

## *Rāgamālā* : Garland of Musical Melodies

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**T**he six major melodies (*rāgas*) and thirty-six minor melodies (*rāginīs*) with their beautiful bodies emanated from the Abode of Brahma, the Transcendental being, and sing hymns in honour of Brahma Himself.

- Nārada, *Pañcama Sāra Samhitā*, 1440 CE, tr. O.C. Gangoly

The diversity characterizing the musical forms of India, undoubtedly, reflect an entire array of racial, linguistic and cultural variance of the subcontinent. Over the centuries, music served as one of the primal sustaining components of sacred ceremonies and secular festivities. Ancient Indian scriptures refer to the origin of music as a divine phenomenon, all the three deities of Hindu triade, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, being the primordial musicians. Consequently, the 'divine beginnings' of music was codified over the centuries and, as laid down in the Sanskrit canons, the classical form had melody (*rāga*) and rhythm (*tāla*) as vital constituents. However, the use of drone is a fundamental element of the classical music, usually provided by a wind instrument or a plucked stringed instrument, tuned to a pitch suited to the principal performer. The classical melodic forms were presented usually accompanied by a melody instrument set to the principal melody line and one or more percussion instruments to mark the time measure and act as the rhythmic counterpoint.

The conception of *rāgas* and *rāginīs* are the basic principles of Indian music and they have no exact parallel in any other musical tradition. The nature of a *rāga*, a melody-mould or musical pattern, as has been defined by Mataṅga (c. 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE), the ancient authority, in his seminal treatise *Brihaddesi* is as follows: "A *rāga* is identified by the enlightened ones as a kind of sound

composition adorned with musical notes in some peculiarly stationary (*sthāyī*), or ascending (*ārohaṇa*), or moving (*sancari*) values (*varṇa*), which have the effect of colouring the hearts of men". In its literary connotation, a *rāga* would mean "something that colours, or tinges the mind" with some definite feeling, an influx of passion, or emotion (*rasa*). The "colouring" caused by a *rāga* is certainly associated to a certain spatio-temporal context and is bound to differ. Every *rāga* has its special sequence of ascending notes (*āroha*) and descending notes (*avaroha*) that determines its structure or *thāṭ* (lit. an array or setting). A *rāga* experience would change from dawn to dusk, from a sunny afternoon to a moonlit night, from spring to autumn, so on and so forth. On the basis of this, *rāgas* and *rāginīs* were associated with particular moods and regions, with particular seasons and, categorically, to the explicit hours of the day and night. For example, *Dīpaka rāga* was associated with fire and scorching heat while the recital of *Megha rāga*, in contrast, was ideal for the season of clouds and rains, its flawless rendition promising downpour. Similarly, *Vasanta rāga* is meant to express the joy of life in spring and *Naṭa rāga*, the heroic martial spirit of the man. *Bhairavī rāgini* is the plaintive morning melody of love and devotion, and *rāga Yaman* is meant to evoke the somber, explicitly devotional mood in the early hours of the evening. A *rāga* is not a song or tune, on the other hand numberless songs can be composed in a certain *rāga*-mould.

Bharata in his *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c.2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), a celebrated work dealing with dramaturgy in all its aspects, made a reference to *grāma-rāgas* as certain musical entities to be performed as a part of the enactment of a drama. The Kudumiyamalai inscription of c.7<sup>th</sup> century CE on a flat rocky surface in the old native state of Pudukkottai in Tamilnadu, describes seven *grāma-rāgas*. Spread over an area of approximately sixteen square meters, this seminal inscription commissioned by the art-loving Pallava kings serves as a meaningful link between the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the subsequent textual references regarding the *rāga* classification. Mataṅga was the first to discuss the *rāga* categorization in detail. Next important text to focus on the subject was *Saṅgīta Ratnākara*. A scholar with a passion for music, Sāraṅgadeva hailed originally from Kashmir and during his stay at Devagiri (Daultabad) in Deccan between 1210 and 1247 CE completed this encyclopaedic work. In *Saṅgīta Ratnākara*, he presented a survey of *rāgas* according to his fore-runners including Mataṅga.

With a view to emphasize the divine qualities of music, each *rāga* and *rāginī* was attributed with a particular *rūpa* or psychic form. Further, the psychic form was divided into the invisible sound form or the *nādamaya rūpa* and tangible or image form referred to as *devatāmaya rūpa*. It was required on the part of a performer (*kalāvanta*) to imbibe the presiding spirit or ethos of a melody and please the deified form. *Rāga-dhyānas* or contemplative prayer-formulas were devised for the purpose, passed on from the master (*ācārya, ustād*) to the student. A melodic rendition cannot be successful without a proper invocation of the deified form and any amount of mastery over the musical structure would not ensure the attainment of the divine essence inherent in every *rāga*. Sri Kantha in his *Rasa-Kaumudī* (c.1575 CE) laid down the injunction that “those unskillful singers who attempt to interpret any melody without following the image given in the contemplative verse (*dhyāna*), can never achieve the spiritual values (*phala*) prescribed in the science of music (*saṅgīta śāstra*)”. In past, the *rāga-rāginī* iconographies as enjoined in the descriptive *dhyāna* verses were carefully studied by all practitioners of Indian music. An important segment of music-lore, the *rāga-dhyāna* verses were available in Sanskrit, *Braja-bhāṣa* and even in Persian. The visual illustrations in the form of *rāgamālā* paintings followed the *rāga-dhyānas* in order to portray the *rasa* or the emotive essence of a particular melody.

In Nārada's *Saṅgīta Makaranda*, datable between 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, do we come across the earliest classification system of six *rāgas* as male and six *rāginīs*, attached to each *rāga*, as females forming six cohesive families, *rāga-parivāra*. Strangely, this system was not followed by the painters. Also, it is in the *Saṅgīta Makaranda* that we find a classification of *rāgas* according to the proper hour for rendition. Mesakarna or Kṣemakarna, a 16<sup>th</sup> century rhetorician from Rewa (central India), in his treatise *Rāgamālā* compiled the elaborate system of six *rāgas*, each with five *rāginīs* and eight *rāga-putras*. This system of *rāgamālā* composition belongs to the period before the revival of Indian music under emperor Akbar, renowned for his musical acumen and catholicity of artistic taste. It had been followed in a restricted manner with some changes by the painters attached to the princedoms of Rajasthan and Deccan whereas in the *rāgamālā* sets of miniatures belonging to the Pahari tradition this system was adopted all along.

Mesakarna or Kṣemakarna's system of building up a compositional pattern of melodies as stated in his remarkable text *Rāgamālā* (one manuscript with a colophon dated CE 1509) is quoted below:

#### BHAIRAVA RĀGA

- 5 *Rāginīs* : Vangālī, Bhairavī, Velavalī, Puṇyakī, Snehakī.  
 8 *Rāga-putras* : Vangāla, Pañcama, Madhu, Harṣa, Deśakh, Lalit, Velāval, Mādhava.

#### MĀLA-KOUSIKA RĀGA

- 5 *Rāginīs* : Guṇḍagri (Gouḍakri), Gandhāriṇī, Śrīhathī, Mālaśrī, Dhanaśrī (Andhreyakī).  
 8 *Rāga-putras* : Māru, Mevāḍa, Varvalī, Mistānga, Candrakāya, Bhramara, Nandana, Khokhara/Kokkara.

#### HINDOLA RĀGA

- 5 *Rāginīs* : Tilaṅgī or Bhūpālī, Devagiri, Vāsanti, Sindhūrī, Abhirī.  
 8 *Rāga-putras* : Mangala, Candravimva, Subhraṅga, Ānanda, Vibhāṣa, Vardhana, Vinoda, Vasanta.

#### DĪPAKA RĀGA

- 5 *Rāginīs* : Kāmodinī, Paṭamañjarī, Toḍī, Gūjjarī, Kahelī or Sāraṅgī.  
 8 *Rāga-putras* : Kamala, Kusuma, Rama, Kuntala, Kaliṅga, Vahula, Campaka, Hemala.

#### ŚRĪRĀGA

- 5 *Rāginīs* : Vairaṭī, Karnāṭika, Saverī, Gouḍī, Rāmagirī.  
 8 *Rāga-putras* : Sindhava, Mālava, Gouḍa, Gambhīra, Guṇasāgara, Vigada, Kalyāṇa, Kurabha or Agāda.

#### MEGHA RĀGA

- 5 *Rāginīs* : Mallarī, Sorathī, Suhavī, Asāvarī, Kokanī.  
 8 *Rāga-putras* : Naṭa, Kanara, Sāraṅga, Kedāra, Gauḍ Mallāra, Guṇḍa, Jālandhara, Saṅkarā.

Some of the earliest *rāga-dhyānas* (contemplative prayer-formulas) inscribed on the surviving specimens of *rāgamālā* paintings have been credited to the ancient theoretician, Hanumāna, who may have lived between 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Regarded as one of the commentators of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, he propounded a system of six *rāgas* with five *rāginīs* each. His *rāgamālā* scheme is as follows:

## BHAIRAVA RĀGA

5 *Rāginīs* : Madhumādhavī, Bhairavī, Baṅgālī, Varāṭī (Bairādī), Saindhavī.

## MĀLKOS RĀGA

5 *Rāginīs* : Toḍī, Gaurī, Guṇakalī, Kakubha, Khambhāvati.

## HINḌOLA RĀGA

5 *Rāginīs* : Velāvalī, Rāmakalī, Deśaka, Paṭamañjarī, Lalita.

## DĪPAKA RĀGA

5 *Rāginīs* : Kedārī, Kānadā, Desī, Kāmodī, Naṭa / Naṭikā.

## ŚRĪ RĀGA

5 *Rāginīs* : Vasantī, Māru or Mālavī, Mālaśrī, Asāvarī, Dhanasika (Dhanaśrī)

## MEGHA RĀGA

5 *Rāginīs* : Mallārī, Deśakarī, Bhūpālī, Gurjarī, Tanka.

The exhaustive research in the area of *rāgamālā* miniatures and musical texts led Klaus Ebeling to conclude with a "Painters' System". He could locate in approximately two thousand inscribed paintings the continuity of this particular mode of an obscure origin. The "Painters' System" in its detailed breakdown, documented by Ebeling, is as follows:

## RĀGA BHAIRAVA

5 *Rāginīs* : Bhairavī, Naṭa, Mālaśrī, Paṭamañjarī, Lalita.

## RĀGA MĀLKOS

5 *Rāginīs* : Gaurī, Khambhāvati, Mālavī, Rāmakalī, Guṇakalī.

## RĀGA HINḌOLA

5 *Rāginīs* : Bilāval, Toḍī, Deśākha, Devagandhāra, Madhumādhavī.

## RĀGA DĪPAKA

5 *Rāginīs* : Dhanaśrī, Vasanta, Kānadā, Bairadī, Desavarātī or Pūrvī.

## RĀGA MEGHA

5 *Rāginīs* : Gujarī, Gauḍa-mallāra, Kukubha, Vibhāṣa, Bangāl.

## RĀGA ŚRĪ

5 *Rāginīs* : Pañcama, Kamod, Set-malhāra, Asāvarī, Kedāra.

A passage from O.C. Gangoly's essay entitled "*Deification and Visualization of Melodies*" is worth quoting: "The objective of the *rāga* is the *rasa*, the aesthetic emotion, the theme, the subject matter, the motif of the melody. As the soul must inhabit a body, so every *rasa* is incarnated in the *rūpa* (form) of particular *rāga* or *rāginī*. To invoke the *rasa*, one must meditate upon the *rūpa*. Each particular form of *rāga* is suitable for the expression of a particular type of *rasa* . . . A musician should therefore, have a knowledge of the relation of the *rāgas* to their associated *rasas* . . . The *devatās* (deities) of the world of music have also their *dhyānas*, contemplative prayer-formulas, but they usually take a dramatic pattern, rather than the static iconic phrase of the religious images. They are the picturization of emotions in a concrete and plastic form answering to, rather than symbolizing, the abstract states of the mind. They are depicted in an appropriate dramatic and emotional setting, the surrounding circumstances which give rise to the various emotions." Gangoly further explained the nuances of *rāga-dhyāna* as follows: "In many of these personifications, particularly those which have many phases of human love for their theme, the principles of old Indian love-lore and erotics (*rasaśāstra*) have been applied and the personages have been conceived in terms of the classic conventions of "love heroes" (*nāyakas*) and "love heroines" (*nāyikās*) in all the rich variety of their moods and types. The introduction of these poetical ideas has not only enriched the significance of the musical expressions, but has, also, helped to achieve a happy and a subtle unification of literary and musical ideas. It is a profoundly expressed truth that music begins where the language of words fail."

### **Imaging Rāgamālās**

Miniatures of musical inspiration form one of the most captivating genres of Indian painting. Some of the masterworks of highly gifted painters are veritably portable little jewels, a connoisseur's everlasting delight. Quite like the classical tradition of Indian chamber music, an ideal spectator needs to savour leisurely, intently and rather privately the "emotional substance of the various musical modes visible to the eyes." Needless to add, while his eyes would invariably hear, his ears in turn would ever enhance visualizing process of the inward eye. The depiction of musical melodies on the single-sheet album folios forming a complete *rāgamālā* set as also those on the wall (particularly, in the palace of Bir Singh Dev at Datia and Badal Mahal at Bundi, Rajasthan) beautifying

the palace interiors, followed the *rāga-rāginī* iconography laid down in the elaborate musical theory and canonical literature (*śāstra*). It is not surprising to find in a few surviving examples of courtly embroidery from Mughal north India, painted enamels from Hyderabad and *theva* (gold work on coloured glass) works from Partabgarh, the continuity of the same *rāgamālā* iconography for the simple reason that such artefacts were also master-minded invariably by the same hereditary painter-ornamentalists proficient in imaging musical melodies. Closely related to the cardinal concept of *śṛṅgāra* (the erotic sentiment) that originated in Sanskrit poetics and eventually popularized in late-medieval Hindi devotional poetry, the music-inspired themes were generously fed with variegated sentiments of love, in states of enraptured union or ceaseless lament. Eventually, the poetry, painting and music were brought into an altogether new relationship.

### The Earliest Surviving *Rāgamālā* Paintings

The depiction of six multi-armed male deities, labelled as *rāga*, and thirty-six female figures as *rāginī* on the back of twelve *Kalpasūtra* folios are the earliest known *rāgamālā* paintings to have survived (Fig.1). These are datable to c. 1475 CE on stylistic ground and were formerly in the collection of the late Jaina Ācārya Jaya-simha Suriḥ of Ahmedabad. The system followed in this *rāgamālā* series of forty-two paintings correspond to a certain degree to the *rāga*-classification system of the rhetorician Kallinātha (CE 1460), the famous commentator of the musical treatise *Saṅgīta Ratnākara*. These small little paintings are dominated by the anthropomorphic presence of the melodic form, personified as gods and geniuses. The *rāginīs* are referred to as *bhāṣā* and they resemble to a degree the celestial dancers painted on the margins of several other contemporary *Kalpasūtras* from Gujarat, finished with opulent details in gold and scintillating hues. In terms of *rāgamālā* iconography, these paintings acquire a unique position as no second *Kalpasūtra* manuscript with such *rāgamālā* paintings are known. Also, the six *rāgas* namely, Śrī, Vasanta, Bhairava, Pañcama, Megha and Naṭa Nārāyaṇa, as a group never preside any *rāgamālā* system. Strangely, many of the *rāginīs* depicted on this *Kalpasūtra* were never mentioned in the later *rāga-rāginī* schemes.

The next surviving *rāgamālā* set from Uttar Pradesh or Palam (Delhi), datable to c.1540-1570 CE, adhere to an iconographic system that eventually became the “mainstream of the Rajasthani tradition” (Fig.2). Originally, this



Fig.1 : Rāgas and Rāginīs, *Kalpasūtra*, c.1475, opaque water-colour and gold on paper, Collection unknown, after Ebeling, C48, p.121



Fig.2 : Vasanta and Kanhado (Kānadā), Painters system, c.1540-1570, opaque water colour and gold on paper  
 J.P. Goenka Collection, reproduced from Goswamy, *Painted Visions*, Pl.18, p.21

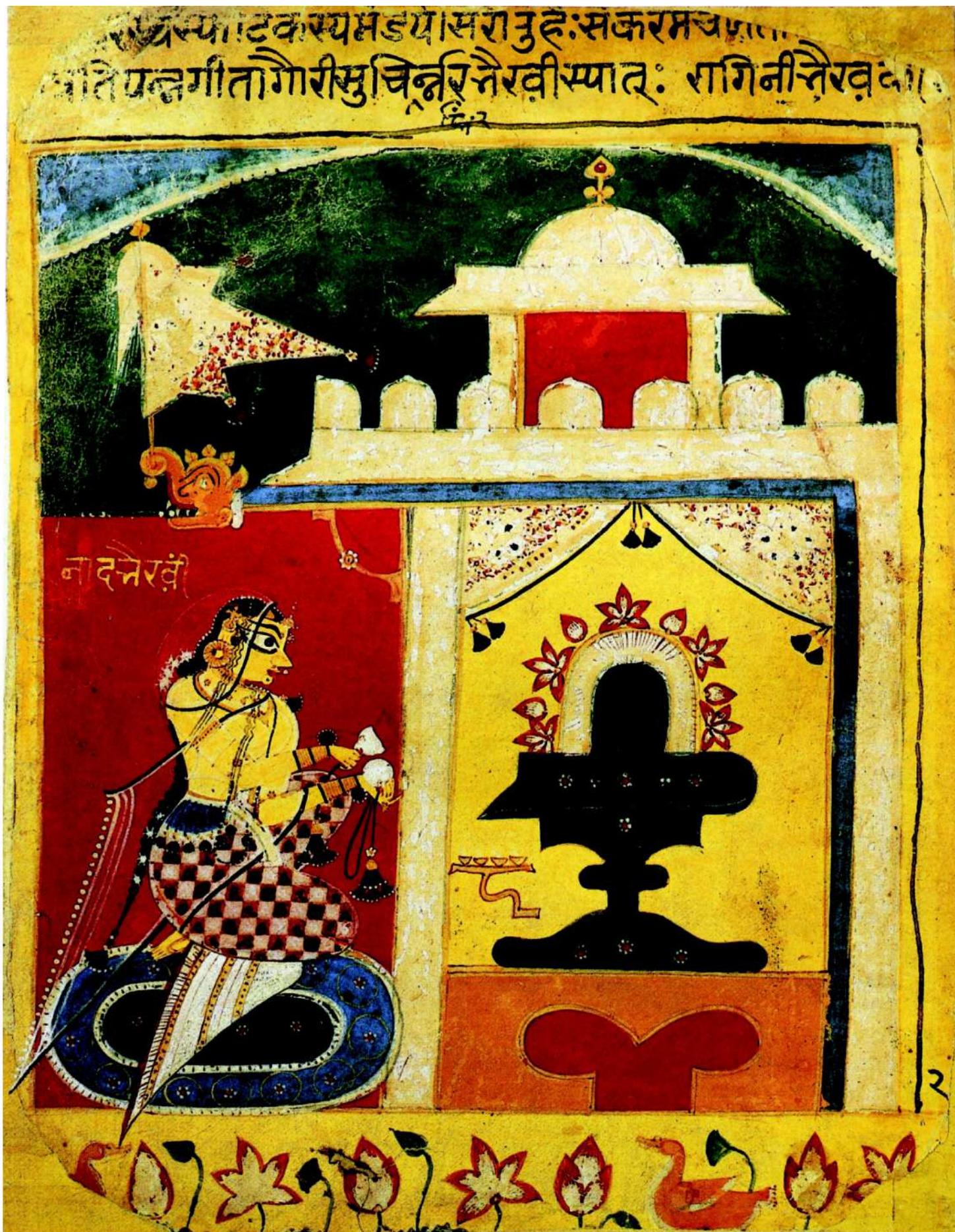


Fig.3 : *Rāgini Bhairavī*, c.1540-1570, opaque water-colour and gold on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum

important set had 36 paintings, arranged in pairs on horizontal folios, out of which only 20 exist. The *rāgamālā* series was formerly in the collection of the late Jaina Muni Vijayendra Suri. Couplets in *Braja-bhāṣā*, a Hindi dialect of the Agra region, were inscribed on the back of the paintings. The *rāgamālā* set represents a classification system of obscure origin that was, however, followed by the Rajasthani painters of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Stylistically belonging to the same group is an isolated depiction of *rāginī* Bhairavī (Fig.3) in vertical format, inscribed with a *rāga-dhyāna* couplet in Sanskrit attributed to poet Kaśyapa(?) by Ebeling.

### Suggested Reading

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