

The word 'Varna' in general, has different meanings like, colour, a syllable or people belonging to a particular sect, and so on. Bharata, the author of 'Natyasastra'- one of the earliest literature on music- describes Varna as 'a mode of singing' (Ganakriyaa uchchyate varnaha). Here Varna means musical notes or 'Swaras'. Varna evolves from 'sapta swaras' and expresses itself through various combinations of these 'sapta swaras'. In yet another treatise the process of singing itself is described as Varna. Matanga explains the features of Varna as existing in groups of notes, traversing in the pattern of 'Taanas'. An earlier treatise says that the ancient Varna patterns have absolutely no relation with the present Varna forms, and therefore Varnas must have come into existence only after 'Kritis' were shaped. Presently, in the field of carnatic music Varna is one of the most popular pieces of composition which has its own definite form and a huge variety. It has prime of place both as a practice piece (abhyasa gana) and a warming up piece in a regular concert.

Records show that a type of composition called 'Varna' or 'Varnasara' was in practice in Indian Music System even 1000 years before. But a piece of composition which came to be popularized as Varna with a specific format was composed about a generation or two before the Trinity – Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar and Shamasastri.. It is believed that Varnams must have been composed at Tanjavur during the time of kings like Tulajaji, Pratapasimha, Sarabhoji, under their patronage.

A musical composition presents a concrete picture of a particular 'Raga'. The jurisdiction of a composer lies essentially in his proficiency in 'Sangita' (musical notes) and not in his proficiency in 'Sahitya' (lyrics). The permanence of any composition lies primarily in its musical setting. It is very important that the lyrics blend perfectly and beautifully with the notes. Varnams are scholarly compositions. They are replete with 'raga bhava'. A Varna has in it not only combination of swaras that are 'raga ranjaka' but also they have 'visesha sancharas'(special sancharas) and several 'apoorva prayogas' (rare usages) and 'datu prayogas' that the raga admits of.

A Varnam is a musical form which has in it all elements of 'geetam', 'jati swaram' and 'swara jati'. This is a special item which highlights everything important about a raga - known as 'sancharas of a raga'. This includes which notes to stress, how to approach a certain note, classical and characteristic phrases of a raga, the scale of a raga and so on. As a composition coming under the category of 'abhyasa gana', (technical composition), Varna takes the first rank in point of importance. It prepares the students with adequate skills to be able to learn 'kritis'.

Just as swarajathis are stepping stones to 'Taana Varnas' Taana Varnas are to kritis and concert forms. Therefore Varnas are learnt with great care and assiduity by both vocalists and instrumentalists. Varnas consist of several important, unique, special and unusual phrases of a raga. Therefore, it requires great skill, knowledge, technical capacity, creative faculty of a high order and good musicianship to sing and compose a varna. A composer of a varna should be equipped with a detailed knowledge of 'lakshanas' (features) of a raga, and creative faculty of a high order to bring out a piece that is long lasting. That is the reason why there are only few composers of Varnas and few hundreds of Varnas only, while there are thousands of kritis and hundreds of composers of kritis.

The practice of Varna helps one in the artistic, polished and stylish rendering of pieces. The long syllables of sahitya make it an ideal type of composition for vocal exercise, while to instrumentalists, it develops finger skills and improves the style and technique of execution. The swara passages consisting of long and jumbled phrases are good basis for the development of 'kalpana swaras' and practicing them in 2 or 3 speeds ensures proper control over rhythm. It improves 'Laya Jnanam'. The characteristic pattern of a particular raga is exposed in it's totality in a Varna. Varnas are designed to develop voice culture and proper control over the 'talam'. The Varnas are considered the most complex type of exercises in carnatic music. Rigorous practice of Varna in 2 or 3 speeds helps in breath control, mastery over laya and swara, developing the 'Neraval' technique and singing 'Pallavis' in different 'gatis' with extreme ease, during an RTP presentation.

TYPES AND STRUCTURE OF VARNAS:

The two major types in Varnas are – Pada Varnas and Taana Varnas. There is a minor difference between the 2 varieties. Pada Varnas usually have 'sringara' as the theme. They are composed mainly for dance. They are artistically constructed and beautifully designed. They are composed in rare taalas, in 'anagata graha' (where composition begins after the taala), and 'eduppus' at different places and are in 'vilamba kala' (slow tempo) in order to give scope for depiction of 'Bhava'. More importance is paid to the 'sahitya' (lyrics) here. The lyrics consist of conversation between 'Nayaka and Nayika' (hero – heroine), both in unison and separation (sambhoga and vipralamba sringara). Some of them have devotional theme, and some, in praise of their patrons also. The words are rhythmic and metrical. Swara, sahitya and solkattus are also seen in these compositions. Generally Pada varnas are also called 'Chowka Varnas' and if they are with 'Jatis', they are called 'Pada Jati Varnas'.

Taana Varnas were in existence earlier than Pada Varnas. There were no Pada Varnas earlier and all Varnas were called Taana Varnas.

Taana Varnas are those which are sung or played at the commencement of a concert, according to the tradition. Taana varnas consist of Pallavi, Anupallavi and Mukthayi swara which form the 'Poorvanga' or the first part and 'Charana' followed by 3,4,or 6 'Ettugade swaras' (swara passages) which form the 'Uttaranga' or the latter half of the composition. The Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charana will have sahitya, with profused vowel extension. Taana Varnas are in medium speed (madyama kala), usually starting at 'sama eduppu'. They adhere to a specific metre and are full of raga sancharas, and bring out the nuances of that particular raga. The Taana Varnas are mostly set to 'adi tala', but there are also Varnas in other taalās like āta, rūpaka, chapu, jhampe, khanda triputa, etc. Lyrics are of lesser importance here. Only a minimum of lyrics with lot of elongated syllables (Akaara, Ikaara, Ukaara, etc.) are found in the sahitya portion. The style of the Varna follows the taana pattern and is full of taana jatis. Hence the name, 'Taana Varna'. Some earlier Varnas had a special feature called 'Anubhanda', which was composed with the idea of completing the meaning implied in the charana portion.

Varnas are usually composed in Telugu perhaps owing to the beauty of the language which lends itself to the lyrical requirement of such a composition. Even though all composition of Dikshitar are in Sanskrit and Manipravalam, when it comes to varna, he has used telugu! Now Varnas are found in Tamil and Kannada also. Depending on the 'swaroopa lakshana' (identity) of a Varna, one finds varieties like Ragamalika varna - Dina Raga malika- Vara Ragamalika – Nava Ragamalika - Taalamalika varna, Grahābheda varna, Nakshatramalika varna, Swara-Sahitya varna, etc. in Taana varna. It is said that Swara-Sahitya varna in raga Todi set to Adi tala composed by Ramaswamy Dikshitar is the one and only varna of its kind in the entire field of Carnatic music.

The theme of a taana varna will be devotional, sringara, (erotic) or in praise of the patronizing king or his minister.. The only essential requirement is that there should be a perfect blending of the swara and sahitya. It is said that the famous Tanjavur Quartets who were composers of Varnas as well, would compose the Varna format with all the swara patterns and for the same pattern they would match different sahitya depending on the requirement and circumstance, be it romantic, in praise of the deity, or in praise of their patrons. Such was their genius.

Some of the most popular composers of Taana Varnas are: Veena Perumalaiah, Pachchimiriādiappāiah, Sonti Venkatasubbaiah, Veena Kuppaier, Shamasastri, Pallavi Gopalier, Mutuswami Dikshitar, Manambuchavadi venkatasubbaier, Swatitirunal, Patnam Subramanya iyer, Rudrapatnam Venkataramaiah, Tanjore Quartets, Pallavi Seshaiyer, Thiruvottiyur Thyagaier, Fiddle Ponnuswamy, Ramnad Srinivas Iyengar, Shatkala Narasaiah, Ramaswami Sivan, Harikeshanallur Muthaiah Bhagavata, Mysore Sadashiva Rao, Veena Seshanna, Veena Subbanna. (the list is not exhaustive). The famous Tanjore Quartets,

Ramaswamy Dikshitar, Vadivel Nattuvanar, Pallavi seshaiyer, Mysore Sadasiva Rao, Kunrakkudi Krishnaiyer and others have composed many valuable Pada Varnas. Padmabhushan Lalgudi G. Jayaraman, recognized as one of the most prolific composers in carnatic music of the modern era, has composed many Taana and Pada varnas that have come to serve as guides to various ragas. Earlier it was believed that only certain ragas were suitable for composing Varnas. He has disproved this by composing in ragas like Neelambari, Devagandhari, Valaji, Bahudari, etc.

As a post script to this article, I wish to bring to the notice of the readers certain facts about Varnas which call for further study. First, if we compare the lyrics of the Varnas, many of them (pallavi) start with a similar sahitya like 'ninnukoriyunnanu', 'vanajakshi', 'sami ninne or neepai', 'sarasuda/sarasija', 'chalamela', 'viribhoni', and so on. In some Varnas even the charanas are repetitive. What is it that makes for the common pallavi, even if the theme be the same? Secondly, all the ata tala varnas start at the same eduppu. Why aren't the lyrics managed in such a way that each of these ata tala varnas start at different places? Is there any specific reason for composing ata tala varnas that style? Lastly, even though the Varnas have varied themes, majority of them are composed with 'sringara' as the theme. In a Pada Varna composed mainly for dance, there is scope for 'abhinaya' and bringing out the particular 'rasa' is possible. (it also conforms to Bharata's expectation/prescription). But in a Taana Varna where the purpose is entirely different, when there is no such requirement, nor is it apt to express the bhavas intended, at the beginning of a carnatic music concert, why have our great composers even thought of 'sringara' for a crisp Varna? When an artist opens a concert with a Varnam at a high speed where does he have the opportunity to bring forth the intended rasa/bhava, or make the audience understand what the lyrics mean? There are ample examples of Taana Varnas which are regularly sung at concerts, having erotic themes. To quote a few, 'sarasuda' in 'saveri', 'inthachalamu' in 'begada', 'karunimpa' in 'sahana', 'eranaapai' in 'todi', 'viribhoni' in 'bhairavi' (ata tala) and 'vanajakshi' in 'kalyani' (ata tala). These are certain aspects on which the learned musicians and musicologists should throw more light upon. The topic is open for debate and more insight or any valuable contribution will be appreciated.