

## A Study of Select Varṇa-s of Tiger Varadachariar

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### Abstract:

Karnāṭaka classical music is known for its rich and diverse repertoire, shaped by centuries of contributions from composers, most notably the Trinity—Tyāgarāja, Muddusvāmi Dīkṣita, and Śyāmā Śāstri—and their disciples. In the 20th century, Tiger Varadachariar emerges as a significant figure whose multifaceted role as a musician, scholar, teacher, and composer merits closer attention. While his varṇa-s are relatively more popular in performance practice compared to his kṛti-s and tillāna-s, they still remain underexplored in the concert repertoire, indicating the need for renewed focus on his compositions.

The varṇa holds a unique place in Karnāṭaka music, serving as a bridge between practice and performance. Through its structured form, it captures the essential features and characteristic phrases of a rāga, making it a vital tool in both pedagogy and artistic presentation. This paper aims to bring Tiger Varadachariar's select varṇa-s to the forefront and analyse his portrayal of rāga-s through this compositional form. The study is based on published notations and select recordings available in the public domain. By examining the melodic structures and key phrases evident in these varṇa-s, the study sheds light on the composer's innovative approach to rāga delineation. His varṇa-s, while adhering to the traditional frameworks of rāga grammar, also exhibit his distinct creative imprint, reflecting a deep understanding of both theoretical frameworks and aesthetic expression.

By undertaking this analysis, the study not only contributes to a greater appreciation of Tiger Varadachariar's compositional style but also underscores the importance of revisiting and reviving lesser-performed works of the 20th century. In doing so, it aims to enrich the contemporary understanding of Karnāṭaka music's compositional heritage.

## Keywords:

Tiger Varadachariar, Karnāṭaka Classical Music, Varṇa-s, Rāga, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Composers, Compositional forms

## Introduction:

Varadachariar was born in 1876 in Kolathur, near Sriperumbudur, in Chengalpattu district. He was the third of six sons born to the kathākālākṣepam performer Ramanujachariar and his wife, Kalyani Ammal. Varadachariar's childhood was spent in Kaladipet, where his father practiced his profession. Among his siblings, two brothers gained significant recognition. His elder brother, K.V. Srinivasa Iyengar, was a noted musicologist and his younger brother, Veena Krishnamachariar was both a vainika and a vocalist (Ramanathan 21).

Although Ramanujachariar was not supportive of his sons pursuing music likely due to the hardships he faced as a performer, Varadachariar's musical talent emerged naturally. He credited his elder sister as his first musical influence. A respected singer, composer, and teacher, she was highly sought after in the village, even by Nāgasvara vidvān-s eager to learn her tunes. Varadachariar learned much from her during his early years (Ramanathan 22).

Varadachariar's first teachers outside his family were Appadurai Iyer and his son Ramachandran who was a violinist. Later he pursued music under the guidance of Masilamani Mudaliar and Pedda Singracharyulu. He regarded Patnam Subramania Iyer as his mentor and was deeply influenced by him. This influence was evident in Varadachariar's own music, as recognized by his admirers, who often compared his exceptional tana-singing skills to those of Patnam (Ramanathan 22).

When he was at Mysore, Varadachariar attracted the attention of Krishnaraja Wodeyar, who honoured him with the title of 'Tiger'. It was unique that in spite of a gruff voice, the 'Tiger' strode like a colossus for decades and extracted respect and honour. From the mid-1920s until his death in 1950, Tiger Varadachariar was a towering figure in Carnatic music, especially in Madras. Though he performed occasionally, he was more revered as a senior authority whose opinions were highly respected (Ramanathan 23).

Esteemed musicians like Veena Dhanammal, Mysore Vasudevachar, and Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar held him in great regard. Varadachariar successively led four prominent institutions dedicated to music education: the Teachers' College of Music at the Music Academy, Madras (1931–32), the Music Department of Madras University (1932–37),

Annamalai University's Music College (1937–43), and Kalakshetra's Music College (1944–50). These positions further affirmed his authoritative stature in the Karnāṭaka classical music world and allowed him to mentor and shape many highly skilled musicians. For over 25 years, Varadachariar stood as a symbol of classical excellence and musical leadership (Ramanathan 23–24).

Tiger Varadachariar, a versatile musical genius, was not only a renowned vocalist and teacher but also a composer. His journey into composition began relatively late in life and was initially focused on varṇa-s. Varadachariar has some thirty compositions to his credit which include about half-a-dozen gītam-s and a dozen varṇa-s.

### **Varṇa as a Compositional Form**

Varṇa-s occupy an important position in the Karnāṭaka classical tradition and are regarded as one of its most essential compositional forms. Varṇa as a compositional form is said to be the bridge between abhyāsa gāna (practice repertoire) and sabhā gāna (performance repertoire). A varṇa serves not merely as a performance piece, but also as a pedagogical tool that encapsulates the salient features of a rāga. Structurally, varṇa-s integrate lyrical content along with svara passages, and typically comprise of distinct sections such as the pallavi, anupallavi, muktāyi svara, caraṇa, and ciṭṭesvara-s.

Over the centuries, different types of varṇa-s have been composed. Some of the types include:

1. Tāna varṇa
2. Pada varṇa
3. Daru varṇa
4. Cauka varṇa

Varṇa-s are composed in a wide range of rāga-s. While ādi and aṭa tāla-s are most common, varṇa-s have been composed in many other tāla-s as well.

In the tradition of Karnāṭaka classical music, the varṇa stands as an indispensable compositional form that encapsulates the essential grammar of a rāga while also serving as a technical and expressive vehicle for musicians. The varṇa is unique to the Karnāṭaka classical system, reflecting its rigorous integration of rāga, tāla and bhāva.

Tiger Varadachariar is said to have composed around a dozen varṇa-s, as mentioned earlier. This study examines select varṇa-s of Tiger Varadachariar.

Seven varṇa-s in phrase-based rāga-s<sup>1</sup> are analyzed in the study. They are listed in the table below:

Sl. No.	Varṇa	Rāga	Tāla
1	alaikaḍal tuyilvōi	Kāmbhōji	Ādi
2	amudinum inimaiyā	Bhairavī	Ādi
3	manamiraṅgādadēnō	Śahana	Ādi
4	nīye mudalvan	Kēdāragauḷa	Ādi
5	sariyō nī seyyum	Bēgaḍa	Ādi
6	cāla ninnē nammina	Kēdāra	Khaṇḍa Aṭa
7	ēlā nē vāni jōli	Sāvērī	Ādi

The analysis is based on the published notations of the varṇa-s found in the book ‘Varṇasāgaram’ by T K Govinda Rao.

## Analysis parameters

The varṇa-s are analyzed based on the following parameters:

- **Opening phrase of the varṇa-s**

The way a varṇa commences is highly significant because the opening phrases often sets the identity of the rāga. By studying the opening phrases, an insight can be gained into Tiger Varadachariar’s approach to rāga delineation.

- **Ending notes of the ettugaḍe svara-s and connecting back to the caraṇa**

The transitions between the ettugaḍe svara passages and the caraṇa are crucial for maintaining melodic continuity. Examining these endings shows how Tiger Varadachariar managed smooth connections and structural coherence within his varṇa-s.

- **Characteristic phrases and unusual phrases**

Every rāga is defined by its characteristic prayōga-s, but the individuality of a composer often comes through in the use of unexpected or unusual phrases. Identifying such phrases helps understand how Tiger Varadachariar stayed rooted in grammar while also experimenting with fresh melodic ideas.

- **Patterns used in svara passages**

<sup>1</sup> Phrase based rāgas are those rāga-s which are mainly identified by characteristic and typical phrases, rather than the ārōhaṇa-avarōhaṇa (or the scale).

The svara sections in varṇa-s bring out rhythmic symmetry and aesthetic appeal. Analyzing the patterns found in these svara passages reveal the technical depth of his compositions.

## Analysis

### a) Opening phrase of the varṇa-s

Of the selected varṇa-s, the varṇa-s in Kēdāra, Bēgaḍa, Śāhana and Sāvērī have opening phrases which immediately establish the rāga. For instance, the Kēdāra varṇa commences with the phrase ‘npns ,ns, pmgr ssrg s,,,’ which is characteristic of the rāga.

P.	” ”	” ”	*NPNS ,NS, cā la nin	PMGR  SSRG\ S,, ne	MMGR G SRS ,SNP nam mi	NPŃ S MGMP  NP,M na vā ḍa	PM,G nu rā	MG,R SR,S	*
			*NPRS ,N SS sa ma ya	MG,R  SMGM PMGM mi de	PN-GM PN S-G MP,N nan nu	PPRŠ ,N- PŠ brō va	Š,NP- vai	M NP,   MG, G RSNP	*

Figure 1: Kēdāra varṇa – pallavi

Kēdāragauḷa and Kāmbōji varṇa-s establish the rāga characteristic only in the later part of the āvarta and not immediately.

P.	PMG,	MGGR	SRGS	R,R,	RGMR GS,N	DP,-D	SRGM	PMPG ,MPM	PD,M	GMPD-	MP/D\P, MGR	G\S,-P	DSRG										
	a	lai	ka	ḍal	tu	yil	vō	y	āṭ	koḷ	lu	vā	yē	a	ḍi	mai	yai.						
A.	MPDN	D\D,P	/ND/N\P,-/DMG	M-/PMG R	SRG	MPMM ,DPD	MPDMGMP,-	DPD-M	GPDS	MGRG \S,-/RN	DP,-M	GSRG											
	ka	ja	bha	ka	stū	ri	tu	ja	bha	mā	lai	mār	bā	til	lait	ti	ru	gō	vin	da	rā	ja	nē

Figure 2: Kāmbōji varṇa – pallavi and anupallavi

The Bhairavī varṇa has an unusual start; a phrase which corresponds to Śrīrañjani. The rāga Bhairavī is only established in the second āvarta of the pallavi showing both the dhaivata-s.

P.	R,G,	R,,	NSRR	GGRS	N,D N	SRG,	R-SMG ,GRS	RGMR ,G-SR	G S,R	GMPD	N,D P	ND PD	MG, P	MGRS	
	a	mu	di	num	i	ni	maiyaī	a	gat	ti	ya	na	ru	ji	ya
A.	N,D,	P,,	MPDP	NNDP	MGRG	MPDP	MPDN Š,,	P,DN Š NSR-	G,RŠ	NDNS	GR, Š	RNDP	DP,-M	PGRS	
	ta	mi	zhin	ma	hi	mai	ta	naic	cā	rri	ḍa	val	lai	yō	

Figure 3: Bhairavī varṇa – pallavi and anupallavi

### b) Ending notes of the ciṭṭesvara-s and connecting back to the caraṇa

#### 1. Ending with the previous svara:

In the Sāvērī varṇa, all the ciṭṭesvara-s end with “sr” and join with the caraṇa which starts with a madhyama.

Figure 4: *Sāvērī varna – carana and cittesvara-s*

Figure 5 : Bēgada varna – carana and cittesvaras

Figure 6 : Śāhana varṇa – carana and cittesvara-s

Figure 7 : Bhairavī varṇa – carana and cittesvara-s

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Figure 8: Kēdāra varṇa – anupallavi

3. ŚNPM GRSN P-MGRGS-NP N-PMM|PMGS G-NPMNPMG P-ŚNP ŚNMP |ŚPPŚ GPŚŚ |NŚMG PŚP R ||  
RŠN Ġ ŚM NŚ M ĠRŚ PŠN Ś ĠMGŚ |MĠRŚ Ġ-ŚNP MGR-N PM-NŚ PŠN |MĠRŚ NPN-M |MGRS NPNM ||NPSN SMGM \*(bhūlōka)

Figure 8: Kēdāra varṇa – third ciṭṭesvara

Śahana varṇa has “mdmg” prayōga in the third ciṭṭesvara and “gmdn” prayōga in the fourth ciṭṭesvara which is unique.

3. DNŚ D NDPM DPDM PGMR |GMP R PMDP |MDMG M DNŚ ||DNŚ-MDNŚ R ŚDNŚ RĠMĠR |ĠRŚ D ND PD |MPMR GMPM ||(vinai)  
4. Ś,, Ś NŚR, R N,Ś D,ND |P,, R ĠMPD |NDPM GMDN ||ŚRŠN , NŚD N,ND P DPM |PGMR RGRS |RGM P MDN, ||  
SDND PM, D ,NDP ,DPM |MPM M ,DPM |PMDN Ś,, ||DNŚR , PMP Ġ,MĠR RĠRŚ |RŠD NDPM |PGMR GMPM ||(vinai)

Figure 9: Śahana varṇa – third and fourth ciṭṭesvara-s

#### d) Patterns used

In the Bhairavī varṇa muktāyisvara, the phrase “gr, ns, rn, dp, – g, rs” is articulated through the pattern tadhīm–tadhīm–tadhīm–tadhīm–kiṭataka. This construction employs successive four-syllable groupings, culminating in a five-syllable unit, thereby introducing rhythmic asymmetry within an otherwise symmetrical framework. Such structuring exemplifies the interplay between svara organization and laya precision in varṇa compositions.

Similarly, in the fourth ciṭṭesvara, the phrase “g,rs – n,dp – g,rs – rgmpd” illustrates a sequencing of three four-akṣara groupings joined with a five-akṣara sequence.

ci. RGM G MGRS- SRG S RSND |NSRG , RGM |,-PDM P,, ||MGRG, MPG ,R SR NSRG |M,P N DPDM |P,DN S,,- S ||  
P, DN Ś NŚR Ġ,R Ś ĠRŠR |N,D P ND MP |D,NŚ R,, ||RŠR Ġ,M RĠ ŚR ND N,ŚR |ĠR, N Ś, R N |,DP,- G,RS ||(amudinum)

Figure 10: Bhairavī varṇa – muktāyisvara

4. S,,Ś ,Ś-ĠR ŚN DP ,M=GR |S,,-M GR-PM |G-DPM-GRGM ||PM,G RS-R N ,DPD- M/PGR |GMPN ,SRG |MPDN  
DNŚ-P DNŚ-M PDNŚ- /RNDP |DMGR-SRNS |RGMP DNŚR ||ĠMRĠSRNS- PDMP DNŚ-Ġ ,RŚ-N,DP-G |,RS-R

Figure 11: Bhairavī varṇa – fourth ciṭṭesvara

In Kēdāra varṇa, the second ciṭṭesvara incorporates the phrase “snps mgg, rsnp rss, npns mgg,” as a pattern. This is a classical pattern of mandra-madhya-tāra phrases seen in several rāga-s

2. P,NP NŚ,N P,MP ŚNPM G,RS |GMPN PPMM GGRS SNP S MGG, |RSN- P RŚŚ, |NPN- Ś MĠĠ,- ||RŠN P ,M

Figure 12: Kēdāra varṇa – cāla ninne – khaṇḍa aṭa

In the Bēgaḍa varṇa, the muktāyisvara presents “mpdp – mgr – sndp, mgr – gmdp – snd” phrase, which is rendered through the pattern takatadhīṅṇatōm–takatadhīṅṇatōm–takatadhīṅṇatōm.

SSMG ,MPM- DP,D- PDN, |DPD-MPD-MP |GRS-S R\NDP ||MPDP ,MGR SNDP ,MGR |GMDP ,SND |P-N,D PMGR ||  
SMGR S,-SS PM,P GRS,- |SSDP ,D-N, |DP-MP DPŠ, ||SNRŠ ,SNS GR-GM/PGRŠ |SN/GR S-N,D |P-MM, GRSN ||(śariyō)

Figure 13: Bēgaḍa varṇa – muktāyisvara

## Findings

The analysis of Tiger Varadachariar's varṇa-s reveals several noteworthy features. In some compositions, the rāga is firmly established in the very opening phrase, while in others its identity only emerges gradually, sometimes as late as the end of the first or even the second āvarta. His varṇa-s predominantly operate within the madhyasthāyī range, though occasional and fleeting movements into the mandra and tāra registers are employed with care, resulting in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing melodic contour. Particularly striking is his Bhairavī varṇa, which presents an unusual and refreshing flavor of the rāga, distinct from the conventional interpretations commonly encountered in the repertoire. Likewise, his Kēdāra varṇa stands out for its liberal use of dātu prayōga-s, imparting a unique melodic character that sets it apart within the tradition.

## Conclusion

The study of Tiger Varadachariar's varṇa-s highlights both his respect for tradition and his own creative approach as a composer. While the structural framework of his varṇa-s follows convention, the way he treats the rāga often shows individuality. In some cases, the rāga identity is established right at the beginning, whereas in others it unfolds only after a full āvarta or two. The unusual flavor of his Bhairavī and the striking use of dātu prayōga-s in Kēdāra bring out a unique personal stamp.

These qualities reflect Varadachariar's dual role as a teacher and composer. His varṇa-s serve as valuable material for both learning and performing, bridging the gap between practice and concert repertoire. Yet, despite their depth and beauty, they are not frequently heard on the modern stage. A revival of these works could add variety and richness to contemporary concerts while also preserving the legacy of a major 20th-century figure in Karnāṭaka classical music.

In conclusion, Tiger Varadachariar's varṇa-s demonstrate how a composer can stay within the boundaries of tradition and still contribute fresh perspectives. Studying them not only helps us appreciate his artistry but also reminds us of the importance of exploring and sustaining less familiar compositions in our living tradition.



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