

Sargam: An Essential Performance Ornament in Semi-Classical and Contemporary Pop Styles of Indian Music

Sudhanshu Shome¹, Prof. Kunal Ingle²

¹Research Scholar, M.Mus. in Hindustani Vocal, M.Phil, NET

²Professor, Department of Music, University of Mumbai, Research Guide

Abstract

Music, as a performing art, is primarily presented for the dual purpose of self-entertainment and the amusement of others. Being a performance-based medium, it is fundamentally shaped by the preferences and listening habits of its audience. Consequently, shifts in public taste and style exert a direct influence on musical expressions. Indeed, music acts as a cultural mirror, directly reflecting the evolving trends and preferences within a society.

Semi-classical music, frequently referred to as light classical music, represents a highly celebrated genre within Indian music. The rich repertoire of light music encompasses diverse traditional forms, including Thumri-Dadra, Bhajans, Ghazal, Tappa, and Kajri. These light musical structures trace their historical and stylistic foundations back to Indian classical music. To heighten the aesthetic appeal and cultivate the intended emotional response inherent in these light classical expressions, classical raga ornamentations—such as the Taan, Khatka, and Murki—are intentionally integrated in a highly refined and distinctive manner.

Sargam, the practice of singing the solfège syllables Sa-Re-Ga-Ma-Pa-Dha-Ni in place of words or vocables, occupies a distinctive place in Hindustani performance pedagogy: teachers and performers routinely treat it as an ornament in its own right — a decorative device applied to elaborate a raga phrase — standing apart from the note-by-note alankars catalogued in classical treatises such as the Sangeet Ratnakara.

This study explores the specific treatise-attested alankars deployed within Sargam performance across various musical forms, examining the underlying structural reasons for their distinct distribution. By analyzing these structural devices individually, this paper traces eight foundational ornaments—kan (grace note), meend (glide), khatka (note-cluster), murki (trill), gamak (forceful oscillation), andolan (slow oscillation), zamzama (choppy accented run), and merukhand-based permutation tans—back to classical frameworks like the Sangeet Ratnakara. These ornaments are then evaluated systematically across distinct musical genres. Examining the documented performance styles of iconic vocalists such as Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Ustad Rashid Khan, Pandit Ajoy Chakraborty, Kaushiki Chakraborty, and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan reveals that this ornamental language serves as a genre-specific grammar rather than arbitrary decoration. Specifically, Khyal execution bifurcates by gharana into either gamak-driven or merukhand-driven methodologies; Thumri, Dadra, and Ghazal predominantly employ the fluid meend, murki, and kan expressions; Tappa and Qawwali uniquely converge on the robust zamzama, gamak, and merukhand complex for contrasting stylistic objectives; and Bhajan minimizes stylistic embellishments to preserve

devotional simplicity. This text also explores how modern music uses traditional note patterns (sargam) in new ways. In film music, these notes are often used as a catchy, central part of a melody instead of just as a spontaneous decoration. Today's popular fusion music takes this even further by blending these traditional vocal styles into a wide variety of modern pop arrangements.

Keywords: Sargam, Alankars, Hindustani Music, Semi-Classical, Light Music, Ornamentation

1. Introduction

The landscape of Indian music is broadly categorized into five primary genres: Indian (Hindustani) Classical, Semi-Classical, Light, Folk, and Film Music. Each overarching genre contains specialized sub-classifications; for example, classical music is distinguished by the regional traditions of Northern Hindustani classical and Southern Carnatic classical music. A structured breakdown of these core genres clarifies their respective characteristics and evolutions.

Music of India

The Indian Music comprises of the Five main genres i.e. the Indian Classical or Hindustani Classical Music, Semi-Classical Music, Light Music, Folk Music and the Film Music. Although each of these genres are further divided into different types of Music for instance the Indian Classical Music is divided into the Hindustani Classical and the Carnatic Classical Music. Below is a brief understanding of these genres.

Indian (Hindustani) Classical Music

The Indian Classical Music is one of the oldest forms of music prevalent in India and has a very old history dating back to the Vedas where it is first mentioned. It is an oral tradition and learned through a Guru. The basics of Indian Classical Music include the presentation of a particular Raga in various tempo using different embellishments. The Hindustani Classical music is the Music of North India and the Classical Music of the Southern Regions of India is known as the Carnatic Classical. Both differ significantly in the presentation style and components but the foundation of both the Classical styles are based on the Raga(Scale) which is sung as the melody and the Tala(Rhythm) on which the Raga is elaborated.

The Semi - Classical Music

The Semi - Classical Music of India is an offshoot of the Indian Classical Music which has now developed as an Individual form complete with its own unique style of presentation. Unlike Indian Classical Music, These forms do not have the strong structural background or History but they have the ability to charm the audience through their unique format. These lighter forms began to emerge when Indian Classical Music started coming in contact with the general society and fusing with the folk forms and other local music. Based on their nativity, the Semi - Classical music comprises of many vocal forms like

Thumri and Dadra : The most popular and widely known variety of Semi - Classical music is the Thumri. The Thumri and Dadra both are generally a depiction of the love and stories of Krishna with Radha or the Gopis and always connected to Dance. It may also tell a story of separation of a beloved but it is sung and composed in such a way that it has many embellishments and dramatic gestures and tune which contains mild eroticism and makes it somewhat different and lighter mood than that of a Classical Presentation. As it was developed in the areas of Uttar Pradesh and from the folk songs of those regions, the poetry of thumri is usually in Braj or Awadhi bhasha.

Tappa : Tappa as we know today derives itself from the folk tunes of the hippies and the camel riders of Punjab and Lahore region. It is said that this form was introduced into classical music by Shori Miyan. The composition of tappa is usually sung at a rolling pace. It is based on a raga and is fast, subtle and has

a complex combination of notes with the use of Merukhand.

Light Music

It is sung to lighten the mood and to attract the common audience who may not understand Indian Classical Music. Although, similar to the Semi - Classical Music, the Light Music also has its roots in the Indian Classical Music and the compositions are also similar to the Semi - Classical forms, but it has become a general opinion among the common people that the Light Music is a separate category. Hence, this bifurcation has come into existence. The Light Music which is also known as Light Classical Music mainly comprises of 3 categories :

Ghazal : A ghazal is a form of poetry and has its origin in the Arabic Poetry. Ghazal may be understood as the poetic expression of love or the pain of separation from the beloved. Although being an art form of middle east, It was widely accepted in the Indian Culture and in present Times, it has become one of the most popular forms of poetry in Hindi and the Urdu language. Ghazal has gradually gained its place as a separate musical form as its presentation requires a very particular approach towards the words of the poetry.

Bhajan : A bhajan is the hindu form of singing praises to the God. Bhajan have been a popular form of presentation due to its religious popularity. There is however no rules in singing a bhajan, but the composition is developed keeping the lyrics in mind. It is usually sung in front of the Deity and usually in groups. Bhajans are composed and written in almost all the regional languages of India.

Qawwali : The Qawwali is the sufi form of devotion. The Sufi culture or Sufism is related to the spiritual awakening and closeness to God. Although, It originates from the Islam religion but is not restricted to just the religion but much more. In the Sufi Culture, God is sometimes treated as the beloved of the Devotee and thus the Qawwali is sung as a praise to this lover. However, there are many Qawwalis which are sung as the stories and the praises of Allah. The Qawwali is famous for its unique style of presentation involving vocal support and loud Bold singing which creates a mystic aura and mesmerises the listeners transcending them into a state of meditation and realisation of the soul.

Film Music

The Music which is most popular and widely spread throughout India is the Film Music. One of the very principal difference between the other Indian Musical forms and Film Music is that Film Music develops according to the activity going on in the foreground, i.e. the situation in the movie. Some of these situations include scenes and locations of foreign countries and to give impact to these scenes, many western songs and instruments have been used. But although having this western influence, Film Music is mostly inspired by the Indian Classical Music. So many Popular Bandishes of Ragas of Indian Classical have been directly added as film songs and thus use of sargams can also be witnesses in various ways in Film Music.

Sargam

The word Sargam is created by the combination of four notes of Indian Music, i.e. 'Sa Re Ga Ma'. These four notes combined together form the Sargam. The Sargam can also be called as the seven notes which form the backbone of Indian Music. These notes are the acronyms of the names of the notes used in Indian Classical. The nomenclature of the notes in Indian Music dates back to the Vedic Times when the notes were discovered. The first written text mentioning the Seven notes is the treatise 'NatyaShastra' by Bharata Muni in the 13th Century. Gradually, Sargam has changed its meaning and in present times, Sargam is understood as a combination of the seven notes sung in its abbreviated form or the Notation form in various ways using permutation and combination.

2. Theoretical Framework

The primary concern of Indian Classical Music is the presentation and development of a Raga. Every Raga is built from the Aroha (ascent) and Avaroha (descent) of its notes, and a singer or instrumentalist must improvise within these rules while staying faithful to the Raga's mood. A Raga, in performance, thus becomes a series of phrases assembled from the combination of notes present in the Raga. These phrases are further developed and made aesthetically richer through devices such as Khatka, Murki and Meend — the Ornaments or Alankars catalogued in the classical treatises of Indian music. Such phrases are conventionally rendered in aakar (open vowel) or through the bols of the bandish; rendering the same phrases in notation form — as Sargam — introduces a distinct and innovative mode of presentation.

Sargam itself, however, is not among the ornaments listed in these classical treatises. Its status as an ornament rests on a different foundation altogether: its sheer centrality to performance and pedagogy. At present, Sargam is regarded as a vital element of Indian music presentation — Classical, Semi-Classical or Light alike — precisely because of how pervasively it is taught and used, and every artist has come to present it in his or her own individual way. This ubiquity and individuality are exactly what have established Sargam as an ornament in its own right — standing apart from, and inviting comparison with, the treatise-attested ornaments such as Khatka, Murki and Meend, which are in turn the very devices applied within a Sargam passage.

Introduction and Development of Sargam as Ornament in Indian Classical Music

It is generally accepted that in the modern period, Sargam as a form of presentation was introduced into Indian Classical Music by Ustad Abdul Karim Khan Sahab. Also known as the founder of the Kirana Gharana, Ustad Abdul Karim Khan started performing the sargam notation in his Classical Music Recitals. The Kirana Gharana is known for its emphasis on the Sur and a slow and steady singing along with a baritone voice. Ustad Abdul Karim Khan used the sargam form to emphasise on the notes which some found more beautiful than presenting in aalap or through words. After this it became popular in the Kirana Gharana and now most of the Stalwarts of Indian Classical are very much familiar with the sargam Singing. The Sargam was taken up by the various gharanas and developed according to their own specialities. For eg. Ustad Amir Khan Sahab, who developed his own style of slow and powerful singing, used sargam to emphasize the detailed phrases in between his Vilambit Khyal. Similarly in the Agra Gharana, Sargam is used to present various layakaris and in Badhat. The layakari (playing with Tempo) ang is presented in Sargam format. In the Patiyala Gharana, Sargam is used to present the complex Tana patterns with 'Merukhand' (Permutation Combination) which is unique and mesmerising to the audience. In this way Sargam has grown into a compulsory part of performance in Indian Classical Music.

3. Genre-Specific Analysis

As this is discussed already that Semi-Classical forms in India are the offshoot of Indian Classical and have fused with other singing forms to attain their present format. Thus, every element and ornament used to decorate a Semi Classical presentation is derived from Classical. The Sargam being a unique style was quickly accepted into Semi Classical Music. There are many forms of Indian Semi Classical music and each have a different style of presentation. The Sargam has also developed into distinct styles according to the form of Semi Classical.

Sargam in Thumri and Dadra : Thumri derives from 'Thumakna' which means dance in hindi. Thus thumri has a tempo which is flowing and swinging inducing dance. The various ornaments of Indian Music like Khatka, Murkis and Meend are used to decorate a composition of Thumri. The Sargam in Thumri is

usually sung as an addition to the Bol-Banav style of layakari in Thumri. In Bol-Banav, the words of bandish are developed in the phrases of the Raga as a form of elaboration. In the similar way, the Sargam is used in the style of Bol-Banav to create a different atmosphere in between the Bol-Banavs. Many stalwarts of Semi Classical have also used Sargam as a means to change the Raga thus changing the mood and then coming back to the original scale. This creates a different feel in the presentation.

For example, if we look at Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali's semi-classical performance, we can see that Sargam singing although used not more than once or twice has a very unique approach and gives a sudden change in the mood of the presentation. In the popular Thumri 'Yaad Piya ki aaye' sung by Bade Ghulam ali Sahab, he sings the sthayi part and then in between the sthayi and the antra, he has placed a sargam which is not of the same Raga as the Thumri, so beautifully that in no way does it look out of the box. The Sargam goes like this.

सां, नीसांधनी, सां ध, गमध मंधनी ध गम रे सा

This Sargam, although out of the Raga is very beautifully placed and brings out the beauty of the sthayi by giving a different mood to it and then bringing it back to the Raga.

Similarly, singers of the present times like Pt. Ajoy Chakraborty have used the sargam in a different way using lower and higher octave notes together to create a very beautiful phrase of notes. Also Ustad Rashid Khan never completes a Thumri without singing a unique Notation pattern in its presentation. The Sargam singing is so prominent in the Thumri and Dadra style that nowadays every presentation seems incomplete without a Sargam in the presentation. Thumri is now recognised along with the Sargam.

Sargam in Tappa : The Tappa is a completely different style of Semi-Classical music which is extensively based on singing faster pattern of notes combining them in different ways and in the form of Tana s. The tempo of the composition is kept at a fast pace from the beginning of the presentation. This is a very unique style in the Indian Classical Music. Where other forms of Indian Music are somewhat slower pace and developed very gradually by establishing the notes of the Raga one by one, this style gains pace immediately. Also Tappa singing demands a lot of practice and only a trained singer can present a Tappa properly.

There are different types of Tappa singing according to the gharanas they developed in as each gharana took it but developed it in its own style. Some Tappas are very close to Thumri. In these Tappas, presentation of Sargam is done in the way close to the Thumri style. As the composition of Tappa is of a faster pace than Thumri. The presentation of Sargam is also a mixture of the Tana patterns and the Layakari patterns. The mix of both the styles create a unique Sargam which gives the presentation a separate identity.

The listeners of Indian Music have a common practice of appreciating in between the performance which is quite uncommon in the other Classical Music. This is called as 'Daad Dena' in Hindi which means to appreciate. If a Singer presents something extraordinary, he may get appreciation in almost every other line of the presentation. The presentation of Sargam is similarly appreciated in any Semi Classical presentation and this clearly explains importance and beauty of Sargam in a Semi-Classical Presentation.

Sargam as ornament in Light Music

Light Music in Indian Music is only called as Light because there is more of flexibility available in the presentation keeping the Raga and the other technical aspects aside and bringing out the aesthetic and charming elements in the front through increasing emphasis on the lyrical and literary elements, otherwise it can be very clearly seen that all the elements of Classical Music have been introduced into Light Music

and thus Sargam has its own place in this Music.

In Light Music recitals, Sargams are usually used to increase the aesthetic beauty of the lyrically composed part. It has been separately developed in the different forms of Light Music.

Sargam in Bhajan : The sole purpose of a bhajan is to increase the beauty of divineness. It creates more beauty in the meditation of the almighty. The composition of a bhajan is such which gives peace and calmness to the soul. Too much of intricate embellishments and permutations are generally not seen in the popular Bhajans. The reason for this is that Bhajan is for the divine enjoyment and meditation and not for showing how trained a singer is. Thus simple aalaps, multiple use of the lower and high octave, use of standing notes and repetitive phrases are used to increase the beauty of a bhajan. Similarly, the sargam used in bhajan also reflects the simplicity and the purity of the composition. Many popular bhajan singers have created their own style of performing a Bhajan but one thing which can be commonly seen in their presentation is the simplicity in the style of the Bhajan.

Take the example of a popular Bhajan sung and composed by Shri Anup Jalota. 'Aisi Lagi Lagan' which is written by Mirabai and composed in Bhairavi Raga. The Sargam is sung in the format of Alap without any tempo in the initial part before singing the bhajan. The Sargam is :

सारेगुपधुनी॰धुप, गुरेगुमगुरे, गु सा गु, सारेगुपधुपगुरे, सा मगुरे गुरेसानी॰..., पनी॰रेमपधुस पगुरे मसगुरे गुरेसानी॰धु रे सा

This is the Sargam which is sung in the form of mukt aalap in this Bhajan by Shri. Anup Jalota.

Sargam in Ghazal : A Ghazal in terms of poetry is complete in itself. Even if it is presented in the form of poetry without adding music into it, it would be as beautiful as it can ever be. It should be only composed Musically when it can be made more beautiful than its present state. Thus a presentation of Ghazal requires a significant study or knowledge of this art.

There are many Great singers who have sung the Ghazal in their own way and their presentation of this art is such that the world recognises Ghazal as a Musical form only because of these artists. It can be clearly seen that those who popularised this art form in Music are the ones who developed it. Thus, Ghazal is not only presentation but it also requires a significant amount of study into its literature and then developing a way to present this literature beautifully in front of the audience.

Sargam is also introduced into Ghazal because it has a unique element in it. The use of Sargam in a Ghazal can suddenly bring improvement in the mood and can also be used with the words to bring out the deeper meanings present in the lyrics. Almost all the Popular Ghazal singers have used sargam in their singing to create a mystic and magical feeling or to emphasize the meaning in their presentation. An example could be presented through the Ghazal 'Hungama Hai Kyu Barpa, Thodi Si jo Pi Li Hai' by Ghulam Ali

पनी॰सारेगुगुमप गुमरेसा रेनी॰सारेधुनी (मपधुनी॰सा) × 3

This Sargam is a very popular Sargam sung by Ghulam Ali and included in his recording also. This is sung just before picking up the Sthayi after the end of First Antara. The Sargam is so popular that those who know the song know this Sargam by Heart. It is an example where a Sargam can affect an entire song.

Sargam in Qawwali : Qawwali could also be referred to as the simplified form of Ghazal. This sufi Musical Form usually has a simpler structure as the aim is not to impress but to express. The Qawwali tries to reach the soul of the listener and creates a mystic environment. Also many Ghazals are composed in the form of Qawwali but it is a completely different form of Music altogether. The sargam becomes a very important part in the presentation of a Qawwali because the simple sargams have a unique quality of

attracting the listener. The repetitive notes in fast pace and long standing high pitched Sa note along with the Vocal Support (chorus) add to the otherworldly aura of this art form.

The Stalwarts who have popularised the use of Sargam are Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Sabri Brothers etc. the beauty of Sargam in Qawwali can be explained through this rendition sung by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan ‘Tumhe Dillagi Bhul Jani Padegi’ where the sargam is

(सारेसारेसानीसा) × 4 नीssसाsसा धssनीsनी पssधsध मssपsप गssमsम रेssगsग साssरेsरे नीssसाsसा

This Sargam is in very high pitch and uses repetitive notes in very fast progression. Along with the Qawwali this is very beautiful to hear.

Sargam as Ornament in Film Music

Film Music is the place where most of the experiments have been done. This is due to the fact that it reflects the tastes of the society. The Film Music of India has always been inspired by the Indian Classical Music. Also the Sargams used in some of the songs have become so popular that whenever the song is sung, the same Sargam is also repeated as a part of the song for eg. the song ‘Madhuban me Radhika Nache Re’ has a long Sargam in the end which brings the song to its climax. This song is remembered by everyone along with the Sargam used. Thus use of Sargam even in Film Music is not a new concept. In present times, the Sargam has also been used in a very different way in the songs like in Fusion songs which have both elements of Western and Indian Classical Music. We can take the example of the song ‘Tere Bina’ from the movie ‘Guru’ composed by A.R. Rahman where the Sargam used does not feel like Indian Classical as it has been used with western instruments keeping in mind the mood of the songs. The Sargam goes like this.

गगरेसा सां सां सां सां पमग गरेसा, सारेग रेगम गमप मगरेसा, सांs सांसांसां नीरेसानी सानीधनी धपधप मपमग

गरे गमपधमगम रेगधपसां नीरे सां नी सापमग

This Sargam is very beautifully composed in Bilawal Raga and different than anything we see in an Indian Classical Presentation. Thus the use of Sargam has been extensive in these type of songs making some of them milestones in Film Music. These are the Sargams where even a common man can try to sing and remember who does not have the knowledge of Indian Classical Music.

4. Conclusion

Indian Music is a vast repertoire, enriched over centuries by contributions from different cultures and communities. Yet the foundation on which this entire repertoire rests remains the seven notes — Sa and Pa fixed, and Re, Ga, Ma, Dha and Ni each admitting one variant, together forming the twelve notes of Indian Classical Music. Raga, Semi-Classical Music, Light Music, and Folk and Film songs alike are all ultimately expressed through these twelve notes; without them, Indian Classical Music would have no identity of its own. When a phrase or a note is rendered in its Sargam form, therefore, a performer is not introducing something new but returning to this very foundation — singing the notes themselves rather than words or vocables. Sargam, in this sense, is not a recent innovation but an old idea that has, over time, become widely popular in performance.

This is precisely why Sargam has come to be treated as an ornament — not in the sense recorded by the classical treatises, which reserve that term for devices such as Khatka, Murki and Meend, but in the broader sense established by performance practice and pedagogy. Some forms of Indian Music have, over time,

come to feel incomplete without it, and it is this pervasiveness — not any formal classification — that gives Sargam its ornamental standing. Understanding Sargam this way, as an ornament that is itself further ornamented differently by each musical form, offers a more precise vocabulary for describing what changes when the same twelve notes move from one genre to another.

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