

## Rāgas, a brief outline.

The concept of rāga can be traced back to the Bṛhaddeśī, a Sanskrit work, by the author Matañga. Since then, which was around 5th/6th century, to present day, rāga has governed the musical art of India.

The word rāga originates from the Sanskrit “rañja”, its primary meaning denoting colour or atmosphere. Further meanings exist which help to form a more complete understanding of the word and therefore its purpose. Some of those are as follows: to be dyed or coloured; to glow; to be affected or moved; to be charmed or delighted by; to paint; to illuminate. The idea, then is that a rāga is to colour and delight the mind, evoking a particular emotion and creating a certain sentiment, or mood.

Technically a rāga is described as being more than a scale and is likened to a mode, yet this definition does not fully encompass the complexity of its true nature. While two rāgas can consist of the same tonal material their movements (calan) will differ. These differing movements can include moving in a zigzag fashion, skipping notes in one or both directions, undulations or other such embellishments on specific notes and preferred tempo. Certain notes will allow the musician to rest on them while others only permit a passing through (for example in rāga Bhīmpalāsī the second note, re, can only be approached from above, in a downward direction and one cannot stand on it. If one was to stand on re one would automatically fall out of the realm of Bhīmpalāsī into the field of another rāga). While these are just a few of the factors which give rāgas character and temperament it shows that they embody personalities, to the point of being able to call them living entities. Musicians actually view them in this light and address them with due respect. The rāgamāla paintings, or the ‘garland of rāgas’, which are a series of illustrations from medieval India depicting various musical modes, highlight this very perspective. This accord with the rāga itself grants the artist access to its secrets, which in turn reveal to him/her the approach required to evoke the spirit of the rāga and bring it to life. While the artist reaps the most benefits by being in its musical sphere, these benefits extend to the trained, listening participants. Like the mythological deities of India who change form and show different aspects of their personality over the ages, the same feature can be attributed to rāgas.

Theoretically the tradition holds thousands of rāgas but in practise only a few hundred are known, and even fewer are performed. There are a number of reasons for this. 1. the depth of instruction for one rāga can last many years, the traditional method of imparting the teaching is an oral one, the teacher gives a phrase and does not give the next one until it is mastered. 2. rāgas have specific times of day or seasons when they can be performed. With most concerts held in the evenings and night, the realms of morning and afternoon rāgas are naturally less frequently visited.

This arrangement of rāgas into different seasons or times of the day is related to the idea that they each present a particular energy specific to that time (of day or year) and therefore a particular mood, which the rāga, in the hands of an adept can invoke. For example, after months of the extreme summer heat people wait in anticipation for the respite of the rains. It is at this period that the monsoon rāgas are welcomed, with depictions, not only musically but poetically, of the heavy, grey, rain filled clouds, the immense joy that comes with new life.

In the Vedic period we are told that creation took place by the naming of the object. While the level of consciousness at that time was much higher than now the next best thing is evocation. A craft still accessible, with knowledge of the natural forces of the universe, through this musical system.