

## Alamkara-Gamaka: An Anthology

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**Abstract:** Music, by nature is a dynamic embellishment. But, it is the innate embellishments present within the art form and the artiste, makes it appreciable to a large audience. Alamkara (Fore-runners of Gamaka) and Gamaka (Certain melodic embellishment in the voice which is aesthetic to the aesthete) are the codified embellishments as per Sanskrit lexicons. These are not units in themselves but they are Unifying Forces. It is interesting that the mnemonic syllables (Abstract sound rhetoric units) emanated from percussion instruments which by nature are abstract units of sound phonemes perfectly synchronize with the diffused elements such as Alamkara and Gamaka. While summing up the thirty three Alamkaras of Bharata as per the treatise Natya Shastra, the "Tension-Retention Concept" discussed in the paper proves the above statement.

**Keywords:** Alamkara, Gamaka, Mnemonic Syllables, Music, Natya Shastra, Nuances, Percussion, Sangitaratnakara.

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### I. Introduction

Any Art, be it performing, visual or otherwise is basically are set of gyrations; but without the nuances which adheres in the art form. The nuances might not have a definite scientific origin but the fact of; "something catchy or different" which makes the aesthete appreciate a particular piece of work proves the presence of the nuances or certain embellishments. However, these nuances are developed further by the artiste himself through his basic lessons learnt, his intuition, imagination and his own observation of nature. This is perhaps why every new piece of work which is produced becomes a masterpiece and not a mere replica of the previous one. In performing arts, these embellishments are termed as Alamkara and Gamaka (in music). The present paper discusses various aspects of the same as per the treatise- Natya Shastra of Bharata (between 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE-2<sup>nd</sup> Century ACE) and Sangitaratnakara of Sarngadeva (13<sup>th</sup> Century ACE).

Alamkara's and Gamaka's are embellishments in music. They apply directly and visibly as vocal manifestation and instrument manifestation among instruments. This is an obvious fact among the vocal rendition, string instruments (Veena, Violin, Sitar etc.) and Wind instruments (Flute, Shehnai, Nagaswara etc.). However in percussion instruments (Tabla, Ghatam, Mridangam, Pakhwaj etc.) it is a common belief that, since it is a Tala Vadya or instrument which dramatizes rhythm, makes it less of a musically oriented (as per the norms of other instruments) instrument; or in other words, it has less to do with Gamaka's or Alamkara's. The present paper addresses the same in a cohesive-theoretical way based on performance experience with the help of the treatises- Natya Shastra and Sangitaratnakara.

The main contribution of the paper is that it sums the thirty three Alamkara's mentioned in the Natya Shastra of Bharata. These Alamkaras by the acknowledgment of various scholars are fore-runners of the Gamakas mentioned in the Sangitaratnakara of Sarngadeva and various other treatises on dramaturgy and histrionics. Another main contribution is the proposal of a new axiom "Tension-Retention Concept" which gives a theoretical perspective of Gamakas and Alamkara's through phoneme manifestation in percussion instruments.

### II. Theory

Alamkara's and Gamaka's are basically connective forces from one swara (note) position to another. They can as well be defined as, the manner of travel from one swara position to another by the artiste. The beautified and exaggerated travel by the artiste in/through these minutest notes can be defined as Alamkara and Gamaka. Apart from the richness of the lyrics, richness of the Raga (tune) and the richness of the innate swara, Alamkara's and Gamaka's are mainly responsible for the aesthetic enjoyment in the entire performance. They differ from each artiste. The true calibre of an artiste is measured not only by the technique of the art but also with the base-line and usage of these embellishers.

The course of a performance depends on three main factors<sup>[1]</sup>. They are:

1. Time – The speed in which the performance is carried.
2. Space – The physical environment in which the performance is carried out. The acoustical factors.
3. Intensity – The concentration of the performance.

Among the three, time and intensity will be under the control of the performer. Space is not directly under the control of the performer. In music, Gamaka is the soul. Like how grace is an impregnable factor in dance, Gamakas are impregnable in music. Gamakas need a high aesthetically and grammatically satisfying treatment. Sarngadeva<sup>[2]</sup> describes as ‘The shaking, trembling of the swara which is delightful to the listeners’ mind is called Gamaka’ Sarngadeva further classifies Sthaya and Vaga as two components of Gamaka. He says Sthaya is the organic compound, while Vaga is the Gamaka<sup>[2]</sup>. Sthayas are ninety six in number and Vagas are described as Gamakas. The Gamakas as per description as per Sarngadeva are fifteen in number, they are Tiripa, Sphurita, Kampita, Lina, Andolita, Vali, Tribhinna, Kurula, Ahata, Ullisita, Plavita, Humphita, Mudrita, Namita and Misra.

R. K Shringy<sup>[2]</sup> remarks, “... Gamakas as defined by the author in the widest sense is the shaking of a tone or it may be said to be a tonal shake that is musically delightful. ‘S’ (Simhabhupala) quotes Parsvadeva who defines it as follows, “In the melodic structure the formulation of a tonal shade arising out of a swaras own srti and restoring to that of another srti, is demonstrated to be a gamaka. Obviously, this definition is more precise and gives a better idea of what it means”. The author’s understanding of the term Gamaka and Parsvadeva’s interpretation is valid. For example, suppose a tuning fork is struck, the tuning fork physically vibrates giving variant resonations; this is due to the physical striking of the fork. The vibrations can be called “shaking of the tone” and the resonations as “the Gamakas inferred”.

Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam<sup>[1]</sup> remarks, “the Gamakas actually give the respective ragas their identity. The Gamakas are caused through a webbed state of microtones built on semitones and tones of musical notes. The exact frequency of the straight notes of the key gets defused through flattening, sharpening, or even combining these. Yet, they are woven around the notes called the Svarasthana’s which are quite steady or fixed in nature”.

By above derivations of various medieval and contemporary scholars, Gamakas exist in the most defined state and also at the level of defused state of a Raga. Dr. Shringy is of the opinion that Sarngadeva was the first to codify the theory of Gamakas in a very elaborative state. “Historically, Sarngadeva seems to be the first writer known to us who has consolidated the concept of Gamaka and formulated it as such in some detail. It is well known that Bharata does not distinguish between Alamkara and Gamaka; He rather includes the latter in the former.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Alamkaras are enlisted and described by Bharata in the Natya Shastra, under the chapter heading Tathatodyavidhihi (that is, Chapter twenty nine- Stringed instruments) Alamkaras are the fore-runners of Gamakas. Alamkara literally means embellishment or beautifying. Hence, the embellishment which beautifies a meter (song or dance) is called Alamkara. Bharata defines Alamkara<sup>[3]</sup> as “like night without moon, river without water, creeper without flowers, and woman without ornaments, the song without Alamkaras. (will appear jaded)” Bharata enlists thirty three such Alamkaras as per Varna and as per Giti. Sangitaratnakara also gives similar reading of the Alamkaras (although the names given by the author differ). Brhaddesi of Matanga also mentions the same.

Varnas are the tone patterns in the act of singing. Bharata, Matanga and Sarngadeva give the same descriptions on Varnas. There are four types of Varnas. They are –

- Arohi – The tone patterns which ascend.
- Avarohi – The tone patterns which descend.
- Sthaya – The unvarying tone pattern.
- Sancari – The mixed tone pattern.

Gitis are given in relation with Alamkaras in the chapter twenty nine of Natya Shastra. But the definition etymology remains obscure. “Gitis have been described by some as an ancient system of classification of rhythm”<sup>[4]</sup>

The descriptions of the Alamkaras as per Bharata’s Natya Shastra are:

1. Prasannadi: The note which gradually arises from a low pitch to a gradually becomes brilliant.
2. Prasannata: The opposite of Prasanna□di is Prasannata. That is, from a brilliant pitch to low pitch in a gradual way.
3. Prasannadyanta: The beginning of the note in the low pitch, the middle in the high pitch and the end in low pitch
4. Prasannamadhya: The beginning of the note in the high pitch, the middle in the low pitch and the end in high pitch is called Prasannamadhya.
5. Sama: That note which is equal and remains equal in all the pitch is called Sama.
6. Bindu: When a note in one speed-in low pitch touches the high pitch and comes back to the [aren’t pitch is called Bindu.

7. Nivrta-pravrta- The opposite of Bindu is Nivrta-pravrta. That is, a note in high pitch (in one speed) touches the low note and comes back to the parent pitch.
8. Venu- That in which the tempo is varied.
9. Kuhara- That in which the notes are varied (in a medium pitch)
10. Recita- The trembling of the notes in all the three pitches is Recita.
11. Kampita- The trembling of notes in the three speeds in the low pitch.
12. Prekholitaka- The notes (in all the three speeds) occur in ascending and descending order simultaneously.
13. Taramandraprasanna- When a note gradually falls down to low or medium pitch from a high pitch.
14. Mandratarapasanna- When four or five notes rise to a high pitch after skipping over other notes in the parent pitch.
15. Prasvara- When a note rises gradually from a single note.
16. Prasada- The opposite of Prasvara.
17. Udvahita- When two consecutive notes ascend and two such speeds make Udvahita.
18. Avalokita- When in Udvahita, the repeated speeds are in descending scale.
19. Krama- When speed is successive; one to seven consecutive notes ascend simultaneously.
20. Niskujita- The speed is a play in Niskujita. The notes in a speed after ascending to the next note and speed come back to the parent speed.
21. Udgita- The speed in Prasvara, the notes ascend and descend back.
22. Hradamana- The notes in Udgita in two speeds, come alternatively.
23. Ranjita- The two consecutive notes in two speeds arise half a speed and jumps to the next speed.
24. Avarta- Eight speeds and four consecutive notes in ascending and descending order.
25. Parivartaka- in the eight speeds, the note jumps to the higher note (that which is third from it) and descends in the same manner.
26. Udghattita- Consists of speeds which ascend for two notes and leaves the immediate note after ascending and then ascends to the next note.
27. Aksiptaka- contains six speeds and three notes.
28. Sampradana- Similar to Aksiptaka, but the notes are alternative.
29. Hasita- Consists of two speeds and consecutive notes like laughter.
30. Humkara- The same as Hasita, but the notes are ascending.
31. Sandhipracchadana- Having groups of four speeds and the notes ascending from the beginning to a high note.
32. Vidhuna- After producing the first song containing two short notes, each consecutive note must ascend to a higher pitch.
33. Gatravarna- The notes will ascend and descend back with a trembling.

It can be incurred that Bharata only gives the outer structure of the Alamkara and not the actual play between the notes within. That is for the performer to internalize and emote. At the end of each chapter Bharata humbly says that his theory and treatise was written only as a document and guide; the techniques and theories can vary as per time and as per the requirement of the exponent. But it is certainly the greatness of Bharata that all his theories are still applicable even to the present day and perhaps, to the coming generations as well because Bharata's theories and techniques are always left open-ended and universal.

All the thirty three Alamkaras mentioned by Bharata are directly applicable to both percussion instrument and to the aural rendition of the same (mnemonic syllables). 'Frets' is the common term used among the modern day Mrdangists to describe these nuances. In a way, Alamkaras and Gamakas and their rendition is not a direct unit or a part of the performance, but they are innate unifying forces of the performance connecting the minute-st of the glide to the biggest leap. Alamkaras and Gamakas serve as vectors in connecting one emotion to the corresponding emotion.

### **III. Tension-Retention Concept**

The birth of these unifying forces or can be theorised based on aesthetic experience:

“When a note is struck either through an instrument or produced from human throat, it creates a certain tension. This tension creates an equal and opposite retention. The conjoining of the previous note's tempered retention along with the following note's tension gives birth to Gamaka”.

Meaning- A note is a composite unit of a tension; this tension of the note will invariably form a retention (which takes birth almost immediate to that of the birth of the tension). Thus a note is a webbed state of, balance and counter balance of micro-tone. And naturally, when a performer travels from one note to the second, he will have to temper the counter-balance (retention) deliberately in order to move on to the corresponding note. This tempered counter-balance will now be the actual (created) tension of the corresponding

note. This process of tempering the counter-balance (or retention) of one note and tension of the other forms a certain bridge between the two notes. This bridge can be defined as Gamaka and Alamkara.

For example, suppose the note 'Sa' is struck, Sa produces a certain tension and retention. The tension is sustained for a while and when the next note is to be struck, Sa naturally has to be deliberately tempered to create the sthana for the consecutive note. Hence, the tempered retention of Sa and the sustained tension (now newly created or formed) of the consecutive note creates a certain bridge in the tonal pattern. This bridge is the Gamaka or Alamkara.

This bridge which is formed can be plain or can be severed further to exemplify the melody of the tonal pattern. And, the bridge is directly correspondent with two major factors. They are:

- The pattern of the notes. And,
- The Manodharma (creativity) of the artiste.

Gamakas are dependent on the Swarasthanas. The greater the distance between the notes, the lesser the Gamakas; since the attention of the artiste would immediately turn to touching or reaching the consecutive note from a certain pitch to the desired one. Hence, unless deliberate, the artiste will not concentrate on Gamaka while travelling between two different notes. The true capability of the artiste lies in this factor as well. In a way, Gamakas and Alamkaras help in creation of the Rasa (emotion) in the poem and in turn, the Asvadana (aesthetic experience) in the rendition to the spectator. The same-basic Sa can be rendered in different microtones, within the basal Srti. But ultimately it is always dependent on the Manodharma of the artiste

The same applies to the mnemonic syllables of percussion as well. The tension-retention concept can be better understood and applied through phonemes, because unlike the notes, phonemes are fragmentary units. Suppose, a pattern Tat-Dhin-Gi-Na-Tom is considered of percussion, each phoneme is a separate unit. The syllable Tat is a soft stroke on the percussion (a soft stroke with respect to the above considered pattern only). The corresponding syllable Dhin is a hard stroke. The letter 'Dha' or 'Dhi' is a mahaprana aksara, thus, naturally the syllable will be a hard stroke. Now, the transitions from Tat (a soft stroke) to Dhin (a hard stroke) must invariably have a 'bridge'. If not, the rendition will automatically sound un-aesthetic or 'not powerful or impactful'. The same is applicable to the transitions from Dhin to Gi (which is a soft stroke), and from Gi to Na and from Na to Tom. And at the end, the tension of the Am-kara in Tom is not a hard or a sharp stop, but it gradually decreases. And before it dissolutes completely, the next set of syllables would have begun thus making a chain of action/reaction, a continuous-iterative process.

Likewise, if the pattern Dha-Ne-Ku-Jham is considered, the travel between Dha and Ne is an immediate process because Dha is a hard stroke and a Mahaprana syllable and Na, is a Karkashavarna syllable, so it invariably creates a bridge in between the two. In the travel between the Na and Ku, there is a drop in the tone because Ku is an Alpaprana syllable and it is soft stroke. From the Ku to Jham, there is heightened pitch because Jham is a hard stroke and Mahaprana syllable by nature. Hence, in every case and in between every syllable there is a creation of bridge irrespective of the syllable.

The only difference between the Gamakas and Alamkaras of percussion syllables and the regular music notes is that, in the music notes the bridge which is created will be severed further to produced a diffused state called Raga while in percussion syllables the severed bridge is retained as it is.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

No matter how much Gamakas and Alamkaras are theorized, it always works as per the performer's capacity. From the perspective of psychology, it becomes easier for the mind to associate when there is a symmetry and order in a rendition. Gamakas act as cement in building a Raga (physically) and Rasa (psychologically). In other words, they fill up the gaps which are persistent between the notes. Gamakas and Alamkaras cannot be theoretically codified as a scientific derivation since they are intuition and experience based. Bharata, Matanga and Sarngadeva only enlist and describe the gross physical elements and do not deal with the nature of these unifying forces in detail because of the same reason- the Manodharma differs from each artiste and intuition is highly subjective. From the point view of spectator, addition of these unifying forces draws a smooth blend and 'neatness' in the presentation resulting in greater results. Gamakas and Alamkaras are not merely bound to performing arts, but the subtle embellishments are seen in every part of our mundane life. It is what keeps a man with motive to pursue further goals in life. Therefore, the concept of embellishments is universal; Independent of time, art form and artiste. The best that can be done is to leave it open-ended for these derive the meaning as per the intellectual capacity of a man.

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