
Unique Poetry on Five Ragamala Paintings in the National Gallery of Victoria: Rhyme, Alliteration and Rhythm in Couplets of Great Intensity and Charm

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The ragamala tradition of painting, as the Sanskrit word *rāgamālā* (a garland of ragas) implies, has a close association with the ragas or melodic modes of India, particularly of northern India. The ragamala tradition of painting is not found in southern India. On ragamala paintings the name of a melodic mode identifies the iconographic image created in a particular miniature painting.

In this article, the phrase 'ragamala tradition' refers to the widely known examples of some three thousand miniature paintings created in many different styles and schools dating from around the year 1475 to the end of the nineteenth century.¹ The word 'ragamala' is also used as an adjective to designate a text associated with a painting or a series of paintings in the ragamala tradition. In music performance, a similar term, 'ragamalika,' is used generically to refer to the rendition of a few or several different melodic modes in succession, as is occasionally found in performances of South Indian or Karnatic music.

This article, however, does not consider music performance as commonly conceived. The discussion focuses instead on five couplets inscribed on five miniature paintings in the ragamala tradition. The rhythmic patterns embedded in the organisation and flow of words in these couplets give clear evidence of an excellent musical capability, easily heard in recitation. The poems not only illustrate the creative genius of a poet gifted with an unusual talent for combining words, but also reveal the work of a poet simultaneously acutely sensitive to musical aesthetics. The couplets show great flair and have an engaging musical quality. It is reasonable to assume that the subtle and arresting rhythmic patterns present in the poems, which become

¹ Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* (Basel: Ravi Kumar, 1973). See pp. 20–25 for a listing of extant leaves of ragamala paintings, enumerated chronologically, series by series.

manifest even within the limitation of the poet choosing to include conventionally prescribed names for musical modes, were fully discerned and enjoyed in recitation, no doubt with great delight, by the elite patrons and owners of these paintings, and by their families and friends.

The couplets discussed here are inscribed on the back of five ragamala paintings from the southern region of Rajasthan. Formerly they were in the collection of the maharanas of the princely state of Mewar, the capital of which was Udaipur. These paintings, part of a holding in the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) collection of twelve paintings from an incomplete set of ragamala miniatures, have been assigned by Andrew Topsfield, the well-known art historian of Rajasthani paintings, to the middle of the eighteenth century.² In his extensive catalogue of the large collection of paintings from Rajasthan in the NGV, Topsfield also includes initial transcriptions of the texts inscribed on the paintings.³

Recently, a useful survey of the ragamala tradition has been written by John Andrew Greig.⁴ The most extensive source on the ragamala tradition is the wide-ranging reference work by Klaus Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting*, published in 1973.⁵ As the catalogue by Topsfield was published in 1980, information about the NGV ragamala paintings and their inscriptions does not appear in Ebeling's earlier reference work.

The five ragamala couplets discussed in this article are new in the ragamala tradition. More importantly, they are also unique in the ragamala tradition. Placing their uniqueness aside for the moment, however, they call to mind two threads in the music culture of India dating from antiquity that were fundamental to the emergence of the ragamala tradition—gender identity for melodic modes, and meditative poems (*dhyānas*). It will be useful to review these two strands first, to establish a broad historical framework for understanding how our couplets relate to other texts in the ragamala tradition.

This study is presented in two parts. Historical data for understanding the broad context of the five ragamala couplets with respect to gender identity and meditative poems are presented in part one. The contents and the poetic and rhythmic features of the poems are discussed in part two.

I. Historical Background

In northern India, two continuous threads of music culture, which existed for over a millennium, eventually played a role as causal elements in the emergence of the ragamala tradition. These strands comprise: (1) melodic modes being thought of since antiquity as being either male or female in gender; and (2) a long tradition of meditative texts which deify and personalise musical modes and contain descriptions of their personal attributes. The earliest evidence for both strands emerges in the latter part of the first millennium AD in Sanskrit music treatises.

The link between melodic modes and gender will be considered first. This link, which is a cultural norm of conceptualisation based on the use of gender in language, and thus seems

² Andrew Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan in the National Gallery of Victoria: A Collection Acquired through the Felton Bequests' Committee* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1980) 107.

³ Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan* 107–8.

⁴ John Andrew Greig, 'Ragamala Painting,' *South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent* (*The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 5), ed. Alison Arnold (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) 312–18.

⁵ Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting*.

to have been only an indirect or implied link at first, appears to have led somewhat later to the overt classification of melodic modes by gender.

Melodic Modes and Gender

In two of the earliest extant treatises in ancient India containing music data, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* attributed to Bharata and the *Dattilam* (a text by Dattila), dating from early in the first millennium AD, two scales are identified as the source of eighteen melodic mode-classes known as *jātis*. Organising and classifying melodic modes according to scale patterns has been a continuous thread in Indian musical culture and is still followed today in the art-music systems of south Indian or Karnatic music and north Indian or Hindustani music. The ancient scale-derived mode-classes (*jātis*), the framework for composed music at the time, were differentiated by technical names, based on the scale degree of their final note and on other aspects of their musical characteristics.⁶

The principle of classifying musical modes according to musical features such as starting note, emphasised note, sub-final note and ending note, continued to be followed late in the first millennium. During this millennium details changed about the number of basic modes and sub-modes. At the end of the millennium two categories of modes were identified. Basic modes were known as *grāmarāgas* and derivative modes as *bhāṣās*.⁷

Concerning the system of the late first millennium, which is immediately relevant to our discussion, Richard Widdess has observed that ‘the division into male and female rāgas [of later times] is prefigured in the relationship between the *grāmarāgas*, all of whose names are masculine in gender (agreeing with *grāmarāga*), and the *bhāṣās*, all with feminine names (agreeing with *bhāṣā*).’⁸ This reference is to the respective gender of the words *grāmarāga* and *bhāṣā* in Sanskrit. Thus, in addition to the continuous thread in India of using scales and modal characteristics as two organising principles for classifying melodic modes, a connection between mode and gender in the subcontinent dates from the second half of the first millennium and has continued through the nineteenth century, especially in the ragamala tradition. Initially the relationship appears to have been indirect yet strongly implicit, as it was derived from the use of gender in Sanskrit.

Evidence for change in the implicitness of the relationship appears sometime during the first half of the second millennium, in the treatise *Saṅgītamakaranda* by one Narada. Though difficult to date, Emmie te Nijenhuis argues that it seems to have been written in the thirteenth century, after 1250 AD.⁹ Though its date remains somewhat uncertain, this treatise ‘presents a new system of classification, which anticipates the later north Indian system ... [as it] speaks about male (*pulliṅga*), female (*stri*) and neuter (*napuṃsaka*) rāgas.’¹⁰ The evidence suggests that sometime during approximately half a millennium, from the late first millennium to the early second millennium, the implicit relationship between a musical mode and its gender identity,

⁶ Richard Widdess, *The Rāgas of Early Indian Music: Modes, Melodies and Musical Notations from the Gupta Period to c. 1250* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 4–7.

⁷ Widdess, *Rāgas of Early Indian Music* 4–7, 10–12.

⁸ Widdess, *Rāgas of Early Indian Music* 15, fn. 7.

⁹ Emmie te Nijenhuis, *Musicological Literature*, vol. VI, fasc. 1 of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977) 12–14.

¹⁰ te Nijenhuis, *Musicological Literature* 14.

based on gender usage in Sanskrit, became explicit, as stated in the *Saṅgītamakaranda*. The three-part gender classification of melodic modes in this treatise, however, does not appear to have gained acceptance.

It is difficult to determine when the strand of gender identity for musical modes settled into the two-part male/female distinction of raga/ragini commonly used in the ragamala tradition. Considering evidence inscribed on ragamala paintings, in the earliest known series of ragamala paintings from Western India, dating from c. 1475, which according to the manuscript on which they appear and their style of painting are placed near the end of the Western Indian school, two words inscribed on some of the paintings identify gender—*rāga* and *bhāṣā*.¹¹

Of thirty-six female musical modes in this ragamala set—six are associated with each of six male ragas—eleven have *bhāṣā* inscribed after their name, as in *drāviḍī bhāṣā* (*drāviḍī* female mode) and *abhīrī bhāṣā* (*abhīrī* female mode). In one instance the word *bhāṣā* minus a specific name before it is inscribed as the name itself of a female musical mode. For the male musical modes the word *rāga* is inscribed after a name, as in *pañcam rāga* (*pañcam* male mode).¹² The combination *rāga/bhāṣā* in this earliest set of ragamala paintings seems to be a faint echo of the *grāmarāga/bhāṣā* gender distinction in evidence from the late first millennium, some six or seven hundred years earlier.

Only a few decades after this first series of ragamala paintings, however, roughly by the middle of the sixteenth century, while the term *rāga* remains constant, the word *raginī* has replaced *bhāṣā* to designate feminine gender in inscriptions on ragamala miniatures, in the newly emerging Rajasthani style of ragamala painting.¹³ Though more work is needed to tease out the details of what appears to be a period of transition during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the terminology used to identify female gender in ragamala paintings, part of the answer may lie in the rise of regional traditions and the use of vernacular languages in artistic traditions.

As we shall see, though our couplets are unique, they nonetheless adhere to the thread of gender identity for melodic modes common to the ragamala tradition. Further, they also reflect a time subsequent to the middle of the sixteenth century when the terms raga and ragini were first used for noting gender on paintings in the ragamala tradition. The latter point is not surprising. As noted earlier, Topsfield has dated the paintings in the middle of the eighteenth century, some two hundred years later.¹⁴ The assumption is that the poems were inscribed shortly after the paintings were completed. It is possible that the poems may have been inscribed significantly later than the completion of the paintings. Investigating that possibility, however, is beyond the scope of the current study.

To summarise, for several centuries from an early date melodic modes were conceptualised and named as being either male or female in gender. This idea seems to have led to the overt

¹¹ Sarabhai M. Nawab, 'The Oldest Miniature Rāga Paintings of the Western Indian School,' *Masterpieces of the Kalpasutra Paintings* (Ahmedabad: Sarabhai Manilal Nawab, 1956) 1–7 and plates A–G. Also see Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* 120–21, 150–51.

¹² Nawab, 'Oldest Miniature Rāga Paintings.'

¹³ Jim Masselos, Jackie Menzies and Pratapaditya Pal, eds., *Dancing to the Flute: Music and Dance in Indian Art* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997) 147, 282, 284; W. Norman Brown, 'Some Early Rājasthānī Rāga Paintings,' *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 16 (1948): 1–10, plates I–III. Though Brown dates the ragamala series he discusses here c. 1600–1625 (p. 3), a later view is that the paintings should be dated c. 1525–1570 (Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* 84–85, 152).

¹⁴ Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan* 107.

grouping of melodic modes together by gender, first documented in the *Saṅgītamakaranda* of the second half of the thirteenth century. In this treatise, however, melodic modes are classified into three genders, according to whether they are considered to be male (*pulliṅga*), female (*stri*), or neuter (*napuṃsaka*). This three-part classification system did not gain acceptance.

In inscriptions on the first known ragamala paintings from around 1475 from the Western Indian school, male and female gender are identified respectively by the words *rāga* and *bhāṣā*. These two terms seem to reflect an ancient two-part classification for naming melodic modes according to gender, the first evidence for which dates from the latter part of the first millennium. With the rise of a Rajasthani style of painting in the mid-sixteenth century, however, the term *bhāṣā* is no longer found in inscriptions on ragamala paintings. It has been replaced by the term *rāgiṇī*. As will be seen in part two, our poems maintain a male/female gender identity in the names of melodic modes and reflect the more recently adopted raga/ragini gender terminology, which accords with their mid-eighteenth century date.

Melodic Modes and Meditative Poems

The first evidence for meditative poems (*dhyānas*) in Indian music culture appears in the well known music treatise *Brihaddeśī* by Matanga, from the latter part of the first millennium. The existence of meditative poems about ragas (*rāga-dhyānas*) in the *Brihaddeśī*, in a part now lost, is confirmed through specific reference to Matanga in the *rāga-dhyāna* section of a much later treatise dating from the middle of the fifteenth century, the *Saṅgītarāja* of Kumbhakarna, a king of Mewar (1433-1468) in Rajasthan.¹⁵ Concerning the *Brihaddeśī* text, te Nijenhuis has noted: ‘of the lost *dhyāna* section of the *Bṛhaddeśī* only four lines on p. 141 [Sastri ed.], enumerating some of the well-known iconographic elements, are handed down.’¹⁶ Empirical data for *rāga-dhyānas* in the *Brihaddeśī*, even though minimal, and reference to *rāga-dhyānas* in the *Brihaddeśī* in the treatise *Saṅgītarāja* of the fifteenth century, indicate that *rāga-dhyānas* have been present in Indian music culture from the latter part of the first millennium.

The next evidence for the *dhyāna* strand in music culture may well appear in the medieval period in the famous treatise *Saṅgītaratnākara* of Sarṅgadeva, a music text written during the first half of the thirteenth century. In this treatise the data is to be found possibly in song texts. In his discussion of the *Saṅgītaratnākara*, Widdess describes a genre known as *ākṣiptikā*, consisting of ‘short measured songs with texts in Sanskrit or Prakrit.’¹⁷ The texts of these songs are sacred and secular and describe ‘the features and attributes of a particular deity, person or tableau.’¹⁸ Widdess continues:

Could this [the *ākṣiptikā* songs] have been the unknown mechanism by which, in the period immediately following ŚSR [Sarṅgadeva’s *Saṅgītaratnākara*], each *rāga* became identified with various attributes—depicted in a short Sanskrit poem (*dhyāna*) and in *rāgamālā* miniature-paintings?¹⁹

¹⁵ te Nijenhuis, *Musicological Literature* 16–18.

¹⁶ te Nijenhuis, *Musicological Literature* 18, fn. 83.

¹⁷ Widdess, *Rāgas of Early Indian Music* 177. Prakrit refers to ancient and medieval vernacular dialects of north and central India, either derived from Sanskrit or occurring in parallel with Sanskrit.

¹⁸ Widdess, *Rāgas of Early Indian Music* 178.

¹⁹ Widdess, *Rāgas of Early Indian Music* 178.

This is indeed an important point and one wonders what a study of these song texts in comparison with *rāga-dhyānas* in the *Saṅgītarāja* of approximately two hundred years later might uncover.

Another medieval music treatise written about a century after the *Saṅgītaratnākara* contains pictorial descriptions of melodic modes, the *Saṅgītopaniṣat-sāroddhāra* by Sudhakalasa, dated 1350, which is an extant abridgement by Sudhakalasa of his *Saṅgītopaniṣat* (1324) now lost.²⁰ According to te Nijenhuis, however,

it is a long way from Sudhākalaśa's pseudo-iconographic *dhyānas* to the latter idyllic-romantic *dhyānas*, describing the emotional content of the *rāgas*. One can hardly say that the former descriptions of *rāga* deities, resembling gods of the Jain pantheon, were continued in latter descriptions, which show a preference for erotic situations and only incidentally refer to personifications of gods (to Krishna in *rāga hindola*, to Vasanta in *rāga vasanta*, to Vishnu in *rāga sāraṅga*, to Śiva in *rāga bhairava*). It is interesting to note that some early specimens of marginal painting in a Kalpasūtra manuscript from the Jayasimhasūrji collection of Indore, illustrating particular *rāgas*, correspond to the *dhyānas* of the *Saṅgītopaniṣat-sāroddhāra*.²¹

The last sentence refers to the earliest known series of ragamala paintings of c. 1475 noted earlier, forty-two in number, in which gender terminology inscribed on some of the paintings reflects the ancient *rāga* / *bhāṣa* distinction. A detailed study of the *dhyāna* texts of the *Saṅgītopaniṣat* of 1324 and the associated ragamala illustrations of c. 1475 would make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the history of the ragamala tradition. It would also be interesting to determine the relationship between these *dhyānas* of Jain culture, which may be dated to 1324, and their associated paintings of c. 1475, with the *ākṣiptikā* songs of the *Saṅgītaratnākara* (c. 1250), and the *rāga-dhyānas* of the *Saṅgītarāja* (c. 1450).

The important point for determining the significance of our five couplets, however, lies in the two-part distinction that te Nijenhuis makes between the earlier descriptions 'resembling the gods of the Jain pantheon' and the subsequent 'idyllic-romantic *dhyānas*' of the ragamala tradition. Our five couplets fit neither category and consist of a new and third type. They do not describe the Jain pantheon. Neither are they of the widely known idyllic-romantic type more commonly associated with the ragamala tradition.²²

In marked contrast to the two *dhyāna* traditions noted by te Nijenhuis, our five couplets straightforwardly name the five raginis associated with a particular raga. Additionally, each of the five poems includes a cleverly constructed catch-phrase to make the recitation of the names quite enchanting and memorable. The names of a raga and five raginis and the catch-phrase are set within a very demanding and highly compact structure of twenty-four syllables, organised as two lines of twelve syllables with a caesura after seven. These couplets appear to be unique in the known body of ragamala poems.

²⁰ te Nijenhuis, *Musicological Literature* 15. Jainism is an autochthonous religion of India notably different from both Buddhism and Hinduism.

²¹ te Nijenhuis, *Musicological Literature* 15–16.

²² Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* 112–49 ('Chapter V: Ragamala Texts (A-W)'); Walter Kaufmann, *The Ragas of North India* (Calcutta: Oxford/IBH Publishing Company, 1968) plates I–XXXV; Pratapaditya Pal, *Art from the Himalayas & China* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003) 222–57, 266–69.

Our five couplets are in a vernacular language or dialect yet to be confidently identified. Initial indications point to a regional language from southern Rajasthan or a contiguous area, possibly Mewari, or to a dialect of such a language.²³ In the interests of maintaining the empirical reality and identity of the texts, the names and spellings used in the poems have been retained in the subsequent discussion. This evidence should be helpful in the long run in contributing to a more thorough understanding of these paintings and their provenance.

In an early study of the mainstream type of expansive and romantic ragamala texts, Ananda Coomaraswamy, a famous scholar of Indian paintings, provides valuable guidelines for understanding our five poems as well. Coomaraswamy notes that ragamala poems are very closely linked to other aspects of Indian culture, as are our new type of ragamala couplets:

As literature, the *Rāgmālā* poems are in fact related to such poetry as the *Rasikapriyā* of Keśava Dās and *Satsāiyā* of Bihāri: and like these works, they are far more than descriptions. Paintings and verses alike are traditionally and profoundly imagined pictures of human passion, and the more they are studied the more they reveal their content of experience. Their style is elusive and their vocabulary is rich in associations of both classical and folk origin. The Tertiary Prakrits at this time have lost the greater part of their inflections so that the poems consist to all intents and purposes of a series of words reduced to their bare roots. At the same time the poet wastes no words that can be spared: the consequence is that while the language is highly expressive, and is used to express the deepest emotion, the meaning of the lines must be grasped as a whole rather than word by word, and can be grasped only by one familiar with, and sympathetic to, Hindu modes of thought.²⁴

Though an image of human passion is suggested in only one instance in our five couplets, the words by Coomaraswamy about the compact intensity of ragamala poems and the importance of grasping a larger conceptual wholeness are apt clues for comprehending the poems inscribed on five ragamala paintings in the NGV collection.

II. Five Ragamala Couplets

Method of Presentation

Each text is presented in an analytical layout consisting of three horizontal sections (Figures 1, 2, 4–6).²⁵ In the top tier, the original text is presented. The middle level includes a transcription of the two-part text, in which an identifying phrase precedes the couplet, and to its right two lines of rhythmic notation showing patterns derived from the metre and words of the couplet. The lowest section comprises a translation. The initial phrase, with one exception, identifies the image painted on the front and the main subject of the couplet. Square brackets

²³ Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan* 107.

²⁴ Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Hindi Rāgamālā Texts,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 43 (1923): 396.

²⁵ I am grateful to the National Gallery of Victoria for permission to publish the texts inscribed on the back of five ragamala paintings in their collection, in Figures 1, 2, 4–6. Carol Cains, Curator of Asian Art in the National Gallery of Victoria, photographed the texts and made copies available on a CD, reproduced in Figures 1, 2, 4–6, for which I am grateful.

identify the minimal additions deemed necessary for determining an easily comprehensible yet compact translation.²⁶

In the middle tier, superscript accent signs (>) in the transcriptions and notations indicate a strong pulse. In the transcriptions, two additional superscript signs assist in identifying syllables after a strong pulse. Whereas a dot indicates the next syllable, articulated generally on a weak pulse, a dash, which appears less frequently, signifies the extension of the syllable on the previous strong pulse for the subsequent weaker pulse.

In the notation, a note represents a syllable. Quavers and crotchets show relative durations. Words with two, three and four syllables are indicated by a curved line. Signs for a rest are used in the middle tier as appropriate, in both the transcriptions and notations. They signify short periods of silence during recitation. In the original text, a punctuation sign consists of two dots in vertical alignment. These dots identify the end of the introductory phrase before a couplet and subsequently the internal organisation of the couplet. To retain the clarity of the subdivisions identified by the vertical dots in the text, they have been repeated in the transcriptions and translations.

Before considering each of the couplets in sequence, a broad general point about the paintings and their inscriptions should be made. In three instances the text and its image agree—*rāg bheru*/Raga Bhairava, *rāg mālkos*/Raga Malkaus and *rāg meg[h]*/Megha Raga (Figures 1, 2 and 6).²⁷ In the case of *rāg hīndol*, the image on the front is yet to be identified (Figure 4). Additionally, though the iconography for Sri Raga is clearly delineated on another painting in the NGV collection,²⁸ the couplet about *rāg śrī* is inscribed on the back of a painting of Malasri Ragini, which is unusual (Figure 5).

The problematic issue of this miss-match is noted elsewhere, as are several other instances of inconsistency between a text and its associated image among the twelve ragamala paintings of the incomplete series in the NGV collection.²⁹ Though these ambiguities are challenging and worthy of further attention, they are outside our focus here on the unique couplets inscribed on five of the ragamala paintings in the collection.

In the discussion of each text, comments on its translation are presented first. These observations facilitate subsequent discussion about the inherent rhythmic patterns of a couplet notated in the middle tier and the corresponding transcription. With some practice back and forth between a transcription and its notation, one can quickly learn to recite a couplet and thereby gain a lively sense of its engaging musical features and intrinsic charm.

²⁶ In the interests of maintaining an empirical perspective on the evidence contained in the five NGV ragamala texts considered here, vernacular or dialect spellings and italic font are used in this article in the corresponding discussion. I am grateful to Dr Rashmi Desai, a distinguished anthropologist, retired from Monash University, for his assistance and insights in reading, transcribing, and translating the texts on the back of the NGV ragamala paintings.

²⁷ The vernacular names and spellings used in the texts have been retained, together with the two conventions followed by art historians for identifying ragamala images: the use of Sanskrit spellings and upper case letters at the beginning of a word. Recent research suggests that the image identified in the NGV catalogue as Megha Raga, on which the couplet for *rāg meg[h]* appears verso (cat. no. 141), may be an image of the month named Magha, which, being in January–February, is half a yearly cycle removed from the summer monsoon season in India associated with Megha (‘cloud’) Raga. I am grateful to Richard Runnels for informing me of this possibility.

²⁸ Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan* 108, cat. no. 149.

²⁹ Reis W. Flora, ‘Twelve Ragamala Paintings in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne: A Concordance for Two Sets of Names and Five Sets of Numbers,’ *Fontes artis musicae* 55.1 (Jan.–Mar. 2008): 191–204.

The Couplet for *rāg bheru*

After the initial phrase preceding the couplet, *bhervī* is named as a *dhun* of *rāg bheru*. The use of the grammatical construction *kī*, which expresses possessive case with feminine gender agreement, makes this meaning clear. This construction occurs once in each of the other four couplets as well. In the translation, the word *bhervī* is spelled with two syllables, which agrees with its pronunciation in the vernacular language or dialect of the couplet. In the transcription it is spelled with three syllables, as *bheravī*, to conform with the poetic metre at this point. The dropping of internal vowels in words derived from Sanskrit is common practice in the spoken vernaculars and dialects of northern India, as is the re-insertion of these vowels in poetic recitation. In a similar manner, a final short *a* in Sanskrit words is also dropped in vernacular speech, which may be retained in poetic recitation. In both instances the metrical structure of a poem and a desire to render a pleasing euphonic interpretation influence decisions about the use of a dropped vowel when reciting any given poetic text.

These conventions result in a subtle and important flexibility in the spelling of a word, depending on the context in which it is used. In this article, the spellings used in the transcriptions conform to how a word would be recited in the relevant poetic context, while the same word in the translation is spelled as it would be pronounced in the vernacular or a dialect. In addition to the two acceptable spellings for the same word noted here—in the case of *bheravī*/*bhervī*—several other words in the couplets are spelled slightly differently in a transcription and its corresponding translation, according to the context in which the word appears and the demands of the poetic metre and recitation at that point. Having noted the reasons for the occasional use of two different spellings in a transcription and its translation, the use of the word *dhun* by the poet to identify *bhervī*, one of the wives of *rāg bheru*, merits further comment.

Today the term *dhun* refers to a light tune, more specifically, as Ashok Ranade notes, to a genre of instrumental music.³⁰ Additionally, Ranade states, ‘as a rule *dhuns* are composed in non-major *ragas* or the *ragas* used in semi-classical forms.’³¹ At the time our couplet was created, approximately 250 years ago, the word *dhun* probably carried a similar meaning, which accords very well with its use in this instance as a synonym of one syllable for *rāgnī*. Its use here is not a coincidence, as it appears to have been deliberately chosen to fit into the rather constraining and very challenging scheme of seven syllables plus five syllables per line, in place of the two-syllable word *rāgnī*, thus saving a syllable for use elsewhere.

At the beginning of this couplet, inscribed on the back of the first and most important painting in any ragamala series,³² about the highly esteemed *rāg bheru*, a melodic mode used in devotional songs sung at sunrise, the use of a what would be the very similar and expected phrase *bheru kī rāgnī bhervī*, with seven syllables more or less equal in emphasis, which might have been used instead, does not have nearly the same ear-arresting quality or impact within the set poetic metre of the couplet as the phrase *bheru kī dhun, bheravī*. The latter phrase quickly sets up an expectation and then fulfills it with flair, with a pleasing sound articulated both in the expectation and its resolution.

³⁰ Ashok Da. Ranade, *Keywords and Concepts: Hindustani Classical Music* (New Delhi: Promilla, 1990) 36, entry 1.6.3.

³¹ Ranade, *Keywords and Concepts*.

³² With the exception of the first extant ragamala series, an issue outside the scope of this article.

The synonym *dhun* apparently was chosen to articulate a short added-on length of sound in the middle of the phrase, with a resonate nasalisation, followed by a brief pause. Additionally, with its single syllable, by its use here the word *dhun* also allows the vowel *a* to be re-inserted into the spoken *bheravī*. The sound of a clever and subtle rhythmic device in the middle of the phrase, followed by the re-insertion of a dropped syllable, establishes a more euphonic result in the first line overall than would have been the result if the ‘correct’ phrase noted above had been used instead. A remarkable difference is noticeable when the two phrases are spoken out loud.

The names of the four other *rāgnīs* of *rāg bheru* follow immediately—*baṅgālī*, *berār*, *madhumād* and *sindhvī* (spelled with three syllables in the transcription), taking one through the first part of the second line of the couplet. Five syllables remain in the metrical scheme to complete the poem. The last five syllables are used most effectively in a very compact and charming turn of phrase, which succinctly and aptly summarises the relationship between *rāg bheru*, an epithet for the divinity Siva—one of the three main deities in Hinduism, the other two being Vishnu and Brahma—and his five wives. The number five (*pānc*) refers to the *rāgnīs* of *rāg bheru*. The word *brehe* is taken to be a vernacular or dialect version, possibly a poetic version in this instance, of the Sanskrit word *brihat*, translated here as ‘great.’³³ The appearance of the final two words, *nar nār*, is considered subsequently. Knowledge of the translation and the general order and flow of words prepares the way for considering the transcription and the rhythmic patterns proposed for this poem.

For me, the key that unlocked the metre and rhythms in this couplet, which eventually led to unraveling the metre and rhythms of the remaining four couplets, appears in the first seven syllables. They encompass four words—*bhe-ru kī dhun*, *bhe-ra-vī*—which project a particular rhythm in a compelling manner, in a type of triple metre—1 2 3, 1 - -, 1 2 3, - - -. The remaining two names of *rāgnīs* or *dhuns* of *rāg bheru* in the first line, in its second part, together comprise five syllables in a clear rhythmic pattern: long, short, long / short, long (*ban-gā-lī be-rār*). Accents naturally fall on strong syllables briefly extended into a weaker pulse, also in a triple metre. The punctuation in the text confirms the seven/ five organisation of syllables per line in this couplet, a pattern which is followed, with one exception, in the remaining couplets.

Having determined the internal organisation in the first line, it became apparent that the second line followed a similar pattern. I have chosen to articulate the rhythm of the second line in a manner similar to the first line, which maintains a certain crispness of rhythm for the first seven syllables, with the use of triplet units. Nonetheless, a consistently repeating long/short rhythm could be used from the word *bheravī* to the end of the couplet. Such a choice would result in a rather lilting effect and give the rhythm of the poem a more smoothed-out quality. By contrast, as shown now in Figure 1, in each of the two lines a crisp rendering in part one is followed by a more gentle rhythm in part two.

Indeed, a hard and fast rule for recitation appears to be inappropriate, as after the words *bheru kī dhun* the rhythmic patterns noted above could be recited in different permutations and combinations according to one’s inclination at any given time. The words remain constant, while their rhythmic treatment can vary. This concept is very similar to musical performances

³³ Monier Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1976 [reprint of 1899 ed.]) 735.

Figure 1. An inscription on the reverse of a painting of *Raga Bhairava: Shiva Seated Inside a Pavilion*, a Page from a *Raga Series: Raga Bhairava*, mid-eighteenth century, (Mewar), Rajasthan, India, watercolour on paper, 29.0 x 22.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, Felton Bequest, 1980, AS156-1980.

रग भैरव को पानो दुहा: मधु मी धुन मेर
 ब्रह्मिणी ब्रह्मिणी: मधु माधु मधु मधु मधु
 ब्रह्मिणी ब्रह्मिणी

rāg bhairava ko pāno duhā:
bhairava kī dhūn bhravī: braṅgālī bharā:
madhumād hār sindhuvī: pāne - brehe - nar nar

A couplet [about] the picture of *rāg bhairava*:
bhravī [is] a *dhūn* of *bhairava*: [as one] *braṅgālī* [and] *bharā*:
madhumād and *sindhuvī*: [each of the] five [the] great man [is] wife

in India in which the accepted and conventional melodic rules applicable to a raga remain constant while a raga nonetheless can be realised differently in every performance. The rhyme scheme in this couplet and instances of alliteration remain to be noted.

Concerning the rhyme scheme, both internal rhyme and end rhyme are used. The internal rhyme in each line is the vowel *ī*. Interestingly, and possibly of significance for eventually establishing the provenance of these couplets, in the other four poems the internal rhyming vowel is also *ī*. The end rhyme in this couplet is *ār*, which is also used in the last couplet about *rāg meg[h]*, a point to which we shall return later (Figure 6).

The alliteration in this couplet is notably subtle. In the first line, two appearances of the consonant *bh* are followed by two appearances of the consonant *b*, which show evidence of careful craftsmanship by the poet. The name of the first and most important raga in a series of ragamala paintings begins with the consonant *bh*. This consonant is then repeated immediately in the name of one of the raginis. The names of two other raginis beginning with *b* immediately follow. In Sanskrit and in the vernacular languages derived from Sanskrit, aspirated and unaspirated consonants are identified by different letters, which clearly distinguish two different linguistic sounds. This difference effectively makes for a delightful outcome in sound in the two instances of alliteration in the first line. Adding to the charm is the fact that here the order of the consonants is the reverse of their order in the Sanskrit and vernacular alphabets, where the unaspirated consonants come first. Additionally, *b* appears again near the end, at the beginning of the word *brehe*, a very apt and carefully chosen adjective for referring to Siva. This third appearance seems to serve as a pleasant and catching reminder of the two subtly

different alliterations in the first line, with their reverse order. The use of *b* at the beginning of an adjective describing Siva strongly enhances its effect at this point as well. The conjunction of both aspects of the appearance of *b* near the end markedly increases the intensity and charm of the poem as a whole.

Finally, the last two words, *nar nār* (literally ‘male female’/‘man woman’/‘husband wife’), are strongly alliterative in their own right. They bring the poem to its close with great impact. The meaning and general effect of the second part of the last line, and indeed of the entire poem overall, is not known until the very end. Earlier in the couplet, at the end of the first line, one feels a preliminary emphasis simultaneously with an increase in anticipation, the latter having occurred previously in the first part of the line. A noticeably stronger accent occurs at the end of the second line, where a consistently increasing anticipation throughout the poem, arising from the question ‘what’s the drift?’, is also fulfilled, to which the words *nar nār* strongly contribute at three levels—rhyme, alliteration and meaning.

This effect is reminiscent of the end of an improvisatory run in the performance of Hindustani music. Tension and anticipation, which gradually build up because of increasing melodic and rhythmic complexity, reaches a successful resolution and dénouement at the arrival of *samī*, the most important beat in the *tāl* pattern or metrical cycle, marked by an ‘x’ in Indian notation systems. A graph-like representation of this experience in Hindustani music is symbolised in Figure 1, by the rising curved line at the top of the notation, terminating in an x. A larger X has been placed at the end of the second line to show increased emphasis. A similar type of musical sensation is also felt quite strongly in the other four couplets. To avoid redundancy, however, the three signs in Figure 1 symbolising this sensation are not included in the analytical layout of the other couplets. Finally, as the recitation of this couplet becomes more and more familiar, each line can be recited very comfortably within four slower pulses. These pulses, identified in Figure 1, are also implicit in the remaining four couplets.

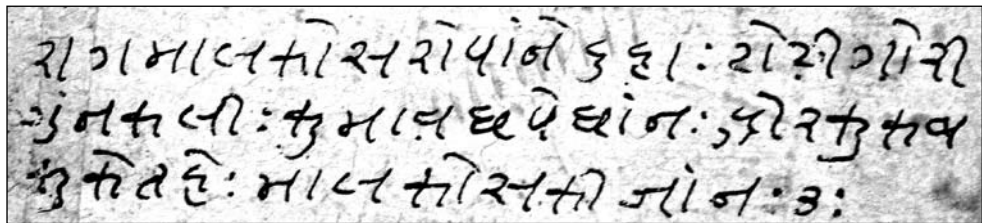
In summary, this is a very charming couplet which very cleverly includes a remarkable amount of information with great aplomb. Thirteen words are employed in a very dense and compact structure of twenty-four syllables in a metrical scheme of seven/five per line. First, a particular raga and its five raginis are named. Second, a sense of increasing expectation occurs throughout the poem. Additionally, internal and end rhyme and three instances of alliteration culminate in a powerful final phrase, bringing the couplet to an exhilarating end. The first family in the ragamala system is well served in this couplet. It establishes a pattern repeated with variations in the remaining four poems.

The Couplet for *rāg mālkos*

In marked contrast to the couplet about *rāg bheru*, in which the name of the raga is mentioned at the outset of the poem, in this couplet the name *mālkos* does not appear until the last moment, near the end (see Figure 2). Four *rāgñīs* of *rāg mālkos* are immediately and efficiently named in the first line, where they are cryptically identified at the end of the line by an imperative form in dialect of the Hindi verb *pachānnā* (to recognise).³⁴ The first part of the second line, about *kukab*, the remaining *rāgñī* of *rāg mālkos*, sets up expectations for the appearance of the quick turn of phrase in the five syllables yet to be read or recited. This last phrase effectively fulfills

³⁴ R.C. Pathak, comp. and ed., *Bhargava’s Standard Illustrated Dictionary of the Hindi Language (Hindi-English Edition)*, rev. and enlarged (Varanasi: Bhargava’s Book Depot, 1970) 364.

Figure 2. An inscription on the reverse of a painting of *Malkaus Raga: A Lord and Lady Sit together in Front of a Garden Pavilion*, a Page from a *Ragamala Series: Raga Bhairava*, mid-eighteenth century, (Mewar), Rajasthan, India, watercolour on paper, 29.0 x 22.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, Felton Bequest, 1980, AS163-1980.



rāg mālkos ro pāne dukā:
torī gori gunkālī : kumāvach pechān :
or kukab kuke take : mālakos ki jān . 3 :

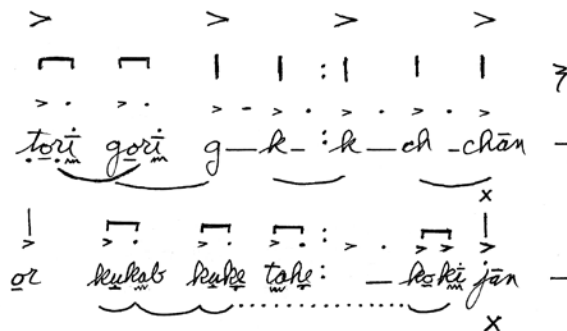
A couplet [about] the picture of *rāg mālkos* :

torī [?] *gorī* [?] *gunkālī* : [and] *kumāvach* [?] recognize [them as raginis] :
 while *kukab* is said to be : *mālkos*'s life .

the expectation that a sensible and pleasing meaning for the poem will appear delightfully at the last possible moment. Simultaneously the rhyming requirement established by the word *pechān* at the end of the first line is also completed with flair. Though the internal rhyme *i/e* is not as strong in this couplet as the *i/ī* internal rhyme in the other couplets, the end rhyme matches perfectly.

Instances of alliteration with four different letters occur in this couplet, in the first line. Furthermore, keeping in mind the internal rhyme already noted, additional internal rhymes using five different vowels are present as well, two instances in the first line and three instances in the second line (see Figure 3). A complex array of sounds in this couplet appears to be its key feature. The notion that the poet was creating ‘internal sonic fun’ may be an apt observation.

Figure 3. Alliteration and rhyme in the couplet about *rāg mālkos*.



torī gori gunkālī : kumāvach pechān :
or kukab kuke take : mālakos ki jān . 3 :

At the outset of the poem, the two vowels of the first word are repeated in the second word. The sound of the consonants in the two words, however, changes from retroflex to non-retroflex. Speakers of vernaculars derived from Sanskrit in India today would quickly recognise such a change. Even with the notable change from retroflex to non-retroflex in the consonants of the first two words, the *r* sound of the second syllable in the first word is repeated in the second syllable of the second word. Additionally, subsequently in the first line the quick repeat of three non-retroflex consonants in sequence, with one other consonant intervening in most instances between these alliterations, has the effect of impelling recitation of the words strongly forward.

In the second line rhyme and alliteration become increasingly dense. The initial word *or* recalls the middle two letters of the first two words in the first line. Additionally, whereas the stopped *k* sound appears twice in the first line, on a strong pulse in each instance, it appears in double time in the second line—on a strong pulse and the following weak pulse, which is immediately repeated—followed by a short length of time when it is not used. In the second part of the second line, the *k* sound appears twice again, similarly in double time, to very good effect.

The poem also includes a virtuoso expansion of the technique of quickly repeating a vowel, as encountered at the beginning of the couplet, the repeated vowels there being *o* and *ī*. In the second line, by comparison, three vowels are quickly repeated in a slightly different manner, and they are also new vowels—*u*, *a* and *e*. After the first appearance of *a* and *e* in the second line, for their second appearance they are cleverly knit together into the word *tahe*. Near the end, *o* and *ī* reflect their use twice at the beginning.

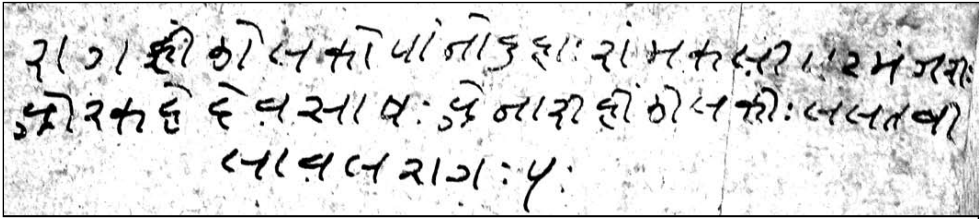
With the build up of rhyme and alliteration in the first and second lines, reciting this couplet is as delightful as reciting *bols*, the mnemonic oral notation syllables one learns for playing the tabla. Patterns of *bols* are commonly used as oral notation for many drumming traditions in India. This aspect of musical training and performance has a long tradition in the subcontinent. At the time this couplet was written, musicians and non-musician connoisseurs would have been able to immediately grasp the similarity between the sound of reciting this poem and the recitation of *bols* used for playing rhythmic patterns of varying tone quality on a drum.

The Couplet for *rāg hīṇḍol*

Explanatory remarks on the translation of the text for *rāg hīṇḍol* are not required. Another issue arises at this point, however, which merits comment before proceeding to a discussion of the structure and rhythm of the couplet itself.

In this poem the name *hīṇḍol* appears in the first part of the second line, near the middle of the poem, unlike the appearance of the name of the raga in either of the first two couplets (see Figure 4). In this respect the first three couplets are distinctly different, and a pattern seems to emerge, either by plan or coincidence. In the first couplet the name of the raga begins the couplet. Subsequently *rāg bheru* is brought to mind a second time in the penultimate word *nar*. Thus, in the first couplet the compound concept *rāg bheru* / Siva appears at both the beginning and the end. In the second couplet *rāg mālkoṣ* is named only once, but very effectively near the end. In the third couplet, though the name of the raga appears once, as in the second couplet, it appears in a different place within the poem.

Figure 4. An inscription on the reverse of a painting of *Unidentified Raga: A Lady Seated against Pillows with her Head Resting on her Hand*, a Page from a Ragamala Series: *Raga Bhairava*, mid-eighteenth century, (Mewar), Rajasthan, India, watercolour on paper, 29.0 x 22.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, Felton Bequest, 1980, AS162-1980.



rāg hīṇḍol ko pāno dukā :

rām̐kalī p̐atmanjarī : ōṛ kake dev̐ākh : ॠ ॡ ॢ ॣ । ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥

ye nārī hīṇḍol ki : lalat̐ bilāval rāg : 5 : ॠ ॡ ॢ ॣ । ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥ ॥

A couplet [about] the picture of *rāg hīṇḍol* :

rām̐kalī [and] p̐atmanjarī : and it is said dev̐ākh :

these [are] wives of *hīṇḍol* : [as are] *lalat̐* [and] *bilāval rāg* :

It is difficult to know whether the inconsistent appearance of the names of the first three ragas in their respective couplets reflects a conscious difference in the relative ranking for these three ragas in the mind of the poet, or whether the different places for the names are only coincidental. The data suggest that the poet may have considered the ragas to be of a different rank. It would seem unwise to dismiss this possibility out of hand. In the fourth couplet it is quickly discernable that the name *śrī* appears once, in the same sub-section as the name *hīṇḍol* here. The name *meg[h]* in the last couplet appears once near the end of the poem, similar to the name *mālko*.

Rāg bheru appears to have received specialised treatment in his couplet, by comparison with the appearance of the names of the other four ragas in their couplets. This difference is not surprising when one considers the overriding importance and significance of the name and the cultural values associated with *rāg bheru* / *Siva*, which are brought to mind twice. Now we shall consider structure and rhythm in the third couplet.

The names of two *rāguṅs* quickly account for seven syllables before *dev̐ākh* is named at the end of the first line.³⁵ The extra length of time accorded appropriately to the first syllable in the name *rām̐kalī*, a length of double duration, seems to foreshadow the use of this duration in the rest of the poem, where it is used in a remarkable and catchy manner. A similar duration of one crotchet begins the second part of the first line, and then strongly articulates the two

³⁵ In his article 'Hindī Rāgāmālā Texts,' Ananda Coomaraswamy has noted that '*kh* is often represented by *ṣ*, a peculiarity which I have not reproduced in the transliteration' (p. 397). His example has been followed here to spell *dev̐ākh*.

syllables in *devsākh*, which gives a feeling of extension at this point, while simultaneously emphasising the crotchet length.

Then the duration of a crotchet appears at the beginning of the second line, reflecting its use at the beginning of the first line. The duration of a crotchet has now appeared five times on a strong pulse. This reiterated occurrence brings forth an expectation that a crotchet falling on a strong pulse will be the norm for the remainder of this poem. In this sub-section our expectation is quickly denied, however, with telling effect.

In the sixth instance the duration of a crotchet very engagingly articulates a syncopated rhythm on the second syllable of the word *hīṇḍol*, the raga which the couplet is about and thus arguably the focus of the poem. Indeed, this syncopation reflects the rhythm associated with the meaning of *hīṇḍol* (swing),³⁶ which carries a wide range of associations in Hindu culture, among them the idea of 'bliss and the cessation of care; a flying motion away from things mundane.'³⁷ When pushing a child on a swing the motion has a syncopated feel. Short, long—, short (1, 2 3, 4); i.e., push, away and back, end of the return.

The poet, now having established a cross-emphasis against the strong pulses in the couplet, uses the crotchet duration again in the manner of a mirror image at the beginning of the second part of the second line, to name *lalat* ragini in a syncopated manner, with an additional effect that pleasantly enhances the syncopated feel. The second syllable in *lalat* naturally elicits a staccato articulation in recitation, and the second half of the crotchet duration is consequently silent, coinciding with a strong pulse. In this instance a rhythmic feature symbolic of the name *rāg hīṇḍol*, rather than an engaging turn of phrase, is the climax of the couplet.

After the two syncopated rhythms, the second subtly increased in emphasis over the first, with its difference of silence on the strong pulse, the remaining ragini is named and the poem finishes with the duration of a crotchet on the last strong pulse, thus ending the poem as the couplet began. Interestingly, the syncopated pattern in part two of the second line would work if the names of the two raginis were reversed, with the syllable *lā* in *bilāval* receiving the emphasis. In this case, however, the use of *bilāval* would simply repeat the rhythmic pattern used in *hīṇḍol* without much difference in the sound of the recitation, as sound would be articulated for the duration of the crotchet. The silence which occurs by using the name *lalat* would not be available to give increased distinction to the second appearance of the syncopated rhythm through a tasteful and very importance difference. The musical skill of the poet comes to the fore here in the decision made about the order of the words in the fourth sub-section of this couplet.

The seven/five syllabic structure for a line, used consistently up to this point, and also consistently in the remaining two couplets, seems to elude the poet in the second line of this poem. The organisation here is symmetrical, consisting of six syllables in each sub-section. The total number of syllables in the line still remains twelve, thus maintaining that structural element even though the internal arrangement is different.

The internal rhyme *ī/ī* is maintained. In the second line the internal rhyme appears one syllable earlier, however, due to the six/six structure of this line. Nonetheless, the rhyme appears at the same place in the musical metre of the poem. This seemingly contradictory result occurs because the second crotchet in the second line has been moved forward into the

³⁶ Spelled *hindola* in Sanskrit and *hindol* in Hindi.

³⁷ Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, 2 vols (New York: Praeger, 1968) II, 470–71.

first sub-section, by comparison with the appearance of the second crotchet in the first line, through its use in a syncopated pattern for *hīṇḍol*. Maintaining consistency in the musical metre while the poetic metre becomes inconsistent heightens the overall effect.

Another feature occurs simultaneously. Though four crotchet durations are used in both lines, their configuration in each line is different. The interplay of poetic metre against musical metre, together with different configurations for the appearance of the duration of a crotchet and its two notably different syncopated usages are additional instances of evidence that highlight both the poetic and musical skill of the poet.

The last word in the couplet does not rhyme perfectly with the word at the end of the first line. The use of the word *rāg* instead of the technically correct word *rāgñī* appears to have been brought about by the demands of the poetic metre at this point, as only one syllable remains in the couplet after *bilāval* is named.

The three minor indiscretions noted above—the single instance of a different internal structure in the second line, the gender ‘mistake’ for the last *rāgñī* to be named, and the lack of a perfect end rhyme—are more than compensated for by the other poetic and musical features identified in the couplet. The rhythm in this couplet, with its eight durations of a crotchet incorporating two subtly different syncopated patterns, calling to mind the meaning of the name *rāg hīṇḍol*, presents an overall result in sound starkly different from either of the first two couplets. Indeed, in their rhythmic patterns all three poems are notably distinct.

The use of triple metre in the couplet for *rāg bheru* is significant, as it is not repeated in any of the other four couplets, each of which is composed in a duple metre. The couplet for *rāg mālkos* is notable for the internal play of a dense and rather complex array of sounds. The couplet for *rāg hīṇḍol* is notable for a very skillful and effective use of the duration of a crotchet, six times on a strong pulse and twice in a syncopated rhythm. In many respects, a greater rhythmic difference between these three short couplets cannot be imagined.

Noting this difference, what is constant between them is the requirement and challenge of including six names from a different family in a ragamala series, and, at the same time, also setting up and then delivering a captivating catch phrase of meaning, together with both internal and end rhyme. In the case of the couplet for *rāg hīṇḍol*, though the catch phrase is rather straightforward and occurs in the middle of the poem, engaging rhythmic features are a compensating factor. The consistency of the challenge of naming each member of a ragamala family in twenty-four syllables has led to remarkable, very impressive and ingenious differences in rhythmic results.

The dramatic couplet-by-couplet rate of change and the creative use of new rhythms and sounds as noted in the first three couplets are not maintained with the same pace and flair in the remaining two couplets. Nonetheless, a notable display of rhyme, alliteration and rhythm is evident in the remaining two couplets. Another point of interest in these two couplets is the use of key words which call to mind broad cultural concepts. Before considering these two couplets, however, comments related to the missing couplet broaden the perspective about the significance of these five couplets in the ragamala tradition.

Rāg dīpak

Rāg dīpak is the only head of a family in the ragamala system not represented by a couplet among the poems inscribed on ragamala paintings in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria.

This couplet may well be inscribed on the back of one of the seven dispersed leaves known to be part of this particular series of ragamala paintings.³⁸ Though this text is not available for consideration, based on data in the poems in this study, it is reasonable to assume that the couplet for *rāg dīpak* would include four features common to the other five. First, it would consist of two lines of twelve syllables, with each line arranged internally into seven/five. Second, as well as an end rhyme integral to couplet metres, the internal rhyme would follow the *ī/ī* pattern. Third, the couplet would include a catch phrase. Fourth, the raginis named in this couplet would agree with the particular group of female melodic modes associated with *rāg dīpak* in the rare Hanuman system of classification found in the ragamala tradition, named after an obscure music theorist.³⁹ The Hanuman system accounts for the different groupings of raginis associated with each of the five ragas in our poems. In their Sanskrit spellings, the names of the raginis associated with *rāg dīpak* in this system are: *kedārī*, *kānnaḍā*, *deśī*, *kāmodī* and *nāṭikā*.⁴⁰ What are probably regional and vernacular variations of two of these names, *kāfi kannarā* and *naṭvo*, are inscribed on the back of two of the NGV ragamala paintings.⁴¹

Up to this point the notable rarity of the Hanuman system has not been discussed, and space here precludes a thorough discussion of this point. Suffice it to say that the Hanuman system is one of three classification systems followed in the ragamala tradition. The other two are the Painters' system, found extensively in Rajasthan from about 1550 through to the mid-nineteenth century, and the system of eighty-six melodic modes, including wives and sons, found in the *Mānkutūhal* of c. 1500, commonly followed in the numerous sets of ragamala paintings from workshops associated with princely states in the Himalayan foothills of northern India, dated in the eighteenth century.⁴²

According to Ebeling, of the 133 sets of ragamala paintings he documents from c. 1475 to the end of the nineteenth century, the Hanuman system is followed in only eighteen sets, or only 13.5 percent of the sets known to him when his reference work appeared.⁴³ The organisation of the raginis into families according to the rare Hanuman system in our five poems adds another important aspect to the significance of the couplets on the back of five ragamala paintings in the NGV collection.

The Couplet for *rāg śrī*

In the first line the names of four raginis account for all twelve syllables (see Figure 5). The last name comprises a compound word identifying a melodic mode associated with the spring season, *basant* (Sanskrit *vasanta*, literally 'spring season').⁴⁴ Before proceeding to the second line, a brief explanation about the name *gorbasant* is appropriate.

The music theorist Narendra Kumar Bose has reported that historically two very different types of melodic mode named *basant* were associated with western India and eastern India,

³⁸ Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan*; Flora, 'Twelve Ragamala Paintings.'

³⁹ Greig gives the name of this system as '*Hanumāna mat*' (opinion of Hanuman). See Greig, 'Ragamala Painting' 314, 316.

⁴⁰ Greig, 'Ragamala Painting' 316.

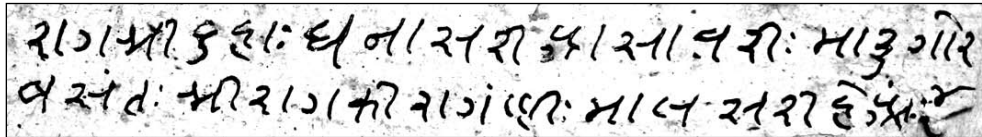
⁴¹ Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan*; Flora, 'Twelve Ragamala Paintings.'

⁴² Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* 18–25; Greig, 'Ragamala Painting' 314–16.

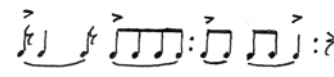
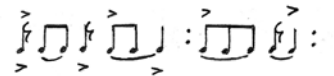
⁴³ Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* 18–25.

⁴⁴ In India the twelve months and six seasons are lunar. Spring (*basant*) lasts roughly from mid-March to mid-May. See A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Taplinger, 1968) 494.

Figure 5. An inscription on the reverse of a painting of *Malasri Ragini: A Lady Seated on a Black Chair with White Inlay*, a Page from a Ragamala Series: Raga Bhairava, mid-eighteenth century, (Mewar), Rajasthan, India, watercolour on paper, 29.0 x 22.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, Felton Bequest, 1980, AS161-1908.



रीरागः दुहाः धनारि सरि मारु गोरबसन्तः
 श्री रागः श्री रागिनीः मालसरी हेमन्तः

rāg śrī duhā:
dhanāsri āsāvri: māru gorbasant: 7 
śrī rāga śrī rāgini: mālasri hemant: 4 

A couplet [about] *rāg śrī:*
dhanāsri [and] āsāvri: māru [and] gorbasant:
 [these are] raginis of *śrī rāg:* [as is] *mālasri* [of] *hemant:*

noting that the type from western India was named *pāścātya vasanta*, while the type from eastern India was named *prācya vasanta*.⁴⁵ Though the transformation from the Sanskrit word *vasanta* to the Hindi word *basant* is easily understood, it is obvious that neither of the other two words given by Bose may be discerned in *gorbasant*. The word *gor* in the first part of the name refers to the famous medieval settlement of Gaur, a well-known cultural centre in eastern India in former days located north of Kolkata.⁴⁶ The name *gorbasant*, linguistically a vernacular version of a Sanskrit name, appears to identify the eastern version of *basant* which Bose has mentioned. Bose notes that the western *basant* and the eastern *basant* 'are quite different Ragas, based on different Modes and different Scales.'⁴⁷ Further, he notes that 'Prācya Vasanta and Shri Raga are based on the same Mode of the same Scale,' which seems to account for the presence of the ragini *gorbasant* in the couplet for *rāg śrī*.⁴⁸ Today *basant* and *rāg śrī* are associated with the same basic scale,⁴⁹ which seems to reflect historical continuity for the eastern melodic mode *prācya vasanta*. It could well be that when the couplet was composed, in the mid-eighteenth century presumably, the performance of two very different *basants* was current, thus causing

⁴⁵ Narendra Kumar Bose, *Melodic Types of Hindustan: A Scientific Interpretation of the Rāga System of Northern India* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1960) 626. Bose spells the melodic modes slightly differently, as 'Pāschātya Vasanta' and 'Prācya Vasanta.'

⁴⁶ Joseph E. Schwartzberg, ed., *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, 2nd imp. with additional material (New York: OUP, 1992) 37 (H4), 44b, 99c.

⁴⁷ Bose, *Melodic Types of Hindustan* 649. Upper case letters are retained as in the original.

⁴⁸ Bose, *Melodic Types of Hindustan* 651.

⁴⁹ Kaufmann, *The Ragas of North India* 277–89.

the need for the compound name *gorbasant* as in our couplet, though such a distinction is no longer necessary today.

In the second line the translation of the first part is straightforward. The catch phrase is in the second part. After the name of the ragini *mālsrī*, which has a middle vowel added in the transcription to fill out the poetic metre, the word *hemant* carries significance two times over. It simultaneously fulfills the rhyme set up at the end of the first line and identifies another season in the Indian calendar, winter time from mid-November to mid-January,⁵⁰ in this instance the season to which *mālsrī* is associated, as this melodic mode should be performed in this season. Again, significant cultural meaning is revealed at the last possible moment in a delightful and impressive manner, in conjunction with the fulfillment of rhyme.

In this instance, however, the meaning is not about the raga/ragini relationship, as is very cleverly and aptly demonstrated in the first couplet, but about the relationship between a melodic mode and the season in which it is performed. Though the raga/ragini relationship is mentioned in the first part of the second line, emphasis on a second cultural value comes to the fore in this couplet, inspired no doubt by the name *gorbasant*. In the first three couplets, only the raga/ragini relationship is brought into play in addition to giving the required names.

The number 4 has been inscribed at the end of this couplet. Its appearance there is enigmatic, as is the number 3 inscribed at the end of the couplet for *rāg māl̄kos*, and the number 5 inscribed at the end of the couplet for *rāg hīṇḍol*. In the conventional order for ragas and their families in each of the three systems commonly used in the ragamala tradition, *rāg bheru* is first, followed by *māl̄kos*, *hīṇḍol*, *dīpak*, *śrī* and *meg[h]*. In our poems, however, a number has not been written after the couplets for either *rāg bheru* or *rāg meg[h]*. It is possible that the number 2 may have been inscribed after the missing couplet for *rāg dīpak*. Nonetheless, the unusual configuration of numbers in our poems remains enigmatic. *Rāg māl̄kos* should be number 2, *rāg hīṇḍol* number 3, the missing *rāg dīpak* number 4 and *rāg śrī* 5. A possible explanation for this conundrum is that in this instance the poet or the person who inscribed the poems may have seen the six ragamala families recorded in a manuscript in two vertical columns on a page, of three families each. This listing should have been read top to bottom, firstly in the column on the left and then in the column on the right. Instead, however, the person numbering these couplets may have read horizontally left to right, which would account for the unusual configuration of numbers seen at the end of three of our couplets. These incorrect numbers according to convention, though possibly an inconsequential clerical error, nonetheless may contain a clue that eventually may help unravel the provenance of these poems. Though another explanation for these unusual numbers may be possible, the one offered here is the only one that has come to mind.

In the couplet for *rāg śrī* the mid-line rhyme is maintained. Additionally, the *ī* at the end of the first two names adds a rhyming quality to the first part of the first line, and also foreshadows the rhyming and rhythmic use of this vowel in the first part of the second line. In the latter instance, *ī* is cleverly employed while calling attention to the raga/ragini relationship. In this phrase the *ī* rhyme is employed three times to produce a pattern of asymmetrical cross-accents against eight quavers organised symmetrically as two units of four, the asymmetrical accents following the classic pattern >->->->-. This pattern is marked below the text and the notation

⁵⁰ Basham, *The Wonder that was India* 494.

in Figure 5. Then the rhyme *ī* appears for the last time in the name of the last ragini. In this instance it serves as a quick reminder of its earlier appearances in the first and second lines.

The two contrasting syncopation patterns in this couplet add another interesting element to the musical qualities of this poem. The straightforward syncopation pattern that highlights the very first name, *dhanāsrī*, has been used previously in the third couplet to highlight the name *rāg hīṇḍol*. In the context of this usage in an earlier couplet, the first appearance of syncopation here may be seen as a reminder of its earlier use. Then the contrasting and more complex syncopation pattern at the beginning of the second line may be seen as development in the complexity of the concept of syncopation, which is used here skillfully, with a subtle and most telling effect, to highlight the name *rāg śrī* while confirming his relationship to the other melodic modes, his raginis. Today the same pattern of syncopated cross rhythms is a feature of the metrical cycle *kaharvā tāl*, of eight pulses, which is commonly and widely associated with the performance of many lighter genres of music in northern India.⁵¹

An outstanding feature of this couplet is the use of only ten words. Indeed, the names of four raginis of *rāg śrī* comprise the first line, with no extra words. In the second line the poet gives the two names remaining, *rāg śrī* and *mālsrī*, and uses only three additional words—*kī*, *rāgaṇī* and *hemant*—to delightfully knit together rhyme, rhythm and meaning for the entire couplet. Three of the other couplets use twelve words each, while the couplet for *rāg bheru* uses thirteen words, which is perhaps additional evidence indicating a special status for *rāg bheru*, as the greatest number of words are used in his poem. Within this context, in reading and reciting the couplet for *rāg śrī* one is left to marvel at the very compact, dense and accomplished use of only ten words, seven of which account for names that must be included. These few words also make a point of referring to the important cultural value in India of a strong association between the performance of certain melodic modes and the seasons of the year.

In this couplet, the two relatively longer names in the first part of the first line, of three and four syllables respectively, naturally lead one to feel four larger pulses per line in recitation, instead of eight pulses per line as initially felt in the first three couplets. The couplet to be considered next also naturally falls into a feeling of four pulses per line. Indeed, with increasing familiarity, the first three couplets may be felt in this manner as well, as noted earlier, leading to a more fluent result in both comprehension and recitation. The consistent pattern of larger pulses in each of the couplets, four per line, allows for a useful abstract comparative overview of the large rhythmic structure of the poems, which will be considered in the summary section after comments about the final couplet.

The Couplet for *rāg meg[h]*

Though the translation of the first line is straightforward, three poetic aspects elicit comment. First, to fill out the poetic metre in the transcription, the short vowel 'a' has been inserted in the middle of two names, *gujri* and *deskār* (see Figure 6). Second, at the end of each of the first two names rhyme is provided by the long vowel *ī*, the second occurrence of which also sets up internal rhyme with the second line. Third, in three words the final consonant *r* provides a second rhyme pattern in the first line.

⁵¹ Nikhil Ghosh, *Fundamentals of Rāga and Tāla with a New System of Notation* (Bombay: Nikhil Ghosh, 1968) 69.

known hero/heroine or *nāyaka/nāyikā* theme in Indian aesthetics,⁵³ at another deeper level of human experience it reflects the concept in Hinduism whereby all members of humanity, regardless of gender, are symbolically considered to be female, searching for union at the deepest level with the male divine principle. Thus, the text simultaneously calls to consciousness these two different levels of human experience and values in Indian culture. The immediate and surface meaning of the text generally brings to mind its powerful sub-text and the symbolic link between them, which is constantly known and ever present.

At the top of Figure 6 is a transcription of the text crossed out above the couplet. This phrase may be translated as ‘a picture of *rāg slām kallān*.’ In this instance such a mistake eventually may provide a clue that leads to a deeper understanding or more comprehensive view of the ragamala paintings in the NGV collection.

The particular configuration of quavers and crotchets in the first line of the couplet is repeated exactly in the second line. This symmetrically repetitive rhythmic feature, line by line, is non-existent in the other four couplets, thus providing a reader or one who recites the poem, and the listeners, with a new and fresh sonic experience.

Finally, remembering the first couplet about *rāg bheru*, one cannot help but notice the use of the sound *ār* as the end rhyme in this couplet. Additionally, the use of the same word at the end of the first couplet and the end of this couplet—*nār* (wife)—increases an impression of having come full circle to a significant point of arrival. This effect is comparable to the completion of the final *tāl* or metric cycle in a musical performance. Further, the use of the word *nār* at this point, calling to mind its use in the first couplet in what here is to all intents and purposes the sixth and final couplet, seems to encapsulate the whole essence of the raga/ragini family scheme used in the ragamala tradition. Gender identity in the conceptualisation of melodic modes in Indian culture, dating from antiquity, receives a very strong endorsement in a much later era in our poems, both in the texts themselves and by the appearance of *nār* as the last word in the first and sixth couplets in this series of ragamala paintings from southern Rajasthan dating from the middle of the eighteenth century.

Summary and Conclusion

These couplets do not describe the attributes of a melodic mode, a characteristic of mainstream ragamala texts. These couplets also do not describe members of the Jain pantheon, as is found in a text possibly associated with the earliest known series of ragamala paintings. The five ragamala couplets on paintings in the NGV collection are new and unique in the ragamala tradition. They present the names of the members of a particular raga family, according to the rare Hanuman system, in a compact couplet of twenty-four syllables organised seven/five per line, using rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, and a catch phrase which highlights a particular cultural point, reality or value.

In a ragamala text inscribed on four different sets of ragamala miniatures from the Amber school of northern Rajasthan, dating from the early eighteenth century and thus somewhat earlier than the NGV mid-eighteenth century paintings, which are also organised in the Hanuman system of classification seen in the NGV ragamala couplets, a similar approach of

⁵³ Anand Krishna, *Malwa Painting* (Varanasi: Bharat Kala Bhavan, 1963) 37–40 (‘Appendix “C”: A Note on the Nāyikā-Bedha Motif’).

identifying the raginis of a raga is evident, but the metre of the couplets consists of thirty-two syllables organised eight/eight per line.⁵⁴ An initial analysis of the comparable couplet for Raga Bhairava from this text, inscribed on the front at the top of a ragamala painting, suggests that the poetic and rhythmic flair and charming catch phrase noted in the NGV couplets are not present.⁵⁵ It is possible that the NGV couplets may show some influence from this earlier Amber text in the Hanuman system, but more work is needed on this point. Even if influence can be established, the NGV couplets of only twenty-four syllables are notably more compact.

An abstract schematic comparison of the five couplets considered in this study demonstrates their basic similarities and differences (Figure 7). In this outline each couplet is identified by a roman numeral commensurate with their place in the Hanuman system, an order also followed in the Painters' system and the system recorded in the *Māṅkutūhal*, which corresponds with the roman numeral that precedes each text in the analytical presentations (Figures 1, 2, 4–6). This number identifies an abstract scheme for the data given in the middle tier of each figure, comprising the rhythmic pattern derived from the more significant strong pulses, and the letter in each respective couplet that falls on the corresponding pulse, in total comprising forty-four consonants, three vowels and one semi-vowel.

Figure 7. A scheme showing the letter structure and rhythmic structure, at the same abstract level, of ragamala couplets inscribed on five ragamala paintings (verso) in the NGV collection.

	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
I	bh	bh,	b	r	♩.	♩.,	♩.	♩.
	m	s,	p	h n	♩.	♩.,	♩.	♩.
II	t	g,	k	ch	♩	♩,	♩	♩
	o	k,	m	k j	♩	♩,	♩	♩
III	r	p,	o	d s	♩	♩,	♩	♩ ♩
	y	h,	l	l r	♩	♩,	♩	♩ ♩
IV	?				?			
V	d	a,	m	g s	♩	♩,	♩	♩ ♩
	s	r,	m	s m	♩	♩,	♩	♩ ♩
VI	b	g,	d	k l	♩	♩,	♩	♩ ♩
	t	k,	m	r n	♩	♩,	♩	♩ ♩

Glancing up and down the column of notation to the right, one may discern differences and similarities in the large rhythmic patterns of the couplets. Despite a change from triple metre to duple metre, couplets I and II appear to be linked as a pair at an abstract level. The

⁵⁴ Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* 136–42 (Text I, by the poet Paidā).

⁵⁵ Ebeling, *Ragamala Painting* 29.

pattern for couplet III is notably different and may pair up with the pattern in the missing text of couplet IV. The patterns for V and VI at this abstract level are the same. The overall view suggests three pairs of abstract patterns.

The patterns for the corresponding letters are not as immediately revealing as the patterns of notation. One can quickly discern, however, additional evidence for the intrinsic appeal and power of the first couplet, and, in a similar manner, the other four couplets. In the couplet for *rāg bheru* (I), for instance, the beginning of five out of six names falls on a major pulse, and rhythmic intensity increases in the second part of the line, which, as we have seen, contains a catch phrase. In couplets III, V and VI, the beginning of five out of six names also falls on a major pulse. In the couplet for *rāg mālkoṣ* (II), by comparison, the beginning of only four out of six names falls on a major pulse. In this couplet, however, the extensive use of alliteration and repeated vowels compensates.

The absence of an overt catch phrase in the couplet for *rāg hīndol* (III) is offset by a subtle and very effective use of two different versions of a simple syncopation pattern, which rhythmically symbolises the meaning of the name of the raga. In couplet V two catch phrases are contained in the second line. Perhaps the catch in the final phrase, with its repeat of the concept of a season linked to music performance, first brought to mind in the name *gorbasant*, in combination with the end rhyme, overrules the complex syncopation of the first catch phrase. The use of the latter followed by the former, however, together with the presence of only ten words overall, creates a memorable impact. This couplet seems to contain a double or triple intensity not discernable in its abstract schema in Figure 7.

Finally, the end rhyme of the couplets present an interesting pattern: *ār, ān, - , ? , ant, ār*. The same end rhyme is used for couplets I and VI. The end rhyme for couplets II and V show a remarkable similarity. Though end rhyme is absent in a technical sense in couplet III, the possibility exists that this inconsistency may be resolved somehow in the missing couplet IV. The tentative paired arrangement at this level of analysis—I/VI, II/V, possibly III/IV—is in marked contrast to the paired couplets noted on the basis of abstract rhythmic patterns in Figure 7: I/II, III/?, V/VI. Two different systems of paired couplets appear to be discernable, depending on the parameter being used. This contrasting data for paired couplets adds to our view of the unusual talent of the poet who composed these couplets.

In conclusion, in addition to the names and the cultural values present in these couplets, their essence musically may be reduced respectively to the following:

- I in a scheme using triple metre, while the other couplets follow duple metre, the beginning of five names fall on major pulses, with a powerful catch phrase at the end;
- II shows internal sonic fun with much rhyme and alliteration;
- III uses the basic and simple syncopation pattern in two versions;
- V uses the simple syncopation pattern, and subsequently a syncopation pattern of increased complexity; and
- VI shows exact repetition in detail of the rhythmic pattern in the first line in the second line.

The end-rhyme pattern showing paired couplets for four of the six poems from the outside toward the centre, the data presented in Figure 7 and the analysis of many points in the earlier

discussion clearly reveals poetry of uncommon quality, composed by a very skillful wordsmith and musician. The five couplets inscribed on five ragamala paintings in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria constitute a unique, unusual and valuable ragamala text.