



## Decoding Traditional Indian *Rāga* Theory

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This paper will address the problematic relationship between traditional Indian *rāga* theory and performance practice. The object is two-fold, first to characterize traditional writing on *rāga* theory and the ways in which it is disconnected from *rāga* performance, and second to suggest ways that a limited descriptive theoretical methodology can be converted into useful prescriptive models.

### 1. The Nature of the Problem

For nearly two millennia there have been two distinct streams of musical practice in India: performance and theory (i.e. writing about music – known as *sangīt sāstra*). The tradition of writing about music has been concerned primarily with scale, interval relationships and distributions of microtones (tuning). There is little if anything in the canon written before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that would allow a musician to “play/sing” a *rāga* based on the information set forth in these texts.

In contrast to the written tradition, the oral tradition was and remains virtually the only means through which information on the performance practice of *rāgas* is conveyed among musicians, particularly from *gūrū* to disciple. This tradition is robust and effective, yet relatively disconnected from the *sāstras*.

### 2. Source Materials: *sāstras* and performances/recordings

It wasn't until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that writers of texts about *rāga* music tried to expand the common ground of description about *rāga* by adding information pertaining to melodic language. Yet, even with the newly expanded range of indigenous *rāga* theory, the gap is still challenging for those who are not intimately conversant with performance practice and the *rāga* repertoire.

### 3. Conclusion: Decoding traditional *rāga* descriptions

Ideally, one would work with both recordings of *rāgas* and acknowledged quality texts that effectively describe the melodic character of those *rāgas*. The *Rāga Guide* (Nimbus Records, 1999) is an excellent resource. The paper will conclude with suggestions of how one can create models of melodic behavior that connect written descriptions of *rāga* with recorded performances and further how those models can be converted into prescriptive models.