola referred to Ebeling's observation in the context of the interrelation of music and ragamala painting *Ragamala: Paintings from India*:

Ebeling postulates a similarity between the painted and musical versions of a raga, in that both artistic expressions are composed of 'compulsory elements...variable additions subject to local style, wealth of the patron, skill of the painter and other influences. (Glynn,et al. 20)

The study of the old scriptures and other classical and religious texts again show that the feature of the personification has not been limited to the divine figures. The *ragas* have been classified into six types of which, each includes one male *raga* and six female *raginis*. The gender of the raga has been defined, according to Dr. Sharma's findings, on the basis of *taal* (rhythm). If the *taal* is strong enough and the *raga* tends to ascend towards the higher pitch, then the *raga* is recognised as a male one. (Sharma 37) It is needless to say that the structure mirrors the human society itself by following the stereotypes.

If meaning can be more convincing by tracing the etymology of the word, then *raga* is not an exception. The word is derived from Sanskrit *ranj*, which possesses the property of colouring the mind with its serenity and sweetness. Matang Muni defined raga in his treatise *Brihaddeshi* as follows: "A *raga* is called by the learned that kind of sound composition which is adorned with musical notes, in some peculiarly stationary or ascending or descending or moving values, which have the effect of colouring the hearts of men". (Glynn, et al. 14) It is argued (but not proved) that the rigidity of time to perform a *raga* is established, consuming the scientific relationship of sound and light. It is worthwhile to quote the statement, published in the third chapter, entitled "Indian Classical Music" of a thesis on inflibnet:

The Vedic chants and music were intoned with utmost care as each intonation and inflection of voice could have benefited or adverse effects. The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* had more of sound and rhythm and were used as a source of healing and upliftment. These Vedic songs were used by people to please the presiding deities of different Vedic sacrifices or yajnas to get benedictions of brilliance, power and wisdom. It was only from this sama-gana, that the seven notes [Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni] were evolved which formed the basis for the raga system of India. (48)

The *Ragamala* painting had mostly been executed during 1600 to 1800 AD and from the latter half of the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century can be considered its full blooming period. The huge gap between the Vedic age, from where the music originated and the painting, embodying these melodic modes, forms the ground to argue that before execution of the painting, symbols and figures must have been decided to denote each particular *raga*, and undoubtedly, they are influenced by the cultural and sociological belief of the Indian subcontinent, more particularly, the desert land of the western part of it. Although dominant trend in *Rajput* painting, the *Ragamala* painting has their glorious presence in Punjab Hills as well as in the Deccan region. Therefore, the iconographies varied according to the place, time and taste of the artist to depict the *raga* in the human form:

The painting depicts a ‘dramatic situation’ and the composition must be read in its totality: the human figures, their stance and appurtenances, the animals, the elements of the landscape and the background of the scene (an interior of a house with, for instance, an empty bed suggesting the absence of a lover). All these elements help to decode the situation and the occasional poem or inscription on the folio helps to reveal the identity of the *raga* or *ragini* depicted. (Glynn, et al. 15)

There are different series of the *Ragamala* painting, which include dissimilar number of *ragas*. For example, the ‘Painters System’ *Ragamala* set contains thirty-six leaves for six male *ragas* and five wives or *raginis* for each of them, which is most commonly found categorisation

of the *ragas*, and has its source in Damodara Mishra's *Sangita Darpana*(c. 1625). A different categorisation has been made by Kshemakarna, employed as the priest at the King's court at Rewa:

This Sanskrit text, variously dated to 1509 or 1570, had a pivotal influence on the beginning of *ragamala* painting. It describes the six principal *ragas*: Bhairava, Malkosh, Hindola, Dipak, Shri and Megha, with their five *raginis* and eight *ragaputras*, sons of a *raga*. (Shri *Raga*, in some cases however, is an exception with six *raginis* and nine *ragaputras*.) (Glynn, et al. 16)

Among the fifty presently existing and commonly performing *ragas*, *Bhairava* and *Meghmalla* have been placed with high esteem. I shall analyse the characteristics of the each specific *raga* of the two with the respective paintings to support my argument how visual art narrates the story if it is studied minutely in the respective cultural context.

The *raga Bhairava*, as it is traditionally attributed to the figure of lord Shiva, is believed to be performed first when the *swara* came into practice. Thus, it has been given the homage of *adi raga*. The time specified for this *raga* to be performed is the first break of the day. Embodying this particular *raga* with the image of Shiva may further be explained, keeping the fact in mind that even lord Shiva is worshipped as *Adi Guru*, the oldest among the deities. In Hindu mythology, Shiva is reckoned as both, a destroyer and a creator but the image, associated with the *raga Bhairava*, is bestowed with calmness and serenity. The arrangement of the *swara* in this particular *raga* itself creates tranquility. The image here, attached below presents the *ling* (phallus) form of Shiva and *nayika* (the female protagonist), worshipping the idol. This piece of painting, taken from the Jaipur *ragamala* series, skilfully depicted the morning time. The background of the blue sky and blooming tree further suggest the serenity of the early morning.

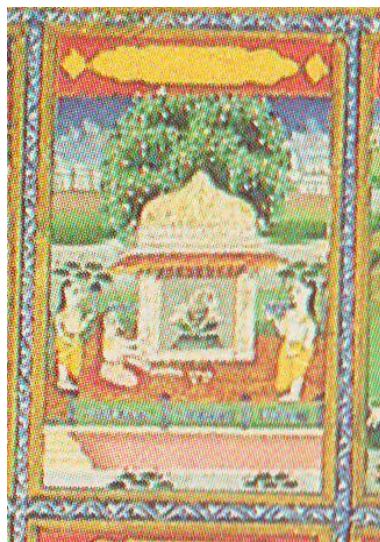


Fig. 1. *Raga Bhairava* from: Sharma, Dr. Mahendra Kumar. *Rajasthani Ragmala Chitra Parampara*, 1990, p. 44.

Another implication of the phallic symbol, in Indian mythology, is regeneration. But a different iconography has also been used for this *raga* in the incomplete *Kalpasutra* manuscript (1475 c.). Glynn, Skelton and Dallapiccola provided the image, which is not the phallic symbol but Shiva with many arms, “carrying his typical attributes, his body smeared with holy ash, hair tied in a topknot, carrying a *vina* in his hands. At his feet crouches the bull Nandi”. (16)

Dallapiccola further stated:

Or he can be visualized as Bhairava, riding on Nandi, brandishing in his left hand a trident and carrying a skull cup in his right. However, he often appears in the guise of a prince or nobleman being massaged by two ladies, while two or three more are in attendance with unguents, perfumes, and the paraphernalia typical of a beau. (16)

Although the present paper focuses exclusively on certain ragas, executed in different states of Rajasthan, there is a little discussion on the *Bhairava* raga, which has been taken from Pahari *ragamala* painting. This is a fine example of the influence of local attributes on the

deification and personification of the *ragas*. Even the trio, Glynn, Skelton and Dellapiccola supported this while analysing this painting, attached below: “We see that the hero is very closely modelled upon the ruling Raja of Nurpur, Raja Mandhatta ...who reigned 1661-1700”.

(47)



Fig. 2. *Bhairava Raga* from: Glynn, Catherine, et al. *Ragamala: Paintings from India*, 2011, p. 47.

It was no wonder that the local rulers and the patrons of the art had their presence as the *nayak* or hero of the paintings. Sometimes this resemblance between the rulers and the male figures of the paintings comes as a help to decipher the place of the execution of the paintings. The words of Glynn echo this:

Until the turn of the seventeenth century, the hero in *ragamala* paintings was a generic, idealised male with no degree of individualisation. Beginning c. 1590 we see a shift; at least one *ragamala* series done under Bundi patronage incorporates facial features and turban styles that resemble local nobles. Within a short time, in *ragamala* paintings from another *Rajput* court, Marwar, the hero resembles the Marwar ruler Gaj Singh 1 of Marwar/ Jodhpur... . (33)

A noticeable change took place when the *Bhakti* movement fertilised the spiritual life of the Indians. This single movement caused an upheaval in the sterile life of the people who were tired of the strict *Brahminical* ideologies and rituals. *Bhakti* or the spontaneous fountain of love and ultimate submission of one's own self to the supreme centers on Krishna and his *leela*. But this further needs the narrative scenes to be depicted to give a complete understanding of how the divine being's playfulness with the human beings is nothing but the path of *bhakti*. The *bhasha kavya* has a pioneering role to bring the narrative scenes of Krishna-*leela* into painting:

One god in particular, Krishna, became the focus of north Indian devotion. The impassioned verses in praise of Krishna by Mira Bai and the charming poems by Sur Das celebrating Krishna's childhood and adolescence undoubtedly had an influence, along with many other such works, in changing the ethos of *ragamala* painting. (Glynn, et al. 17)

Among the *ragas*, associated with Krishna, *Meghmallar* is the most common *raga*. The *raga Meghmallar* too has been attributed with similar kind of spiritual and socio-religious connotations:

Meghmallar is a good, wise king. He dances well and enjoys the pleasures of life with gay abandon. Of a slightly dusky complexion with bright shining eyes, king Meghmallar is dressed handsomely, wearing a tiger skin, and adorned with all kinds of bright ornaments. He is in the company of beautiful maidens bedecked with jewels. The king dances with them to the resounding beat of drums and clapping. The dancing and music bring forth clouds of various

colours in the sky. The moving clouds thicken to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning which brings the rain. (Datta 31)

Anyone, familiar with the Indian culture and mythology, could easily make out that the very above description can be made visible only through the image of lord Krishna. *Megh* is cloud, and thus, the performing time of this *raga* is the season of monsoon. Monsoon in Indian literature, beginning from Kalidas's *Meghdoot* to the *Krishna-kavyas*, has been portrayed as the season of love and romance. As an obvious consequence of the *Bhakti* movement and the stories of *shringar* between Krishna and Radha, Krishna became the unrivalled deity of love and romance. Here in the given image, Krishna, dancing with the *gopis* on the bank of the river Yamuna, is sketched by the artist. The dark blue complexion of Krishna, which is akin to the clouds, is often used as a stereotype to symbolise the mythical bondage between the deity and the monsoon. The festivals of Krishna such as the festival of swing and the *Janmashtami* all are celebrated in the monsoon.



Fig. 3. *Raga Meghmallar* from: Sharma, Dr. Mahendra Kumar. *Rajasthani Ragmala Chitra Parampara*, 1990, p. 44.

Another painting of the *Meghmallar raga* shows the figure of Krishna again but in a different pose. Unlike the former one, he is not in the mood of dancing but enjoying the musicians while holding his consort, Radha in his arm. The pouring rain, cloudy sky and the birds hurrying to their nest are all suggestive of an inclement weather but a pair of peacock and peahen symbolises the romantic union. The bright red skirt and bodice in the latter painting hints at the rising passion of the lovers as red is often regarded as the colour of burning passion. In the lower part of this image, the *raga* has been named as ‘*ragini Meghmallar*’. As it is already stated above that the concept and icons of these melodic modes vary according to the time and place, it is no wonder that sometimes, particularly in the Bundi school of painting, *Meghmallar* is addressed as *ragini*.

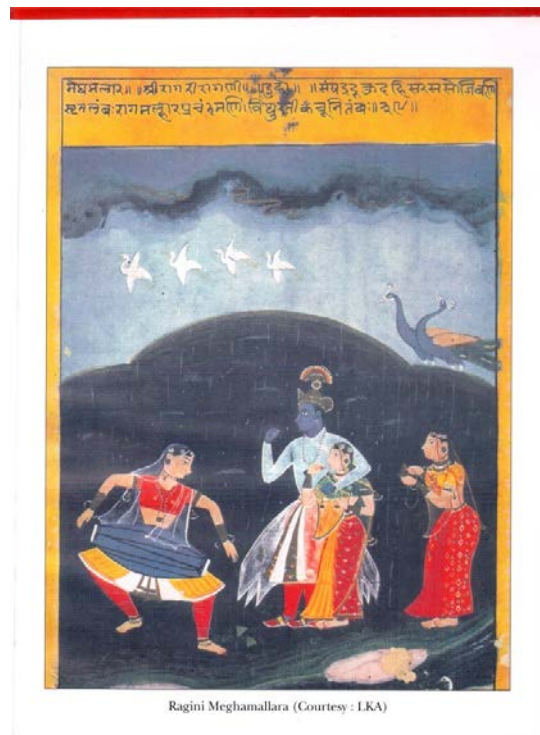


Fig. 4. *Ragini Meghmalla* from: Rajdan, Vijay Bazaz. *Hindustani Ragas: The Concept of Time and Season*, 2009, Plate 27.

The temporality in the *ragamala* painting has been associated with the performing of the *ragas* and shown through the symbols. The paintings here are monoscenic which manifest the essence or *rasa* of the *ragas* through the expression of the characters. In the *Bhairava raga*, the *rasa* is *shanta* or tranquil whereas the *Meghmalla* is associated with *shringar rasa*. Krishna's joyful pose of dancing in the former piece of painting and his passion and love for Radha in the latter make the depiction of melody perfect.

Over the period of time, the symbols may be revised and refashioned in accordance with the imagination of the artist, and sometimes the instruction has been given by the patron but nothing can be more significant than the *ragamala* painting to show that visual art can narrate a story in a more fertile way, imbibing the cultural codes and the mythic past of a region because it has established itself as a better medium of communication from the beginning of the human civilisation when language was not formed and acquired.

Looking at *ragamalas* requires us to bring an educated eye and open mind to each painting.... The idealized archetypes and divinities in *ragamala* paintings brought entire narratives immediately to mind when they were originally viewed, when they were exchanged as gifts, when they were passed by hand during long evenings after shared meals and music. (Glynn, et al. 36)

It will not be inappropriate to say that the *Ragamala* painting holds the beacon of the rich tradition of the age-old Indian art. This particular trend does not only present the love of the

people for the classical music and but also saves it from going into oblivion. Therefore, once again it is justified to state that painting narrates, enlivens, and preserves the culture.

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