

Analytical study in the composition of Amba Neelambari of Ponniah Pillai

Author name:- Megha Pillai

Corresponding Author:-Dr. V Janaka Maya Devi

Institute: Avinashlingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education, Coimbatore

Department:- Department of Music

Email id:- ashumegha20@gmail.com

Abstract:-Raga is the main milestone in the history of Carnatic Music. Each raga has its own flavour and bhava. Neelambari is such a raga starts from pre-historic period. The lullaby of a mother is mostly depicted or constructed by the raga Neelambari only. Neelambari is meant for vatsalya bhava, karuna rasa and bhakti rasa. This article analysis the theoretic and musical aspects on the rasa in the Carnatic kriti "*Amba Neelambari*".

- The main theme of the kriti is the pleading request of a daughter to the Goddess Neelambari. The composition exemplifies how musical and lyrical elements together evoke deeply personal and spiritual emotions. Hence,
- The request to Goddesses evokes **Bhakti rasa**,
- **For Bhakti rasa** the lyrical analysis has been done
- The pleading to the mother of the world exhibits the **Vatsalya rasa** and also wanting of the Karunaya of a mother from the daughter exposes the **Karuna Rasa**.
- Karuna rasa and vatsalya rasa both are taken for analysis in **two aspects**
- Raga and rasa analysis
- Raga and rasa with the lyric has been analysed

The study also highlights the emotional and cultural significance of the composition in the Bhakti tradition.

Keywords:- Raga Neelambari, emotions, bhavam, karuna rasa, vatsalya rasa, bhakti rasa.

Introduction

Carnatic music, the classical art form of South India, is known not only for its structural complexity but also for its deeply expressive emotional and spiritual qualities. Compositions

often serve as vehicles for devotional expression, with the lyrics. One such composition is “*Amba Neelambari*”, composed by Ponniah Pillai which idolized the goddess in her compassionate form. It is set in **Raga Neelambari**, a melody traditionally associated with lullabies and maternal tenderness. Small description about the Neelambari Raga can be seen below and visualised an outline knowledge of the Raga.

Raga Neelambari:- Neelambari is an ancient raga that dates back to 1100 CE. An earliest reference to the raga is from the text *Sangita Makarandha* (7th – 9th century) by the author Narada. Ancient ragas like Neelambari, predate the concept of a bounded scale, a *janya* of Sankarabharnam. These ragas are defined by their *sancharas* (characteristic phrases). This is a raga that is associated with relaxation and peace. Neelambari has *gamakas* that flow seamlessly from one note to another, blending subtle notes, like a shading on a canvas, and finally it all merges into one phrase that make so much sense. Designed to evoke *bhakti*, *karuna*, and *vatsalya rasa*.

Neelambari in today’s context takes the following notes:

- Shadjam - S
- Chathusruthi Rishabham -R2
- Anthara Gandharam- G3
- Suddha Madhyamam- M1
- Panchamam- P
- Chatusruthi Dhaivatham -D2
- Kakali Nishadham -N3

Neelambari is a Bhashanga raga that take an *anya swara* (extraneous note). In Neelambari, this behaviour can be observed in phrases like PNDN and PDNDNP with the occurrence of Kaishiki Nishadam (N2).

Lakshana terms for Neelambari:

- Nyasa swaras, notes which can be used as the ending notes M&P
- Common kampitha swaras: R&M
- No phrases are sung below the Manthrasthayi Nishadam

Neelambari is usually thought of as a slow raga. General notions include that this raga cannot be explored in faster speeds using patterns of swaras. Neelambari is one of the most emotionally resonant ragas in Carnatic music, with its core essence rooted in *Karuna Rasa*

(compassion and pathos). This raga has been widely used in lullabies, devotional music, and compositions that express deep maternal love and divine grace.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, descriptive methodology**. This study presents an analytical exploration of Ponniah Pillai's Neelambari Raga, focusing on the lyrics of the Kriti, the emotions (bhava) evoked, and the inherent beauty of the raga.

Through this exploration, the study underscores the enduring relevance of Neelambari in expressing complex human emotions and its role in the devotional practices within Indian classical music.

The interpretive framework includes:

- **Textual analysis** of the lyrics of “*Amba Neelambari*”, using translations and interpretations grounded in devotional literature.
- **Theoretical analysis** of Raga Neelambari, its scale, characteristics, and emotional register.
- The application of *rasa* and *bhāva* categories to understand emotional resonance in musical expression.

Lyrical interpretation

Ragam- Neelambari
Talam- Adi
Composer- Ponniah Pillai

Pallavi

"Amba Neelambari Ananda saagari"

Oh Divine Mother Neelambari, you are the ocean of bliss, clothed in the celestial hue of blue.

The **Pallavi** introduces the goddess as a majestic, compassionate divine figure — Neelambari, whose very presence is as boundless and serene as the ocean. The name also reflects her blue-hued radiance, linking her to cosmic energy and infinite peace

Anupallavi

"Ambujākṣi nīdu pādāmbujamula neranammithi

Ambarīshu modalu ninnu pogadagā ādhāramaina bruhannāyaki"

Oh lotus-eyed goddess, I have complete faith in your lotus feet.

Even the gods, starting with Indra, find their praise fulfilled only in glorifying you, O

Brhannayaki, the supreme consort.

Here, the devotee speaks with humility, expressing total surrender at the goddess's feet. The lotus imagery reinforces purity and divinity. Referring to Brhannayaki (a form of Goddess Parvati worshipped in temples like Thanjavur's Brihadeeswara), she is placed above all celestial beings, becoming the very essence of divine power and nurturing strength.

Charanam

"E dharanu nī sari samāna mikaleranucu nē gācimari

Mādhava sōdariyani nē pilacina

Vīnula sunta vinarādhā nādhu pāli deivamanucu moralida

Nīvitu palkucu rāvā

Ādharincakane yūraka yunna ara nimiṣamu

Ninnu viḍuvanu O jagadamba nīlāmbari"

No one on this earth is your equal.

Yet despite my pleas, calling you as the sister of Lord Madhava (Krishna), you do not seem to listen.

I cry out, "Are you not my protecting deity?" but you remain distant.

Please come and speak to me,

For even half a moment's distance from you is unbearable.

O universal mother, O Neelambari, I will never leave your lotus feet.

This is the emotional climax of the piece — a heartfelt, almost desperate plea of the devotee. There's longing, frustration, and unwavering devotion. The devotee questions the goddess's silence but does not doubt her presence. By calling her "**Madhava Sodari**" (sister of Vishnu), he appeals to her familial love, hoping it will melt her heart. The final lines convey an intense spiritual dependence — a connection so deep that even a moment's separation feels unbearable.

In the first line of pallavi Raga Mudra has been used Amba Neelambari which refers to the goddess symbolizing the goddesses cosmic and serene nature depicted a blue colour.

Anupallavi – antyaakshara prasa –ambuja--- padhambuja

Notation:-

Rasa and Bhava Analysis

Neelambari Raga and Karuna Rasa

Karuna rasa, associated with compassion and pathos, emerges strongly in the charanam:

**"E dharanu nī sari samāna mikaleranucu nē gācimari
Mādhava sōdariyani nē pilacina**

P, P N N P P M M, M, P M M G G, S G G S | M G S, , R S 'N | S, , S, M G M ||

ee dha ra nu nee sa ri sa mA na mi ka lE ra nu chu nE gA chi ma ri

P,, N N P P M M M D P M, G, R, R, G,, M P, M G, S S, | S, P, P M P N S' R S N P P M | M G G R

mA dha va sO dha ri ya ni pi la chithE vI nu la nun tha vi na

G G M P M G M, ||

rA dhA

"Even for a moment, I cannot be without you" and

"Why do you not listen when I call you as Madhava Sodari?"

These lines reflect a spiritual yearning and sense of separation, evoking the devotee's emotional vulnerability. Rather than mere sadness, the mood is one of deep longing for divine attention and closeness.

Neelambari is deeply associated with Karuna Rasa (the emotion of compassion, pathos, and devotion). Its structure and gentle movement evoke a sense of peace, tenderness, and divine love, making it ideal for lullabies, bhakti (devotional) music, and compositions that express maternal affection or deep introspection.

The stepwise descent (avarohana) with delicate gamakas gives it a smooth, emotional depth.

The lack of abrupt jumps in swaras makes it calming and meditative.

Use of Nishadam (N₃) and Dhaivatam (D₂)

N₃ (Kakali Nishadam) is crucial for evoking longing and devotion.

D₂ (Chatusruti Dhaivatam) adds a subtle sorrowful touch, enhancing the feeling of compassion.

Key Notes that Evoke Karuna Rasa

N₃ (Kakali Nishadam) – Expresses longing, deep love, and devotion.

D₂ (Chatusruti Dhaivatam) – Adds an emotional depth, often associated with pathos.

Smooth, flowing transitions between swaras create a soothing and meditative atmosphere.

The absence of Gandharam (G₃) in the ascent gives it a gentle, open feel, while its return in the descent brings warmth and emotion, enhancing the Karuna effect.

Bhakti rasa, the emotional flavor of devotion, dominates “*Amba Neelambari*.” The devotee addresses the goddess as *Amba* (mother), *Neelambari* (the blue-hued one), and *Brhannayaki* (the great consort), expressing humility and surrender. Phrases like “*nīdu pādāmbujamula neranammiṭhi*” (I have complete faith in your lotus feet) evoke the central sentiment of surrender, a feature of Bhakti. The **Bhakti rasa** is expressed through:

- Deep **reverence** for the goddess’s form and attributes.
- **Surrender** to her divine will.
- Repeated appeals for compassion and presence.

The devotional imagery strengthens the sense of emotional intimacy. It deliberates the flowing phrasing of the raga. The slow and contemplative rhythm of spiritual reflection.

Vātsalya bhāva -Perhaps most subtly, “*Amba Neelambari*” expresses **Vātsalya bhāva**, the emotional tone of motherly or parental love, especially from the perspective of the child-devotee.

- The goddess is not approached as a distant deity, but as *Amba* — the all-caring **universal mother**.

- The devotee speaks like a child: vulnerable, pleading, and fully dependent on her love.
- This emotional dynamic transforms the kriti into a **spiritual lullaby**, where the devotee, like an infant, seeks the reassuring touch of the mother's presence.

Referring to the goddess as *Jagadamba* (universal mother) and expressing pain at her absence conveys the dependence and innocence of a child longing for maternal affection. This relationship, while not overtly described, is implied in the tone of the lyrics and reinforced by the choice of raga

Conclusion

“*Amba Neelambari*” is a masterful example of how Carnatic music integrates lyrical poetry, emotion to create a holistic devotional experience. The composition is rich in **Bhakti rasa**, gently suffused with **Karuna rasa**, and grounded in the tenderness of **Vātsalya bhāva**.

The use of **Raga Neelambari** not only supports but amplifies these emotional tones, making the song an immersive expression of the devotee's soul calling out to the Divine Mother. The synthesis of text and raga enables an aesthetic experience, i.e both **emotionally powerful and spiritually elevating**.

This composition is a deeply devotional *kriti* that blends reverence, love, and longing. It portrays the goddess not just as an abstract cosmic force but as a tender, personal deity who is close, and emotionally reachable. The recurring imagery of **lotus, blue, ocean, and motherhood** evokes serenity, purity, and infinite compassion.

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