

Carnatic Music- Mudras in Musical Compositions

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, this month we take up a new topic in Carnatic music- *Mudras* in musical compositions. The term *mudra* (in the context of music) means signatures; they are names that are introduced in the lyrics of a composition to reveal either the author of the composition, the *raaga*, *taala*, etc. *Mudras*, while optional in a composition, are introduced in ways that maintain the beauty in the *sahitya* (lyrics).

Mudras may be classified in many ways- those based on the signature of the composer are called *Vaggeyakara mudra*. In turn these *mudras* can be sub classified into- *Svanama Mudra* where the composer uses his own name in the signature. Examples include *krithis* by Tyagaraja, Narayana Tirtha, Jayadeva, etc. In *Itaranama mudra*, the composer uses another name in his signature, such as the name of a Deity. For example Patna Subramanya Iyer used Venkatesha and Muthuswamy Dikshitar used Guruguha in their compositions.

Mudras which incorporate the name of the *raaga* in the *sahitya* of the composition are called *Raaga Mudras*. A beautiful example of this is in the Tyagaraja *krithi*- “Mohana Rama” where the *raaga* name (Mohana) is incorporated into the very first line of the composition. The composer Muthuswamy Dikshitar was a master at cleverly weaving *raaga* names into his compositions. Perhaps, the best known example is his composition “Sree Saraswathi Namostute” where the *raaga* name Arabhi is beautifully woven in the lyrics as-

Samsara bhityapahe

Meaning: *You remove fear (“bhItya-ApahE”) of the cycle of birth and death (“samsAra”)*

Another such example is in the following line from the Dikshitar composition “Kamakshi”

Kaumari kusuma dyuti

Meaning: *She is young Kumari (“kaumari”) with the lustre of flowers (“kusuma dyuti”)*

Here the *raaga* name Sumadyuti (as in the Dikshitar school of music) is woven within the fabric of the *sahitya*.

There are instances where a *raaga* name occurs in the *sahitya*; however it is not a *raaga mudra* unless that name coincides with the *raaga* of the composition. The Shyama Shastri composition “Himadri sute” contains a reference to the *raaga* Kiravani; however this is not a *raaga mudra* since the composition is in the *raaga* Kalyani.

Till we meet next time, do listen to the composition “Sree Saraswathi Namostute” and see if you can spot both the *Vaggeyakara mudra* (Guruguha) and the *raaga mudra* (Arabhi).

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