CHAPTER TWO

STRUCTURE OF THE NAGASWARAM

While studying the structure the Nagaswaram one must also analyse the structure of its allied instruments and ancestors. The Pungi or the snake charmers pipe, which is believed to be the ancestor of the Nagaswaram, was called by different names. It was called the Been, Tumbi and Nagasara in northern India whereas in the south it is called Mahudi, Pungi and Pambaati Kuzhal. Both the Nagaswaram and the Nagasara are reed wind instruments. It is the opinion of Dr Suneera Kasliwal that Nagasara was the general term used for all reed wind instruments initially. Later on, the two pipes of the pungi (one for melody and one for the drone) got separated, the melodious one evolving as the present day Nagaswaram and its accompanying drone as the Otthu or sruti. It is important to note that these days the electronic sruti box has replaced the Otthu Nagaswaram.

The Kahale of the 12th Century was a two meter long war horn which had a body of metal with a flower like formation at one end. It was also a Mangala vadhya like the Nagaswaram. The Mukhaveena is a miniature Nagaswaram which is higher in pitch than the present day Nagaswaram (Kasliwal, 2001)\(^3\). The Mukhaveena was also called Alguja in the northern parts of India. It used to be accompanied by a Danki, a small side-drum (Sambamurthy, Musical instruments of Southern India, 1930 )\(^3\). It was also played along with the sruthi and the Maddalam (a variety of drum) in temples during minor services. All the double reed aerophones like Nagaswarm, Shahnai, Mukhaveena, Nafiri etc. are based on the same structural mechanisms and sound producing techniques. There are a few minor differences which mostly lie in the sizes and pitch.

The blowing reed which is attached to the mouth of the Nagaswaram is called by various names. In Karnataka it is the Peepi, whereas in Tamil Nadu it is Seevali and in Andhra Pradesh it is called the Aku. This reed is made from a marshy tall growing grass widely found on the banks of the Cauvery River. The reed which acts as a valve is attached to a metal staple. This reed was also referred to as “Kendai Jeevali” by leading Nagaswaram exponent Tiruveezhimizhalai Subramanya Pillai

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\(^3\) Dr Suneera Kasliwal- Classical Musical Instruments
\(^3\) Prof P Sambamurthy –1930 Music Academy Journal, Pg. 47-48
(Pillai T. S., 1957)\(^3\). Around the *Seevali* a thread is wound to form a beading between the Nagaswaram blow-hole. This ensures that the Seevali sits tightly in place. A wobble in the Seevali results in a shaky Sangathi. Spare reeds and an ivory needle which is used to adjust the reeds are kept hanging from the mouth of the Nagaswaram. The staple is inserted into the main wooden body of the Nagaswaram which enlarges downward into a wide funnel mouth. This wide funnel shaped mouth is called as *Keezh Anaisu*.

Fig 9: Structure of Nagaswaram

Source: Dr Suneera Kasliwal- Classical Musical Instruments

The *Bari* and *Timiri* are two varieties of the Nagaswaram. The length of the Bari Nagaswaram varies from 2- 2 \(^{1/2}\) feet, whereas the Timri is smaller and resembles the Shehenai of the North. Made of the Blackwood tree *"Achameram"* it is sometimes covered with silver or gold. The Bari Nagaswaram was played only by the artists maintained by the Tiruvaarur Temple. It was not to be played outside the temple for any purpose what so ever. Everywhere else, including the Chidambaram temple used

\(^3\) Music Academy Journal - 1957- Pg. 11
the Timiri Nagaswaram which was much higher in Pitch. However, the most famous Nagaswaram Vidwan of all times, Vid TN Rajarathnam Pillai made a few important changes in the structure of the Timiri Nagaswaram to reduce its pitch. This made it sound more majestic and suited the modern trends of Karnataka classical music where singing at a higher pitch among men or instrumentalists was no longer a fashion. Today what we see being played most commonly is the elongated and reduced in pitch Timiri called the Nadu-Bari.

There are seven playing holes plus five auxiliary ones. These five auxiliary holes are used only to adjust the pitch can be stopped with wax to modify the tone. They are slightly tilted from the other seven and are called “Brahmswaram”. Plugging one or two of the Brahmswaram with wax can either raise or lower the sruthi of the instrument.

The other Nagaswaram used for the sruthi is called the “Othu”. It is played as an accompaniment to the lead pipe just to maintain the pitch. Similar in shape and construction it is longer than the lead Nagaswaram. It is a wooden conical instrument of two and a half feet with five or six holes at the farthest end (towards the enlarged mouth). These holes are wholly or partially plugged according to the pitch of the lead instrument. The sruthi swaras are produced continuously without a break by using a special method of blowing involving a circulatory movement. This circulatory breathing and blowing of the Othu ensured the continuity of sound. No other instrument in the yester years enjoyed as much continuity of sound as the Nagaswaram and it fired the imagination of many leading vocalists such as GN Balasubrahmanian, Vid Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, and Sangeetha Kalanidhi PS Narayanawami etc. He described that when graha swaras were sustained against the sruti of the Othu and phrases developed around them during raga alapana, a brilliant effect of contrast was heard. The sruti of the plain note had to be precise to create an effect of harmony when two swaras were held against each other.

The Nagaswaram has no keys for playing unlike the Saxophone or clarinet. The fingers of the musician come into direct contact of the holes. It requires great skill and concentration to produce all the quarter notes by partially closing the holes with appropriate fingering and breathe control. Yet it is this lack of keys which facilitates the production of the meend and gamakas (trills, shakes and graces on the melodic
scale) of Indian classical music. However, unlike the flute where semi and quarter tones are produced by the partial opening and closing of the finger holes, in the Nagaswaram they are primarily produced by adjusting the pressure and strength of the air-flow into the pipe. This means that the semi and quarter tones are produced by the breath of the Nagaswaram player. This technique is very close to the technique of vocal singing or the production of sound, where the breath from the lungs and diaphragm are used to create a colour of air which in turn creates vibration in the vocal chords. The vocalist uses his mouth uses his mouth as a resonator whereas the Nagaswaram player uses his instrument as an outer extension to create a more powerful sound. According to leading Nagaswaram exponent Vid Meheboob Subhani and Dr BM Sundaram, TNR was known was known to have a great shareeram (Vocal timbre and flexibility). He could sing in the same speed and render all the brigas he played in the Nagaswaram using his voice. Ample gramophone records of his singing stand testimony to his singing prowess.

Due to its great volume and strength it is largely an outdoor instrument and much more suited for open spaces than indoor concerts. It is rhythmically accompanied by the Tavil which is also called Dholu in Telugu and Kannada. Large cymbals made of bell metal called Talam are also used to keep track of the Tala with the Nagaswaram.

Nagaswaram being a Mangala Vadhyam was essential for temple rituals. This could have been for a simple reason that stringed instruments, no matter how large, could not produce a sound large enough to be audible in the crowded temple scenario. The Nagaswaram has always been the principal instrument among an ensemble consisting of two Otthus’, tavil, talam and sometimes Shankham. This ensemble is called the Periya Melam or Pedda Melam. The Periya Melams was also used for marriages, royal processions and other temple festivities.

Most Nagaswaram players use the fingers of the left hand for playing the upper holes (nearest to the seevali) and the right hand for the lower holes. Sarangadeva’s Sangeetha Rathnakara specifies that the left hand fingers be used for the upper holes in its chapter on wind instruments. However Vid Sheik Chinna Moulana one of the stalwarts of the Nagaswaram, preferred to play the instrument in the reverse order. The reverse order of playing does not result in any sort of change in
the playing technique or in the quality of music that is produced according to Meheboob Subhani. It is merely a matter of convenience.

**STRUCTURAL CHANGES**

One of the most important structural changes was made by Nagaswaram Chakravarthy Vid TN Rajaratnam Pillai. It was he who developed the present and popular form of *Nada-Bari* Nagaswaram (*AUDIO R2.1*). The older *Timiri* Nagaswaram (*AUDIO R2.2*) which was smaller had a much higher pitch of G or G Sharp. In an attempt to bring a more majestic, heavy sound and to increase the base quality of the instrument TNR reduced its pitch to D or D Sharp by increasing the length and size of the Nagaswaram. The shrill sound was reduced with an intention of making the instrument universally appealing. The sonority of the instrument is best heard at the pitch of D. According to senior Nagaswaram Vid Semmpanarkoil Rajanna, the Timiri was quite difficult to play. It also had certain minor structural disadvantages. One such disadvantage was that sustaining on the shuddha madhyama was very difficult and it was not clearly audible. TN Rajaratnam Pillai worked with a famous Nagaswaram craftsman from the town of Narasiningapettai called Ranganatha Achari. They worked together to bring in a richer tonal quality in the new structure and also ensured that the new Nagaswaram would accommodate the rendition of the Shuddha Madhyama in an easier way. The sons of Ranganatha Achari carry on the traditional occupation of crafting Nagaswaram and are experts in this field till this day.

**SIGNIFICANCE AND SALIENT FEATURES OF THE NAGASWARAM**

During the course of my interviews with many established musicians it became evident that the music of the Nagaswaram was always held in high esteem. Yet there seems to be a general notion that Nagaswaram is not part of mainstream Karnataka classical music. According to Dr Mysore M Manjunath the Nagaswaram music of the yester years is probably the only kind which could give us a clue as to the original nature and content of ancient Karnataka classical music. There has always been a debate whether the Nagaswaram music is Karnataka classical music in its purest form or not. Scholars such as R Vedavalli believe that Karnataka classical music has evolved and changed so much that pointing out which style is pure has become a matter of opinion. However it is the traditional belief of most senior
musicians including Dr RK Srikantan that some of the main contributions to the core
content, especially in the realm of *Manodharma Sangeetha* or the art of improvisation
in Karnataka music has been from the Nagaswaram.

Karnataka Music like all other Indian music has its genesis from the early
primitive modes of rendition. At a time when the swaras were evolving and the gamut
of the raga based music system was being formed, music is said to have been quite
uniform across all communities of the Indian race. Slowly as community and social
structures became more complex so did music. A gradual bifurcation in the kind of
music being practised by the primitive and learned occurred. Thus music began to
form different genres as to Folk and classical. While folk music remained exclusive
and distinctive of each Tribe, classical music became a wider phenomenon which was
patronised by the temples, kings and later elites. However classical music was as
much a phenomenon of the villages as the towns. Most Karnataka classical musicians
gained their training in their villages and moved to the cities much later on in their
performing careers. Douglas M Knight shares the same view and goes on to say that
“India’s intellectual and artistic wealth sprang from villages as much as it did from the
cities, and more often than not was imported from the countryside to cities where
palaces and major temples existed” (Jr, 2010)\(^{38}\). One must remember the genesis of
Classical music as a genre was always for a religious purpose and hence the temple
patronage. Slowly society began to be stratified into various castes and communities
and music become a specialisation of each segment. The Nagaswaram became an
instrument very dear to the *Isai Vellala* community which thrived on music for its
livelihood until very recently. The practise of making music ones profession was a
very ancient practise in India. Many of the Isai Vellala women who took up classical
dance were known as *Devadasi* or temple dancers. They were probably the only
women in society who were literate and trained in the fine-arts. They also moved in
the upper circles of society. Some exceptional women took up instruments such as the
Veena, while the men took up the Nagaswaram or Tavil, or became accompanying
artists to the Devadasis’ as part of the Chinna melam. The men also became
Nattuvanars’ who were highly regarded musicians who trained the young Devadasis
and also served as composers for Varnas’ Padas and many such music compositions.

\(^{38}\) *Balasaraswati – Her art and life by Douglas M Knight Jr. Page 11*
The Isai Vellala’s chief source of patronage was the Temple. The other source of patronages were the wealthy land lords or merchants.

The Veena on the other hand became the favourite instrument of the literati. Thus it received immense royal patronage and many lakshana-granthas (musicological treatises) were written documenting each step in its evolution. Slowly many aspects of music like Tana and Gamaka began to shine like gem stones on the Veena as its music became more refined. Since it enjoyed patronage of the royal courts and educated segments of society it became a pradarshini Vadhya (An instrument used to demonstrate, explain and explore various aspects of Karnataka classical music such as the 22 srutis and graha bheda, which were recorded in state funded musicological treatises). Many new concepts in Karnataka classical music evolved taking the Veena as an able partner and these concepts gradually started defining the principles of Karnataka classical music according to the socio political developments.

However the Nagaswaram flourished quite away from these musicological developments in Karnataka music. Their musical legacy was passed from generation to another through Karna parampara (oral traditions) and they were performing musicians. Neither the temple nor the wealthy landlords, who were the chief patron of the Nagaswaram community, had any use for musicological treatises or documentation. There was no musicological propaganda (a display of ones knowledge) involved except a show of social status and wealth when it came to hiring the service of the Nagaswaram melam. While the temple expected the Nagaswaram melam to render its music as an offering to god, the wealthy merchants looked upon them as a Mangala Vadyam for family functions and a high quality entertainment suitable to the tastes of the upper class. Thus this hereditary community of musicians devoted all their time to the teaching, learning and performing of music. Musical knowledge was handed down as part of a traditional inheritance and most of it orally. A good example of this kind of oral tradition can be found in the illustrious Isai Vellalar family of Veena Dhannamal, documented by Douglas M. Knight JR who goes on to say “The extended family’s vast repertoire of more than one thousand orally retained compositions and intimate knowledge of the performance of more than one hundred musical modes (ragas) embraces the core of the South Indian musical
Similarly the Nagaswaram musicians weaved magical music from part instinct and part traditional knowledge. Unaffected by the new systems of rules and structural changes, the Nagaswaram music continued to evolve with a very earthy sense of freedom. They relied on Raga bhava rather than Raga lakshana while creating music and passing it on to the next generation. The feel of the raga took precedence over the grammar. Which means they dared to play many innovative sancharas (musical phrases), which might not have been included in the lakshana granthas of the time. The new phrases only had to conform to the over soul and feel of the raga. Vidwan Sanjay Subrahmanyan recalls having heard Nagaswaram Vidwans elaborate a stunning Dhanyasi raga while choosing to highlight the Dhaivatha by standing on it as well! He gave a vocal demonstration of what he had heard being played quite often by the Nagaswaram musicians (AUDIO R2.3). They concentrated more on the performance of Karnataka classical music and did not document their own music in any form. The format of their music also ensured that they enjoyed immense artistic freedom during improvisation. Their music did not rely on compositions irrespective of the fact that the Krithi emerged as a powerful medium of music expression during the 18th century. It caught up to the Krithi much later during the late 19th and 20th centuries in its long history. Nagaswaram music remained a tiny island of pristine musical wealth, untouched by the changes occurring in the musical ecosystems around it till the last century. Nagaswaram music can be said to hold the key to the door of a by-gone era of Karnataka classical music, before the age of changing patronage and music compositions changed the face of our music.

It is often called a Rakshasa Vadhya (an instrument that is demonic to subdue). One needs asura sadhane (the strength and practise of a wizard) to master it and the nature of its music is in itself awe inspiring. It is an instrument that relies solely on improvisation as a format and when Manodharma is an infinite phenomenon one can only imagine the limitless possibilities of the instrument. Renowned violinist Prof Dr Mysore M Manjunath when talking about instruments spoke about how each instrument has its inherent strengths and weaknesses. He went on to add that the Nagaswaram is probably the only instrument which has the barest minimum number of disadvantages. In term of volume, tone, power, speed and continuity the Nagaswaram enjoys great advantages. The Nagaswaram was one of those rare

39 Balasaraswati, Her Art & Life – Douglas M Knight JR. Pg. 5
instruments which struck a balance between art for the sake of art and art for the sake of society in the ancient times. Even though its existence was centred on the temple rituals and town festivities, the structure of its music repertoire provided ample scope for artistic expression through Manodharma Sangeeta. Until the emergence of Krithis and the Sabhas it did not rely on lyrical compositions to carry forth its musical expression. For a long time it was free from the pressures of having to follow a Gayaki-shaili (vocal style). It is very interesting to note that in spite of gaining a ritualistic significance and a close association with temples, their music was predominantly improvised. They enjoyed boundless freedom to explore Raga during raga alapana and played many innovative music phrases. This is also because the compositions from their traditional repertoire were structured to facilitate manodharma. At the same time they had to abide by the rules of temple tradition and Gana-kala niyama (time theory). The short Timiri of the yester years served as a time keeper for rural folk as its sound travelled 4 to 5 miles during various stages of temple service. The Nagaswaram players were known to revel in elaborate raga alapana, which could stretch on for hours together. They played Alapana through the night till dawn, when the temple deity came out for the procession. Thousands of people lined the streets to listen to the pied pipers whose manodharma rose to great heights on these occasions. It was these bouts which caught the imagination of the general public. Contributing to the inspiration behind their raga alapana was the rapport between the audience and the performer during the processions’. Even today there is a difference in the kind of audience which attends Nagaswaram concerts and there is a difference in their reactions to the music. The Krishna Gana Sabha in Chennai is known to conduct an exclusive Nagaswaram festival every year. The audience here is very interactive and vocal about their appreciation, when compared to the audience for other concerts such as vocal, veena or flute etc. they express their appreciation spontaneously with happy remarks and excited gestures which is quite a contrast to the often austere Sabha audience. During the all night processions the overall ambience transcended constrains of space and time. The audience comprised of people from neighbouring villages too and they were prepared for the open air music festival all night for nearly six hours or more. The close interaction between the audience (who stood alongside or right behind the players) and the performers acted as a stimulant for the musicians and they brought out their best to hear shouts of bravo from the audience. This was most prominent during alapana, swara prasthara and laya
The Nagaswaram music tradition has no separate category for Rakthi Ragas. Any raga they choose to elaborate and do so successfully becomes a Rakthi Raga. This is why they were able to elaborate ragas such as Nadanamakriya and Huseini as part of their traditional repertoire. Vid Sanjay Subrahmanian has spoken about this free music played in an open air being much more pro-active to the musical mind and to the Nagaswaram in his award acceptance speech at Bramha Gana Sabha. One has to mention that the Nagaswaram musicians never play with their eyes closed.

Gamaka have always been the very essence of Indian classical music. From time immemorial our music has a characteristic embellishment of each note which has been discussed in great lengths in all the Lakshana Granthas. It is this oscillation of musical notes that slowly evolved into giving Indian music its identity when most other systems of music in the world continued using straight notes. Gamaka are vital in determining the melodic character of a raga. Parsvadeva defines the Gamakas in his Sangita samaya sara as a musical note that produces the colour of the Srutis other than its own. Sarangadeva in his Sangita Ratnakara enlists 15 gamakas while other ancient musicologists give many other numbers and description. The Veena was used to demonstrate and study gamakas. The panchadasha gamakas of Sarangadeva form the basis of most of the other gamakas which have been enumerated in later treatises. They are Tiripa, Sphurita, Kampita, Lina, Andolita, Vali, Tribhinna, Kurula, Ahata, Ullasita or Jaru, Plavitha, Gumpita or Humpita, Mudrita, Namita, and Mishritha.

It is believed that the Veena’s gamaka usages influenced many. Gamakas have always been a part of Indian classical music. Ornamental shakes of musical notes can also be found in various forms in the music of other countries across Asia, like China. The origin of Gamakas is in Indian music is a mystery, however the Veena was always used to demonstrate them. The Nagaswaram is another instrument that has all the structural advantages of being able to produce all types of gamakas. However if we listen closely the Nagaswaram music also used a lot of plain swaras in different swara passages which brought out brilliant shades of bhava in the Raga. These plain notes would come is the form of Viraladi prayogas (staccato notes produced by brisk fingering (AUDIO R2.4) or in a fast paced bruga or birukka. It is believed that these are clues as to an alternative style of our music which was rendered before Gamakas
attained the importance they have today. The Nagaswaram music strikes a right balance regarding the proportion of gamakas one needs to add in raga Alapana, especially while rendering Ragas like Hindola, Charukeshi or Vachaspathi.

One of the most prominent gamaka and beautiful feature of Nagaswaram music is their rendition of Jaru gamaka. Jaaru phrases are those prayogas where there is a gentle yet robust glide from one swaram to another. These swaras can be within the same octave or they can be spread out between two octaves. For example from r to R high. Sarangadeva calls this the Ullasita gamaka. Prof P Sambamurthy gives the two kinds of Jaru as Ekku Jaru (upward glide) and Digu Jaru (Downward glide) (Sambamurthy, South Indian Music, 1998). It is the brilliant jump from one octave to the other which is most characteristic of Nagaswaram music. (AUDIO R2.5) The brilliance is in their being able to glide between swaras smoothly without actually sounding the other notes in between. They would attain the complete glide with all the participating swaras. The complete Raga bhava would be shown to the listener without an individual stand of the swaras involved. It gave the audience an aural experience of a great heave in raga bhava, a crescendo of emotions. The Jaru was described with great admiration by many artists during my interview such as Mysore M Manjunath, HK Venkatram, Vid Jayanthi Kumaresh, Vid PS Narayanaswamy, Vid RK Srikantan etc.

Urruttu is another gamaka which one can notice in the music of the Nagaswaram (AUDIO R2.6). It is a very interesting passage where two to three swaras are rendered in a rolling pattern. The Nagaswaram players would many a times render multiple uruttus in quick succession to create a wonderful cascading effect. According to senior vocalist vid PS Narayanaswami, the uruttu was born out of the Nagaswaram music. This opinion is also shared by Bangalore HK Venkatram. This gamaka lends itself more easily on susheera vadyas (which are not keyed) and can also be rendered by vocalists with great results. The violin is another instrument that uses this gamaka to maximum effect. According Vid PS Narayanaswamy, the uruttu is an instrumental embellishment and originated from the Nagaswaram music which has been successfully adopted into vocal music. Of the various the various gamakas that come and go like ripples on water, some stand out for their sheer brilliance, and the Jaru and Urruttu are such. Another type of gamaka which is very pronounced in

41 South Indian Music Book IV – Prof P Sambamurthy, Pg 137
the music of the Nagaswaram in the Sphurita. The sphurita is a Janti swara like phrase where in the second swara is rendered with a stress (Sambamurthy, South Indian Music, 1998). Like a push to the second note. This gamaka adds a lot of depth and weight to the Nagaswaram’s music.

However there is another contrasting aspect for which the Nagaswaram gained great popularity. This was their rendition of plain notes and sustaining on them to give a most pleasing effect. The Nagaswaram music played a lot of plain swaras which would come in the form of sustaining the graha swaras and also in the form of datu swaras. These Datu swaras or zigzag notes were played across two octaves. They would be played in pin point precision giving the listener the impression that they were randomly picked across the octaves. However these notes are played with a careful sense of aesthetics and consonance. Plain notes were played extensively in ragas such as Charukeshi, Keeravani, Kalyani, Shankarabharanam and they brought out different shades of the Raga bhava. These were very innovative phrases which were unheard of in the other traditional instruments and vocal music during the 17th to 19th century. One can hear the usage of such plain notes in Vid TN Rajarathnam Pillai’s rendition of Kharaharapriya (AUDIO R2.7).

The Nagaswaram music was most famous for its lightning speed sangathis called Bruga or Birukka. Here again it was played by using plain notes in quick succession to form a very fast passage. However the most salient feature of the Nagaswaram birrukka was that the notes involved in the creation of a birukka were rendered with precision and they were never muddled. TN Rajarathinam Pillai had a legendary status in the realm of Birikka (AUDIO R2.8). The amazing clarity in swaras in spite of the speed of the birukka rendered by the Nagaswaram musicians gave them a legendary status. The Birukka of the Nagaswaram captivated many vocalists and those who had the shaarira indulged themselves by including it in the raga alapana. Vid Mahavaidyanatha Iyer (Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan) was one of the earliest musicians of whose singing style we have references. He is said to have sung a lot of these birukkas. Vid Sanjay Subrahmanium confirms that the inclusion of Birukkas in Karanataka Vocal music is definitely an instrumental influence. One has to understand the fact that before the advent of violin and the kind of playing techniques that have evolved in it today, only the Nagaswaram rendered sangathis of

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42 South Indian Music Book IV – Prof P Sambamurthy, Pg. 136
such high speed in the realm of Karnataka classical music. Also the fact that Nagaswaram was the only publically available Karnataka classical music to have had high standards of Manodharma (improvisation). Thus vocalists such as Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer and Coimbatore Raghavaier would have had some kind of inspiration from the Nagaswaram to have included the birukkas in their own styles.

No other instrument was as popular as the Nagaswaram for its speed during their lifetime (in the 1800’s). Now an entire generation of instrumentalists and vocalists such as TN Sheshagopalan have come under the influence of the Nagaswaram’s birukka and it is no longer the signature style of one Bani. There is an interesting anecdote which illustrates the legendary status of the Nagaswaram’s birukkas and the speed of the sangathi. TN Rajarathnam was once presenting Raga Kalyani at the Park Fair exhibition in Madras. Behind him the famous boxer Gunboat Jack was riding a motor cycle inside a well called the well of death. The thundering sound of the bike and its speed seemed to be pulling the attention of the audience away. Then TN Rajarathnam put down his Nagaswaram and carefully watched and heard Jack perform the stunt twice. Before he could complete the third, Rajarathnam unleashed a thundering briga that matched the speed and sound of the bike and traversed the distance between adhara sadja to Antara gandhara and back in a quick flash. The crowd erupted into a loud cheer and there was a huge applause (Annamalai, 2013).

Within raga alapana, the Nagaswaram was known for lengthy phrases during raga alapana which demanded a lot of breath control. This kind of singing or playing in long breaths was referred to as Karve sangeetham. Vid Sanjay Subrahmanyam demonstrated this to me during my interview. The Nagaswaram in the yester years were known for playing such long phrases as opposed to the shorter phrases of the Veena. This also resulted in a continuity of sound. Many a times the phrases would be so long that at the end of it one could hear a gasping for breath before breaking into the next lengthy phrase (AUDIO R2.9) Nagaswaram Karaikurichi P Arunachalam). At one point of time some vocalists have tried to sing in the same manner, smitten by the style which also included the gasping for breath, which became a bane for the audience. The remarks of N Pattabhiraman, Founding Editor of the Magazine sruti bear proof to this. “But the same cannot be said when a vocalist chooses merely to imitate the music of the Nagaswaram maestros and tries, as some musicians do,

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43 R Annamalai – Sruti Magazine, October 2013 ISSUE 349, Pg. 32
exactly to reproduce passages as played on the Nagaswara and incorporates hallmark passages, like those of TNR, and even the gasping for breath that often punctuates Nagaswaram music” (Raman, 1998). This shows certain mal practises by some vocalists but leaves us beyond doubt that the Nagaswam music had impacted mainstream Karnataka classical singers. The powerful impact of these long Sangathis or Karve-laden Sangathis was described in length to me by many Vidwans from Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Vid PS Narayanaswamy.

The Nagaswaram vidwans achieved a systematic development of each segment within the raga. Elaborating phrases between Madhya-Sthaayi sadjam to panchamam they would not move forward until they have exhausted all musical possibilities within the chosen frame. This ability to have developed an unlimited flow of Manodharma was quite characteristic of the Nagaswaram vidwans. The lengthy raga alapana literally exhausting all the musical combinations was made possible in the raga by a methodical development. Vid Dr BM Sundaram clearly stated that the Nagaswaram was an instrument that was almost totally dedicated to Alaya Vazhivaad or temple tradition, no chariot festival would happen without the Nagaswaram leading in front. It is hard to say whether the Gods in the chariot were pulled by human beings or the divine music of the Nagaswaram. It was this temple tradition that resulted in the Nagaswaram’s famous capacity for manodharma. The rule was that no Sahithyam or words was to be played before the Gods enter the Sancto Sanctum. Its own repertoire was structured in such a way that there would only be a line of Sollukattu or a passage of swaras as the chorus line, around which extensive raga alapana and swara kalpana was woven around. Thus the Nagsawaram payers often played one raga up to a span of six hours. According to Vid PS Narayanaswamy, many a times one player would expand a raga till a certain stage and then another Nayanakara took off from the swaras at which the previous player had halted. This enabled two different versions of the same raga, thus keeping the innovation alive and yet achieving depth within the same raga. Even the audience would be totally captivated by their manodharma. They were experts not only at elaborating Melakartha ragas but also Ragas like Mukhari, manji, Ananda Bhairavi, Asaveri etc. Rangaramanuja Ayyangar talks about his own memory of listening to

44 N Pattabhiraman – Sruti Magazine, May 1998, Pg. 28
four hours of Nagaswaram Vidwan Chinna Pakiri’s Begade raga alapana (Ayyangar, 1972)\textsuperscript{45}.

The Nagaswaram musicians were also famed for their Sustainability of each note. This was achieved by their mastery of \textit{otthu muchu}. This was a very special technique of breathing through a circulatory movement of breath through the nose and mouth. The sruti Nayanam or the otthu was played in such a manner and the lead musicians engaged this technique while sustaining on the graha swaras during their own alapana too. Unfortunate this technique is now lost. Together with the Otthu Nayanam the Peria Melam created a continuity of sound which was not heard in any other instrument before the advent of the Violin. This made the Nagaswaram music very impactful. Vid PS Narayanaswamy talks in length about this in his interview.

Along with the elaboration on each graha swara, the Nagaswaram vidwans were known for their mind blowing combinations done with just three to four notes. When the Nagaswaram vidwan’s were expected to play one Raga Alapana for hours together it is only natural that they would evolve certain genius techniques which would captivate the hearts of their audiences and more importantly keep them in tow. One such technique was their ability to create a dozen combinations with just a bare minimum of swaras. They would start the phrase by weaving sancharas around three swaras and then slowly weave other notes one by one like strands into the Raga alapana or swara kalpana. This was a technique which fired the imagination of many musicians. Nagaswaram Vidwan Sheik Meheboob Subhani demonstrated this in the interview he granted me by singing it. Slowly the Birukkas are included (\textit{AUDIO R2.10}). Swaras rendered are closely connected and similar sounding Sangathis are strung into the line. He also went on to add that Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was very adept at it. K Raghavendra Rao, a correspondent for the Sruti Magazine remembers a memorable alapana in Raga Ravichandrika by Vid R Parthasarathi of Mysore. He took dha sa ni dha as the base chord and played many swaras surrounding the Sadja and chathusruti dhaivatha (Rao, 1999)\textsuperscript{46}.

Similarly Vid Sanjay Subrahmanyam also talks about the how the Nagaswaram Vidwans could make many combinations with a minimum number of

\textsuperscript{45} History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, ch 24, pg. 271

\textsuperscript{46} Nagaswara Music in Karnataka: Reminiscences of an Old-timer, K Raghavendra Rao for Sruti, Issue 179, Aug 1999, Pg. 17
swaras and how their method of attacking the Raga alapana was very different. *(AUDIO R2.11)* This recording has a demonstration of how Nagaswaram Vidwan Vyasarpadi Kothandaraman’s brother, Uttharakumaran who was also a Nayanakara, demonstrated Huseini raga to Sanjay Subramaniam and we have him singing in the typical style. Here he sings Huseini keeping only Sa Pa Sa as the base. This was a totally different approach and Sanjay Subrahmanian specifically mentions that no vocalist had taught him the Raga Huseini alapana like this. Here one can see that their music did not have any fixed template. There was no signature starting phrase that we have today. The raga alapana was started keeping in mind the audience’s mood and the kind of audience that was present. If there was a restlessness amongst the audience then the Nagaswaram Vidwans would start from the Tara sthayi, at the same time would start in the lower octaves to please a more learned audience filled with scholars *(vidwath sabha)*. They most often started with a phrase that suited the mood of the raga and that which brought out the bhava. There was no fixed formula or template, yet their alapana was very well structured and paced. This was mentioned by Vid Jayanthi Kumaresh in her interview to me too.

The Nagaswaram Vidwans made use of silences or Pauses to create a dramatic effect, almost using complete silence to create a spring-board effect. Leading vocalist Vid Kalavathy Avadhooth mentions how these silences gave a balance to the raga alapana and created a very relaxed atmosphere. At times the silences came across as heavy with musical thought. The silences also created a certain eager anticipation in the minds of the audience as to the next Sangathi that would follow. We can find many such examples in the famous Sahana raga Krithi ‘livasudha’ rendition of Karaikurichi P Arunachalam in between the Krithi sections We can find the same treatment in Karaikurichi’s Ananda bairavi raga alpana. This is a valuable trick in aesthetics and concert preparation. In many concerts today there is not a moment of silence, which can be both mentally exhausting to the listener and at the same time make the music predictable. Notice the livasudha 2nd sangathi as a distinctive Nagaswaram interpretation on the Kruthi *(AUDIO R2.12)*.

An analysis of the same line also shows how they would embellish a Krithi while rendering it. Today, after shifting to the Kruthi as a medium to Manodharma, they are expected to stay true towards the lyrical- structure of the Kruthi, however within that structure they take a lot of freedom to embellish it with brukkas and
sangathis which make the Nagaswaram music unique. For the Nagaswaram artist the 
Kruthi carries the thought behind the music and more importantly acts as a vehicle to 
bring-forth the Raga. They don’t stress on the Kruthi structure as a musical 
composition. Many past Vidwans’ were in the practise of leaving multiple Tala-
avarthas between a Pallavi and Anupallavi for the Tavil Vidwan to add his flourishes 
and many a times they themselves would fill it with raga sancharas. For example in a 
famous recording containing Karaikurichi P Arunachalam’s rendition of the krithi 
‘Marivere’ in Ananda Bhairavi ragam (composed by Syama Sastry) recording one can 
clearly hear how long a gap he gives after the Pallavi, before starting the Anupallavi. 
He has left close to 50 avarthas of Mishra Chapu tala if one counts. One could notice 
in the recording how he has gone about meandering in raga Anandabhairavi during 
this vishram period (AUDIO R2.13). This practise lent a very relaxed pace to 
concerts of the yester years. Today there are some concerts that come across as a little 
rushed.

Rare prayogas in raga: There is a general perception that the Nagaswaram is 
not a part of the main-stream Karnataka classical music world. Perhaps this was due 
to the fact that they had an entirely different set of compositions in their repertoire. 
Another reason could also be their different approach and treatment of Raga alapana.
Many a times one would find some rare prayogas in raga elaboration which we 
thought did not exist within the lakshana of that raga. Whether these are acceptable 
phrases, or were they ancient phrases which have gone extinct is debatable. For 
example if we listen to the sound bite of Karaikurichi, the way he ends a phrase with a 
stress on shuddha dhaivatha, the gandhaara he chooses to use more is the sadharna 
gandhara or the minor ga. Then later on during the ending of the raga he almost skips 
the SGRG prayoga. (AUDIO R2.14) Concentrating on the nsgns,, nsg,,,gr-rs-n,,/ns-
ng-sgm-gmpd,, he successfully gives us a very different feel of the raga. Generally 
the sgrg prayoga is used to keep the raga in check however here he uses is the 
shuddha dhaivatha for that purpose. Similarly is his Sahana raga alapana he has given 
the prayoga a clean RGMPDANS and he further goes on to RGMPDNS-RGR-SRS. 
(AUDIO R2.15) Later he also uses phrases such as D-R-M-D-R as a beautiful jump 
makes it one of the most exiting Sahana ragam I have ever heard. One can also notice 
that the Nishadha played is slightly plainer and lower in shruthi- and that this is a 
deliberate usage. In Karukurichi’s Sahana raga alapana the Gandhara is sung slightly
lesser in Shruthi than what we usually hear. It stands out distinctively and does not merge into the Madhyama. According to Vid R Vedavalli the Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarshini mentions that the Gandhara of Sahana is to be sung a little flat and lesser in Shruthi. Similarly Sanjay Subrahmanymam mentions about how the Nagaswaram Vidwans used dhaivatha as a resting point in Dhanyasi, which is against the rule of Raga lakshana. Even though many Sangathis which seemed out of the box crept into their Raga alapana, it never went beyond the Raga Bhavam.

The Nagaswaram vidwans also used a lot of repetition or repetitive and similar sounding phrases to create an effect of homogeneity. This also ensured that the audience has hooked on to that phrase in the alapana and is not left behind and they used these repetitive phrases to maximum effect. The Nagaswaram players had a very close connect with their audience which followed right beside or behind them in the temple procession. Thus the Nagaswaram Vidwans knew how to make their music Shastriya (classical) and Janapriya (popular).

Ragas were of utmost importance to the Nagaswaram artists’ and they had a special niche for playing elaborate Ragas. This was classified as Rakthi melam (Perhaps this referred to the Peria Melam which was going to play the Rakthi). Any Raga could be chosen for elaboration and this depended on the ability of the Nagaswaram players. However ragas such as Kamboji, Shankarabharanam, Shanmukhapriya etc. were most popular. I believe that what we call as Rakthi Ragas in today’s Karnataka music scenario could have been a terminology derived from the Ragas that were popularly chosen and elaborated for Rakthi by the Nagaswaram vidwans. Even though they have certain special ragas which were often elaborated as the Rakthi, they had no special category called “Rakthi-ragas”. Any raga that could be elaborated by the masters became part of the rakthi. The term “Rakthi” in Nagaswaram music, is not just ‘that which has depth or beauty’ but is a very specific kind of music composition which is centred on Manodharma according to Dr BM Sundaram. In the case of the Nagaswaram, even Huseini which is played on the last day of the Temple procession qualifies to be part of the Rakthi. Husieni was elaborated throughout the last night of the Temple festival according to Dr BM Sundaram, however this Huseini could have been very different from what we hear today and seems to have had a lot more sancharas in the sangathis earlier when compared to our present times. Even ragas such as Ananda bhairavi and reethigowla
have changed beyond recognition today and there was a conscious effort to change, modify and codify the arohana and avarohana of popular ragas. The Madras music academy discussions stand testimony to this. This Rakthi is believed to be one of the early ancestors of the modern day Raga Tanam Pallavi by some scholars. Senjurutti or Janjutti was always considered a minor raga. Not fit for elaborate raga alapana. However there were many Nagaswaram Vidwans who went and challenged this very idea and brought out these Ragas in its full glory. Elaborating these ragas were a part of their tradition. One such Vidwan was Nagur Subbaiyya. He was known to have played Senjurutti for four hours. In Karnataka classical music, all the other instruments relied on compositions which were mostly composed for the purpose of singing, only the Nagaswaram had developed its own compositions which catered extensively to the instrument’s versatility. Some of the other musical compositions were the Odam, Odakuru, Nadupati, Vattam, Tevaram, Mallari etc.

It is very interesting to see that there are many similarities between the music of the Nagaswaram and Hindustani music. A: The stress on Manodharma and very little use of sahithya. B: The increase of tala-speed is horizontal not vertical. Usually in Karnataka music (arithmetic progression) 1 beat-1 note is Vilamba kalam, 1 beat-2 notes is Madhyama Kalam and 1 beat- 4 notes is Dhrutha Kalam. In the case of the Nagaswaram the progression of speed is geometric i.e. they start at a certain speed, then take it a little faster and then increase it again by a few points and not in exact doubles. C: The Tavil giving his percussion support even during raga elaboration just like the Tabla, in Hindustani music. This makes one wonder, that perhaps Nagaswaram music is the only link left to the confluence period before Hindustani and Karnataka music branched off and before Karnataka music assumed its present form. It is perhaps Karnataka music which has changed beyond recognition and at a faster pace than Hindustani music.

One of the most interesting features of the Nagaswaram music is the inherent laya within its Raga alapana. This is ably maintained by the Tavil accompaniment during raga alapana. Alapana is a free form of improvisation of the musical scale. There are no words or mathematic calculations involved and the musical notes are not spelled out but sung in aakaara. However in spite of being a free form, the Nayanakaras believed that there should be a pulsating rhythm to give the Alapana a sense of form and Kala pramana. A loosely kept eka tala is maintained by the Tavil
which gives the gentle beats. However when a peak or crescendo is reached by the nayanakara in raga alapana, it is accentuated by the tavil going into a small korvai to suit the mood. This gave the Nagaswaram alapana a sense of proportion and it had a definite structure.

Another very special feature of the Nagaswaram from a socio-religious point of view is the special presence of Muslim practitioners of Karnataka classical music. This very interesting Bani, within the Nagaswaram world is called the Chilakuripetta Bani. The descendents of this school are Muslim Nagaswaram artists who hail from Andhra-Pradesh. Their music is quite different from their Tanjore counter-parts. I have personally heard them playing kruthis of Saint Tyagaraja with so much soul and depth that lord Rama might just flash in front of the eyes of a sceptic. They follow both Hindu and Muslim practises at home. Along with Namaz, Lord Vinaayaka is also worshipped. They have created an amalgam of both the religions which has resulted in a new one called “the Nagaswaram.” The leading Nagaswaram artists in our country, belonging to this school today are Sheik Meheboob Subhani and Khaleeshabi Subhani couple, Vid Kasim and Babu. The most famous exponent of this Bani was Sheik Chinna Moula. After these artists settled in Srirangam, they adopted the Tanjore Bani in their playing. However on my special request Sheik Meheboob Subhani once presented Arabhi raga in the original Chilakuripetta Bani and I was completely taken aback by its beauty. It sounded like a beautiful blend of Karnataka classical, folk and Hindustani. Karnataka classical music to the outsider, has often sounded very Sahithyam oriented, steeped in religion and Hinduism. The fact that is a shared space between many communities is a fact to be cherished and celebrated and this happens to be one of the greatest contributions (and significances) of the Nagaswaram to the Karnataka classical music world.

**Tala structure in Nagaswaram music**

The Nagaswaram followed the same format of Tala as the rest of the Karnataka music scenario. However they lay special emphasis on the 35 talas. Compositions like the Mallari and Pallavi were traditionally set to any of the 35 talas and Chapu (Khanda) would be played only in the beginning of the Mallari by the Tavil. However there were some special techniques of keeping Tala. The ‘Kai Tala pidi’ was one such practise of rendering 8 counts in a different way to challenge and
confuse the accompanying Tavil vidwans. This was done by changing or omitting the angas of Adi tala to make it look like a different tala. For example the regular beat, 3 counts-beat-turn-beat-turn would be put like this (The commas denote the beats and hyphen denot a period of rest)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
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Even though the Ashtotthara Shatha Talas’ were more ancient, the Nagaswaram seems to have always been using the 35 Talas. However there seems to be a debate as to the use of Chapu talas. While Scholars such as R Vedavalli mention that the Nagaswaram music did not use Chapu, Vid Dr BM Sundaram mentions that Chapu tala was very much part of the Nagaswaram repertoire. While counts such as seven were rendered as thishra Jati thripu tala in compositions such as the Mallari, Rakthi seems to be structured around the Chapu.

Mallari: The Mallari was traditionally always in set to Raga Gambheera nattai. This composition was to be played exclusively for the Lord’s chariot procession. There are special reasons for choosing the Raga Gambheera Nattai. According to the Agama Shastras, the number 5 is used to symbolise Lord Shiva. Thus the Raga that is used to beckon him had to be a pentatonic scale. At the same time, the Raga had to have a feel of valour to it to suit the majestic gait of the Lord and Raga Gambheera nattai fulfilled these requirements. The Mallari is symbolic of the Lord commencing his journey. This makes us wonder whether the term “nattai” could have been derived from the Dravidian word “nadai” (gait), thus Gambheera nattai. There were traditional Mallari’s which were handed down from Guru to shishya and also mallari’s which could composed by the artists as a challenge to his Manodharma. Mallaris’ could be set to any one of the thirty five talas. Mallari’s were never set in Chapu talas. Mallari’s are only set to rhythmic patterns in Swara and Thathakara. It has no sahithya. 

(AUDIO R2.16) It is played on the Nagaswaram as a tune to be repeated according to the situation, almost like the soundscape or back ground music of the special occasion of the day.

The Mallari starts with the Otthu playing the Sruti. Then the Tavil starts by playing a set piece of rhythm called Alarippu in Khanda Nade. This is followed by a detailed Raga alapanaby the main Nagaswaram. Then comes the elaboration of the
line of the Mallari, playing it in three speeds followed by Thishra Nade. Sangathis are also added into the structure of the Mallari and it is also topped by swarakalpana based on the kind of Mallari and the Situation in which it is played. The Mallari’s edupu are always in Samam and many have Yati’s such as Gopuccha yati pattern inlaid in them. Mallari’s can be set in any of the 35 Talas. The different kinds of Mallari’s are Mudal Mallari, Theertha Mallari, Thaligai Mallari, Ther mallari (Vedavalli, Mallari: An endangered species, 2010)\footnote{Mallari: endangered species, Sruti magazine July 2010, Pg. 42} and ‘Palli Arai’ mallari. The Mallari’s are usually set to four or eight Tala avarthas.

UDAKURU: This is a composition which is always set in Nadanamakriya raga and was rendered in Shaivate temples, particularly in Chidambaram. Set to Mishrachapu Tala, it is known to be a mathematically layered and complex composition. It acts as a challenge for the accompanying Tavil Vidwan. The theme of the Udukuru is based on Lord Shiva. The Rishi and Muni’s of Daruka vana are said to have become very proud of themselves and vain. To teach these rishis a lesson in humility, Lord Shiva is said to have dressed up in the garb of a beggar and entered the forest. The wives of Rishis however became enamoured at the sight of this beggar and desired his company, resulting in insult to Rishis’ thus quelling their pride. Here Lord Shiva sings that everything in this world is false including this body and its beauty, touching a philosophic note. The Udukuru I played on the eighth night of the temple festival. Since the Raga Nadanamakriya was to be played throughout the night according to the Chidambaram temple tradition, the Nagaswaram players would render elaborate swara kalanpana and fill it with complex laya patterns to fill up time and which would challenge the Tavil. The audience kept awake and excited throughout the night just to watch the calculations and sawal javab between the artists.

RAKTHI: The Rakthi was a composition which was based on a Thathakaram. Its primary melodic line is is set in Mishra Chapu tala. Then after elaborating it in the Mishra Chapu it goes on to Thishra Nade and then Sarvalaghu Eka Talam. It is preceeded by a Raga alapana and followed by extensive Swarakalpana. There is only one solkattu for the Rakthi, which was Dheen ki ta tha dhinn na. The Semmbanarkoil Family of Nagaswaram musicians is said to have formulated this composition and specialised in its performance. There is a famous recording of the two brothers from the same family SRG Sambandam and SRG Rajanna playing a Rakthi is Raga
Natakuranji (AUDIO R2.17). This is probably the only recording of the Rakthi we have today. It starts after a gap of two aksharas. One of the most challenging aspects of the Rakthi was that during swarakalpana, the edupu’s were shifted. Again swarakalpana was said to have been put to five different Edupus.

ODAM: this is a kind of song rendered during the Theppolsavam of the temple. Tyagaraja has quoted this composition and its practise in his Krithi “Odamanujaripe” which is in Saranga Raga.

HECCHARIKA: This composition was played to wake up the god and it was also played when the goddess finished her procession and reached the steps of the temple. Another form of composition called the ‘Tiruvandi kapu’ is also played in Vaishnava temples. It was played during the gods ‘Padiyetram’. The Heccharika can be played in any raga but the Raga Ahiri is said to be more suitable and commonly used. This composition too has found mention in Tyagaraja’s composition ‘Heccharikaga rara’ in Raga Yadhukula kamboji.

NADUPATTHI: This composition was played when the procession came to a small halt in between the procession or just before entering the temple. A special Pandal was erected for this purpose. This composition which had Sahithya was set in Ragas such as Kedara Gowla, Kurinji and Navroj.

In the Palanquin festival at Chidambaram, the composition called ‘Nadavana Pandal’ is played in Sankeerana Gati followed by the elaborate alapana of Huseini raga (Vedavalli, Mallari: An endangered species, 2010)48.

PALLAVI: The Nagaswaram repertoire had a very eclectic collection of Pallavis’. The Pallavi’s were unique in structure and the Sahithya was mostly in the regional languages. One of the unique feature of the Pallavi’s in Nagaswaram music was the continuous flow of thought, throughout the line. This resulted in the lack of the concept of the Arudhi or Pada Garbha (Mid stress point). There was no Purvanga and Uttaranga and the Pallavi was one whole flowing unit.

The Nagaswaram played Thathakara Pallavi and Sahitya Pallavi. The Thathakara Pallavi were only set to swara and solkattu, there was no Sahitya. The structure of such Pallavis were challenging and complex. There would be two or three

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48 Mallari: endangered species, Sruti magazine July 2010, Pg. 42
speeds or *Nades* built into the structure. These served as a challenge to other Nagaswaram and Tavil vidwans. On the other hand the Sahithya Pallavi was a melodic line set to lyrics. These Pallavi were simpler in structure or they were composed in a way where the Sahithya gained equal importance. According to Dr BM Sundaram, the concept of *Arudhi or Pada Garbha* in Pallavi structure was a fairly new concept in the 19th century. The word *Arudhi* means limit. How did such a term come to denote the mid-point where the swara and sahithya fall exactly on beat? It is interesting to note that many of Tyagaraja’s compositions don’t follow the *Arudhi* and the Poorvanga of the Sahithya spills into the Uttaranga without any deliberate emphasis on a mid-point. Ex Dinamanivamsha in Harikamboji raga, Yenthara (Harikamboji), Evvari maata (Kamboji).